

School essays made easy Computer program helps students shape their writing

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If Alegra Holt had \$100, she would spend \$1 on candy, buy some clothes, give some to charity and see if she had enough left to buy a Chihuahua.

If Alegra had to write a short essay on what she'd do if she had \$100, she'd sign on to a program called My Access, using a computer in the basement computer lab of Carleton Elementary School, 4116 W. Silver Spring Drive.

The 10-year-old fifth-grader at Carleton would fill in blanks in a "cluster web" on her screen to begin shaping her essay. From the central idea of using \$100, she would put "buy candy" in one branch of the web, with what kind of candy or what store she'd go to in sub-branches, then do the same in other branches for her other plans.

Then she'd begin to type the assignment in sentences and paragraphs.

And at most any time, she could click on functions such as "My Tutor" or "My Editor" and get instant responses, with coaching on what she could do to improve what was on her screen, corrections of spelling or grammar errors and other help. With one click, she could get scores ranging from zero to six on different elements of her assignment, including focus, content development, organization and language style.

In fact, that's exactly what Alegra and about two dozen of her classmates were doing on a recent morning at the school, and what they've been doing at least once a week during the second semester.

It is part of the introduction of My Access, a commercial product of Vantage Learning, into 132 schools in the Milwaukee Public Schools system at a cost of \$2.8 million over seven years. The goal is to improve student writing, providing more feedback and advice - and much more quickly - than a teacher alone can provide and motivating the students to do more revising to raise their scores.

Added incentive

As Patrice Ball, English language arts specialist for MPS, put it, "I've never seen students submit 20-plus drafts of a paper that was written with pen and pencil, and they're willing to do that online."

For some of the students in Alegra's class, it appeared to be fun to do some touching up on a paragraph, click the mouse and see that their scores had improved. Their teacher, Tracy Revels, said students didn't seem to resist the advice they get from a computer the way they sometimes resent what a teacher has to say.

Ball said the immediate feedback is a key to the way My Access works.

"In the 21st century world, students have immediate feedback when they work on video games, and they're used to that," she said.

The program allows teachers to oversee what each student is doing, as they are doing it - at least when the software and the teacher's computer ability are on track. Teachers also can get to students' work from home computers and enter their own comments and corrections for the kids to review later.

The school's literacy coach, Natasha Harris, and Principal Leea Power can do the same, reading over the shoulders, electronically speaking, of every student using the software. Each said that is giving them much more awareness of how kids are doing and involvement in improving writing.

Ball can do the same.

My Access



Photos/Jack Orton

Fifth-grader Edward Stray, 11, works on the class writing assignment, "If I Had A Hundred Dollars," at Carleton Elementary School in Milwaukee last week, with the help of a computer program called My Access.



My Access is a writing tutorial from Vantage Learning that is being used in 132 schools in the MPS system.

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"Every Sunday night, My Access sends me a report - it comes right to my e-mail - and I can drill down as much as I want," looking at results in specific schools, classes or even for specific students throughout MPS, she said.

The focus on writing comes when MPS students clearly need to do better. In test results released recently by the state Department of Public Instruction, 53% of fourth-graders and 37% of eighth-graders were rated proficient or advanced in language arts, the test that covers skills used in writing.

Ball said she was also pleased to have a new tool available to encourage writing at a time when the federal No Child Left Behind act has moved many school districts around the country to focus strongly on reading and math, reducing attention to other academic areas, including writing. The federal law's system for determining whether schools are making adequate progress is based primarily on reading and math scores.

Ball said the use of My Access is not intended to replace teachers, but to broaden the impact they can have and to provide a balanced approach to learning.

In addition to My Access, Carleton has done such things this year as teaching kids a rap, complete with dance motions, that emphasizes elements of good writing. And the school recently had its own version of the Oscars, complete with a red carpet, to honor student writing. Alegra received one of the top awards.

Ball said some schools have taken to using the program better than others and there have been some lessons learned about implementation. For example, turnover among teachers who were trained to teach other teachers how to use the software has been higher than expected and modifications have been necessary. In many MPS schools, the adequacy and availability of computers is also an issue.

What grade would she give the first year of My Access? "I would say 'B,' " said Ball. "I think it's as best as can be expected."
