



Combining culture and proven strategies results in better literacy for Navajo students



The Challenge

Students in the Kayenta Unified School District, located in the Navajo Nation in Kayenta, Arizona, vary widely in terms of language proficiency. In both English and Navajo, their proficiency levels are affected by their socioeconomic backgrounds and language used at home. District-wide, students in all grades were scoring low in reading and writing, and school leaders were looking for a way to improve proficiency and overall achievement.

Strategic Solution

McREL was contracted in 2007 and 2008 to deliver a unique program that combined our school improvement approach, Success in Sight®, with Classroom Instruction that Works for English Language Learners, under the leadership of Principal Consultant Cynthia Björk.

Björk worked with Kayenta Intermediate School's leadership team to build capacity by applying the Success in Sight process: develop a vision for the school; learn about the process of change; develop collaboration and cohesiveness among the staff; collect and analyze data; create instructional units and plans based on the data; and generate "quick wins," or fractal experiences, toward improving student achievement.

The work also took into account the Navajo culture and research on effective practices for American Indian and, in particular, Navajo children. Björk elicited the participation and knowledge of the

teachers, almost all of whom are Navajo, in sharing research and providing instructional strategies. Grade-level teams developed purposeful, year-long curriculum plans that incorporated cultural elements.

Results

By increasing a sense of community while focusing on student data and honing the use of research-based instructional strategies, Kayenta was able to turn around its scores in reading and writing. Third graders increased reading scores from 51 to 61 percent proficient. In mathematics, scores spiked from 22 to 55 percent. And in writing, proficiency went up 5 percentage points, from 74 to 79 percent. For the same period, 4th graders increased their writing scores from 70 to 84 percent. In reading, scores increased from 40 percent (in 2005) to 53 percent (in 2009). Fifth graders have gone from 26 to 55 percent in reading and 60 to 77 percent in writing.

Next Steps

While the content McREL provides is the same for all clients, the work in Kayenta has shaped how we provide it in the American Indian context. Practices used in Kayenta, such as relationship building, learning about the culture and language, understanding the history of American Indian education, and being aware of indigenous ways of knowing are now being applied to other McREL work with American Indian populations.