Bishop Dwenger Catholic High School

Building better writers

Is there room for improvement in a school that's already succeeding? Bishop Dwenger High School in Fort Wayne had long achieved fairly high scores on the state-mandated Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress (ISTEP). But when school administrators, including Principal Fred Tone, delved deeper into the results, they discovered that writing scores could still be stronger.

The high school decided to place additional focus on writing and implement the *Criterion*® Online Writing Evaluation service. In the first two years of *Criterion* use, writing skills noticeably improved for regular, remedial, and honor students at Bishop Dwenger. "Test scores dramatically improved by as much as four times in some cases," said Tone.

The *Criterion* service has benefited students, teachers, and administrators alike. Students now spend more time writing and self-editing. Teachers have an objective scoring system and access to reports that indicate the specific writing skills that need more instruction. Administrators use the comprehensive data to set goals, track scores by subcategory, and enhance the curriculum.

English teacher Amy Gonzagowski experienced the success firsthand. "There's no doubt of the effects. After using *Criterion* for much of the year," she said, "Students wrote longer pieces that were much more detailed, included good examples, and used more vivid language. Many, frankly, were a pleasure to read."

Quick Facts

- Diocesan Catholic school in Fort Wayne, Indiana
- 1,100 students
- 60 staff members
- Suburban area

Snapshot

Already a high-performing school, Bishop Dwenger set a goal of increasing the writing skills of each student and implemented ETS's *Criterion* Online Writing Evaluation service. Time spent by students on essays more than doubled and writing test scores improved as much as fourfold.

ETS · **Criterion**®

Challenges

- Improving quality and length of student writing

- Integrating more writing into the curriculum without increasing teacher workload

- Tracking and analyzing student progress

Solution

The *Criterion* service includes:

- Immediate holistic score report and diagnostic feedback

- Links between score information and target instruction

- Automated holistic scoring of teacher created prompts

- Unlimited student submissions online at school or at home

Benefits

- Dramatically improved test scores and writing length

- Immediate diagnostic feedback that encourages self-learning and aids teachers

- Extensive scoring data to help teachers focus their lessons

- Online essay storage that simplifies paperwork

Students look forward to writing

"*Criterion* has created an atmosphere where my students actually look forward to writing. You just can't beat that," said Amy Gonzagowski. The *Criterion* service appeals to students because they're not writing into a void. The *Criterion* service creates teachable moments, provides nonjudgmental guidance, and then offers students the opportunity to try again.

Teachable moments occur as soon as a student submits the first draft of an essay. He or she can roll the cursor over sentences or paragraphs to bring up context-sensitive guidance. Possible errors and weaknesses are also highlighted. The main thesis, for example, appears red and supporting arguments show up in blue. "*Criterion*'s feedback is very specific, very detailed," said Principal Tone, "and students like being able to cut to the chase."

Additional learning opportunities appear when students drill down and explore supplementary guidance. The advice, rules, and suggestions in the system lean towards the descriptive, rather than prescriptive, so students have to do their own thinking to come up with the optimal solution. Another click takes students to just the right spot in one of nine Writer's Handbooks so they can read further information on grammatical elements or best practices.

A perfect six

Finally, because good writing is developed through practice, practice, practice, a revision and re-submission process is built right into the system. Each writing submission is scored from 1 to 6. The system arrives at the assessment by comparing the text to a large database of similar texts and by analyzing it for any grammar or other errors.

That simple numerical score delivers a big motivational push. "Students want to keep revising until they score a perfect six—and a lot do," said Tone. "They'll put in the time and the effort."

The *Criterion* service models a process of writing, evaluating, and rewriting that has aided Bishop Dwenger students at all levels. The service helps learners "focus not so much on what's wrong but on how to become better, and it motivates them to keep revising and rewriting until [their essay] is better. In addition, students help one another to correct errors, improve phrasing, and rearrange ideas," said Tone.

Remedial students, who had the most to learn, improved the most. It's not uncommon, said Gonzagowski, for those learners to move from "barely passing to a perfect six."

An invaluable time saver

In the past, integrating more writing—and more types of writing assign-ments—into a curriculum would be tremendously time-consuming for teachers. This is where the *Criterion* service's automated analysis has proved "invaluable" according to Tone. Grading and critiquing all those papers would have been a burden for teachers. But within 20 seconds of submitting an essay into the *Criterion* service, students receive detailed feedback on errors and weak points, plus a holistic score.

The *Criterion* service not only saves time, its objectivity also offers a clear benefit to educators. It pinpoints errors and problems without judgment, opinion, or personal preference. Students read the analysis, explore the advice, and make the changes. "By seeing the error, looking up the explana-tion, and making the necessary correction, it reinforces the skill more than if I just marked and corrected it for them," said English instructor Maryann Spohn.

The computer can pick up patterns that are difficult to recognize. Spohn's learners "are amazed at how often they repeat words and start sentences in exactly the same way. Seeing it visually and not just hearing from the teacher makes more of an impact."

Easy to use

Teachers at Bishop Dwenger have readily integrated the system into their classroom lessons. Hands-on training helped ease the transition. In the train-ing sessions, teachers learned the system's capabilities, genres and reporting features.

"After going to the initial training session, I discovered how easy this was to use," said Gonzagowski. She and her colleagues explored its Teacher View mode where, for instance, they can set up timed writing exercises to simulate high-stakes exams. They also learned the ins and outs of the Student View mode, where they can control the information that students see.

Monitoring scores to enhance progress

Administrators at Bishop Dwenger use the *Criterion* service reports to track student progress and feed it into the overall school improvement plan. Scores from the first and last essay of the year are used to evaluate the progress of individuals as well as groups including Individualized Education Plan (IEP) students, special education students, free and reduced lunch students, and demographic categories such as males and females.

As the head of the English department, the *Criterion* service helps Spohn keep an eye on the number and type of assignments given throughout the school without having to spend time physically gathering that information from her colleagues. "I can monitor student progress or share instructor-scored prompts," she said. It helps communication flow and keeps the department on track.

A database of student essays

The fact that all essays are stored as files in the *Criterion* service database is also a big plus administratively. Because it is web-based, absent students can complete work at the library or at home, and once submitted, their writing automatically becomes part of a teacher's file. "Whenever I need a copy of an essay, I do not need to look through stacks of papers; access is as easy as the Internet," said Spohn, "If a student loses a paper or has printer problems, the essay is still available to retrieve."

Preparing for parent conferences is a breeze because all work is organized and easily attainable. In the classroom, instructors can easily pull an essay from their account and use it as an example. "Recently, I took three essays, removed the names, and had students assess and compare the essays," said Spohn. "No one recognized handwriting. There were no red marks all over it which in the past would have necessitated retyping."

Wise use of class time

Spohn uses the data in the *Criterion* service to guide her teaching. "I know if I need to review the use of apostrophes or appropriate use of passive voice," she said, "I can adjust my lesson planning to review or emphasize certain skills while at the same time omit others that do not seem to be a problem. Using the instructor scored prompts for literature based writing assignments allows the students to mechanically clean up their essays so that I can focus on the content of their ideas. With so many state standards and curriculum elements to be covered I can make the wisest use of class time."

Having used the *Criterion* service for seven years now, Gonzagowski believes she is a better teacher and is certain her students are better writers. "I have seen the students length and development of writing improve a great deal," she said. Proof of that progress is "shown through our writing development scores on the ISTEP+ exam."

For more information about the *Criterion* Online Writing Evaluation service, visit www.riversidepublishing.com or call 800-323-9540.

RIVERSIDE PUBLISHING

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT

www.riversidepublishing.com
800-323-9540