

Fleming writers get coaching help from computer

School considers it a supplement to good teaching

By Patti Richter
of the Daily Courier

MERLIN — Chris Jelderks, an English teacher at Fleming Middle School, knows how frustrating it can be for his students — about 150 sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders — to wait up to two weeks to get an essay back.

The graded work includes feedback about what is good and what needs more work. In the meantime, they have turned in more assignments and repeated some of the mistakes.

“It’s hard for them. But there are only so many hours during the day,” he said. “I do the best I can.”

But things have changed this year.

Fleming is offering an online pilot program called My Access that allows students to upload their essays. The computer program edits the essays, pointing out spelling and grammatical errors. It can even question whether a specific sentence makes sense. Teachers can allow students to make changes to their work and re-submit it. Eventually, however, the work is still graded by the teacher.

My Access is funded by part of the school’s \$3,000 prize money it received from the Oregon Department of Education when it was named one of the state’s seven “champion schools” last year.

Five years ago, online essay grading programs were not very accurate or helpful, said Principal Greg Tardieu. Advances in technology have changed that, however.

The school has more than 400 students but was only able to purchase



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Fleming Middle School eighth-grader Sam Plourd, far right, asks teacher Chris Jelderks a question about one of the points MyAccess made about his essay. Also working on their essays using MyAccess are Cameron Lyon, next to Plourd, and Sean Cole, in the back row. MyAccess is a new online program to help students edit and improve their essays.

300 subscriptions, which cost \$20 each, to the program for most of Fleming’s sixth- and seventh-graders, and a few eighth-graders. Tardieu hopes the program will help catapult the school’s writing scores past the point where 70 percent of the student body is meeting or exceeding state standards.

“It’s not expensive but it does add

up fast,” he said. “But if it gets the results we think it will, it is going to be justifiable.”

Fleming will test that theory this spring. Students wrote an essay in the fall and it was graded by teachers. They will do another one this spring and the two will be compared to see what students have learned and if they have improved.

“There are lots of possibilities ... if it works,” Tardieu added.

Jelderks likes the program because it gives students instant feedback. They can also edit their papers as much as they want up to the due date.

“One of the hardest things for me as a teacher is getting students to edit their work more than once,” he

said. “They think it is fine the way it is when they hand it in. But now they are seeing the mistakes and editing their work five or six times — I had one kid submit an essay 11 times — before I actually get the one that I’ll grade. I’m seeing work being edited more than I ever have in the past.”

The program lets him focus on the students who need help and target specific areas where students are struggling.

“This doesn’t replace good teaching. It’s a supplement,” he said. “But it is a great asset for me. It helps me get more writing from my students and teaches them better editing skills. And there is no question the essays they submit are far better than they would have been.”

Melodie Martz is new to the program but the eighth-grader is already a fan.

“I don’t write too well,” she said. “This shows me what I’m doing wrong so I can go fix it. That is a lot more helpful to me than having to wait to get my essay back in a few weeks.”

Classmate Sam Plourd agreed, saying he has been learning how to edit his work because of it. He normally finds the spelling errors quicker and he can already tell when he’s written a run-on sentence.

“I like getting that second opinion,” he said. “My writing is a lot better now.”

It has been a while since parent Kathleen Plourd was in eighth-grade English and she had forgotten more of it than she cares to admit. For her, My Access, has been such a big help she is even willing to pay so her son can continue to use it. He has become more independent in doing his own work because of it.

“It tells him what is wrong and then lets him figure out how to fix it. It doesn’t give him the answers,” she added. “It’s kind of a game now. I think that’s why he likes it so much. But if that is what it takes to make him a better writer, I’m all for it.”