

Case Study: WriteBoston Partnership with Chelsea Public Schools

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By Christopher M. Horan

Shortly after the 2016 election, Nicole Bribitzer gave her 8th grade Writing class a timely assignment: Write a letter to the President-Elect. Ms. Bribitzer, a first year teacher at Clark Avenue School in Chelsea, Massachusetts, instructed her students that their letters should try to persuade the President-Elect about a particular viewpoint on one of three key national issues – immigration, education, or the environment. The students' arguments had to be informed by a series of news articles she assigned from the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and other major outlets. When they were finished, she told the class, the letters would be sent to the White House.

Ms. Bribitzer knew that this was not a simple task for her students, many of them struggling readers and writers. The articles she assigned were written at a sophisticated level and explored complex ideas unfamiliar to most 8th graders. To make it work, Ms. Bribitzer employed several strategies she recently had learned in professional development sessions with [WriteBoston](#), the school district's partner in a new middle school literacy initiative. Rather than asking students to work independently, she decided to try an approach recommended by WriteBoston of organizing the class into small groups working together to unpack a tough text. This was a departure for the first-year teacher, who often felt more comfortable leading the entire class, but with support from the district's writing coach, she decided to give it a try. Ms. Bribitzer equipped each group with annotated versions of the news articles, using WriteBoston's "think tank" strategy, which included vocabulary clues and guiding questions throughout the texts, as well as specific points where the student groups had to stop and discuss what they were reading.

According to Roxanne Archibald, the school district's middle school writing coach, the result marked a turning point for Ms. Bribitzer's teaching and her students' learning. The students were fully engaged in the activity, having spirited discussions in their small groups about the articles and the policy issues. They helped one another work through difficult words and concepts and challenged one another's thinking to strengthen their arguments. Their teacher moved around the room, listening to conversations, assisting with an occasional question or comment, but ultimately enabling the students to lead their own learning.

Best of all, the students produced work that exceeded their previous writing in both quantity and quality. They were excited about the arguments they had crafted, citing evidence from the texts and from their own lives. With great pride in what they had accomplished, the class mailed their letters to the White House.

According to Ms. Archibald, this lesson – and the way it was delivered – provide a perfect snapshot of the impact WriteBoston is making, not only at Clark Avenue School, but with all middle school students in the Chelsea Public Schools.

Bringing coherence and alignment to literacy instruction

About 55% of the nearly 6,500 students in the [Chelsea Public Schools](#) (CPS) come from "economically disadvantaged" homes.¹ More than 80% of students speak a first language other than English, and more than 30% are classified as English Language Learners. Many families in this predominantly working-class Boston suburb are immigrants, including large populations from Central America.

¹ Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education website

Leaders of the school district have wrestled with the fact that too many students enter 9th grade without the critical reading, writing, and thinking skills essential to success in high school and beyond.

Prior to engaging WriteBoston, Chelsea had identified the need to build common instructional practices across their three middle schools, each serving approximately 500-600 students in grades 5-8, and to embed more writing in response to text. CPS Superintendent Dr. Mary M. Bourque identified “increasing the rigor of instruction through purposeful text and task complexity” as one of the district’s overarching improvement goals. In order to accomplish this goal, the district knew it needed comprehensive, job-embedded professional development across the middle schools.

“We knew that we needed a long-term plan and partner because ‘one-shot’ professional development doesn’t work, and change doesn’t happen overnight,” said Michele Sodergren, the district’s Literacy and Humanities Coordinator. “Through our conversations with WriteBoston, we realized we wanted professional development that addressed the needs of our classroom teachers and encompassed our coaches and our principals as well. We also came to recognize that we could not look at our students’ needs as writers separately from their needs as readers.”

According to Jessie Gerson, Deputy Director and Chief Academic Officer of WriteBoston, Chelsea is not alone in confronting this problem. “What may at first look like a writing challenge often proves to be a reading and comprehension issue,” she said. “Our theory of action is that in order to write sophisticated, grade-level academic pieces, students need to have consistent, purposeful opportunities to engage with complex text and ideas to be able to develop the ideas, arguments, and understandings that make for excellent writing.”

In building these critical literacy skills across the middle school buildings, Chelsea and WriteBoston further identified the need to support the school coaches and administrators in turn responsible for supporting teachers. Each middle school has a full-time literacy coach, and Ms. Archibald serves as a writing coach across all three schools. However, these coaches and the school administrators who evaluate teachers rarely had opportunities to work together to develop a common language and approach. Explained Ms. Sodergren, “We were looking for sustainable and systemic change and work with coaches and principals that impacts every humanities classroom.”

Ms. Sodergren and other district leaders became aware of WriteBoston in part through the [Five District Partnership](#) (5DP), a “joint educational effort among the Massachusetts districts of Chelsea, Everett, Malden, Revere and Winthrop to improve instruction and academic achievement.”² Hearing about WriteBoston’s emerging success in Revere, Ms. Sodergren engaged the organization to begin work on a small scale during the 2015-16 school year with a subset of teachers in two of Chelsea’s middle schools.

Based on preliminary outcomes and enthusiastic feedback from the initial work, district officials were eager to expand and deepen WriteBoston’s involvement. The result is a three-year partnership across all middle schools, beginning in 2016-17, with support targeted to three groups of staff: teachers, coaches, and administrators.

In its first full year, the project includes several components:

- Four times during the year, Ms. Gerson leads professional development sessions with all of the middle school Literacy, Writing, and History teachers, including those in Special Education programs.
- WriteBoston coach Merle Berman, a former middle and high school teacher and administrator, spends one full day each week in each of the three schools. In collaboration with the three literacy

² <http://www.5districts.com>

coaches and the writing coach, Ms. Berman assists teachers with lesson planning, suggests teaching strategies, observes classroom practice, provides ongoing feedback, and supports the coaches in their own work with the teachers.

- Ms. Gerson and Ms. Berman meet every other month with Ms. Sodergren and the four CPS coaches, running workshops that address particular coaching challenges and strategies.
- The team also meets periodically with principals and assistant principals from the three schools to ensure that coaching practices are aligned with these administrators' supervisory and evaluative conversations with teachers.

The project design includes WriteBoston's involvement gradually decreasing in the two subsequent years, with a goal of building enough capacity within the district to sustain the work internally. Each year also includes specific areas of focus; for example, the team will place greater emphasis in year two on using student work to guide instructional moves throughout the writing and revision process.

While WriteBoston has worked since 2002 with individual middle and high schools, and even multiple schools in the same district, the Chelsea partnership represents its first district-wide project at particular grade levels.

"This is a natural outgrowth of the core work of WriteBoston, which had formerly focused on coaching at the classroom level," said Ms. Gerson. She said that WriteBoston once maintained a more distinct separation between short-term, stand-alone workshops and long-term, ongoing coaching. "We knew that our impact could be so much more powerful if we aligned workshops that introduced new strategies with coaching that provides sustained feedback and support."

Teams of educators working together, yielding promising results

In designing the partnership, WriteBoston and CPS identified two main indicators of success: student work – both the *volume* and *quality* of writing – and educator feedback. Ultimately, district leaders expect to see significant growth over time in student performance on State assessments such as MCAS and PARCC.

Although still in its first full year of implementation, the partnership is beginning to show promising results, particularly as evidenced by teachers' and coaches' accounts of the improvements in their professional practice. In a survey of 100 Chelsea educators about the effectiveness of WriteBoston workshops, 92% of respondents "strongly agreed" that the sessions provide them actionable strategies that they can use immediately in their classrooms.

Jessica Ganz, a 6th grade Literacy teacher in her seventh year at Clark Avenue School, began working with WriteBoston when Ms. Gerson led a workshop last year about supporting struggling readers.

"I've been here a while and have seen professional development programs come and go," she said. "This is, by far, the most effective."

Ms. Ganz noted the particular challenge of student writing that was largely "stream of consciousness, with no main idea and no structure." Through her work with WriteBoston and CPS coaches, Ms. Ganz learned new strategies to increase student engagement and output. For example, to strengthen her annual unit about Sandra Cisneros' novel *The House on Mango Street*, Ms. Ganz asked students to explore and write about connections between the main character's discovery of her identity and the students' own lives and identities. The result, she said, was more robust student writing using evidence from the text.

Ms. Archibald, the CPS writing coach, began her career in Chelsea in 2011 as a 7th grade Writing teacher. She said, “WriteBoston’s professional development is unlike any that I’ve seen or been a part of.” She praised the emphasis on collaboration across classrooms and across schools, saying that as a teacher she often felt isolated. “It was very rare for us to have a chance to collaborate.”

According to Sarah Kent, Chief Academic Officer for CPS, this approach is beginning to foster the coherence and alignment that were lacking. “We’re seeing the tremendous benefits of pulling people together from different buildings to hear the same message and row the same boat,” she said.

Ms. Berman, the WriteBoston coach, emphasized the importance of differentiating support for teachers, based on where each educator is in his or her own professional growth. She described a veteran teacher highly skilled at classroom management, who maintains a climate that is “very orderly and controlled, but often lacking in both student engagement and complex tasks.” Coaching for this teacher focused on developing a range of strategies and classroom activities to get students more involved and accountable, as well as increasing the rigor of student learning.

By trying new teaching strategies, said Ms. Berman, “this veteran teacher discovered things in herself – capacity and passion – that I’m not sure had been evoked before.” That experience, she said, seems to be shared among her colleagues. “We’re seeing teachers using a variety of strategies and a range of teaching modes – including independent learning, small group, and full class work.”

The project also includes an “audit,” conducted three times per year, to track the number of minutes students spend in each class period *writing, reading, listening, and speaking*. The audits are designed to measure student engagement in each classroom, in order to move to more student-centric environments, in which learners demonstrate active participation. Initial findings from the audits suggest promising improvements in increasing classroom engagement in this way, with a 55% decrease in “low literacy engagement” classrooms.

Ms. Archibald is seeing this shift first-hand. “Classrooms are becoming much more student-centered,” she said. “Teachers aren’t standing in front of the room lecturing. Instead, they’re facilitating lively conversations among students about what they’re reading and writing.”

She added, “I believe WriteBoston strategies work well because they’re open to interpretation and adaptation,” enabling teachers to tailor them to their students’ needs and their own teaching styles.

School administrators agree that the WriteBoston approach yields more lasting changes in teacher practice. David Liebowitz, principal of Browne School, described the limitations of some other professional development providers: “As long as they’ve delivered their model, they feel like it’s a success. With WriteBoston, we have a shared vision of what excellence in literacy looks like, and we have the tools and strategies to help us get there. Success is ultimately measured by what students are producing in classrooms.”

“We’re seeing a significant increase in process-based writing, resulting in longer pieces that students have drafted and revised over time,” said Dr. Liebowitz. As a result, he added, the quality of writing is improving, students are demonstrating “an increasing sense of pride in the craft of being an author,” and they are excited to share the products of their writing assignments with broader audiences.

Dr. Liebowitz also described a greater emphasis on reading and writing in History classes as a result of the WriteBoston program. He has been encouraged to see writing assignments in History classes that are more rigorous and relevant to students. Dr. Liebowitz cited the example of students writing personal narratives from the point of view of historical figures – such as someone living in Jerusalem during the Crusades – drawing from both primary and secondary sources.

The WriteBoston team agrees that the opportunity to work with so many educators in different roles is making the greatest difference in getting traction in Chelsea.

“This is how we can have an exponential impact,” said Ms. Berman. “I think of it as a waterfall of teachers” learning from the coaches, from their administrators, and from one another.

Superintendent Bourque is most encouraged that the partnership is fostering authentic, ongoing collaboration at the classroom, school, and district levels.

“WriteBoston has a deep understanding of effective adolescent literacy instruction,” said Dr. Bourque. “Jesse Gerson and Merle Berman have integrated seamlessly into our systems and teams and have pushed our educators to improve. The design and follow-through of this multi-year partnership have been impressive.”

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