



Computer in the sky

By MATT BALDWIN *Whitefish Pilot*

"Hello, HAL. Do you read me, HAL?"

While seventh-grade students may not know of Stanley Kubrick's 1968 science fiction film "2001: A Space Odyssey," Whitefish Middle School has taken a page right out of the script.

The school is utilizing "artificial intelligence" through a program called "My Access" to help students develop their writing skills.

My Access is a Web-based writing curriculum that scores students' responses to writing tasks immediately after submission through what the founding company calls "advanced artificial intelligence technologies."

"No human can do what this program does," Brenda Moen, a fifth-grade teacher, said. "When we use this, we talk about it being the big computer in the sky."

The "artificial intelligence" program works by scanning more than 1,500 human-written essays on a particular topic and, using the IntelliMetric system, decides a scoring system for the prompt.

Students then write to the prompt — which can range from social studies to science to music — and are scored on a scale from one to six based on their submission. A score of four is considered proficient.

Along with a score, the program offers suggestions on how to improve the essay by enhancing thought organization and correcting spelling and grammar.

The score is then archived under the student's login name so they, and the teacher, can review their progress over the semester.

No special equipment is needed for My Access other than a basic computer with access to the Web.

According to Kelly Talsma, a councilor at the middle school, the program has been a hit among students.

"The kids love it," Talsma said. "Kids who said, 'I don't like writing' before think this program makes it a lot more fun."

Middle School student Danielle Morris says she really enjoys using My Access because it lets her know her score right away and because she receives individualized advice about how to improve her writing.

"It helps the struggling writer the most because it gives them confidence," Talsma said.

The developers of My Access say the program's instant scoring engine also benefits teachers by freeing the instructor from grading hundreds of essays by hand and giving them more time to conduct class.

"If I have 100 papers to grade, it takes a week for the kids to get their paper back," Dan Gould, a seventh-

and eighth-grade instructor, said. "The kids like the motivation of the feedback."

Talsma emphasizes that the program isn't meant to replace hands-on instruction, but rather enhance it.

Teachers have full access to each student's account and can review their writing process from start to final submission. They are able to add special instructions and can "chat" with students on their individual progress.

While the program isn't intended to be a grading system, the teachers can factor the score into their personal grading system.

The program's developers say My Access has been shown to help students perform better on state writing test scores in some cases.

At Bluff Ridge Elementary School in Utah, fifth grade students showed meaningful improvement on the state's Core Assessment Program after one year's use of My Access, the program's developers report. Scores at that school jumped between 15 and 20 percent on the assessment's two writing components.

There are some flaws with the program's artificial intelligence, including that it doesn't understand when a student is using a fragment sentence for creative effect or colloquial phrases, but the teacher can override any correction suggested by the program.

My Access was implemented in Whitefish at the start of the school year and was funded by the Parent Teacher Association.

Because of the high level of feedback from teachers and students alike, the school system is looking at different ways to fund the program next year, which costs about \$20 per student.

For more information about My Access visit www.myaccess.com.