

**Cobbet Elementary School
Presentation
Pathways to Improved Student Performance
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Linda Lord

Cobbet Elementary School is an urban elementary school with numerous obstacles that we have come to think of as challenges that we must work on every day. Last year our poverty rate was 89%, and it has increased this year to 93%. Our minority rate was 84%, while this year's rate is 86%. The number of students who speak a first language other than English has increased, as well. Those parents have released their children from bilingual education, and want full immersion. We have a small population of Russian speaking students who receive language support, which is the only pull-out program in the school. Perhaps our biggest challenge is student mobility. In the first month of school alone, my secretary reported to me that we had over one hundred students transfer out, with over one hundred more transferring in. In an urban district such as ours, it is not uncommon to have students attend four schools in one year. Quite often these students stay in Lynn, but move from one elementary school to another within the district. Given all these factors, or *challenges*, you will come to see during our presentation, the recurring themes, or *the pathways*, that have helped our student population to achieve.

The Lynn Public Schools District implemented two initiatives that have been crucial to our effectiveness. One was John Collins' Writing Across the Curriculum. The other was Growing With Mathematics, a literacy-based mathematics program. Additionally, the district applied for, and received, grants for four schools from The Read Excellence Act. Cobbet was one of the schools to implement balanced literacy through this grant.

All initiatives:

- Are in alignment with state frameworks
- Provide materials
- Provide initial training
- Provide ongoing, site-based staff development
- Demand accountability from teachers and Principal
- Were implemented in a strategic, gradual way

Based at Cobbet are two key staff members who are crucial to the successful implementation of these initiatives. Mary Ann Sharpe was the Literacy coach who was charged with the implementation of the Read Excellence grant, while Stanley Serwacki was the Instructional Facilitator who went into classrooms modeling lessons and team teaching, supporting classroom teachers in their curriculum needs. Both are veteran teachers with extensive training. They are truly *master teachers* to whom classroom teachers can go to for training, resources, assistance, and advice. This year their titles

have changed to that of Curriculum & Instructional Support teachers. They are now both funded through Title I. They are in various classrooms all day, working after school on professional development activities, parent involvement, teacher assistance and support, among many other tasks. For this work, they are paid through stipends from Title I funds, as well.

In addition to district implementation and support of the above-mentioned initiatives, the district has set aside two full days for Staff Development activities during which students have the day off, while teachers work on Data Analysis activities. We have already had one of the days during which we, as a staff, used current MCAS data to:

1. Use Demographic Analysis to identify similarities and differences in scaled scores (raw scores in grade 3) among or between groups and between School and State.
2. Use the Subscore and Item Type Analysis to identify similarities and differences in percents between School and State.
3. Use the Sequential Item Sort to
 - Identify the Item Type,
 - Identify the standard applicable to each test item and to review it
 - Identify non-respondents/zero performance
 - Identify attractiveness of distracters and to identify random response patterns
4. Use the Category Sort to identify performance on specific standards and content areas.
5. Use the Difference Sort (between School and State) to identify, in descending rank order, differences in performance between School and State.

Strengths and Weaknesses were addressed, as well as 2001 and 2002 comparisons of MCAS tests with specific trends cited.

Stanley Serwacki

John Collins' Writing Across the Curriculum is an instructional writing program that the Lynn Public Schools implemented citywide seven years ago. A uniform writing program addresses Lynn's very transient school population. The program is designed to improve student writing in all content areas through frequent writing assignments that are maintained in folders by the students. Teachers are held accountable for a prescribed number of writings determined by grade level. They receive continuous onsite support and feedback from myself and are assessed once a year by the principal on the implementation of the writing folders. Professional development ensures the continuous improvement in the quality of the writing program. Initially, teachers received thirty hours of training. In my role as facilitator, I provide teachers with onsite, instructional supervision. Additionally, an annual refresher training from a Collins' consultant is conducted by grade level.

At the beginning of each school year, teachers receive a revised copy of writing expectations that have been developed by the district with teacher input. This table tells the teacher the number and types of writing pieces to include in the folders. The table

includes the editing symbols and revision techniques to be used by grade level. Teachers are also given a revised copy of grade level Focus Corrections Areas (FCAs). The students are graded on their writing for addressing the three Focus Correction Areas that have been determined by the teacher for each particular writing piece. Writing begins with brainstorming vocabulary and building background using graphic organizers. The student uses the graphic organizer to write a draft focusing in on the three correction areas. Teachers use overheads to model instruction for students. Editing and a revision technique are required on each piece before it is entered into the child's folder.

The John Collins' writing program encourages students to reflect on their work by editing and revising. Students take responsibility for their learning and understanding as they focus on the correction areas for the writing. Finally, they refine listening and speaking skills through a major revision technique.

Each child's folder is given an annual evaluation by the school Principal. A copy is forwarded to the Superintendent, who then uses it to ensure that it has been evaluated properly by the administrator. At the end of the academic year, students choose their three best writings to send to their next teacher, accompanied by a writing that explains why those particular pieces were chosen.

Growing with Mathematics was another systemic initiative implemented gradually over the past five years. The program is activity based and language- oriented. It reflects the spirit of NCTM curriculum and evaluation standards for Mathematics. Samples of work from each topic are saved in a folder to determine student progress over time. At the end of the academic year, these folders also undergo an evaluation by the school Principal.

Growing With Mathematics, originally entitled *Mimosa Math*, was piloted the first year in only one kindergarten, grade one, and grade two class per school in the district. During the following summer all teachers in kindergarten through grade three were given three days of training by a consultant. Teachers met monthly by grade level with a consultant for more support through the school year. The following year, grade four began the program, and last year grade five received training. This year Pre-kindergarten classes are using the program and receive monthly training. My role as facilitator has been to support classroom teachers and to model lessons.

Growing with Mathematics lessons begin with a number sense activity that has students orally communicate strategies to answer mathematical questions. Teachers use the overhead and manipulatives for each lesson. Teachers were given all necessary manipulatives to support the program and help students to understand concepts concretely. Another component of the program is the discussion book, which is used to explore mathematical concepts through regularly guided discussions and writings. Teachers have at least four math story books, where students can relate mathematics to real-world situations through literature. In the *Math from Many Cultures* big book, students explore the contributions that different cultures have made to mathematics that we use today. Children have individual student books and practice/homework books to provide follow-up activities to the concepts introduced in lessons.

When students transfer to another school in the district, their *Collins* and *Growing With Mathematics* folders go with their school records, following them to assure continuity in writing and math instruction.

Mary Ann Sharpe

Balanced literacy was introduced to Cobbet School in the year 2000 with the award of the Read Excellence grant. As a literacy coach, I conducted staff development seminars for both the school and district to address the administration of mandated assessments and their subsequent use to inform instruction. As a literacy coach, I was able to go into the classroom and model test administration. I was there to answer questions, clarify test procedures, collaborate on test interpretations and help the classroom teacher test. I felt my role eased teacher anxiety about the tests that were new to all. Since I was in the classroom testing at the same time as the teacher, I was always available to answer questions and concerns as well as help with the volume of testing itself.

My role as literacy coach also included setting up and explaining a balanced approach to literacy. It included collaboration on classroom reorganization to accommodate literacy centers and guided reading groups. It also included workshops on the four components of a balanced literacy program that included reading aloud, shared reading, guided reading and independent reading.

Since guided reading was new to the staff at Cobbet, I modeled many lessons where reading strategies were the focus. The aim was not to teach a child how to read a particular book, but rather to teach a child skills he could use to read any book. I modeled taking running records and analyzed them with teachers so future instruction would address student needs. I conferred with teachers about book leveling issues and student progress. I served as a partner with teachers to help struggling readers.

The concept of literacy centers was new to teachers as well, and it was my aim to cover the philosophy and benefits of heterogeneous cooperative learning. I worked closely with teachers to set up their literacy centers making sure that management ran smoothly and that the centers were curriculum related and addressed the Massachusetts state standards. Reflection was an integral part of this process, as problems were noted and solutions discussed. Teachers had the opportunity to visit other classrooms in the building where the program was running well. They “found” each other as sources of new ideas, sounding boards, and a way to share the work necessary in setting up a new program. Everyone, whether new or veteran, was new to balanced literacy. This opened classroom doors and an unprecedented sharing of ideas resulted.

My role as parent involvement coordinator allowed me to work with teachers and parents as partners in education. Grade level parent nights, fashioned in the style of literacy centers, highlighted the importance of parents reading to their children, MCAS testing and our new curriculum in math and reading. Parents and their children wrote books together, listened to read alouds, read recipes to create decorated gingerbread cookies,

and worked on mathematical estimation activities, to name a few. Every child attending received a book and, of course, had a chance to work with their parents on educational activities that were fun and easily duplicated at home.

My role as coach and mentor has supported literacy at many levels and has remained, basically, the same. The one major difference is that I am no longer bound by the constraints of the grant requirements, allowing me to work at all grade levels, in addition to grades K-3. This year, I am working with grade four teachers to implement balanced literacy. Whether in the classroom, or at a parent night, my goal is not only to make children readers, but also to make children readers for life.

Linda Lord

We are very fortunate that the former Superintendent of Schools began the implementation of initiatives throughout the district that have addressed the many needs and challenges of our school population. Thanks to the current Superintendent, these continue to be supported and maintained. Addressing language arts and mathematics in a systemic and systematic way, with plentiful resources, professional development, continuous site-based staff support, and accountability have been the *Pathways* that have led to the improved performance of our students.