

Online writing program shows results in Brooklyn student performance

Computers give instant feedback

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Brooklyn, Conn. — Sixth-grade students have been using an online writing program that gives them immediate feedback on their compositions since November, and they and teachers have already seen results.

“What it is, is artificial intelligence,” Brooklyn Middle School Principal Alan Yanku said.

The automated essay program, My Access, is a product of Vantage Learning, which the school has brought into classrooms with a \$50,000 state grant. The grant also purchased 25 laptops and a mobile lab, sixth-grade teacher Sharon Loughlin said.

Nearly 100 sixth-grade students spend between an hour and a half and two hours a week working on the program, Loughlin said.

Students said they write their essays on the site and take advantage of numerous editing and writing tips offered. These range from spelling and grammar checks to tips on how to organize the composition better and where to add more details.

The program highlights errors and show where improvements could be made. It provides definitions and examples of grammatical terms or alternative formatting.

“If there’s a grammar issue, it will help you understand it,” student Alexis LaPointe, 11, said. “I like this a lot, it’s really helpful.”

Student Amanda Haines, 11, said her skills have improved since using the program and the editing software points out fewer mistakes.

“I used to have my periods in the wrong places,” Haines said.

But student testimony and approval isn’t the only measuring stick for how well the program is working.

Loughlin said the essays are scored on a range from zero to six. When the program began in November, a sample of 25 students scored an average of 2.9 on an essay. In mid-January, that score rose to 4.3, Loughlin said.

“I was a total nonbeliever when we first started this,” Loughlin said. “But it provides kids with that immediate feedback that one teacher in a classroom of 20 kids couldn’t possibly (give).”

But for all its benefits, the program still requires human interaction. While students work on their laptops, teachers check in with each of them, answering questions and providing tips.

As Loughlin moved among the students Tuesday, she provided a few tips to student Billy Hagge, 12, about his creative license.

“You don’t have to do everything the program says — you’re the writer, it’s your piece,” Loughlin said. “You’re going to be making choices as a writer that this computer can’t do.”
