

Collins Writing Program

Implementation Profile

<p>Berkshire Arts and Technology Charter Public School North Adams, Massachusetts</p>

In 2010, Governor Deval Patrick named the Berkshire Arts and Technology Charter Public School ([BART](#)) one of only thirteen schools in Massachusetts to be commended for “high growth” and “narrowing the achievement gap.” In 2011, BART was named a silver award winner of the EPIC award, an honor bestowed on eighteen schools in the country that demonstrate outstanding improvement in student achievement. This prize represented the culmination of an intensive three-year school improvement plan launched at BART in 2008. As part of this effort, the Collins Writing Program was introduced to BART in 2008 to help teachers create concrete expectations—and more opportunities—for student writing across the curriculum. Teachers and administrators at BART now consider the Collins Writing Program a major factor in the dramatic improvement of students’ state test scores over the last three years.

Background

BART is a tuition-free charter school serving grades 6–12 located in North Adams, a rural town in Western Massachusetts. Since its inception in 2004, BART has shown a serious commitment to its mission of preparing students for college. While over 50% of students come from low-income families and only 16% of BART graduates have a parent who graduated from college, 100% of BART’s students have passed at least one college-level class and have been accepted into college before graduating from high school.

BART’s success over the last two years did not come easily. In 2007, student performance on the MCAS fell short of expectations. More than half of the students were not proficient in math and more than one quarter were not proficient in Language Arts. The targets were 70% proficiency for math and 85% for Language Arts.

When Benjamin Klompus arrived to take over as principal in 2008, he set out to lead the effort toward improvement. “We didn’t just want our kids to get through the door to college,” said Klompus. “We wanted them to arrive at college with skills that would help them succeed once they got there.” He felt that writing, “a necessary twenty-first century skill,” should be at the curriculum’s focus. During his first year at BART, Klompus noticed that teachers had a lot of interesting ideas for teaching writing but no measurable results. That same year, Klompus initiated a three-year school improvement plan that would require regular interim assessments of student achievement in math and ELA and extensive data analysis.

In addition to extensive data collection and analysis, Klompus decided to introduce the Collins Writing Program, which had been introduced to in North Adams where he’d previously taught. With its focused yet flexible approach towards remediating weaknesses in student writing, the Collins Writing Program provided a practical means by which to respond to the detailed reports produced by the interim assessments. In addition, Klompus expected that the Collins Writing Program’s analysis on student portfolios would make it possible to monitor and give feedback to faculty on the quality and quantity of writing assignments. The Collins Writing Program would hold both the students and teachers accountable for reaching their collective goals.

Implementation

The implementation of the Collins Writing Program at BART began in the summer of 2008 with an intensive four-day workshop for the entire faculty. Over the course of the workshop, teachers from all subject areas learned how to create short writing assignments (Type One and Type Two) as a tool to improve instruction. They also learned how to set clear criteria and give timely feedback on their students' writing using Focus Correction Areas (FCAs). In addition, the workshop involved the development of mini-lessons to teach critical skills. Collins associates then modeled a number of these lessons with the faculty who role-played as students.

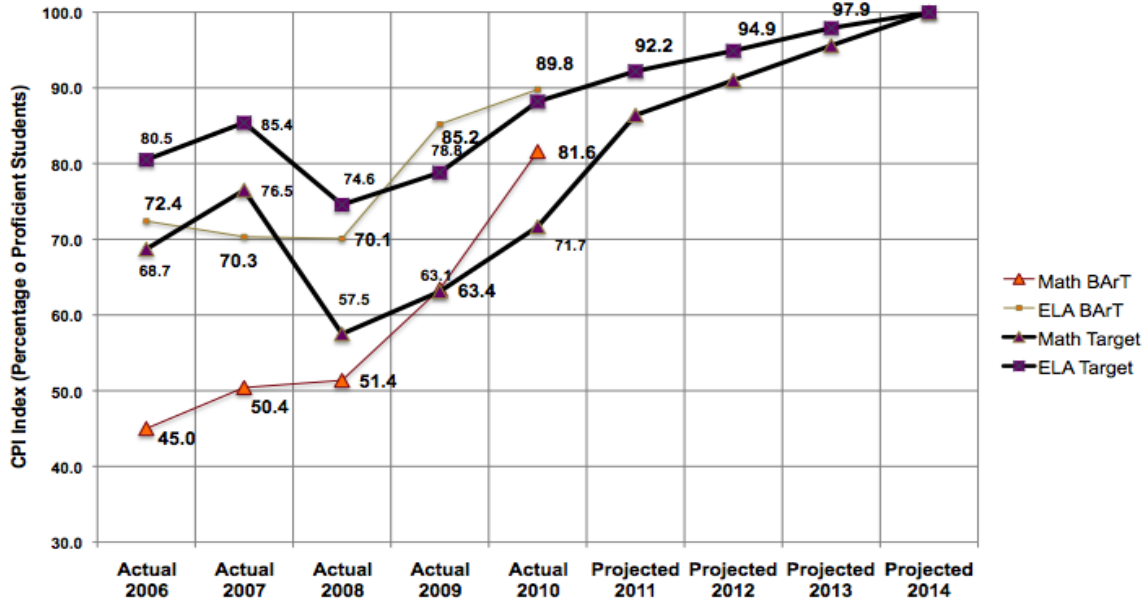
Over the course of the next two years, a Collins associate returned six times. During these visits, the associate modeled lessons for teachers in the classroom with BART students, observed teachers, and conducted staff meetings to review student progress and offer feedback to teachers. Every summer, new teachers have been trained in the Collins Writing Program as part of orientation. Additionally, in 2009, a number of BART teachers chose to enroll in a Collins graduate course that focused on persuasive writing.

According to Klompus, the Collins Writing Program has improved students' performance at BART in three major ways. First, it has expanded the teaching of writing from just English/Language Arts to all subject areas. Second, Collins' short writing assignments, which teachers at BART now use daily and sometimes more than once per period, "ensure that students are processing what they are learning and give the teachers a quick snapshot of how much the students have absorbed." Third, with its focus on setting specific goals for student writing, collecting data, and reflecting on the results, the Collins Writing Program has enhanced the longer-range interim assessments that are part of BART's school improvement plan with a clear and precise way to assess student writing on a short-term basis. "Collins helped our teachers set concrete expectations for our students' writing," says Klompus. "When strong expectations are in place and students are given frequent feedback, achievement inevitably increases."

Results

As Klompus predicted, since the Collins Writing Program was introduced in 2008, student achievement in both English/Language Arts (ELA) and math has increased dramatically, as measured by MCAS scores.

Chart One
BArT Charter AYP 2006-2014
School Performance Over Time



As Chart One demonstrates, between 2007 and 2010, the percentage of proficient students in math has jumped from just over half to over eighty percent—an increase of roughly **thirty percent**. In the same period, the percentage of proficient students in English/Language Arts increased by nearly **twenty percent**. At the same time, as Charts Two and Three show, the percentage of students who have fallen into the “warning” zone in ELA and math of the MCAS exam has, between 2007 and 2010, decreased by 13% and 30%, respectively:

Chart Two
BArT ELA MCAS Performance Over Time

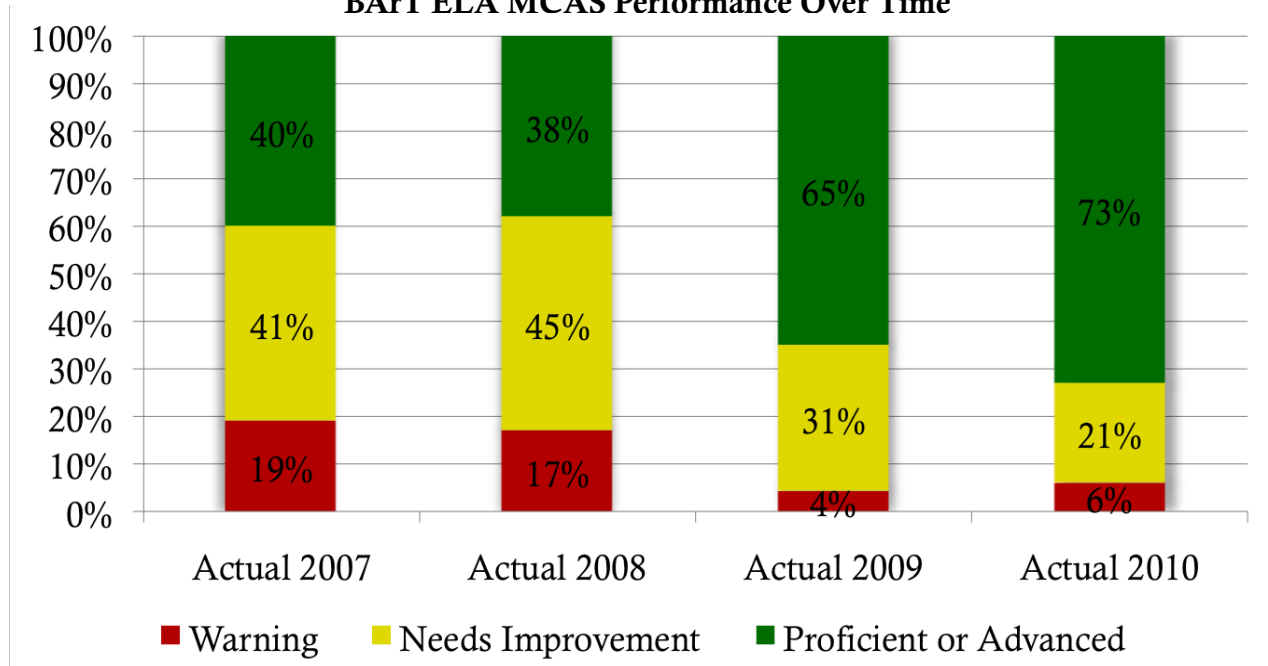
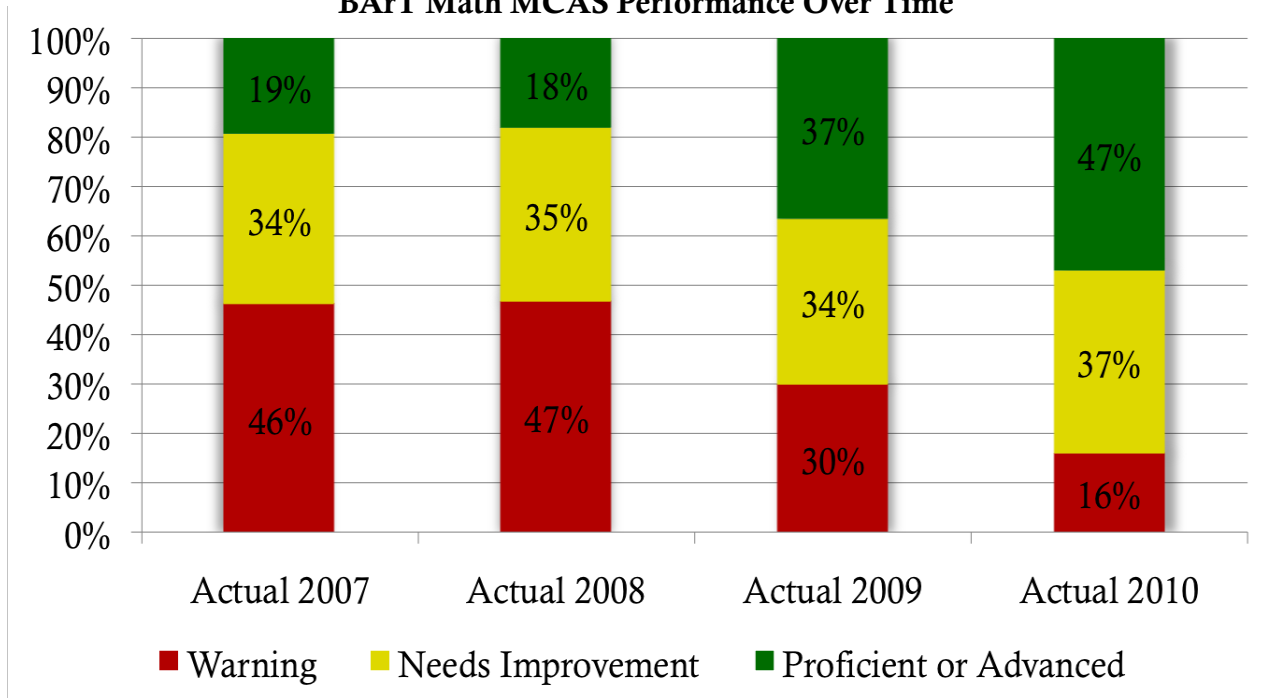


Chart Three
BArT Math MCAS Performance Over Time



Klompus attributes the dramatic increase in student performance in large part to the Collins Writing Program, which not only introduced methods for integrating writing into its entire curriculum, but also established clear expectations for student writing and efficient strategies for teachers to provide their students with valuable, regular feedback. Adds Klompus, “Collins offered us plenty of concrete tools to improve achievement, but I don’t feel that we’ve maxed out the program at all.” With even more focus on writing in the classroom, he believes student performance at BART will continue to rise.

*All graphs courtesy of Berkshire Arts and Technology Charter Public School