

Gwinnett County Public School Study Demonstrates Positive Impact of WriteToLearn on Student Performance on Writing Assessments

Introduction

Gwinnett County Public Schools, located in metropolitan Atlanta and the largest school system in Georgia, designed and implemented a large-scale research study to evaluate the impact of learning with WriteToLearn, Pearson's award-winning online literacy tool, on students' state writing assessment scores.

WriteToLearn is a complete literacy tool for implementing rigorous learning goals, providing automated essay writing assessment to build writing skills, summary writing to develop reading comprehension, and vocabulary exercises in select reading passages to expand students' word knowledge. WriteToLearn's emphasis on the comprehension and analysis of informational texts supports the requirements of today's rigorous standards.

District researchers, Melinda Mollette and Jewelle Harmon, based the design of the study to satisfy the *What Works Clearinghouse (WWC)* evidence standards to study student outcomes associated with use of this tool in their district. They presented the positive results of the study in a paper, "Student-Level Analysis of WriteToLearn Effects on State Writing Test Scores," at the 2015 American Educational Research Association Conference in Chicago.

Large Scale Study, Examining Real-World Implementation of Learning Technology

Gwinnett County Public Schools currently serves more than 168,000 students across 122 schools. WriteToLearn was provided to all schools on a voluntary basis; the district issued site licenses to use the program to interested schools. Some schools focused their implementations on a specific grade level or subgroup of students and others made the program available to all students.

Since statewide standardized writing tests are administered in fifth and eighth grade, the research study included fifth (approximately 13,000) and eighth (approximately 9,000) grade students from the 2013-14 school year. The study contrasted students in schools that used WriteToLearn (approximately one-third of the schools) and schools with site licenses for the program but that did not use the program that school year (the remaining two-thirds schools). The research compared individual student usage data from WriteToLearn with student achievement data from the fifth grade Georgia Writing Assessment, the eighth grade Georgia Writing Assessment, and a district writing assessment called the "Gateway Assessment." Baseline student achievement levels were controlled for by using the students' previous year's ELA scores. Consequently, the results of this study controlled for student's existing achievement level and are based on external validation, not an internal measure from WriteToLearn.

Intensity of the use of WriteToLearn was measured by the number of "responses" a student

submitted. After being presented with a writing prompt appropriate for their grade level, a “response” occurs when students submit a draft of their essay. The student’s goal is to write an essay of at least five paragraphs, use formative feedback to help make revisions (up to five) and submit a final essay for scoring. The students’ classroom teachers also have the ability to provide feedback to students through WriteToLearn.

Results: Learning With WriteToLearn Increases Writing Assessment Pass Rates

The study’s findings demonstrated a highly significant relationship between student use of WriteToLearn and performance on the state writing assessment, particularly for fifth grade students. Over 96 percent of high frequency fifth grade users (5 or more responses) passed the fifth grade writing assessment compared to 90.7 percent of the minimal users (0 to 2 responses). In addition, fifth grade English language learners and economically disadvantaged students who were moderate or high frequency users of WriteToLearn also saw significantly higher state writing assessment pass rates than their peers who were minimal users.

Similarly, 94.5 percent of the eighth grade students with high use of WriteToLearn passed the state writing assessment versus 91.9 percent of those with minimal use of WriteToLearn.

Conclusion

Gwinnett County Public Schools will use the results of this research study to review and change how it implements WriteToLearn in the schools. The researchers concluded that, “While the data indicates positive benefits to students, particularly struggling middle school students, it is important for schools to understand the potential rewards and use this information to encourage participation among their teachers.”

With the critical importance of building strong literacy skills, schools and districts around the country continue to look for tested tools to support student skill development. Research, such as this study conducted by Gwinnett County Public Schools, provides schools leaders with data to evaluate WriteToLearn and a research design model that can be used to assess the impact of programs that are being used in their districts. The full report is available at WriteToLearn.net

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