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Writing skills get a boost

Educators want Legislature to fund software in all districts

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PLEASANT GROVE - After just two years using new writing software in her classes at Pleasant Grove Junior High School, Jenny Reuel noticed a remarkable improvement in her students' writing skills.

One student narrative in particular stood out. Asked to pen an imaginative narrative about waking up to find herself transformed into a bird, one of Reuel's students described in vivid detail how plumage took root on her arms and her nose became a beak. Then she related where she flew and what she saw.

"It was pretty remarkable," Reuel said.

Today the "My Access" writing software gracing computer screens in Reuel's class, and in the classrooms of approximately half of Utah school districts, is so popular among teachers and students the Utah State Office of Education hopes lawmakers will find money enough for it to take flight in the remaining districts.

After a presentation of the software's virtues to a group of state education officials and lawmakers Thursday morning at Pleasant Grove Jr. High, all involved agreed that the software program hit the sweet spot of educational products so many others miss. The "My Access" program - which offers students immediate feedback on five crucial elements of effective writing skills - is popular among teachers, cost-effective, a hit with students and, most important, effective at improving students' writing scores. The software program was first introduced in the Alpine School District five years ago. The district found that the percentage of students passing the state writing exam's proficiency mark at the sixth, ninth and 10th grades increased from 50 percent to 78 percent after the program was introduced.

"I'd like to see it expanded to the entire state," said Sen. Howard Stephenson, R-Draper, co-chairman of the Legislature's public education appropriations standing committee. "It's a very expensive [writing] exam we've got going now."

With Utah students' writing scores at their lowest in 2003, but rising slowly, plus anxiety among educators about how text messaging and other technology may adversely affect grammar and articulation among the young, writing as an academic skill has taken center stage like never before.

"Strong writing skills are essential. They are not an option for today's students," College Board President Gaston Caperton said in a report released this week. Released in conjunction with The Pew Internet & American Life Project, the study found that the majority of teens surveyed believed their writing would improve if teachers let them pick "topics relevant to their own lives and experiences."

It also found that while the majority of teens recognize the need to write well because of their use of the Internet and text messaging, they do not believe their style of writing across these media has influenced their "formal writing." At the same time, they realize the two writing styles as different, and admit the stylistic quirks of writing for the Internet and text messages can slip into school assignments.

Unlike teacher-corrected writing assignments, the "My Access" program offers students immediate feedback on the quality of their writing's focus, content development, organization, language style and conventions. At the same time, the program enhances instruction without replacing it - a selling point for educators wary of computers replacing teachers.

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More findings

* Eighty-seven percent of 700 U.S. teens between the ages of 12 and 17 use an electronic device to communicate, but 60 percent of them don't believe this kind of communication passes for "writing."

* More than half of those teenagers say they edit and revise their writing more when using a computer. Still, 63 percent

say using a computer to write makes no difference in how well they write.

* Eighty-two percent of teenagers said if teachers assigned them more writing exercises, their writing would improve.

Source: Pew Internet/College Board National Commission on Writing