

School district expanding use of online writing tool

By Caroline An Staff Writer
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INDUSTRY - The Hacienda La Puente School District plans to spend nearly half a million dollars for an online writing tool that gives instant feedback to students preparing for state standards tests.

The My Access program allows students to submit parts of an essay or the whole thing on the Internet. The essays are then scored on a four-point or six-point rubric, which includes spelling, punctuation, language use and organization.

Shannon Ladwig, an English and social-science teacher at Cedar Lane Middle School, said it is the "tutoring" aspect of the program that is most appealing.

"It details what their deficiencies are and shows the students how they can improve," Ladwig said.

Judy Carlton, the district's director of instructional support teams and programs, said My Access - introduced three years ago for sixth through twelfth grades - will expand to include fifth-grade students.

Expanding availability through the \$486,000 investment was a result of a decision this year to provide students with laptops, and because some principals requested to have the program available to younger grades, officials said.

In all, 13,517 students will use My Access, Carlton said, potentially every day in class.

"We were limited before because some teachers had to wait for a laptop cart or take the class to the computer lab," she said.

Officials also attributed higher scores from several middle schools - some posting an increase of nearly 50 percent - on the writing portion of the 2007 California Standards Test to the program.

The program has essay topic suggestions - writing prompts - that teachers can use. The program also gives students some advice on improving their weak areas, such as grammar or spelling.

Stephen Hubert, a ninth-grader at Wilson High School, said he finds My Access useful.

He said his essays last year went through two My Access edits before a final draft was submitted online.

Stephen's weak areas were grammar-related, which came as a surprise. The tips were helpful, he said, and he has noticed some improvements on his writing.

"It is really easy to work with. They give you a grade and summary of what you can work on and improve," he said.

Ladwig said she uses it herself for shorter essays - 500 words or less - and does occasionally rely on prompts.

"It is really helpful, but it is not the only tool I use," she said.

Lanore Pearlman, chairwoman of the English department at Wilson High School, has used My Access for nearly four years and said the program has one hidden benefit.

In order to get a higher score, students have to write more.

"They do not realize that they are writing more and thus providing more information, which is good," Pearlman said.

The longtime teacher said she expects to see the program more in her daily classes because freshman students will have their school-furnished computer with them.

"I can stand there and look over their work, and we can talk over things together," she said.