

## Snazzy online program helping Lake Villa students

By Vincent Pierrì | Daily Herald Staff

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The assignment was clear, but not simple. A five-paragraph essay comparing and contrasting Eskimo culture with life in Midwestern United States. Not the easiest thing for a high school kid to do after a long, hot summer.

M.J. Jones, a student at Lakes Community High School in Lake Villa, wrestled with the words and wasn't satisfied with his composition. But after submitting his piece for computer analysis, the junior was happy to apply the suggested changes.

"This is great," he said. "I'd want my kids to use this."

As the 2008-09 academic year gets under way, administrators in Antioch-Lake Villa Area High School District 117 are excited about starting a second year with the new online writing evaluation service.

Since the high schools began using MY Access! last year, the web-based writing evaluation program is getting good marks from students and staff.

Students can access the Web site from anywhere there's an Internet connection. After logging in, they compose their paper within the program. Once the essay is submitted, they receive an almost instant evaluation and score. Suggestions on how to clarify fuzzy ideas and prompts to improve writing style are given along with the expected spell-checks.

Lakes High School principal Jim McKay says the \$35,000 annual subscription cost is money well spent. "The sheer number of teachers using the program is phenomenal. The benefit to the students is well worth it."

Rebecca Holst agrees. The head of the social studies department, Holst is a huge fan of My Access!. "This program goes well beyond Word," she said referring to the popular word processing program. "It evaluates for meaning, clarity of thought, voice and style."

McKay said students used it more than 13,000 times last year. He said that level of student participation is testimony to its value and ease of use.

It's too early to tell if the program is having a quantifiable impact on state test scores. But McKay says it's not all about numbers. "Writing requires a high order of thinking," he said. "If we can improve on this, it affects everything else positively."

The district will make a "major expansion" in terms of writing assignments this year. And that's across all curriculum from math to fine arts. McKay says much of the grunt work related to grading writing assignments is done by the student now.

Though not replacing the hard work teachers expend on grading papers, the program helps students correct major flaws before they turn in the paper. That gives teachers more incentive to assign essays.

McKay says he's not aware of many other area schools using the service but expects it will catch on quickly. "This comes up at principal's meetings I attend," he said. "The interest level is definitely increasing."