

Writing Skills, Confidence, and State Assessment Scores Rise for Students of All Abilities in California K–8 Elementary School

Over the years, Camino Union Elementary School relies more on Step Up to Writing to establish a common writing approach across grade levels and content areas.

THE CHALLENGE

Transforming reluctant writers into inspired writers at every grade level

In 2010, administrators at Camino Union Elementary School District (CUSD) in California were concerned about the large number of children entering their only elementary school writing below grade level and with a history of poor state assessment test scores.

At that time, of the 460 children attending CUSD, a rural, high-need district in El Dorado County, 59% were



Third graders at Camino Union Elementary School show off their Step Up to Writing skills with a presentation and a song in a special video. Watch the video here: <https://bit.ly/2x8AXTW>

socioeconomically disadvantaged, nearly 24% were Emergent Bilinguals (also known as English Language Learners), and a significant number lacked proficiency in writing. In 2021, these numbers remain similar, although the school has fewer students—now a total of 389. To meet the needs of all their students—including at-risk students, EBs, and gifted and talented students—school administrators set out to find a research-based solution that had a track record of transforming students' writing skills and that could be easily implemented at every level of instruction.

THE SOLUTION

Nurturing students throughout their school experience

Twelve years ago, after research and exploration, CUSD leaders selected Voyager Sopris Learning's Step Up to Writing®, an unparalleled writing solution designed for all learners in grades K–12. Since then, the program has consistently helped Camino Union K–8 students not only reach grade level but become proficient, motivated, high school-ready writers.

Dione Stinnett, a seventh-grade English teacher in the district, has seen the power of the program year after year.

Meeting students at their level and moving them forward

Stinnett explained that many students entered her class unable to answer a writing prompt. Once they understood the writing task, students still struggled with how to organize their thoughts and then with grammar issues, such as sentence structure, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. However, Step Up to Writing offers content and strategies to meet students at their level and move them forward with variation and differentiation based on each student's needs throughout 1,100+ strategies, across all four grade bands. Implemented in every grade, Step Up to Writing establishes a common writing approach across grade levels, content areas, and gives all students the benefit of this unique, differentiated, multisensory program.

"The program helps writers of all writing abilities," Stinnett added. "It's for the struggling writers and the sophisticated writers. It helps students across the curriculum, providing students a tool to accomplish all writing tasks in every subject."

Another aspect of Step Up to Writing that teachers appreciate is that it sequences nicely as students move



through each grade level, eliminating the need to recreate the wheel each year.

"By the time the students start the year with me, they are already familiar with the Step Up to Writing colors, transition words, and structure of writing," said Emily Walker, third-grade teacher. "They learn these strategies in first and second grades, so it is very consistent by the time they reach me."

Step Up to Writing applies to all writing formats. In Walker's class, students learn opinion writing, informational writing, and narrative writing, all supported by the SUTW curriculum.

"The students include more complex sentences, grammar skills, and details to the structure of writing that they are familiar with," Walker explained.

The district believes in the program so strongly that it now offers Step Up to Writing training to new teachers

in its schools. “Ensuring that the new teachers are trained also creates a consistency for our students in the structure of writing through the grade levels,” Walker observed.

“Before being trained on Step Up to Writing, I did not like teaching writing because I didn’t have the strategies to teach students to organize their writing,” Walker says. “The program’s resources provide explicit, systematic instruction that builds on the familiar color-coding organizational structure throughout the grade levels. Step Up to Writing has really helped me as a teacher—it gives me a structure to teach from, and I feel much more confident and have a clear focus.”

“Step Up to Writing has really helped me as a teacher—it gives me a structure to teach from, and I feel much more confident and have a clear focus.”

**—Emily Walker
Third-grade teacher**

For the 2020–21 school year, the county office also offered a “trainer-of-trainers” Step Up to Writing training. The idea, Walker said, “is that each school will send a few veteran teachers to the county training, and then we will come back to our school and train our teachers.”

THE RESULTS

Building confidence and proficiency, achieving higher scores on high-stakes assessments

After a dozen years of use at CUSD, administrators and teachers continue to see the power of Step Up to Writing in transforming the writing experience for students at all ages and levels.

The results of the consistent curriculum are apparent not only in students’ day-to-day work, but also on state assessment tests where students at all grade levels are now demonstrating their understanding of each type of writing. After working with Step Up to Writing in the classroom, students can successfully read text on the same topic from different sources, answer multiple-choice comprehension questions, and write a short essay based on a prompt.

“I have witnessed students with little to no writing skills transform into confident, organized writers by eighth grade,” Stinnett said. “Two of the biggest things I try to

stress with the lower grade levels is to use the same vernacular: ‘blues, greens, yellows, reds, etc.’ and to follow the format for paragraphs/essays I showed them from Step Up to Writing. When this happens, I see students



already knowing the words I say, and they feel more confident. I can build on this confidence and prior knowledge and teach more sophisticated writing. This is so evident when I acquire a new student in seventh grade with no Step Up to Writing background. I must catch them up on the vernacular and what those simplistic terms mean.”

However, Stinnett emphasized, “The best part is that they can take the tools learned from Step Up and use them in high school and college.”

Significantly, students at all levels are more successful on state assessment tests. According to California School Dashboard 2017 results, Camino Union received the highest performance level (blue) for English Language Arts, and its results were significantly higher than the state average.

Long-term value is evident—in student skills and confidence

After using the program consistently in the district for 12 years, Walker has found its value pays off year after year. “The students have a positive reaction to their achievement because of the familiarity and confidence in using the program’s strategies,” Walker said. “The students are engaged because it accesses their prior knowledge from previous grade levels, so they feel more comfortable and confident with the writing process and are able to organize their ideas into structured paragraphs and essays.”

“The best part is that they can take the tools learned from Step Up and use them in high school and college.”

**—Dione Stinnett
Seventh-grade teacher**

Beyond dramatically improved Dashboard progress, Stinnett points to the students’ increased confidence as the key.

“I have seen kids become less intimidated when they set out to write an essay or paragraph, and I have seen students less worried or stressed about having to answer writing prompts since the program’s strategies help them organize their thoughts,” Stinnett explained.

“Writing is subjective, and many students are uncomfortable with this. Step Up to Writing gives a little more structure and a writing formula for essays and paragraphs that they feel comfortable using, but still allows creativity,” she added. “When students have an easy tool to quickly organize thoughts, they are far more likely to complete assignments and feel more successful in school in every class.”

Teachers, too, are feeling an increased confidence with their instruction.



Contact Us:

800.956.2860

voyagersopris.com/literacy/step-up-to-writing