

By Peggy Grant

From Struggle to Success: One High School's Journey to Literacy Achievement

PHOTO: STEPHEN E. GROSS & ASSOCIATES

Three years ago, students in an impoverished high school in New Mexico were struggling with their reading assignments. A group of dedicated educators responded by setting improvement goals, developing and implementing action steps, and monitoring student progress. Improvements in teaching and in learning have been dramatic. This is their story.

In Mr. Espinoza's freshman science class, a group of students follows the directions to conduct an experiment on soil analysis; another group works at a bank of computers in the back of the room preparing PowerPoint® presentations on sections of a textbook chapter; a few students cluster around a computer looking up information on the Internet; and others read scientific materials silently. In another classroom, a reading specialist models a vocabulary activity in a child development class. As students contribute words related to the discussion about child abuse—*abandonment, shaking, domestic violence, neglect*—the reading teacher arranges them on the board. The regular classroom teacher watches, preparing to take the lead in teaching the same lesson the next period.

In classroom after classroom, the high school students at Shiprock High School, located in the Navajo Indian Reservation in the Four Corners area of northwest New Mexico, are actively involved in learning and reading. Their teachers engage in continuous conversations among themselves, peppered with phrases such as *brick and mortar words, cognitive strategies, and strategic reading*.

It wasn't always this way. Just three years ago, the atmosphere of the school was, as a concerned assistant principal describes, "zoo-ish." Test scores were low among students, many of whom lack what are considered the basics of life. Seventy-four percent of these students live below the poverty level; 50 percent have to haul their own water; and 25 percent don't have electricity.

A data-driven district administration and the hiring of a visionary principal brought a new atmosphere to Shiprock High School. Changes in instructional practices that improve student reading achievement have come about as a result of a systemwide school improvement plan built on collaborative planning, the use of data, and comprehensive professional development tied to that data.

When Larry DeWees was drawn out of retirement to become principal of Shiprock, he posed the following questions to the teachers: "Do we want to own the data?" and "If we own it, what can we do about it?" These questions began a series of faculty discussions, which led to their collaborative decision to focus on improving reading achievement. The long-term professional development plan created by the leadership team

focused on three areas: building a knowledge base about reading instruction, modeling of effective instructional strategies, and planning for continuous growth.

The first conclusion reached by faculty members was that they didn't know enough about how to teach reading, so DeWees set out on a mission to inform himself and his teachers about the topic. His research enabled him to build a variety of professional development activities for the teachers, including workshops by visiting experts, a professional library, and participation in the pilot and field test of the Strategic Teaching and Reading Project (STRP) online course "Reading in the High School Content Areas" developed by Learning Point Associates.

According to DeWees, the component in this reading initiative that provides the most "bang for the buck" has been the hiring of two full-time reading specialists. Rather than working primarily with struggling readers at Shiprock, the two reading specialists, Randy Rober and Angela Guiliano, spend nearly all their time modeling in classrooms and working with teachers to help them incorporate research-based instructional strategies that improve students' reading ability, a Joyce and Showers (2002) recommendation.

The specialists meet with teachers in their assigned departments to discuss content goals for a lesson. The specialist works with the teacher to develop a lesson that incorporates an appropriate instructional strategy. The classroom teacher observes the lesson, then—with the specialist's help—tries it out in subsequent classes, and reflects on the experience with the specialist afterward.

The final component of Shiprock's plan to improve reading revolves around structures that foster continuous improvement. As the instructional leader of the school, DeWees is committed to providing ways for the faculty and administration to teach and learn from each other, which he believes is the best way for everyone to continue to grow. Each Wednesday morning, department heads meet with the principal and reading specialists to learn a new instructional strategy that they share with their colleagues.

Each semester, all teachers must observe three other teachers—two outside and one within their subject area. Reports on these observations are submitted to the principal. The purpose of this activity is to give teachers different real-life examples of instruction so that they can expand their "tool-kits," as explained by DeWees.

None of these professional development activities would have the desired effect without an accountability component. The most basic level of accountability is the online course's lesson-plan form, which has a pull-down menu of over 200 strategies. Kevin Werth, social studies department chair, explains that at first he thought the teachers were expected to use all the strategies, which concerned him. However, he soon realized that the reason for so many

strategies was to allow teachers to choose those that best suit them and their subjects. Werth focuses on just three or four of them.

Another noteworthy measure of accountability is what the principal describes as a "no-volunteers" approach. All teachers must observe their colleagues, participate in modeling, read assigned texts, and write reports. One summer, for example, DeWees required all teachers to read VanDoren and Adler's (1972) *How to Read a Book* and write a report about it. If a teacher doesn't participate in required activities, it is noted in his or her performance evaluation. Those who participate enthusiastically and show growth in student achievement can receive rewards, such as technology for their classrooms or attendance at conferences related to reading.

Are these measures working to improve student achievement in reading? Results have been very positive for the first two years of the project, as shown by ninth-grade scores on the TerraNova assessment.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SHIPROCK HIGH SCHOOL

Freshmen TerraNova Scores

Subject Area	2000	2001	2002	2003
Reading	28.7	32.8	36	42.1
Language Arts	26	33	37	43
Mathematics	23	34	34	43.2
Science	29.2	29.8	32.5	39.2
Social Studies	37.1	40.6	25	31.2

Note: All scores are percentile scores.

Professional development activities, no matter how well conceived, cannot be effective on their own. The success of the reading initiative has occurred in an environment that supports growth, as evidenced by the school's participation in the Baldrige National Quality Program, which defines a process for organizational improvement (National Institute of Standards and Technology, 2003). In December, Shiprock High School received the Piñon, a New Mexico quality school award for excellence.

Linda Besett, Ph.D., superintendent of the Central Consolidated School District, and Marlene Frazier, executive



director of curriculum and instruction and manager of federal programs, have been key players in this initiative. Dr. Besett sees her role as advisor, cheerleader, and model for using data to improve student learning. Frazier's enthusiastic support for "the next big idea" enabled DeWees to hire the reading specialists, purchase dictionaries for every student, and provide a variety of professional development activities.

Change isn't easy, but at Shiprock High School the consequences of the change have proven to be the motivational force behind continued improvement. DeWees and Dr. Besett admit frankly that, at the beginning, doing this work was challenging. Some teachers objected to tasks such as writing reports and reading books. Knowing that he had his superintendent's support enabled DeWees to persevere. When the first year of test scores showed improvement, teachers saw the results of their efforts. Now, most of the teachers—80 to 85 percent, according to DeWees—are enthusiastic participants.

Things that appear simple on the surface are often not so. Organizing instruction for several different activities at once—all involving reading and meaningful learning—is a

complex task requiring commitment, knowledge, and teacher expertise. Likewise, having teachers observe experts using instructional strategies with the students in their classrooms is historically a challenge. At Shiprock, however, these kinds of activities occur regularly. By laying the groundwork through collaborative goal setting and decision making, and by committing to professional development that improves teacher knowledge while providing support to implement that knowledge, teachers at this high school are providing students with a better foundation for success in school and in the real world. ●

References

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