

WriteBoston School Partnership: Boston Community Leadership Academy

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At Boston Community Leadership Academy (BCLA), teachers and administrators alike credit WriteBoston with helping to transform the school's approach to professional development.

Kelly Knopf-Goldner, a WriteBoston coach, works on-site with teachers two days a week. BCLA educators say that Ms. Knopf-Goldner, or "Ms. K-G" as she is affectionately known, has brought coherence and focus to teachers' professional growth and classroom instruction.

Said Headmaster Brett Dickens, "Before WriteBoston, I always found professional development to be discouraging for teachers – too many presenters with no credibility and no follow-up. Now, with Kelly, the professional development is institutionalized, planned, teacher-driven, and sustained."



English and Writing Workshop teacher Van Vuong works with students at Boston Community Leadership Academy.

"As a whole, the school is much more aware of purpose," said Sarah Langer, a 9th and 12th grade Math teacher. "Various ideas and concepts from professional development have started to permeate throughout the school."

Boston Community Leadership Academy is a pilot high school in the Boston Public Schools with nearly 500 students in grades 9-12. Located in the Hyde Park neighborhood, BCLA serves a student body who are 86% Black and Latino and 78% low-income. More than a quarter of its students are English Language Learners, and nearly one-fifth are students with disabilities.¹ BCLA is one of 16 Boston public high schools that have partnered with WriteBoston to provide teachers with sustained support from a writing coach.

In 2010, despite gains in BCLA students' writing scores, newly-appointed Headmaster Dickens was concerned about flat reading scores.

"We had to deal with the underlying issue of literacy," she said. Teachers identified a pervasive problem with students' reading comprehension and turned to the WriteBoston coach for direction.

As a result, Ms. Knopf-Goldner led the launch of a school-wide Literacy Initiative. It began with the formation of a Literacy Committee composed of teachers from all grades and subject areas. Ms. K-G worked with the team to design a year-long professional development program for the entire faculty, beginning with case studies about best practices, and later, inquiry groups to address critical issues in reading comprehension. The coach also led the development of a three-year sequential literacy curriculum, which is now becoming aligned to Common Core State Standards.

¹ Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education website

According to Headmaster Dickens, the professional development in reading and writing led to a common language and shared practices among the faculty.

“The biggest change in teacher practice has been seeing non-English teachers doing so much in reading and writing, and holding students and themselves accountable,” she said. “This is no longer seen as the English department’s responsibility. Teachers of all subjects – History, Science, Math, Chorus – are working together.”



Ms. Knopf-Goldner said, “I move around the building and hear teachers speaking the same language about writing – words like *claim*, *evidence*, and *reasoning* – and gradually, students have started using these terms, too.”

Amanda Chaloupka, who teaches English as a Second Language (ESL) to 9th and 10th graders, served on the Literacy Committee and quickly noticed the transformative power of teachers working together across disciplines.

“Having a WriteBoston coach in the building on a regular basis has been huge,” said Ms. Chaloupka. “In thinking about writing, we have to think about so many other skills.”

Today, professional development at BCLA is differentiated by teacher skills. Ms. Knopf-Goldner is teaching a course entitled *Best Practices in Reading* for educators who have been teaching three years or fewer at the school. More experienced teachers are either meeting one-on-one with the coach for tailored literacy professional development or pursuing an inquiry project of their own design.

Said Math teacher Ms. Langer, “The professional development has become much more personalized to

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- BCLA Headmaster Brett Dickens

meet the needs of each teacher.”

Ms. Knopf-Goldner said, “What makes us different is that so many teachers go to a one-time professional development session, and they’re given a binder and told to go back and use it. What they’re lacking is the *how*. WriteBoston provides ongoing, on-site reinforcement of what teachers are learning.”

Headmaster Dickens agreed, saying, “WriteBoston is the catalyst that has enabled teachers to lead their own professional development, support one another, and *be* the professional development in the school.”

In addition to planning professional development, the WriteBoston coach observes instruction, develops curriculum, and helps teachers write lesson plans, set objectives, and look at student work. Teachers also describe Ms. Knopf-Goldner as a valuable sounding board for new ideas and provider of resources, such as books about teaching practice and texts for classroom use.

Ms. Chaloupka also participated in WriteBoston’s summer institute *Writing in the Humanities*. She said, “The biggest change I’ve experienced in my own teaching practice is thinking about *purpose* all the time. With every lesson, I ask, ‘Why am I having my students do this?’ and ask myself the same question from the students’ point of view.”

Dave Sims, who teaches 9th grade U.S. History, said his work with WriteBoston has transformed his teaching practice.

“I was always focused on breadth over depth. Now, we put the skills first – reading, writing, and critical thinking. What’s the point of the content if students can’t access it?”

Mr. Sims said the coach has helped him and the entire BCLA History department take a more document-based approach to the subject matter. Teachers have learned to engage students in more close reading, and using primary and secondary sources to answer questions, what Mr. Sims described as “basic historian skills.”

He noted that he and his colleagues were teaching these skills, which are now at the heart of Common Core State Standards, long before the new standards came along.

Mr. Sims’ unit on the American Revolution has always culminated with students producing an issue of *The Patriot Press*, a mock newspaper featuring student writing about the war. Before his work with WriteBoston, Mr. Sims’ students typically reported on the facts as they understood them, summarizing rather than analyzing the historic events. Thanks to guidance from Ms. Knopf-Goldner, he said students now write essays exploring the complexity of issues from multiple points of view and ultimately make arguments and draw conclusions based on their research. Mr. Sims’ students also wrote “breakup songs” about the colonies breaking away from England using *reasoning and evidence*.

“Students are definitely more engaged,” he said. “My former students will stop me in the hallway to tell me they’re now using in 10th grade the skills they learned in 9th grade. They’re more excited about History now.”

Ms. K-G has helped the History department at BCLA become both horizontally aligned (across each grade level) and vertically aligned (from 9th to 12th grade), resulting in more coherent curriculum and instruction.

Ultimately, the work all has led to improved *quality* and *quantity* of student writing throughout the school. Teachers in upper grades remark that students are coming to their classes with much stronger reading and writing skills than in years past. On the state MCAS exams in English Language Arts, 10th graders scoring at Proficient and Advanced levels soared from 64% to 87% in just three years.² Students are even choosing extra-curricular activities that involve writing, such as Teens in Print and the school newspaper.



BCLA History teachers Jhoanna Ochoa-Martinez and Dave Sims meet with WriteBoston coach Kelly Knopf-Goldner.

² Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education website

Ms. Chaloupka has seen similar gains among students in her ESL classes. Her English Language Learners are now writing stories that are often 6-18 pages long – “far more than they ever thought they could write.”

“Writing has become part of every lesson, every day,” she said. “It’s our major focus.”

Ms. Chaloupka added that students now have a vocabulary to describe their own writing process – a major breakthrough, particularly for students whose first language is not English. She said her students are using “writers’ moves,” specific revision strategies like adding details and dialogue.

She added, “It’s always helpful to discuss with Kelly the process of writing, especially getting students to see that writing is more about revision than it is about the first draft.”

Headmaster Dickens said the WriteBoston coach is no longer perceived as an “outside consultant” but rather a highly valued and trusted member of the BCLA instructional leadership team.

“The greatest advantage of having a WriteBoston coach is professional development that benefits the school at all levels of teaching and across all subject areas,” she said. “Coaching is the only viable way to improve teacher practice and transform the school in a lasting way.”

She added, “Bad professional development is deflating and kills morale. Here, it’s invigorating. It’s the best you could possibly get.”



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- Amanda Chaloupka, BCLA Teacher, English as a Second Language

WriteBoston

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