



Lincoln Public Schools

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Assistant Superintendent of Schools

To: School Committee
From: Mary Sterling, Judy Merra
Re: Report on Plans for District Writing Initiative
Date: October 20, 2010

The major curriculum initiative for the 2010-11 school year focuses on writing. Our goal statement is:

“To increase student engagement and success in writing, the district will strengthen instruction and assessment in writing, PreK – Grade 8.”

This report gives our rationale and plan for improving student writing, describes benchmark events and action steps for this goal, explains our approach to addressing writing in the content areas of middle school, and offers detail about an instructional model being implemented in grades K-5.

Rationale and Plan

A sound plan for improving student learning must be based on a theory of change which includes both underlying principles and specific action steps to reach the desired outcome. As articulated by Joellen Killion, deputy executive director of the National Staff Development Council, “a program’s theory of change specifies the goals and the activities – the series of actions that are likely to lead to the attainment of both the short term outcomes and the long term goals.”¹ As with our math initiatives in past years, clear guiding principles and a comprehensive implementation plan are critical to success, both in terms of increasing the expertise of teachers and the performance of students.

To meet our writing goal, three underlying principles provide the rationale for our implementation plan:

- **Standards:** The Lincoln Learning Expectations for composition describe the Key Outcomes and Essential Knowledge and Skills that we expect students to meet at each grade level. These Expectations are aligned with Massachusetts curriculum standards and are grounded in Big Ideas that articulate desired PreK-8 understanding in composition.
- **Instruction:** Teacher knowledge and skill in teaching writing is essential to effective instruction and improving learning. Teacher knowledge and skill can expand with an infusion of resources, professional development, regular use of research-based strategies in the classroom, analysis of data to inform instruction, support from Literacy Specialists, and ongoing collaboration with peers.

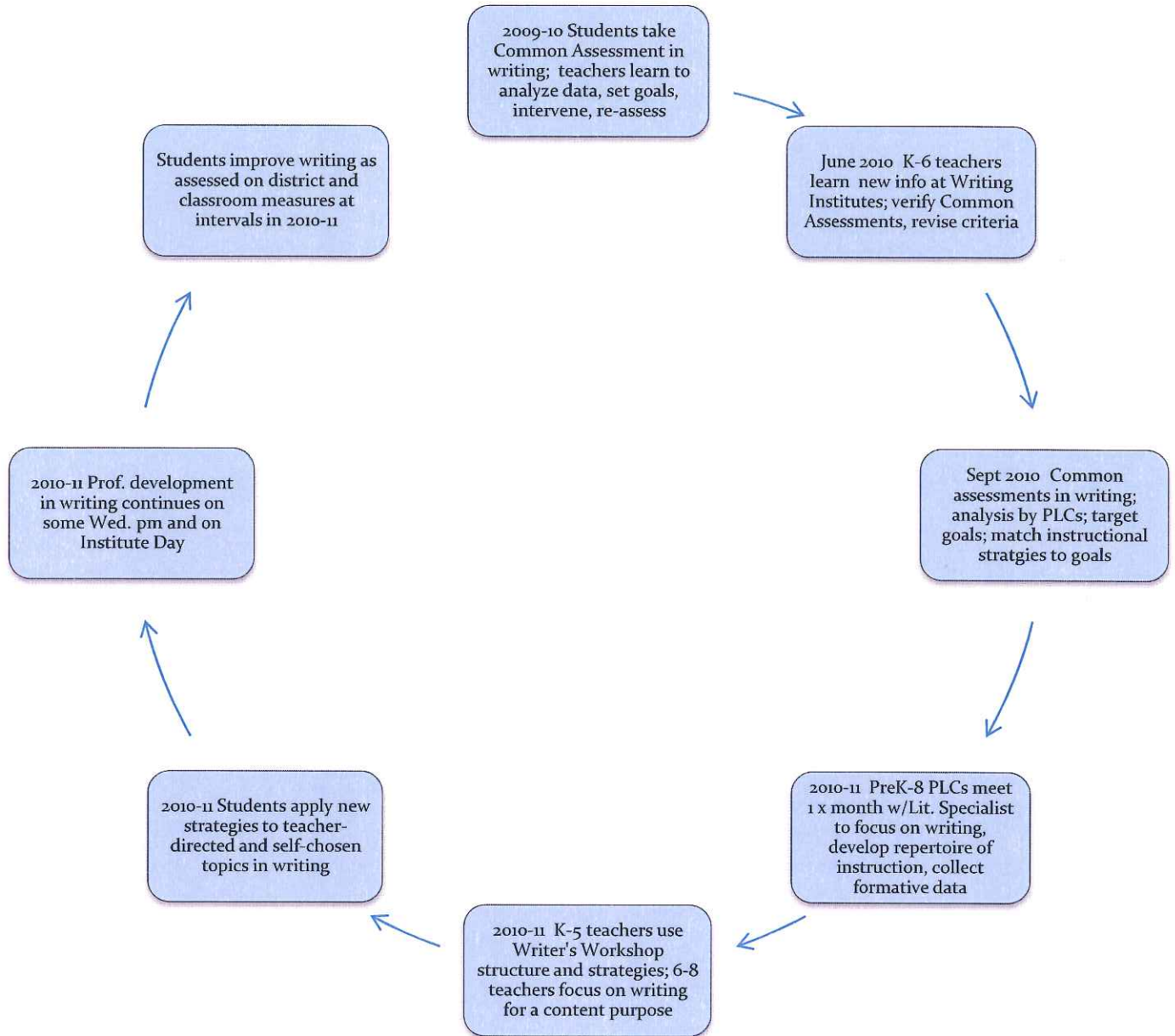
¹ Joellen Killion, *Assessing Impact: Evaluating Staff Development*, Corwin Press, 2008. p. 41.

- Assessment: District Common Assessments in writing are based on grade level standards. They promote high expectations for student learning, create local baselines of performance, advance consistent practices in teaching writing, and provide data about student growth in writing over multiple years. When assessment data is analyzed by teams of teachers at a grade level through a collaborative data process, subsequent instruction can focus on the area of greatest need for students at different levels of skill.

The implementation plan (displayed in the graphic on the next page) includes the benchmark events listed in the district work plan and spells out specific additional action steps.

- Professional Development: An initial step took place in January, 2010 when teachers learned to use a collaborative data process to analyze student writing and then develop instructional goals and plans. In June 2011, two summer institutes provided professional development on writing to teachers of students in grades K-2 and in grades 3-6. Also this past summer, middle school ELA teachers attended a Literacy Institute in Wayland with a focus on writing. Professional development continued this fall with support for the September administration and analysis of the K-8 Common Assessment in writing. Also, a Wednesday afternoon meeting in November is planned for teachers of writing in grades K-8 to learn more about available resources and approaches for focused writing instruction. On Institute Day, January 14th, a nationally recognized expert in the teaching of writing, Carl Anderson, will deliver a keynote address and lead small group sessions with teachers in primary and intermediate grades. Professional learning also occurs in monthly team meetings, often attended by a Literacy Specialist, when teachers examine samples of student work, discuss implications for teaching, and develop strategies to reach a range of learners. Finally, a district-wide teacher guide for writing instruction is now available to teachers on our website and will continue to be developed.
- Student Learning: Students in grades K-5 have regular, designated time in the classroom, called "Writer's Workshop," which includes opportunities to write on student-selected topics as well as fiction and non-fiction topics designed by the teacher. In grades K-8, students are planning, drafting, revising, and editing their written drafts with coaching and feedback from their teacher, special educator, and/or teaching assistant. As the year continues, students will be more involved in setting their own writing goals, assessing their own drafts, and working on multiple drafts to reach a high standard of writing skill. In middle school, students are expected to write short pieces for a content purpose in many content areas.
- Assessment: Teachers conducted Common Assessments on writing in September and will do so again in May, using the same scoring criteria. The September scores are considered baseline information, upon which to build instructional plans. In January, targeted assessments on selected criteria will be undertaken to determine growth and to plan further instruction. In addition to these district assessments, teachers will use informal, formative measures to assess progress with individual students throughout the year. Typically, they keep notes on student writing conferences and a record is kept of writing assignments, which are scored on several criteria. We expect to see student progress from September to June, as demonstrated in our Common Assessments. Real growth will be more readily apparent once our writing program is well established and we have data to analyze over several years with cohorts of students.

Goal: To Improve Student Writing Through Professional Development, Focused Instruction, and Standards-Based Assessment



Middle School Focus

Teachers in all subject areas will be working together this year to establish a consistent response to the question, "What constitutes acceptable writing?" They will formulate some clear guidelines so that students in middle school will know what is acceptable in any content area and will benefit from consistent messages and standards.

In English Language Arts classes, teachers of grades 6-8 have administered the fall Common Assessment in writing. They also plan to use a Common Assessment based on a student's response to literature, which mirrors the Open Response format of the MCAS assessment. Throughout the year, they assign writing for a range of purposes and guide students through planning, drafting, revising, and editing. These assignments provide both formative and summative information about student progress.

In subject areas other than English Language Arts, teachers of students in grades 6-8 will emphasize short writing with a content purpose. These pieces of writing will sometimes be similar to Open Response writing, which calls on students to formulate an opening statement, support it with details, and conclude with a meaningful summary statement. In other types of short writing, students will articulate their process for learning, such as with an art project, or their conclusions at the end of a process, such as in a science lab report. In grade level team meetings, teachers will share examples of student writing from different subject areas so that teachers have the chance to discuss and firm up their expectations of students based on actual samples from several curriculum areas.

Elementary School Focus

In all elementary school classrooms, writing is being taught in a structure called "Writer's Workshop," which is a model for differentiated instruction in writing. This structure allows teachers to focus on writing in any content area, to customize coaching and feedback to the individual student, and to build a sense of "being a writer" within the classroom community. Two key strategies in Writer's Workshop are "mini-lessons" and "conferencing." Mini-lessons are short lessons, either for the whole class or for small groups. Each lesson focuses on a timely aspect of writing related to the grade level expectations and to the needs that arise in the student work. Conferencing is a one-to-one conversation between student and teacher about a current draft. The focus depends on the student's purpose and level of skill. They may discuss strategies for continued drafting, approaches to revising, and/or considerations for editing. Sometimes, the focus of the conference will be the subject of an earlier mini-lesson. A more in-depth discussion of the Writer's Workshop model, including details on mini-lessons and conferences, will be presented at the School Committee meeting on October 28, 2010.

Parents: Home Support

We are developing links for parents on the district website so that parents can access resources and ideas for supporting their children's development as a writer. In addition, our Institute Day speaker, Carl Anderson, will be video-taping a round table discussion on home support for developing young writers. We will make Mr. Anderson's video available to parents in several ways.