



## Write Stuff a Novel Idea Students aim to create 6,000-word opuses

By LIANE M. ROTH

Here's a novel idea. Give portable keyboards to 31 fourth-graders and give them 30 days to write a 6,000-word novel and see what happens.

Doretta Patterson, a teacher at Valley View Elementary School in Lancaster, did just that on Nov. 1, and the response from her students was surprising.

"It's been mind-boggling," she said. "Kids who have never written before are writing these wonderful stories."

Patterson, a third-year teacher, enrolled her class in an innovative program through the Young Writers Program for National Novel Writing Month, celebrated during November. The program encourages teachers and students to set attainable word-count writing goals, then work together to meet those goals.

Nationwide, 15,000 youngsters participated in the program in 2006. The objective is quantity, not quality, and students are allowed to write whatever they want without worrying about spelling or grammar. Teachers are discouraged from correcting the papers and are freed from the onus of grading 30 or so immense bodies of work.

"We set a goal of 6,000 words, and at first the students said, 'Do we have to do this?'" Patterson said. "Now it's almost like a competition to see who can write the most words in a session. One student already blew past the limit. They are having a blast."

Patterson applied to the program for the use of AlphaSmart keyboards. The AlphaSmart is a word processor that functions like a simple digital typewriter. The students keep the miniature machines at their desk and type their stories. When time is up for the day, the teacher transfers the text into a main computer's word processing document. The teacher can verify the word counts. Patterson sent an e-mail detailing the needs of her class and why they should be chosen out of hundreds of other schools to receive the loaner keyboards.

"The head of the organization said we weren't the first class, but we were the second one. So they sent us nine keyboards. This is so neat for the students to have an electronic resource they otherwise couldn't have."

When Patterson told her principal, Cathy Bennett, about the nine keyboards, Bennett said she was going to find enough AlphaSmarts for every one of the 31 students in Patterson's classroom.

"It's the craziest thing," Patterson said. "Since they got the keyboards it's like a green light went off. Ninety percent of the students are over 1,000 words already. Some probably won't make the 6,000-word-goal but most everybody will. This is amazing."

Students face a writing proficiency exam toward the end of the school year, and Patterson said the method of writing a large piece in a short period of time has been an excellent way for the students to improve their writing skills.

"This is a better learning experience than writing a bunch of smaller paragraphs," she said. "This large project is so beneficial. As a writer myself, I like to focus on writing with my class."

"I let the students go on this project. I let them be as creative as they wanted. When I tell them, 'go ahead get going on your stories,' they dive right in. It sounds so weird to hear them type on their keyboards."

The students work on their stories during designated writing periods each day and Patterson uploads their work onto her computer for word counts.

"Some of these students could be future authors," Patterson said. "There have been some surprises, too, from the boys. There are a lot of stories about skateboards and that kind of thing but it's still been great stuff. Some are so silly, but who cares? They are learning that a young author can succeed."

Patterson wants this to become an annual schoolwide event. Other teachers at her school have indicated interest in signing up classes in 2008. Patterson said parents who have helped with this year's attempt want the project to be brought back next year. For details about the program, visit [www.nanowrimo.org](http://www.nanowrimo.org).

Edition: VP

Page: A14, A14 Valley Life

Rundate: Tuesday, November 27, 2007