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## **Bonus passed to students Teachers pool cash, buy gift of writing**

By Monica Bryant, Staff Writer

OCALA- Teachers often make sacrifices for their students, and the faculty at Lake Weir Middle School is no different. Recently, they didn't hesitate when asked to pitch in to help improve their students' writing skills.

More than 80 faculty members gave a portion of their bonuses to purchase Vantage Learning's MY Access, a Web-based writing assessment and instructional tool.

It wasn't the first time faculty members gave up a portion of a state performance bonus to benefit the students. Last year, they gave a portion of their bonus to provide after-school transportation for students and for Read 180, a research-based reading program for students who read below grade level.

Schools that increase a letter grade or score an A under Gov. Jeb Bush's A-Plus Plan receive roughly \$100 per student for employee bonuses, classroom supplies or other purposes. Lake Weir Middle received \$130,000 under the plan, which rewards schools based on standardized test scores.

"We have a fantastic staff," said Joella Markham, an assistant principal at Lake Weir Middle, an A school for the last two years. "They thought that it was worthwhile because the standard for writing was being bumped up to a 3.5 from a 3.0 and we had nothing in place to address that change to help the kids make it.

"It was the entire faculty's decision," she said.

Markham said she found out about the program last year while attending a school board meeting in Marathon, where the program was being used. She liked what she heard and asked several of her language arts teachers to review it.

"I think it is the most wonderful tool I've come across in 23 years," said Fleeta Harris, an eighth grade language arts teacher who reviewed the program for Markham. "One advantage is less paper handling by the teacher. That mountain of paperwork that used to stare me in the face has diminished greatly.

"It is a tool. It doesn't take the place of instruction or replace handwritten essays because there's certainly a place for that," she said. "But with 100-plus students per teacher, per language arts class, we can have them do a lot more writing, which will increase their writing skills."

This is the first year students must meet the higher writing standards on the statewide Florida Writes initiative, an exam that measures students' ability to write responses on a specific topic within a set time frame. Students must score 3.5 on a 6-point scale.

Harris said 70 more students would have failed last year if graded under the higher standards. She said 40 percent of the students are scoring 4 and 5 since they started using the program in December.

Schools using the program throughout the country have seen dramatic gains in writing performance and improvement on statewide assessments, said Jason Policastro, account coordinator for Gregory FCA Communications, in a press release. Teachers who use the program have noticed a boost in student confidence and an increased level of enthusiasm towards subject matter, he said.

The program allows students to practice and revise their essays and receive immediate feedback on their strengths and weaknesses in five major areas: focus and meaning, organization, content and development, language use and style, and mechanics and conventions. The program costs approximately \$39 per student each year. Lake Weir Middle, the first school to use the program in the district, paid \$7,000. Dunnellon High School followed closely behind.

Superintendent of Schools Jim Yancey said he hasn't seen enough data to make a decision about purchasing the program for districtwide use. He said the school board will review it at the end of the year.

James Newkirk, a language arts teacher at Lake Weir, is already pleased with students' progress so far. He said getting immediate feedback is terrific, and the students challenge themselves to do better.

"Nearly all the students have improved since they started using the program," he said. "Seeing the growth is always encouraging. It's been a big help."

Some students were surprised to find out where the money came from.

"They really care," said 13-year-old Olivia Thomas, who said the program has helped her use better descriptive words. "I used to score a 4.5, now I get fives and sixes."

"It shows they're dedicated to our education," added 14-year-old William Coker. "It's made my vocabulary better."

Ethan Longacre, 14, said he's not sure he would have given up part of his bonus, but he's glad his teachers did.

"It's helped me," he said. "I used to get threes, now I get fours and fives."

Markham said the school is hosting a golf tournament on April 16 to raise money to pay for the program next year and to buy more computers for students to use. She said donations are being accepted for the silent auction, and hole sponsors and golfers are also needed.

"By investing that money, that bonus, we were helping ourselves as well as the kids. If our kids do better, then there will be a bonus again," Harris said. "Seven thousand dollars from 80 or 90 teachers was not that much, but what it did for these 1,300 kids is a remarkable thing.

"I would have given it all," she said.

Call Ron Uneberg at 671-6120 for information, to donate items or volunteer for the tournament.