

## CASE STUDY: Cedar Shoals High School



### **With Pearson's WriteToLearn™, English Language Learner Progresses From Struggling Writer to Passing Georgia State Assessment to Planning for College and Career in Medicine**

Just three years in this country after immigrating from Somalia, Mustaf Jeylani, a junior at Cedar Shoals High School in Athens, Ga., has come a long way in mastering the English language. With verbal skills that allow him to navigate the world around him with increasing ease, he was facing one last hurdle: learning to organize his ideas in writing with proper English grammar – a skill he would need to pass the Georgia state writing assessment and fulfill a graduation requirement.

Carla Horne, who teaches English language learners at Cedar Shoals, offers afterschool tutoring twice a week, and she suggested that Jeylani use that time to strengthen his writing skills with the help of WriteToLearn™, an innovative Web-based teaching tool from Pearson that combines summary- and essay-writing activities. She had just started using WriteToLearn with some of her students and was seeing tremendous results.

"When Ms. Horne first told me about WriteToLearn, I thought, 'It's not going to help me that much, but I'll try it,'" said Jeylani. Almost immediately, Horne saw marked improvement in his writing. And three months later, he reached his goal of passing the state writing assessment.

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. The KAT Engine is a unique automated assessment technology that evaluates the meaning of text, not just grammatical correctness or spelling. WriteToLearn provides feedback on 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.

Jeylani's first home in the United States was in Michigan, where snow was falling as his flight landed – a new experience for him and the first of many stark contrasts to his life in Somalia. A year later, he and some of his family members moved to Georgia, while others stayed behind. "Mustaf saw so many changes that he was almost dizzy from it all by the time he came to our school," said Horne.

Using WriteToLearn's essay-writing component, he began chronicling his experiences of adjusting to life in a new country. "I was staying after school and writing, and when I got home, I went on WriteToLearn and wrote some more," he said. "When I showed my essay to Ms. Horne, she was surprised at how good it was."

Jeylani's motivation to succeed stems from the advice his family gave him the day they arrived in this country, he explained. "They told me that this country has the best educational opportunities in the world and that it is my responsibility to study hard and get good grades. I take that seriously."

Horne recalled that initially Jeylani was thinking faster than he could write in English and was omitting essential words. "He thought WriteToLearn would just have him make a few corrections to his essay, and that would do it," she said. However, he discovered the

feedback was much more instructive. It showed bar graphs of Jeylani's scores and offered suggestions for improvement in all of the different trait areas as well as on spelling, grammar and repetition, all based on the adjustable scoring criteria that Horne had selected.

"He found that he could focus on several writing concepts at one time, as opposed to learning one concept now and then another one next time," she said. "He was challenged by seeing how much he could improve with each draft, and he learned that he could write more than five paragraphs." Jeylani agreed, noting that the feedback "is the best part. It shows you where you did well and where you need to improve. Each time I did better."

Meanwhile, Horne was an essential part of the process. "I suggested that he include more details and think about how he felt when he experienced these things. He really began to open up and start writing," she said. Logging on from her computer, she could see his performance and progress and could post comments for him on WriteToLearn's online "scoreboard."

After he saw how WriteToLearn could help him, he wrote several more drafts, expanding on his skills with each one. Horne noted that Jeylani's social studies and science teachers both noticed the change in his writing skills in their classes, too, after he began using WriteToLearn.

The day arrived for the state writing assessment, and Jeylani was nervous, as he had been unsuccessful on his last attempt. "Last time, I had the ideas, but I needed help with the grammar and with putting it together," he said. "After all my practice with WriteToLearn, I knew my writing skills had improved and I knew I could do it. I took a few deep breaths and started writing, and I did much better this time."

Cedar Shoals, made up of 1,500 students in northern Georgia's Clarke County, serves a growing population of English language learners. Jeylani is Horne's only student from Somalia; her other students are native speakers of Spanish, Russian, Korean and Vietnamese, and she is teaching them all how to write in English. Horne demonstrates how to write essays, instructing her students to craft an introduction, body and conclusion, "and I gently move them into writing by themselves," she explained. In the past, this has been a manual exercise, and a time-consuming one. "They all seem to want help at the same time, and with the larger classes, especially, it is very difficult," she said.

When she began using WriteToLearn with some of her students earlier this year, she was no longer scrambling to help everyone, which allowed her to provide more thoughtful instruction, she said. "Students can be writing about different subjects – from motorcycles to Edgar Allan Poe – and they're all receiving the immediate feedback they need," she said. "I'm not having to say, 'Wait a minute' and to switch tracks all the time."

To help her students build reading comprehension skills, Horne hopes to expand her use of WriteToLearn in the coming school year by taking advantage of the summarization component.

Horne knows that strong English writing abilities are key to her students' success, and she is determined to teach them the skills they will need for success in college, the workplace and in 21st century society. Jeylani, for one, is well on his way. With one more

year of high school, he is applying to universities in five or six different states, and aspires to continue on to medical school. "I can see a real difference in his self-confidence now," said Horne. "I truly believe that WriteToLearn and his perseverance are what helped him succeed."