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Teachers purchase Web-based writing tool for their students

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George Horsford / Daily Sun

Lake Weir Middle School eighth-grade students, left to right, Brittany Parrish, Joseph Boothe, and Kyle Besley, use the computer program My Access! to improve their writing skills for the FCAT. Language arts teacher Fleeta Harris helps the students learn the program.

Preparing for the FCAT

Teachers purchase Web-based writing tool for students at Lake Weir Middle School.

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Program prepares them for FCAT tests

By SEAN MAXFIELD
DAILY SUN

SUMMERFIELD — Wanting to help their students score higher on the FCAT, teachers at Lake Weir Middle School decided to get together and spend their own money to provide their students with a Web-based writing tool that has inspired them to write better.

Joella Markham, the assistant principal at Lake Weir, said it's been a good thing for teachers and students.

"It's gotten them (the students) excited about writing," Markham said. "It's taught them to help one another."

The tool is called "My Access!" According to the program's Web site, "My Access!" scores students' essays instantly and provides individualized instruction that motivates students to improve their writing skills. Students can submit and resubmit after each writing sample.

It also helps teachers instruct students on their writing and gives scores for major writing categories such as focus and meaning, organization, content and development, languages and style and mechanics and conventions.

Jason Policastro, an account coordinator involved with the Web-based program, indicated that students must score higher to pass the FCAT this year and he com-

TO LEARN MORE

To find out more about this writing tool, log on the Web and type www.VantageLearning.com.

mended the Lake Weir staff for using their own money to purchase the program.

"The efforts of the Lake Weir staff are in direct response to the challenge of achieving higher test scores under the statewide Florida Writes! initiative," Policastro said.

"Implemented in 1990 to measure students' ability to write responses on a designated topic within a set testing period, this year the state increased the mandated passing score on the Florida Writes! exam from a 3 to a 3.5 on a 6-point scale. Although Lake Weir already has an A+ rating based on outstanding performances on previous exams, the school's faculty wants to ensure that their students are prepared to face an even tougher challenge now that Florida has raised the bar on students' writing requirements."

Markham had looked at the program and had other teachers look at it. They agreed to chip in together and purchase it.

"It's a Web-based program with a one-year license," she said.

Markham added that the students also have an opportunity to use the program at home.

The program was initiated

for Lake Weir students in December, and they took the FCAT in February.

The teachers are looking forward to seeing what effect the Web-based helper will have on their students' writing in the short- and the long-term. Markham has already seen benefits for the students.

"By this time next year, we expect to see a difference (in the FCAT scores)," she said. "Their daily writing has improved."

Teachers at Lake Weir, like Lani Beechen, have enjoyed using the writing tool, and it has helped the students.

"This is the best writing tool I've seen in over 22 years of teaching," Beechen, a language arts teacher, said. "The unique format allows students to feel as if they are not alone in the task of writing. Students who were having trouble writing short sentences are now producing multiple-paragraph, long-form essays."

Principal Walt Miller knew it was a good thing when he overheard students talking as they waited for their rides after school.

"Students were excited about using this Web site for writing," he said. "I am most pleased."

The school is already making plans to raise money to purchase the program for next year.

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