

SIM Boosts Literacy Levels at a Native American High School

An exciting effort to lift literacy levels at a Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) school began last fall at Wingate High School in Wingate, N.M. Faced with reading scores that were well below grade level for most students, the staff revamped the school schedule to allow more time for reading instruction and adopted Strategic Instruction Model (SIM) reading strategies developed by KU's Center for Research on Learning.

Wingate High School serves more than 1,000 students in 9th through 12th grades. Students at this New Mexico school come from a geographic area about the size of West Virginia, and about 50 percent of the students are residential — they may return to their homes only on weekends or holidays. Ninety-five percent of the student population is eligible for reduced or free lunch. Most (about 90 percent) of the student body is Diné (Navajo) with the remaining 10 percent representing Apache, Hopi, Zuni or Acoma Pueblos tribal affiliations.

In June 2005, Dean Leh, principal of the sophomore academy at Wingate High School, and several of the school's faculty members attended the reading component of a weeklong national literacy conference sponsored by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. At the conference, the Wingate faculty team was trained to teach students several SIM reading strategies.

SIM is a research-based, best practice curriculum developed by the Center for Research on Learning, an affiliate of the School of Education. The Center has spent more than 30 years researching how adolescents learn, and under the leadership of Don Deshler has become the premier research organization in the country for adolescent learning.

In addition to the overall averages for each class and the entire school, the stories of three sophomore students provide insight into particular benefits of implementing SIM strategies. The first student represents the group of student with significant deficits; these students also showed the greatest improvement.

Joseph Tsosie (a pseudonym) read at a 3.8 grade equivalent level when he entered 10th grade. In August 2005, he received a RIT (Rasch Unit) score of 188 in reading on the NWEA test and 192 on the language arts section. In May 2006, the scores improved to 198 and 204, respectively. Although this is still well below the grade equivalent of 224, it does suggest gains of nearly two years. (A grade level equivalent for a high school sophomore should be a RIT score of 224 with improvement to about 228-230 range by the end of the year. A grade improvement of four points on a RIT score is about one year of growth.)

Etta Sue Yazzie was at a 5th-grade reading level (5.2) and started the year with RIT scores of 210 in reading and 215 in language arts. Her end-of-the-year RIT scores were 216 for reading and 221 for language arts. This is a typical result for students in the second group, who started below grade level but were much closer to the national norm by the end of the year.

Pete Glen started the school year with a reading RIT of 222 and a language arts RIT of 218. By the end of the year his reading score was 228 and language arts was 232. His is an example of a smaller group of students who already performed at close to grade level and who demonstrated consistent growth. This group of students ended the year at their appropriate grade level.

Note: These students do not represent the entire spectrum of scores since many went up and some went down, but they do represent typical growth of scores among low-, middle- and high-reading ability groups.

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Lee Schwartz, lead professional developer for the project, led participants through several strategies and routines that the Wingate cadre took back to their campus and implemented schoolwide that fall. Every teacher on campus learned to deliver SIM instruction and did so during a second period literacy class. A 45-minute literacy block was incorporated into the regular school day, which lengthened the school day

but added the requisite time to integrate the SIM strategies effectively.

To help teachers successfully implement the SIM strategies, Schwartz made two visits to Wingate during the school year for planning and training. Academy administrators also learned about SIM and provided support for the implementation and accountability phases of the project. Coaches were employed at all four grade levels to support the implementation. In addition, teams of Wingate teachers attended training workshops in both the 2005 and 2006 summer sessions in Lawrence.

At the end of the 2005-2006 school year, teachers and administrators were encouraged by the level of growth. At the start



Jeremiah Cronin and other teachers and administrators at New Mexico's Wingate High School are encouraged by the level of growth they have seen among their students after implementing SIM strategies.

of the SIM intervention, seniors consistently tested at between 6th- and 7th-grade literacy levels in all areas — mathematics, reading, writing and language mechanics, with a range from as low as 2nd-grade literacy levels up through 12th grade (pre-college) levels. After an academic year of SIM strategies, abilities in six content areas were measured by the Northwest Education Association (NWEA) standardized tests.

Students at Wingate showed an average increase of one and a half years of growth in reading and language arts scores. (Typically students in reservation schools lose ground in their reading abilities — as much as the equivalent of a year — during the school year, making the gains even more impressive.) The staff also noticed that student attitudes about reading improved. 🍎

Of Note:

THE USE OF CRL's SIM is not the only Jayhawk connection at Wingate High School. Many thanks to **Jeremiah Cronin**, a language arts teacher at Wingate, for bringing this story to our attention. Cronin earned his master's degree from the School of Education and Emeriti professor **Lee Capps** served on Cronin's doctoral committee at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque. Cronin is, as CRL trainer **Lee Schwartz** says, "a Jayhawk who is in the high desert of New Mexico doing great things." She also says of Cronin and his colleagues, "I work with many schools around the country. Rarely do I find the dedication and concern for students and student learning that I have found at Wingate. It is rare indeed for a high school faculty to embrace literacy. Content specialists tend to want to stick to their content only and if supportive at all, they view literacy as someone else's job. Not at Wingate. Through their common literacy period, each teacher became a member of a learning community where kids come first. And Jerry was right up there at the front of the pack leading the way."

Cronin, in response, says that he is very proud of his ongoing collaboration with the KU School of Education and is very pleased that the Jayhawks continue to serve the Native American Indian communities that need so much support. He hopes to foster even more connections between KU and Wingate, including student teaching placements.

Another connection is Jerry's wife, **Darlene Cronin**, who earned her master's degree from KU. She and two colleagues recently attended a workshop about helping prepare students with disabilities to successfully accomplish the transition to adulthood. The sessions were part of the Transition Coalition and were directed by **Mary Morningstar**, associate professor, Special Education.