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Developing leadership and unity
within our membership to achieve the
continuous improvement of public education

It takes a Vantage village to raise a writer

by Wendy Correll

Vantage Learning's MY Access! helped Ann Arbor School District students rev up their writing scores.

Helping students improve their writing skills is one of the greatest challenges teachers face today. It's already difficult for teachers to properly evaluate different students' writing. And large class sizes, lack of resources, and limited class time only compound the challenge.

Ann Arbor public school teachers were dealing with these problems every day. They struggled to keep students' motivation for learning high. Frustrated students had difficulty grasping the subject matter without intense, personalized attention. And students' writing test scores suffered. Educators knew something had to be done.

So in 2007, the Ann Arbor Public Schools Educational Foundation (AAPSEF) stepped in. AAPSEF is an independent, community-based, non-profit organization created to help Ann Arbor students achieve their highest potential. The group provides support for new educational opportunities that can't be funded through the state's education budget.

To respond to the growing writing problem, the AAPSEF established a community-wide initiative to boost students' literacy and writing skills. They dubbed it the *Village to Raise a Writer* program. The program worked by bringing teachers and volunteers together to find and implement effective educational techniques and technologies.

One technology quickly appeared on their radar: Vantage Learning's MY Access!. Some 2,000 Ann Arbor students had been using the critically acclaimed writing program since 2004, and the teachers involved lauded its ability to build better writers and raise test scores. They reported MY Access! was engaging students with immediate, accurate feedback on their work; and motivating them with human-like interactivity.

The Web-based program works by scoring students essays on focus and meaning, organization, content and development, language use and style, mechanics and conventions, and overall writing proficiency. Students' writing is analyzed for over 350 semantic, syntactic, and discourse characteristics.

The essays are instantly scored using artificial intelligence, so students are engaged and motivated by immediate remedial instruction. In fact, teachers say MY Access! scores are more accurate than expert human scorers, giving educators the time and confidence to focus on one-on-one instruction instead of paper-grading.

Students can gauge their own progress through a rubric-scoring method, which lets teachers provide personalized instruction to the students who need it most. With multilingual support in five languages, MY Access! can also address the growing number of English as a Second Language (ESL) students. A translation feature lets ESL students write in English, but receive feedback and corrections in their native language.

Lastly, a broad selection of MY Access! prompts can be used in math, science, and social studies settings, an adapting program versatile across several classroom curricula.

The AAPSEF needed no further convincing. The members tapped MY Access! to become the heart of a *Village to Raise a Writer*. With \$50,000 earmarked for the ambitious literacy campaign, the foundation secured some 5,000 MY Access! licenses for 33 schools to target students in grades 4 to 12.

The results across the board showed a trend of marked improvement. The following table below shows usage and holistic and domain scoring figures for eighth grade students for two periods; spring 2007 and fall 2007. The figures for eighth grade students best illustrate the positive impact of MY Access! because all other grades had significant population changes between fall and spring, thus skewing results. As you can see, there is strong growth in all domains.

Grade and Time Period	Number of Students	Holistic	Focus	Content Dev.	Organization	Language Usage and Style	Mechanics and Convention
8 th Grade August to December	434	4.04	3.83	3.44	3.40	3.83	3.63
8 th Grade December to May	445	4.39	4.52	4.09	4.01	4.50	4.24
	12	.35	.69	.65	.61	.7	.61

The following table shows Fall 2008 MEAP Writing Test scores for grade levels 4 through 9. As you can see, average student scores were above proficient in the MEAP Test across the board. Next winter we will be able to see the full effectiveness of MY Access! as we compare the Fall 2008 MEAP Writing Test scores of students who have used MY Access! with those who have not and also factor in frequency of MY Access! usage.

Grade	MEAP Writing % 2007	Holistic	Focus	Content Development	Organization	Language Usage and Style	Mechanics and Convention
4	92	4.32	4.17	3.8	3.73	4.17	3.99
5	90	4.29	4.13	3.78	3.69	4.14	3.92
6	92	4.06	3.99	3.62	3.56	3.88	3.68
7	88	4.49	4.46	4.01	3.93	4.44	4.20
8	90	4.39	4.52	4.09	4.01	4.5	4.24
9	NA	4.54	4.55	4.18	4.06	4.42	4.20
AVG	90.4	4.35	4.3	3.91	3.83	4.26	4.04

Benefits are being seen beyond the hard numbers. Teachers report students who once struggled with writing are now vying for their turn at the computer each day. For the first time in anyone's memory, there's an enthusiasm for writing in the classroom. And the measurable uptick in students' writing scores thrilled their parents.

The success of the AAPSEF's program became a catalyst for the Ann Arbor school district, which doubled the number of students using MY Access! in 2007. In addition, Vantage Learning is training 15 teachers on the MY Access! program. The teachers will then train representatives from local learning centers, after-school groups, and other non-profit organizations. They'll be providing students with free high-speed Internet access and after-school tutoring at their facilities.

MY Access! has united the Ann Arbor School District around a love for learning and language, and has quickly become the driving force behind this unprecedented community partnership. Teachers trust MY Access! to help them get the job done in fun and inspiring ways. It's become an incredible way to engage Ann Arbor citizens in public education and endow students with critical communication skills.

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