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Technology Rescues At-Risk Middle-Schoolers

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Students from Escambia County School District in Pensacola, Florida, recently got the chance of a lifetime. Just two years ago I was a principal in that district and decided I needed to do more for my children. I set my mind to saving the children who were slowly falling through the cracks of the education system.

Performing nearly two years below their normal grade progression, these students were given another opportunity to rewrite their future. I was determined to create an environment that would help students thrive academically. It was my hope that these sixth-through eighth-graders could still be placed on the right track to continue on to high school.

To Superintendent Jim Paul I proposed an alternative academic school, O.A.S.I.S. High School Preparatory Academy. The proposal then went, with Superintendent Paul's endorsement, to the Escambia County Board of Education, which voted to approve the concept. One of only a few such schools nationwide, the academy opened its doors two years ago and has been saving students ever since.

The Pensacola campus services 72 students, in grades six through eight. With 18 computers in each classroom, O.A.S.I.S. is a very high-tech school that uses a great deal of computer-assisted instruction, as well as direct teacher instruction, to aid students in their learning environment.

FCAT results for the first year were promising, even though the state of Florida graded the O.A.S.I.S. Academy on the regular school rubric, which landed them an "F" for a school grade. The state of Florida did not have a policy in place to grade such an innovative academic school. The results however, were very good, with the school scoring an 89 percent on the Florida Writes, and they were first in the district in math gains and second in reading gains. As a result of the first year grading problem, the O.A.S.I.S. Academy had been deemed an alternative academic school for the 2006-2007 school year. They will not receive a school grade as such, but will be graded on points only as determined by student learning gains.

This year, O.A.S.I.S. students were determined to shine through. To prepare for the FCAT Writing, school officials decided to make better use of a program that had already been implemented in the classroom.

Vantage Learning's [MY Access!](#), a Web-based writing tool that provides immediate diagnostic feedback on student writing, is used by more than one million students nationwide. The program provides instant feedback on grammar, focus and meaning, organization, content and development, language use and style, and overall writing proficiency. All O.A.S.I.S. students diligently used MY Access! this year to prepare for the FCAT Writing. They each completed 37 essays to practice for the final test. The final results were astounding.

Our students scored 100 percent proficient this year on the writing portion of the FCAT exam. Since a majority of our students are behind their normal grade progression, we needed something that would not only assist their learning, but also make it fun and keep their attention. MY Access! did just that.

The O.A.S.I.S. High School Preparatory Academy was the only school in both the Santa Rosa and Escambia school districts to receive 100 percent on the writing portion of the FCAT exam.

For many, O.A.S.I.S. is a last shot at getting into high school. Students must maintain at least a C average to stay in the academy and reach the 8th grade level to graduate and move on to the regular high school. With 64 of the students promoted to high school and eight promoted to 8th grade, O.A.S.I.S. continues to be a great success.