

Program offers leg up on FCAT



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Santa Rosa County students are using an Internet instructional tool aimed at helping boost writing scores on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test.

About 10,000 students, mainly in grades six through 10, are using the latest version of MY Access!, which allows them to write an essay, type it into a computer and, within three seconds, receive feedback. They can work from school or home.

"The more you write and the more writing is assessed, the better the quality of writing," said Tim Wyrosdick, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. "This technology allows us to increase the amount and quality of our students' writing."

Santa Rosa's writing scores have been above the state average the past few years, but have hit a plateau, Wyrosdick said. Fourth-, eighth- and 10th-graders take the writing portion of FCAT, which will be a graduation requirement next year.

"We didn't see an increase, and we felt we should be progressing more," he said. "We've given so much attention to reading, and done well, and we need to put some emphasis on writing."

King Middle School served as a Santa Rosa School District test site last year, receiving the technology about a month before the FCAT was administered. The school saw some slight improvement in student scores on the state test.

However, Principal Charlotte Hatcher said King Middle had a big leap in its yearly progress under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, particularly among minority and Exceptional Student Education students.

"My ESE kids went from the 58th percentile to the 91st and my African-American students went from 70-plus percent to 100 percent making 11th grade (reading levels) or higher," Hatcher said.

Attitudes also have changed.

"I used to have children who didn't want to write - it was like pulling teeth," Hatcher said. "But with this technology, they are eager to write."

Students get feedback on focus and meaning, content and development, organization, language use and style and mechanics, and are shown ways to improve. They are scored on six levels and may revise the essays.

Writing was not a favorite subject for eighth-grader Timmy Wood, who now enjoys it.

"I didn't like to write because it's hard, and I don't have good handwriting," he said. "But

this helps me correct errors and it helps in other classes."

Assessments are set up so that teachers and principals know the areas where students need improvement.

"I can look at classes and individualize instruction as to what they are missing most," said Jessica Rowell, language arts department chairwoman at King Middle.

Wyrosdick said MY Access! does not replace teachers instructing students about writing.

"We don't just think this tool is the answer - teaching is the answer," he said. "This is not a cure-all, but it has produced significant results."