



# WriteBoston Prospectus



## Description:

*WriteBoston, a city-wide initiative, seeks to foster a “culture of writing” at all public high schools in Boston. WriteBoston works to improve writing proficiency among high school students by matching teachers with expert writing coaches and creating opportunities for students to engage in the writing process with peers and community members.*

**Location:**  
Roxbury, MA

**Website:**  
www.writeboston.org

**Founded:** 2002

**Current Budget:** \$448,000

## Geography & People Served:

High school students and teachers in Boston Public Schools

## Social Problem:

- Forty percent of 10<sup>th</sup> graders in the Boston Public Schools failed to reach proficiency on the English Language Arts section of the 2005 MCAS exam.
- The achievement gap widens for students of color; 72% of African Americans and 73% of Hispanics failed to reach proficiency.
- Between 1996 and 2006, the average literacy rate required for all jobs rose by 14%.
- 71% of U.S. executives cited e-mail as the preferred method of communication in the workplace, up from 27% in 2001.

## Key Accomplishments & Social Impact:

- In the three years since its founding, WriteBoston has worked with 45 teachers and reached over 1,500 students through its programs.
- WriteBoston has developed an effective model, with 100% of teachers reporting that their writing instruction has improved.
- 100% of participating high schools contribute financial resources to support a portion of WriteBoston’s services.
- 350 WriteBoston students have published their work in magazines, online, newsletters, Boston *Teens in Print (T.i.P.)* and community newspapers.

## Goals – Two Years (July 2006 – June 2008):

- Add five schools, expanding to serve a total of 10 Boston public high schools.
- Reach 4,000 students and 75 teachers annually in 2008.

**Total Philanthropic Investment – Two Years:** \$1.1 million

**Social Innovator:**  
Betty Southwick

**Contact Information:**  
(617) 541-2604  
betty.southwick.jcs@ci.boston.ma.us

## Ways to Invest

### In-Kind Support

- Adding 1-2 board members with entrepreneurship /business expertise
- Finding partner companies whose employees will serve as volunteers for the e-pal program
- Developing a database and reporting system
- Developing and implementing a marketing communications strategy
- Redesigning the WriteBoston website to be interactive

### Financial Support

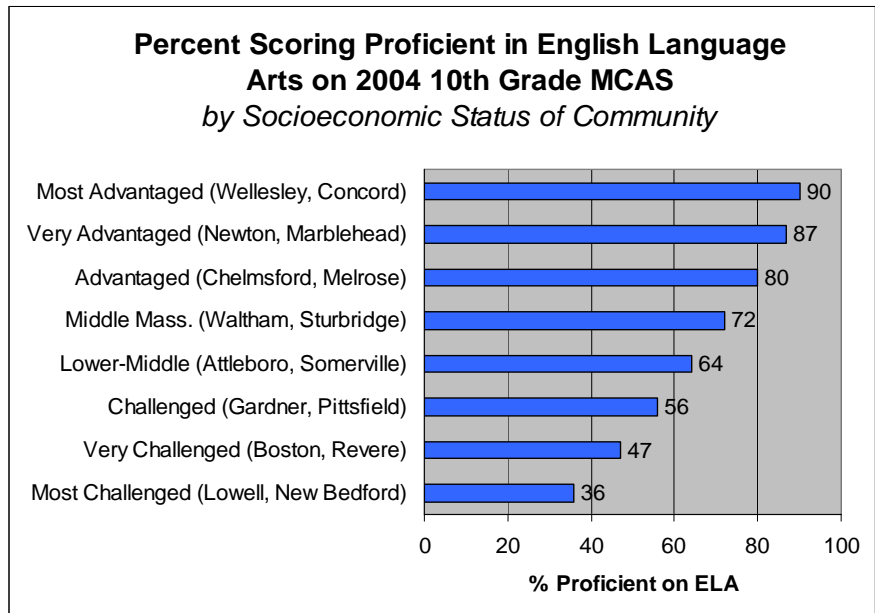
- \$50,000** Launch two new WriteBoston high schools
- \$25,000** Support for annual writing events at seven schools, reaching 2,000 students
- \$10,000** Sponsorship for 10 Summer Journalism Institute students
- \$5,000** Stipends for 5 *Teens in Print* interns
- \$1,000** Rhyming dictionaries, poetry books and books to support Author Series

**Need & Opportunity**

**Social Problem**

In 2005, 40% of 10<sup>th</sup> graders in the Boston Public Schools (BPS) failed to reach basic proficiency or above on the English and Language Arts section of the MCAS exam.<sup>1</sup> Among the most difficult areas for Boston students are the open-ended response questions, which require students to use writing to predict, explain, persuade or problem-solve to develop an answer. The educational achievement gap is more pronounced for students of color; 72% of African American and 73% of Hispanic 10<sup>th</sup> graders failed to reach proficiency last year.<sup>2</sup>

Despite significant investment in standards-based educational reform and a high school restructuring movement towards smaller learning communities, educational attainment in Boston continues to reflect family and community economic status.<sup>3</sup> Writing deficiencies are evident in standardized tests such as the MCAS, SAT, and ACT which are increasingly incorporating writing in their assessments and asking open-ended questions in place of multiple choice. Students who do not demonstrate good writing skills on these tests will have more difficulty gaining admission to college. The graph on the right compares high school MCAS scores in English Language Arts statewide. Boston students, along with other students living in areas considered “very challenged,” score much lower than their peers in wealthier communities.<sup>4</sup>



For an emerging minority-majority city like Boston, this data is particularly troubling because it means that its workforce will not be prepared for jobs in the modern economy. Increasingly, the labor market demands that workers have high-level skills. It is more difficult to enter a career of choice without first demonstrating competency in writing and writing is widely considered a “gateway” skill for higher paying jobs. Over the last ten years, the average literacy rate required for all occupations rose by 14%.<sup>5</sup> Written communication now dominates the workplace. A recent survey found that 71% of executives use email as their primary means of communication, up from 27% five years ago.<sup>6</sup>

**Root Cause Factors**

Boston has nearly 20,000 students attending 38 high schools. Boston Public Schools, like other large urban school districts, educates high numbers of low-income and limited English proficiency children compared to statewide averages. Seventy-five percent of BPS students are eligible to receive free and reduced meals and nearly 1 in 5 are limited-English proficient.<sup>7</sup>

National research shows that schools in high poverty areas and those with high minority enrollment are more likely to have a higher number of teachers who are less qualified and less experienced.<sup>8</sup> Lack of subject area expertise may mean that the teacher needs to spend more time keeping pace with core curriculum requirements,

<sup>1</sup> Boston Public Schools. MCAS Results by Program, 1998-2005. Available: <http://boston.k12.ma.us/gap/>

<sup>2</sup> Boston Public Schools. MCAS Results by Race, 1998-2005. Available: <http://boston.k12.ma.us/gap/>

<sup>3</sup> The Boston Indicators Project: Education, The Boston Foundation, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Source of data: Massachusetts 2020 (May 2005). Addressing the Barriers to Academic Achievement: Partnering for Boston Students' Success. p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Massachusetts 2020. (Jan 2006). Closing the Achievement Gap: The Importance of Additional Learning Time.

<sup>6</sup> Survey completed by OfficeTeam. Available: [www.officeteam.com](http://www.officeteam.com). (Jan 2006).

<sup>7</sup> The Boston Public Schools at a Glance, BPS Facts: No. 7, BPS Office of Communications, March 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Jerald, C. (Aug 2002). *All Talk, No Action: Putting An End to Out-of Field Teaching*, Education Trust.

leaving less time for writing which is not typically considered a core skill in subjects other than English. Schools with a high proportion of minority students and students with limited-English proficiency are also more likely to have larger class sizes, increasing teacher load and reducing their time for individual student attention.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, low-income students tend to move often, changing schools at triple the rate of students from high-income families, highlighting the need for a district-wide solution so that writing instruction is consistent for students moving from school to school.

These factors are compounded by mounting pressure on teachers to satisfy requirements from the federal No Child Left Behind policy and meet standards for high-stakes tests such as the MCAS. Many teachers view high-stakes tests as an imposition on their flexibility in the classroom to teach important skills such as writing because they need to focus on increasing test scores. During an in-service writing session, one Boston teacher stated, “We’re not really teaching them how to write. We’re teaching them to follow a format.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Current Landscape**

When new BPS teachers were surveyed, they often did not know of, or were dissatisfied with, sources of formal support designed to help them. The Boston Plan for Excellence recommends that all professional support be moved as close as possible to the school site. The smaller the unit of support and the closer it is to teachers’ everyday work, the more helpful and valuable it is to new teachers, and the more likely new teachers are inclined to continue working for BPS.<sup>11</sup>

After years of disappointing results from conventional professional development efforts and under rising accountability pressures, many districts are now hiring coaches to improve their schools.<sup>12</sup> Boston has tried a team-based form of professional development, the Collaborative Coaching and Learning (CCL) process. CCL teams at the high schools are multi-disciplinary groups of teachers drawn together once per week in eight-week cycles. Coaches are assigned to work with several teams, often across multiple schools. The group approach means that the learning experience is similar to being in a workshop. As a result, the content may not be tailored to the needs of individual teachers and cannot immediately be put into practice in the classroom.

Though school-based coaching initiatives, many of which focus on improving literacy, have been spreading quickly throughout the nation, WriteBoston has found no examples to date of coaching programs that focus exclusively on writing in high schools. Most writing programs aimed at high school students are considered “creative writing programs” (as opposed to writing as a fundamental skill across subjects) and work on generating a publication as the major component. There are also a large number of summer enrichment programs for high school juniors and seniors, typically offered by major universities.

### **Social Innovation in Action: The WriteBoston Model**

Founded in 2002, WriteBoston focuses solely on building a culture of writing in Boston Public High Schools. As shown in the graphic below, Writing Coaches are the centerpiece of the model, serving as the link between teachers, curricula and the series of authentic writing activities that WriteBoston brings to the school. Each WriteBoston High School has a part-time Writing Coach who works with teachers – new and experienced – to infuse the school with instructional resources, professional development opportunities, and encourage student participation in writing. WriteBoston Coaches partner with 4-6 selected teachers to model writing instruction across the school community and provide them with direct classroom support as needed. Coaches share best teaching practices for motivating students, incorporating volunteers, publishing student work and impacting writing abilities. They integrate their work with the school’s English Department and eventually participate on school-wide curriculum teams. All of WriteBoston’s current Writing Coaches have over ten years of teaching experience in high school English curricula.

WriteBoston also offers its high schools an array of programs that cultivate a culture of writing. The activities are designed to integrate with the curricula and engage students in the writing process with peers and community members. As an example, the WriteBoston E-Pals Program matches freshmen with a writing pal from local

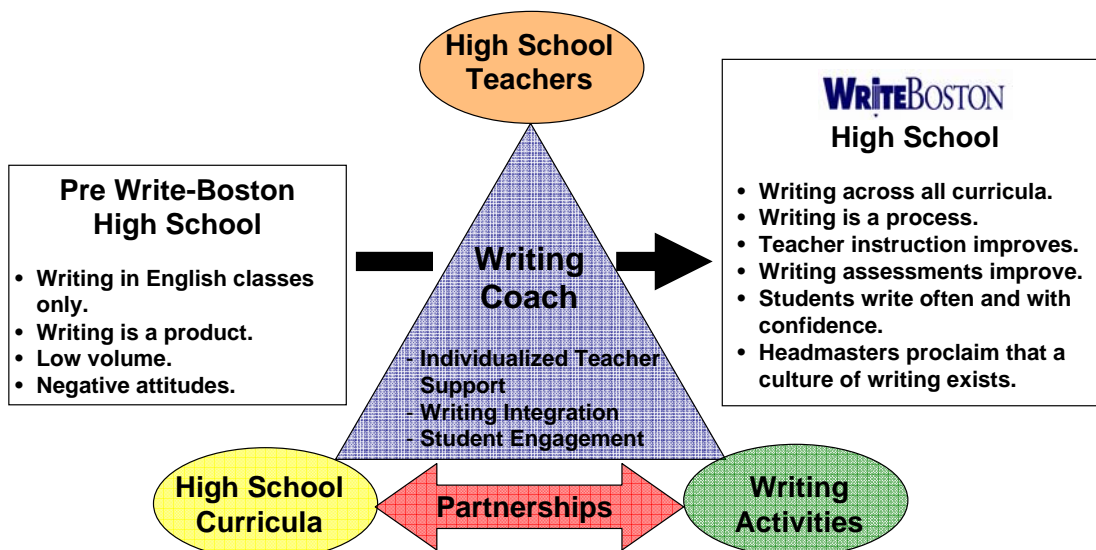
<sup>9</sup> Barton, P. (2003). *Parsing the Achievement Gap: Baselines Tracking Progress*, ETS.

<sup>10</sup> Luna, C., & Livingstone Turner, C. (2001). The Impact of MCAS: Teachers talk about high-stakes testing. *English Journal*, 91, 79-87.

<sup>11</sup> Boston Plan for Excellence (2005). *Building a Professional Teaching Corps in Boston: Survey of Teachers New to the BPS in SY2003-2004*.

<sup>12</sup> Richardson, J. (2004). *Coaches build strong teams*, National Staff Development Council.

companies, such as Robinson & Cole, LLP, and Old Mutual Asset Management. The students and their E-Pals read the same book and then “discuss” the book via email. One of WriteBoston’s goals is to have all freshmen at all of its schools participate in E-Pals. WriteBoston also facilitates author visits, journalism internships, poetry slams (in partnership with Starbucks®) and other writing events both during and after school. In addition, WriteBoston partners with The Boston Globe to publish *Teens in Print (T.i.P.)* a citywide newspaper by and for Boston public high school students.



WriteBoston is currently mapping the developmental path that its schools follow and evaluating the level of service needed to both establish and sustain a culture of writing. In one school that has been receiving WriteBoston services for three years, the Writing Coach now acts as a consultant when needed for her initial group of teachers and provides more substantial support for new teachers and teachers in non-English classes. Anecdotally, the Coach has also noticed differences in attitudes about writing, the writing process, and writing skills between students who have been in the WriteBoston environment and students who have recently transferred to the school. The Writing Coach works continually to integrate students into the WriteBoston writing culture.

### Organizational & Program Health Measures

WriteBoston is tracking the data below to measure the organization’s growth and development:

	2004	2005	2006E	2007E	2008E
Number of WriteBoston High Schools	2*	3	5	7	10
Number of students served	400	700	1,200	2,000	4,000
Number of teachers served	10	22	34	50	75
Number of volunteers	100	120	150	300	500
Number of E-Pal partner classrooms	2	2	4	8	12

\*In 2004, WriteBoston served 3 schools total – 2 high schools and 1 middle school.

### Social Impact

Based on research from the Harvard Children’s Initiative, WriteBoston has built on existing methodology to develop new ways to measurably impact students’ competency in writing. WriteBoston focuses on three core areas to improving students’ writing proficiency: 1) Increase the *volume* of student writing; 2) Change students’ *attitudes* about writing; and 3) Improve the quality of writing *instruction* for teachers.

WriteBoston tracks the data presented on the next page to measure its social impact. Data from teachers and students is gathered through pre- and post- surveys. To assess improvements in student writing, WriteBoston currently uses a 6-level rubric that looks at students’ purpose/focus, organization and details/evidence.

Social Impact Indicator	Current Result
<b>Volume</b>	
• Number of students published	<b>350</b>
<b>Attitude</b>	
• % of students who feel writing is important	<b>92%</b>
• % of students who want to be a better writer	<b>98%</b>
<b>Instruction</b>	
• % of teachers reporting that their writing instruction has improved	<b>100%</b>
• % of teachers reporting they learned new methods to assess students' writing	<b>86%</b>



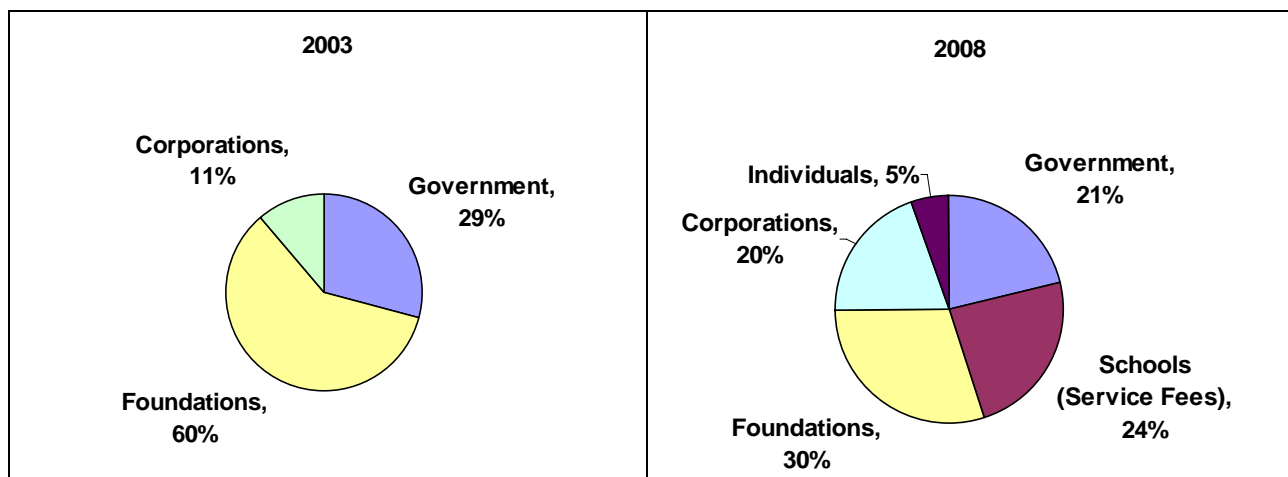
<b>Proficiency</b>	
• % of students who demonstrate improvements on writing assessments	<b>10-40%</b>
• % of students who agree with the statement, "I understand the process of pre-writing, drafting, editing, revising, and publishing."	<b>100%</b>
• % of students who agree with the statement, "When I write, I think about my ideas & how to organize my paper."	<b>80%</b>

### Financial Sustainability

WriteBoston currently has a total of 4.6 staff members: the Executive Director, three full-time Writing Coaches (one of whom manages *T.i.P.*), and one Writing Coach who works half-time with the Odyssey/South Boston after school writing program. Write Boston's goal is to add five schools over the next two years. To do so, they will need to add two Writing Coaches and a Project Coordinator to provide administrative support to the Executive Director. In addition, the Manager of *T.i.P.* will become a full-time position.

	2003	2004	2005	2006E	2007E	2008E
Total Budget	\$287,329	\$400,494	\$438,388	\$448,455	\$636,175	\$840,840
FTEs	3.6	4.6	4.6	4.6	6.1	8.1

After three years of testing and refining its model, Write Boston has achieved enough traction to generate financial support from headmasters who are interested in having WriteBoston's services at their schools. Headmasters pay a portion of the writing coaches' salaries, and WriteBoston seeks matching funds from private donors. These "school fees" will be an increasing source of revenue as WriteBoston serves more schools. During its early years, WriteBoston relied on a combination of government and foundation dollars. The City of Boston continues to provide financial support, primarily for the Executive Director's salary. While foundation grants will remain an important part of the funding mix, WriteBoston is planning to increase corporate support and build relationships with individual donors to provide greater long-term stability for the organization, as shown in the charts below.



## **Leadership**

Betty Southwick, Executive Director, has been with the organization since it was founded in March 2002, when she developed the WriteBoston model. Ms. Southwick brings business, management, and teaching experience to her work. She was a consultant on worklife and dependent care issues for major Fortune 500 companies for 10 years. She also brings experience from her most recent position as Director of the Employer Team at Boston Private Industry Council, where she was responsible for recruiting and matching employers and students in school-to-career opportunities. She brings management expertise, having managed a team of 50, as well as creating a new non-profit community center that grew to serve over 1,000 people per week. Ms. Southwick is also an educator with experience as a teacher and a guidance counselor, and she is the parent of two Boston Public School graduates.

WriteBoston is led by a Steering Committee of 14 members, representing a broad base of support for the organization. Individuals from the Boston Public Schools' leadership team, leaders from WriteBoston's partner agencies involved in school reform and after school programs, PEN New England authors, Harvard University academics, as well as community and parent organizations have all committed their time and energy to this project. The Executive Director reports directly to the Steering Committee, which provides strategic management and support for the organization.

## **Key Funders**

WriteBoston has received funding from a variety of sources, demonstrating support for the organization's approach and results to date:

- Boston Globe Foundation
- The Boston Foundation
- Caroline Knapp Family
- Citizens Bank
- City of Boston
- MA Department of Education (through Boston Centers for Youth and Families)
- Nellie Mae Education Foundation
- Sovereign Bank
- Starbucks® Foundation
- Verizon Foundation
- Houghton Mifflin