



# DUBUQUE COMMUNITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

Gordon R. Alley Partnership Award

Three years ago, the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning and the Dubuque Community School District in Iowa formed a partnership to study and refine Fusion Reading, and adolescent struggling readers nationwide will reap the rewards.

Dubuque teachers and administrators have worked closely with the Center's Fusion Reading team to fine-tune the curriculum and develop an effective professional development model adapted to the unique aspects of Fusion.

"Through our partnership with them, we've been able to come up with a program that's stronger," says Mike Hock, associate director of the Center and one of the Fusion developers. "They made a commitment

from the district level and through all of their middle schools to help us pilot, further refine, and conduct research with Fusion Reading with middle school students who have reading disabilities."

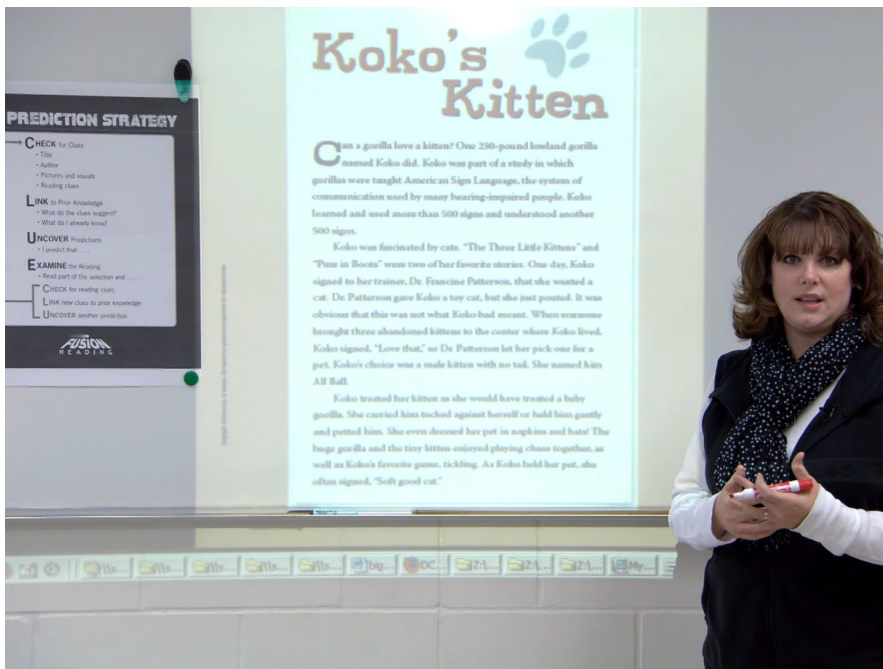
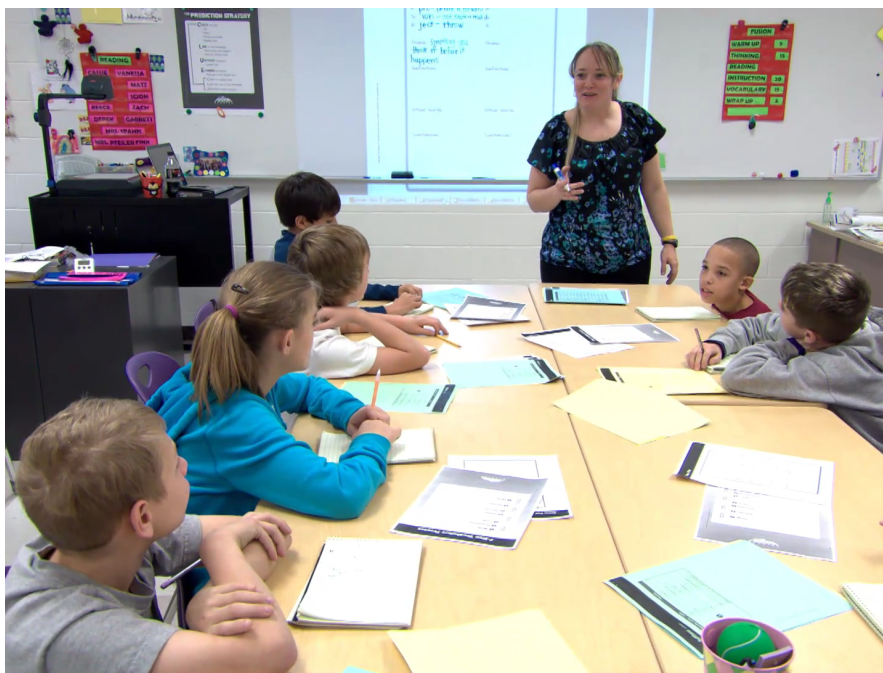
Because of its commitment to working with the Center, the Dubuque Community School District is the recipient of the 2012 Gordon R. Alley Partnership Award, which recognizes the vital role of partnership in successfully conducting large-scale research and development efforts. The award honors the legacy of Alley, one of the Center's founders and a master at mentoring the young and inexperienced assistant professors who were assembled to conduct the first research studies at what was then known as the Institute

for Research in Learning Disabilities. Alley passed away in 1997 from complications from a serious accident he had had several years earlier.

## **BUILDING ON A SUCCESSFUL HISTORY**

The Center's relationship with the Dubuque district began nearly three decades ago, when its teachers were among the first in the country to try Strategic Instruction Model Learning Strategies in their classrooms. Hock was a teacher in Dubuque when the Center partnered with the district to conduct research on the *Paired Associates Strategy* in his classroom at Hempstead High School in the 1980s.

"The district had a real strong buy-in from the get-go with SIM," Hock says. "When Irma [Brosseur-



Hock] and I visited there the last few years, we found evidence that they're still using these strategies in middle school and high schools."

So teachers and administrators in the district of 12,000 students on the eastern edge of Iowa were already familiar with SIM in 2009 when Donna Shaw, the district's special education coordinator (now retired), expressed concern about a

dip in scores when students made the transition from elementary to middle school. At the same time, Brenda Konrardy, then special education department chair for the district's largest middle school, wanted to find materials to reach the school's struggling, disengaged students. They found Fusion Reading.

"I have never experienced something in education make such a

strong impact on a culture in such a short time," Konrardy says. "Fusion Reading absolutely revitalized special education support and services in our schools."

Teacher Jennifer Elbert says Fusion brought a sense of community to her classroom that allowed students to feel comfortable taking risks, to be accepting of each other's challenges, and to serve as coaches for their peers.

"The program is strategy focused but covers all of the core concepts that students need to be able to master to be a good reader in all aspects of life and in all content subjects," she says.

The transformation for students was astounding. Students who had never read a book were now getting in trouble in other classes for sneaking in reading when they were supposed to be doing other work, Shaw says.

"Students were asking their parents to go to the book store and purchase books for them to read. Some of the students formed a book club outside of school and discussed the novel they read as they went between classes, ate lunch, and rode the bus to and from school," she says. "We had never seen our adolescent struggling readers become so motivated about reading."

### FUSION: A PERFECT FIT

About 20 Dubuque teachers signed on to use Fusion in the first year and a couple of administrators in the district's central office became strong advocates, giving the Center the unusual opportunity to conduct several studies involving hundreds of students.

In one study, typical of the results achieved in Dubuque, students in the Fusion Reading class showed reading gains of one-and-a-half years in just five-and-a-half months of instruction. Students in the comparison class showed little gain.



“Fusion is a perfect fit for adolescent struggling readers,” says Konrardy, who is now the district’s special education coordinator. “You don’t find programs that have the components of teaching classroom expectations and addressing student motivation in connection with the best in reading strategies. Fusion does that and does that well.”

As Hock and his colleagues analyzed results from the Fusion studies, they modified the reading program to address the challenges students and teachers were confronting in their classrooms.

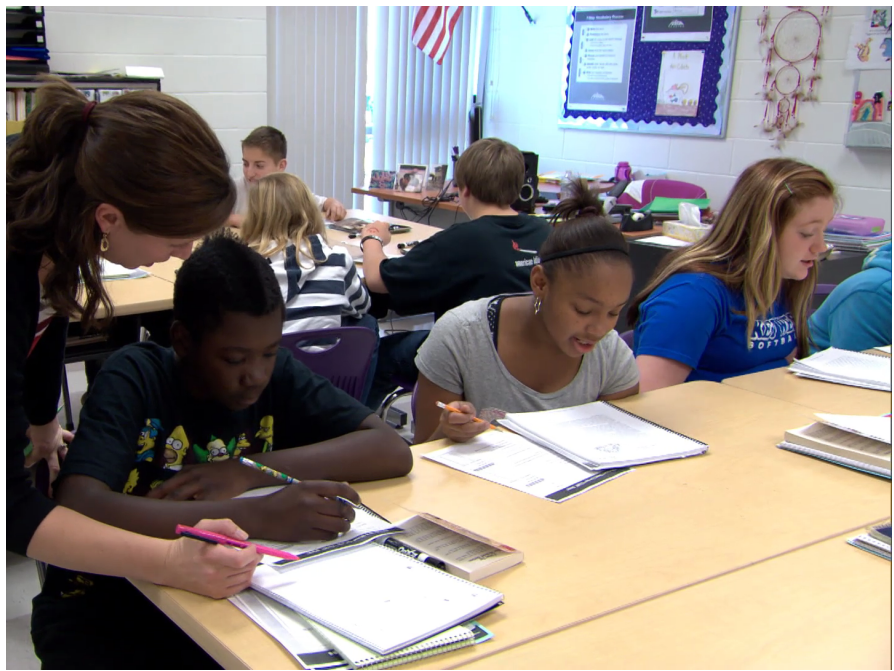
“Our partnership with the Dubuque schools has been invaluable in helping us shape a reading program that is effective for adolescents who struggle in that area,” says Don Deshler, KUCRL director. “In addition, as a direct result of the input from Dubuque teachers and the successes we’ve seen with their students, we have developed a reading program that appeals to educators across the country.”

Education publisher McGraw-Hill recently acquired the rights to publish Fusion Reading and distribute it to schools nationwide.

### **PARTNERSHIP AND SUSTAINABILITY**

Recently, Dubuque has opened its schools to other districts that want to see how Fusion works in the classroom and they’ve allowed cameras into the classrooms so the Center can capture footage of how Fusion should be taught and what good instruction is all about.

“They’ve become kind of a lighthouse for the Midwest,” Hock says. “Districts from around the Midwest travel to Dubuque and watch Fusion in action, get a sense of what it’s really about, and walk away thinking that it’s a really good program.”



The district has also taken steps to ensure that Fusion continues to thrive by nurturing in-house professional developers, like Elbert and other top Fusion teachers.

“Next fall, they’ll start their third cohort, and Irma and I are no longer involved with that,” Hock says. “They’re a really nice model of how partnership results in sustainability and district ownership.”