

WriteBoston School Partnership: Greater Lawrence Technical School

JANUARY 2014

Teachers at Greater Lawrence Technical School admit that they were somewhat skeptical at first about working with a WriteBoston coach. Many of them recalled frustrating past experiences with “expert consultants,” whose support was not tailored to their needs and rarely resulted in any meaningful change in their teaching practices. When Rebecca Steinitz began working with the faculty in the fall of 2011, she knew she had to deliver professional development that was relevant, customized, and actionable.

Two years later, teachers and administrators alike report that their work with WriteBoston has had a profound impact on teaching practice and on the overall culture of the school. Student writing has grown dramatically, in terms of both volume and quality. Teachers now hold students to high expectations for literacy, writing, and critical thinking, not only in English classes but increasingly in other academic subjects and in vocational classes as well.

According to Ms. Steinitz, “Many teachers started by saying, ‘Writing is not my job. Literacy is not my job. I teach Math,’ or ‘I teach History.’ Now they say, ‘Of course I need to address writing and literacy if my students are going to learn the content.’”

Greater Lawrence Technical School (GLTS) is a career vocational and technical high school in Andover, Massachusetts, serving more than 1,300 students in grades 9-12. The student population is 78% Hispanic and 20% White. Nearly 80% of students are low-income, and 22% have disabilities.¹ In addition to core subject areas, students enroll in one of three career academies that offer 18 vocational areas. Students spend about half of their educational time learning technical skills and knowledge in a career path that will prepare them for employment prior to graduation.²

When GLTS administrators engaged WriteBoston, their initial focus was not on writing but on literacy, given a widespread sense that gaps in reading comprehension were preventing students from mastering content and would be an impediment to improving writing.

“Teachers felt that starting with writing would be overwhelming,” said Ms. Steinitz. “We had to address the building block skills first.”

Working closely with the Curriculum Director and an in-house literacy coach, Ms. Steinitz was charged with launching a Literacy Initiative, the leadership of which now includes a team of teachers and teacher leaders from different grades and subjects, including career area instructors. One key task was to develop a year-long



Pam Rogers, 9th grade English teacher and literacy coach, talks to a GLTS student about a writing assignment.

¹ Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education website

² GLTS website

professional development program that brought the entire faculty together for one half-day session per month. The goal, said Ms. Steinitz, was to design “teacher-centered, practice-centered” professional development focused on strengthening lesson plans and classroom materials. In the first year, the faculty concentrated on four critical areas related to reading comprehension: lexiles (a tool for measuring reading levels), The Key to Comprehension Routine, differentiating instruction, and critical thinking.

With new practical tools to bring back to their classrooms and career shops, educators began to recognize improvements in their students’ reading and thinking skills. Teachers reported the emergence of a common language among faculty throughout the school and greater collaboration within and across grade levels and subject areas. Several teams redesigned their curriculum during the first year of working with WriteBoston.

Pam Rogers, a 9th grade English teacher and literacy coach, worked closely with Ms. Steinitz to design the Literacy Initiative. She described common planning time among the 9th grade English team as “productive working sessions” that are now more focused on teaching strategies and student work, with a great deal of sharing best practices and ideas.

“Teachers are much more open to feedback now,” she said.

Ms. Steinitz said her early approach to professional development at GLTS consisted of getting “buy-in” from faculty, empowering teachers to lead the work, and building capacity in literacy throughout the school.

“Success at this school,” she said, “is based on building relationships.”



WriteBoston coach Rebecca Steinitz works with GLTS History teacher Victor Martinez.

Ms. Rogers said, “Each year I work with Becca, I’m more and more amazed by her insights and her brilliance. She is a really good fit for our school – not just because of her knowledge in content but also because of her skills with people.”

After the first year focus on reading comprehension, the literacy team surveyed faculty about their needs and developed a second year of professional development centered around vocabulary development. In the spring of 2013, a Writing Committee was formed to develop a new schoolwide writing program. Ms. Steinitz trained the committee, which included teachers from academic and vocational subjects, in the new Common Core State Standards.

After conducting a teacher survey, collecting and analyzing writing assignments and student writing samples, and analyzing MCAS and lexile data, they worked over the summer to develop a professional development program in writing, tailored to the needs of the school and its students. In the fall of 2013, Ms. Steinitz and teachers themselves began leading professional development to train the entire faculty in a new, school-wide approach to writing instruction.

GLTS Principal Elizabeth Freedman said, “The coach has been able to move us in the direction we’ve wanted to move but had not been able to.”

Today, a poster hangs on the wall of Ms. Freedman's office, and in classrooms throughout the building, that summarizes the GLTS writing philosophy:

GREAT ASSIGNMENTS + CLEAR, CONSISTENT PRACTICES = GREAT WRITING

According to Pam Rogers, the work over the past three years has transformed teaching and learning at GLTS. She said that teachers now place tremendous emphasis on strategy, in reading comprehension and vocabulary, as well as in writing.

"I feel like I work harder but also more efficiently than I have in 22 years, because I'm inspired by what I've learned about the craft of writing," she said.

Ms. Rogers noted that students have demonstrated the greatest improvements in the structure, volume and fluency of their writing and in providing evidence to support their claims.

Gains in student reading and writing are reflected in standardized test scores, too. **In 2010, only 48% of GLTS 10th graders scored advanced or proficient on the MCAS English Language Arts exam. In 2013, 84% performed at the highest levels.**³

Said Ms. Rogers, "Of course the goal includes improved student performance on tests, but more importantly, students will leave here being intelligent and strategic in their speaking and writing."

In addition to school-wide professional development, Ms. Steinitz coaches several teachers one-on-one, meets regularly with various staff, including the Lead Teacher for Reading and English Language Learners and the librarian, attends common planning time meetings, observes instruction, reviews writing assignments, and helps teachers look at student work.

Kerry Bernier, a 9th grade Special Education Resource Room teacher, has worked at GLTS for 21 years. Ms. Bernier said she has grown exponentially as a teacher in the past three years through her work with WriteBoston, including participating in the summer institute *Writing in the Humanities*.

"The biggest change in my teaching has been modeling," she said. "I would give an assignment but never do it myself. Now, I am able to realize how students experience the assignments, and which of them are not doable."

In the past, Ms. Bernier's unit on an Edgar Allan Poe short story lasted about three days, and concluded without much student interest in the text. This year, after Ms. Bernier worked with Ms. Steinitz to strengthen the lesson, students dissected the text, wrote about it, and debated it over the course of a month.

"My students are actually writing, and writing with purpose," she said. "They now have the language to talk about their writing. They're able to articulate their *reason* and *evidence*."



9th Grade Special Education Resource Room teacher Kerry Bernier helps a GLTS student search for vocabulary words online.

³ Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education website

Now, when the class bell rings, and Ms. Bernier tells her students to stop writing and close their Chromebooks, she said they often groan in protest, asking for just a few more minutes to continue looking up vocabulary words.

"I'm certainly a much better teacher than I was three years ago," she said.

Greg Haas, Humanities Instructional Coordinator at GLTS, said Ms. Steinitz has made a considerable difference in the History department, where courses are now "vertically aligned" from grades 9-12 and the majority of teachers now plan lessons together.

"I'm definitely seeing changes in our teachers, especially better assignments that get students to do more," said Mr. Haas. "The expectations are higher now."

Said Ms. Steinitz, "The History team is one of our greatest success stories. Doing this work together has turned them into authentic collaborators, and the amount of reading and writing in history classrooms has increased significantly."

Victor Martinez, an 11th grade History teacher and GLTS alumnus, will admit he was skeptical at first about the benefits of working with a WriteBoston coach. Today, he regards Ms. Steinitz as a valued colleague and sounding board.

"If I need help or insight, I can always turn to Becca to bounce ideas off her," said Mr. Martinez. "She always steers the conversation back to the students' point of view."

"The coach has been able to move us in the direction we've wanted to move but had not been able to."

- GLTS Principal Elizabeth Freedman

Mr. Martinez said he now uses more vocabulary, puts more thought into lesson plans and assignments, and has clear expectations for student success. He said the work in reading, writing, and critical thinking has made him more conscious of student skills, not just the content.

"Student writing now has more structure, detail, deep thought, evidence and understanding of what they're doing," he said. "Students are paying much more attention to what they're writing about."

Mr. Martinez described several lessons in his History class that are now more rigorous thanks to his work with the WriteBoston coach, including a unit about the Holocaust using *Schindler's List*. Together, he and Ms. Steinitz crafted a lesson that asked students to "become" one of the characters in the story and keep a daily journal of the character's experiences and emotions. Class began each day with students sharing what they had written. The result, he said, was much more active engagement in the content.

"The kids were drawn in," he said.

Mr. Martinez said the professional development from WriteBoston works because it is "one-on-one and tailored to teachers' individual needs and curriculum and allows teachers to maintain their individuality."

"The coaching makes all the difference," he said. "Before, professional development was always, 'Here's a box. You've got to fit into it.'"

One of the most notable transformations, according to educators at GLTS, has been a sea change in the way career area teachers approach reading and writing in their vocational classes.

“This is not just about English and History,” said Mr. Haas. “All over the building – in cosmetology, metal fabrication, carpentry, you name it – teachers are talking to one another about their work, which never happened three years ago.”

Pam Rogers cited the auto collision shop, where the instructor now requires students to keep a journal about their work. He asks them to write narratives about the auto collision business, such as stories about how a car became damaged, or the customer’s experience getting the vehicle repaired. Every other Friday, students stand in front of their classmates and read aloud from their journals, often met with cheers and applause. The students are so proud of their work that they invite teachers from other subject areas to visit the auto collision shop to hear the readings.



Said Ms. Rogers, “That’s what WriteBoston has done for our school – shifted the way students and adults alike think about literacy and writing.”

Ms. Steinitz said she has observed similar changes in numerous other vocational programs, including carpentry, electrical, information technology and dentistry, where students previously had done little to no reading and writing.

“That’s what it means to shift from a focus on content to a focus on skills,” said Ms. Steinitz. “It’s been remarkable to see teachers fundamentally change their practice, and to see more student writing – much more – as a result.”

In academic and career classes alike, the skepticism that the WriteBoston coach faced at the outset has been replaced by a sense of deep respect, appreciation, and collegiality.

Said Mr. Haas, “Becca was brought in as a consultant, but now she’s part of the school community.”

WriteBoston

For more information:

Betty Southwick, Director | 617-541-2604 | betty.southwick@boston.gov

www.WriteBoston.org