

Alternative High School Washington, D.C.

Case Study: Alternative School Students Build Writing Skills and Confidence With WriteToLearn

A high school diploma was feeling increasingly out of reach for “Robert,” a junior in a large urban district in the metropolitan Washington, D.C., area. He had tried twice unsuccessfully to pass the writing portion of the state assessment, a requirement to graduate. Meanwhile, with behavioral issues mounting, he was expelled from his school, with one chance left to continue his education: at a computer-based alternative school in the district.

Most of the 26 students at the alternative school, who are in grades seven through 12, stay for a year, but some choose to stay longer. Each student attends classes for two hours a day and then works at least two more from home. Whether they are there because of expulsion from another school in the district or because they have medical issues that prevent them from learning in a traditional classroom, these students are sorely in need of victories, said “Karen,” one of the school’s three teachers. “So many of our students have never had a success in their lives,” she said.

When Robert arrived at the alternative school, “he suffered from emotional problems and lacked any confidence whatsoever,” said Karen. He needed to take the writing portion of the state assessment again, “but he kept saying he couldn’t do it,” she said. He then failed it a third time.

Throughout the school year, Karen and her colleagues provided Robert with direction and encouragement, and he made progress in all

subject areas except writing. His anxiety about writing was preventing him from succeeding, she said. “We really struggled with how to help him.”

Building Writing Skills

Karen turned to WriteToLearn™, an innovative Web-based learning tool from Pearson for developing writing and reading comprehension skills. “We determined that this was the tool that would help us help him,” she said. As the school was already using NovaNET, Pearson’s comprehensive online courseware system, WriteToLearn was an easy fit.

With WriteToLearn, students practice essay-writing and summarization skills, and their efforts are measured by Pearson’s state-of-the-art Knowledge Analysis Technologies™ (KAT) engine, which automatically evaluates the meaning of text by examining whole passages. The KAT engine is a unique automated assessment technology that evaluates the meaning of text, not just grammatical correctness or spelling.

The feedback provided by WriteToLearn is specific to six traits of writing—ideas, organization, conventions, sentence fluency, word choice and voice—and allows students and teachers to focus on each of these important dimensions of writing.

When Robert began the summer session at the alternative school, Karen introduced him to the product—using the essay-writing component. She assigned him 10 essays, allowing him to choose any

topics he wanted from the extensive selection in WriteToLearn. “To motivate him, I gave him a ‘carrot’—that I would let him out of some other assignments if he completed all 10 essays,” she said.

Making the Grade

Karen monitored Robert's progress from her computer screen, seeing how he was using the feedback from WriteToLearn to revise his work—improving on structure, grammar and word choices. “He liked seeing six-traits feedback so he could focus on particular areas. He could actually see his progress on the graphs and charts, and he knew when he had been successful. I think that helped him tremendously,” she said.

Robert wrote about many topics, particularly technology and movies. One of his more memorable essays was about a spider he bought at a pet store. “He wrote in detail about what a spider eats, how it exercises and how he takes care of it,” said Karen. “It was a cute essay, and I really enjoyed it, but I didn't ask if it was true because I didn't want to know. I don't like spiders.”

In WriteToLearn, teachers can set a passing threshold of their choosing, requiring, for example, a score of at least four out of six on each of the traits. Robert “gained so much confidence when he reached the levels he needed to pass,” said Karen.

At the end of the summer, after he had completed all 10 essays, Robert retook the writing portion of the state assessment. This time, he passed. “WriteToLearn made all the difference in the world,” said his teacher.

Extending the Power of WriteToLearn to All Students

Karen has recently begun using WriteToLearn with another student who needs to build the writing skills necessary to pass the state assessment. Next, she will target other eighth- and eleventh-graders who are preparing for the test. Long-term, her goal is to have all of the students in the school using WriteToLearn.

Karen's husband is a science teacher at another alternative school site in the district, and he's recently begun using the summarizing function of WriteToLearn with great success, she said. “We think that's going to be great for us, too, especially in social studies and sciences. It will help with reading comprehension, as well as the ability to decipher important information. Our students will be able to take much better notes.”

As for Robert, he continues to hone his writing skills using WriteToLearn and, with his newfound confidence in the subject, is even completing an elective in creative writing. “If you find a subject that interests him, stand back and look out,” said Karen.

Now that he has passed the state assessment, Robert is on track to graduate and is looking at attending college next year. It would have been very unfortunate, said Karen, if Robert hadn't been able to earn a high school diploma, in light of the many credits he has completed.

“He just needed to get over this hurdle and pass the state assessment,” she said. “With the help of WriteToLearn, he did it, and I am so proud of his success.”

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