

District nurtures critical thinking with digital writing projects

With Frontier powered by eSpark Learning, middle schoolers complete standards-aligned research assignments that promote autonomy and collaboration

Three years after implementing a digital writing program in his district's middle school, Matthew Gaven has seen writing quality increase along with students' enthusiasm for researching self-selected topics.

Gaven, assistant superintendent for curriculum, instruction, assessment and technology for Mineola Union Free School District on Long Island, New York, says Frontier from eSpark Learning also allows teachers to nurture students' critical thinking.

"With Frontier, you [the student] choose what you want to learn, and then you have an in-depth experience," Gaven says. "You read in the content area, digest what's important and synthesize it as part of a writing project. That's the only time—other than with in-person questions—teachers get a concrete example of how students are thinking about text. That's the deep learning we want for our students."

Complex multimedia texts

Frontier is an inquiry-based program that is aligned to ELA standards. It features curated multimedia research materials for students to use before completing an extended narrative, argumentative or informational writing assignment. Students think critically and apply what they've learned while citing evidence from complex texts.

"Frontier provides a safe environment for research and tiered resources so students not reading at grade level can still have a rich experience," Gaven says. "Students like the autonomy and



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the technology, and the collaboration piece lets them engage with friends."

Mineola piloted Frontier with about 50 fifth-graders in spring 2016; today, 650 students in grades 5 through 7 use it.

"It certainly increased the quality of students' writing," Gaven says. "Teachers talk about research projects during grade-level meetings and identify skills that students haven't mastered. Having that robust conversation has really helped us improve instruction."

Multiple feedback opportunities

While using Frontier, students receive automated feedback in real time. A student's initial draft is peer reviewed,

and they submit a revised version to their teacher, who receives data-driven "insight reports," which might suggest providing a mini lesson.

"We get a sense of how our students do individually and as a class, so if kids are having problems with summary, for example, the teacher will spend extra time on that," Gaven says.

Frontier also demonstrates its desire to be a relevant, true partner through insight reports that identify PD topics.

"Frontier and eSpark listen to teachers and kids, and build research projects that are intrinsically interesting to them," he says. "They're not a tech company; they're a learning company."

