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## Schools: Online writing tool boosts test scores

BY: JUAN ANTONIO LIZAMA TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

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Last school year, five Chesterfield County middle schools piloted an online essay-grading tool and saw as much as 21 percent gains on eighth-graders' Standards of Learning writing test scores.

Last week, the School Board authorized the school system to spend about \$45,000 to buy licenses for all eighth-graders to use the MyAccess online writing tool to supplement writing instruction, and an additional \$5,000 to train teachers. The funds to purchase 3,000 licenses will come from the county schools' instructional operating funds and federal grants.

The Central Virginia Consortium for Transforming Teaching and Learning through Technology, which is made up of 15 school districts, purchased licenses for MyAccess two years ago and piloted the program in middle schools in some of the districts.

Initially, each middle school in the consortium received 50 licenses at no cost, said Manorama Talaiver, director of the Institute for Teaching through Technology & Innovative Practices at Longwood University, which oversees the consortium. Last year, that number was increased to 100 licenses per middle school.

Some school districts in the consortium, including Hanover, Goochland, Louisa, Hopewell and Powhatan county schools and Richmond schools, have already bought additional licenses, she said.

Last year, the Chesterfield school system received 1,400 licenses from the consortium at no cost and piloted the program in eighth-grade classes at Carver, Falling Creek, Manchester, Matoaca and Providence middle schools. The licenses that the system will purchase will be in addition to those the district already has.

Eighth-graders were targeted because they have struggled with the SOL writing test, said Marshall W. Trammell Jr., Chesterfield School Board chairman.

"Once we saw how important this tool is and how it prepared students for high school and beyond, we thought it was something that was worth doing," he said.

Entire eighth-grade classes that regularly used the online scoring tool showed gains of 13 to 21 percent in the mean SOL writing test, Trammell said.

"We thought that's tremendous information," he said. "It's very powerful."

Students showed the greatest improvement in written expression and composition, with smaller gains in writing usage and mechanics, Trammell said.

MyAccess offers students more than 200 writing topics. The system scores and grades student essays instantly on grammar, content and focus, and gives feedback on their strengths and weaknesses, Talaiver said. Students can resubmit their work with revisions and the feedback. The scoring aligns with the SOL writing tests.

If teachers use a writing topic that's not in the system, a person would grade those papers, Talaiver said.

Teachers used the results to improve writing instruction in their classrooms, she said. The online tool also frees up time that teachers spend grading papers and encourages them to spend more time on developing instructional strategies, Talaiver said.

"It helps the teacher to really focus on the content of writing," she said. "The teacher is able to really teach about writing."

Once students are set up in the system, they can access the Web program from home or school. "We have found out that students want to beat the system and improve their writing, so they write more," she said.

In Chesterfield, teachers and administrators will monitor the implementation of MyAccess in schools, Trammell said. "We want to make sure that we still continue to show positive results," he said.

Chesterfield school officials will evaluate the effectiveness of the tool in part based on the results from the spring 2010 SOL writing test.

Talaiver has a lot of anecdotal evidence from teachers about how the Web writing tool helps students improve their SOL writing test scores, but now the consortium is collecting data, she said.

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