

Grant helps schools implement writing technology

Contributed by Sean Green
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Bossier Schools gets \$53,250 to pay for new writing software in district's middle schools

Bossier Parish Schools received a grant Thursday that will help make educating children a little easier.

The district received over \$53,000 in educational technology funding as a part of the Vantage Learning Keystone Partner Program.

This program will award over half a million dollars in grants, endowments, and subsidies to 10 districts throughout the nation to install their signature MY Access! writing program.

MY Access! is a web-based instructional writing product designed to help students improve their writing proficiency and overall results on mandatory state exams. It provides students enrolled in grades four through 12 with the opportunity to develop their writing skills within an electronic portfolio-based environment. Teachers can create a writing assignment from a large pool of over 700 unique prompts that are aligned to state standards and provide cross-curricular writing opportunities in areas such as science, math and social studies.

"We're aiming to drive student achievement through the use of writing nation-wide. If you look at research, the best school districts in the country are using writing very aggressively across all curriculum and grade levels and that's what our software facilitates," said Fred Bentsen, vice president of sales for Vantage Learning.

The software provides both an overall score and analytical scores in the areas of Focus and Meaning, Content and Development, Organization, Language Use and Style and Mechanics and Conventions. Teachers have access to a variety of reports to view the students' writing and feedback in almost any manner.

"We think it's a solution for every child, whether they are struggling or not struggling, we think they can get better regardless of their starting point," said Sally Namie, assistant superintendent of curriculum for Bossier Parish schools.

Although scores are good, the administration saw room for improvement in the area of writing.

"We were looking for a program that would give immediate feedback to students like a videogame would. It can have an impact in improving our writing scores and preparing students for the long term, either in the work place or college," said Namie.

Bentensen described the software as student and teacher friendly. The program was started this week, district wide in eighth grade and at Benton Elementary and Princeton schools.

"When we first saw the program, we had an immediate gut feeling that this was going to be successful for our kids. Our teachers had that same feeling when they went through training two weeks ago," Namie said.

Jodi Craig, eighth grade literature teacher at Benton Middle School, said that students are already "addicted" to the program.

"They're more motivated, a lot of students don't want to write and now they're begging to come every day," Craig said.

According to Vantage Learning, data at schools across the country shows that MY Access! works. The A.J. Moore Academy in Waco, Texas, saw passing scores on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills increase between 10 and 22 percent. At Marion Junior High School in Marion, Ark., 69 percent of its eighth graders scored proficient or

advanced on the state literary proficiency exam. At the Oasis School in Escambia County, Fla., 89 percent of students scored proficient on the writing portion of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) after the first year of use.

Vantage is building upon the Enhancing Education Through Technology (EETT) program that was authorized in 2002 as part of the Bush-era No Child Left Behind law. Since that time, funding has steadily declined by 62 percent to \$267.5 million in 2008 from \$700.5 million six years earlier. The economic-stimulus package signed into law this past February by President Obama restored \$650 million in funding to the program, to be used over the next two school years. Vantage will add to these funds by kicking off their program this month and distributing funding to 10 school districts throughout the country.

The Keystone Partner Program will give significant educational funding to districts throughout the country that are dealing with the current economy and increased budget restrictions as they look to incorporate educational technology into the classroom for this coming school year.

"We set up an education initiative to do grants with our partners, especially with the economy and we saw a need where districts want to do more but funds are tight," said Bentensen.