

# The new school

by SEPP JANNOTTA - Ravalli Republic | Posted: Tuesday, May 4, 2010 12:00 am

Kathleen Dent wants to see Hamilton students make the most of the new Web-based tools that are transforming the American classroom.

Where schools were run on a model that has one teacher, chalk or dry erase pen in hand, standing in front of 20 to 30 students, technology now allows that same teacher to track students' individual progress in real time.

As curriculum director for the Hamilton School District, Dent has watched as the technological tools available to teachers have grown in sophistication. The online lesson plans and tests (often standard with many textbooks), multimedia demonstrations and PowerPoint displays are now ubiquitous in a savvy educator's tool box.

The next step in the high-tech evolution of American schools, the use of powerful online teaching programs - Dent signed Hamilton Middle School onto a state Office of Public Instruction-initiated pilot project to test a prompt-driven writing tutorial called My Access - is central the future of education, Dent said.

"Now there are more tools out there for teachers to use for their own planning of instruction and for assessment of their students and for tracking those assessment results," Dent said. "These tools allow teachers to make better decisions about what they are going to teach. The most powerful part of it is that instantaneous knowledge of what the students are knowing ... which allows them to remediate a problem or expand on a point that they have made in class. That's what's so exciting."

The My Access program, which has been available during this school year to 72 sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade students in Hamilton, is a perfect example of this revolution, Dent said.

Jody Parsons, a seventh-grade English teacher at Hamilton Middle School, couldn't agree more, saying that she hopes that the school would subscribe to the program for all its students in years to come.

"I think the kids would feel the same way," Parsons said. "The kids are asking about it, asking me 'are we going to have My Access next year?' They're hoping."

Parsons said the end result for those who have been working with My Access has been a marked improvement in writing proficiency.

"It is a tool," Parsons said. "It is not a save-all, solve-all kind of thing. But it is an exceptional tool and there is so much that the kids get from it."

Using a pre-generated writing prompt or an assignment from the teacher, students composing an essay on My Access are encouraged to revise their writing and work through errors the program flags (it doesn't offer corrections). They then receive a score based on their ability to achieve their narrative or persuasive thesis, as well as their essay's grammatical nuts and bolts, organization, content and overall writing proficiency.

For the students, there is a little video-game competitiveness involved, as each revision is a chance to watch their score improve.

In Parsons' English class there was plenty of discussion about those scores.

"The score gets better because you can do the My Tutor (feature)," said seventh grader Adam Chambers. "It helps you with what (corrections) you need to do and what your pre-write (organization) should be."

Using features that help them to organize narrative or persuasive essays, as well as how to research different topics, students have a tutorial that essentially maps out the writing process from A to Z and rewards revision that improves the final product.

Chambers said there is satisfaction in watching his score jump.

Both students and teachers can access their online My Access profile from anywhere and teachers can leave comments on student work.

Teachers can also increase the degree of sophistication or alter the focal point in the programs' feedback for students. My Access is designed for fourth through 12 grade levels.

Teachers benefit from being able to take into account the programs' charted results from a particular class, a near-instant feedback that

gives teachers the chance to redouble their efforts in the areas of writing that give students the most trouble, Parsons said. The key is that teachers can then teach the aspects of writing that a given group needs.

Answering the question on the lips of the devil's advocate, Parsons said there is still plenty of teaching going on, including taking all those assignments home and adding comments and grades to the work that had been scored by the computer.

"I think the fear is that we're using this as a grading program," Parsons said. "And that's not it.... What it does is helps us as teachers to guide us into what the kids' needs are. So I don't see it as replacement (for teachers) by any means. But it does make my job easier."

Dent agreed.

"As I've watched it roll out this year, I've actually watched the teachers get more involved with individual students to help them get what they need," Dent said. "Because the computers are actually freeing up the teachers' time, they can talk to individual students and focus on individual instruction."

As opposed to "just teaching to the middle," that kind of instruction typically takes a student to a greater depth in understanding and assimilation of a subject, Dent said.

Given that the state Office of Public Instruction is pressing schools to incorporate more of this kind of technology, Dent said it makes sense for schools and their teachers to embrace the possibilities these kind of programs offer.

In fact, Dent said, the shift toward the high-tech classroom has been underway for some time.

"Most of our teachers are trying to implement some technology into their content at least part of the time," Dent said. "But you've got to have the technological infrastructure to go with it.... But this is part of the long-range planning at the state level and we are being encouraged more and more and more to incorporate these things in each curriculum area."

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