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Getting it write

A computerized writing coach? Local schools, including Warwick, Manheim Township and Penn Manor, are using new technology to teach an old lesson.

By Robyn Meadows
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LANCASTER COUNTY, PA - If you've ever written an essay and longed for the teacher to tell you specifically what you did wrong and what you did right, then it's a shame you are not in school now. A Web-based writing program called MY Access! — made by Vantage Learning of Newtown — is gaining popularity in Lancaster County schools.

It's one of the many ways schools are using technology to change the way teachers teach and students learn.

Warwick High School senior Celeste Rodriguez says MY Access! is "like having your own tutor or teacher right by your side..."

It works like this:

Students follow a writing prompt that appears on the computer screen: for example, "A Memorable Childhood Event."

They write about that event; and when they finish, the computer program scores it on either a 1-4 or 1-6 scale — similar to the method used on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment test. It also gives instant feedback: suggestions on how students can focus, improve the content, organize, use stronger words and improve grammar.

Last year, Warwick was the first district here to try MY Access!, signing up 28 students for a pilot program. It now has 573.

This year, the Penn Manor, Columbia, Elizabethtown and Manheim Township school districts are using it.

Other districts are also considering the program.

Warwick school officials tracked the 28 students in the pilot program to see if it made a difference.

They discovered that student scores on the writing portion of the state assessment test improved greatly.

All but one student moved into the proficient level, and that student improved from below basic to basic.

Rodriguez was one of the Warwick students helped by the program.

"I was very unorganized," she says. "My ideas on paper would skip around.

Now, "My ideas come a lot smoother. My sentences flow together."

Mary Hall, Warwick High School writing and English teacher, says the program has changed her classroom.

Because of the instant feedback, she says, she spends less time grading and more time teaching.

"It's given English teachers a life beyond grading papers," Hall says.

The writing program also helps her analyze the class as a whole, in order to spot weaknesses.

For example, if she sees that students are struggling to remain on topic, she can tailor her teaching to that issue.

"I'm not focusing my teaching on things they don't need," she says.

And by freeing up her time, the students write more.

Three Penn Manor High School teachers are using MY Access! in remedial writing classes. They say the program has perks and flaws.

"The computer doesn't always score in the same way a teacher would," says Cece O'Day, 10th grade English teacher. "Often the computer is more interested in the length than we are."

All three ask their students to print out their essays, so they can give them additional feedback beyond a computer's capabilities.

The teachers say they also don't like the fact that they can't provide the writing prompts themselves. They only can pick from the program's choices.

But the Penn Manor teachers say that already are seeing improvement from their students.

Earlier in the school year, the students took a pre-test and scored a 1 on a 1-4 scale.

Many have improved to 3s and 4s, says Penn Manor teacher Holly Astheimer.

And the program has other benefits such as multiple language dictionaries, which will come in handy for those learning the English language, she says.

Samantha Batista, a sophomore at Warwick, has no doubt that MY Access! works.

"I really have improved a lot," she says. "It helps you think about what you are writing, so that you are not babbling on."