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# Increasing Student Achievement in a Rural District: Using Resources Differently

Successful Strategies from Colorado Schools and Districts

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## Why Feature Kiowa High School?

Kiowa is one of Colorado's top schools with the greatest success in improving achievement for students who have been persistently low performers. Kiowa High School received a Colorado Legacy Foundation award for innovative use of resources to meet student needs. This award recognizes a school or district that has effectively aligned all available resources to meet students' needs.

## Kiowa High School Demographics 2010-11 School Year

- . 113 students
- . 90% Caucasian
- . 40% Free and Reduced Lunch
- . Kiowa uses a four day school week

## The Challenge – Low and Stagnant Writing and Math Scores

As Principal and Superintendent Lance Luitjens completed a report to the school board three years ago, he realized it was basically a list of excuses for why student achievement was stagnant and relatively low. Rather than continue to submit reasons for low performance, he decided he and the school would “take 100% responsibility for our students’ achievement.”

Over the next two years, Kiowa implemented several changes that he and his staff attribute to the district's increased growth scores and student achievement. These changes were implemented without additional financial resources.

- . The school schedule was changed to create an academic assistance period for all students;
- . The entire school staff focused on writing instruction, regardless of their subject expertise;
- . Struggling students received more instructional time in math and writing; and
- . Students set achievement goals specific to CSAP.

## Promising Practice – Build in Academic Assistance to the Daily School Calendar

According to Mr. Luitjens, the district adopted a philosophy that they wouldn't exempt students from learning and allow them to receive zeros on assignments. They also recognized that students needed daily opportunities to receive targeted assistance in subjects where they were receiving D's and F's.

In response, Kiowa Middle and High Schools implemented Academic Assistance. A total of 35 minutes were built into the schedule prior to lunch, creating a 65 minute block of time when combined with the lunch hour. For about 85% of students, this time is spent in the cafeteria in a study hall setting. But for the 10-15% of students who are receiving a D or F or zero in any class, they leave the cafeteria and proceed to the classroom of the teacher from whom they are receiving the low grade. They receive individual or small group instruction that is designed to help them finish and perfect their work, thereby improving their grade and completing assignments for which they would have received a zero otherwise.

Clear communication among teachers is needed in order to make this a successful strategy. In the event that a student needs help in more than one subject, Kiowa's small size is an asset. Teachers don't need a lot of formal communications strategies. Rather, informal but daily communication in the hallway prior to academic assistance allows teachers to coordinate which students will be directed to which teacher and for how long. "This strategy leverages our unique situation as a small school (there are 8 teachers in the high school). We can personalize success for students," says Mark Cayou, high school Language Arts teacher. After two years of utilizing this strategy, the staff is experimenting with using a google document that tracks which students are participating in Academic Assistance and which teacher(s) are responsible for them each week. The Principal updates the document each Monday and notifies parents that their child is in Academic Assistance for the week. Teachers are able to access the document anytime, so once the student has increased his or her grade or completed the assignment, the teacher updates the document and sends the student on to another teacher or back to study hall.

## Promising Practice – “Double Dose” of Math and Literacy for Struggling Students

Kiowa recognized that many students need more time in order to become proficient in a subject. In response, the district implemented a Math Skills class and Writing Workshop class. Ninth, tenth, and eleventh grade students who aren't proficient in math and writing attend these courses instead of an elective course such as art, choir, or woodshop. At the beginning of the school year, teachers use several data sources – CSAP scores (students who receive an “Unsatisfactory” or “Partially Proficient” rating) and district tests – as well as their own professional judgment, to designate which students would benefit most from an extra “dose” of math or writing instruction every day. Students enrolled in these courses receive approximately 120 minutes of math or literacy instruction each day.

Math Skills and Writing Workshop are not study halls, nor are they a repeat of the math or language arts class they took earlier in the day. Rather, school staff uses data from district assessments, CSAP, and the school's priority improvement goals to identify specific strands within the math and literacy standards that students struggle with most, and provide differentiated instruction focused on the highest priority areas.

Depending on the progress students make, they could be in Math Skills or Writing Workshop for one or two semesters. Teachers use district assessments and their own judgment to decide if a student would benefit most from continuing to receive a double dose of math or literacy for a second semester, or if they are ready to move on and enroll in an elective.

Mr. Luitjens admits that initially some parents resisted this strategy as well as Academic Assistance. Some disagreed that their child should be required to take math or writing twice a day rather than participating in an elective. Parents had a difficult time seeing the importance of the extra time, in large part because they question the relevance and importance of assessment data. Mr. Luitjens spent a lot of time preparing his staff, district administration and the school board for the change. He continued to push the idea that students needed more time and different opportunities to learn and ultimately increase student achievement. He often talked about the philosophy of “not exempting students from learning.” Subsequently, when he had tough conversations with parents, he felt he had the backing of his colleagues and district leadership. He also made no exceptions for any students – if they were placed in the class, they had to complete the semester. This helped establish expectations for families and the entire school community.

## **Promising Practice – School-Wide Focus on Writing**

In order to improve students' writing scores, Kiowa decided to take a school-wide approach to writing instruction. All teachers, regardless of the subject they taught, were expected to teach writing. Three English teachers helped Mr. Luitjens lead the effort by providing training to the staff during in-service days prior to the start of school, staff development days throughout the year, and PLC time. Staff spent a great deal of time developing and agreeing on a common language, so that when teachers were grading and comparing writing samples, everyone was looking for the same things and teaching it the same way. Then the staff focused on the specific areas of writing where students weren't proficient. All teachers, including science, social studies, and all electives like P.E. and band, were responsible for teaching those components in their classroom as part of the curriculum. Students are required to work on the assignment until it is proficient, which means they may be working on the same assignment for several weeks working on revisions. Often, students used Academic Assistance to work on their writing assignments.

This strategy requires all teachers to be writing teachers, a cultural and strategic shift for most schools. Mr. Luitjens leaned heavily on his literacy teachers to lead professional development for the entire staff and he continuously found creative ways to build in professional development throughout the year so staff had additional time to learn. For example, he implemented a couple late start days for students, and teachers agreed to come to school early, providing a couple additional hours for professional development.

## **Promising Practice – Setting Achievement Goals with Students**

Beginning in January and continuing through the next two months, Mr. Luitjens met with each individual student to set goals for CSAP. He showed students their previous scores and talked about what it would take to improve. Together, the students and Mr. Luitjens set point total improvement goals. Although it took a lot of time to meet with 100+ students, Mr. Luitjens believes this strategy helped students take the test seriously and try harder than they might have otherwise. It also helped students identify areas they needed to work on. Mr. Luitjens made it a priority to meet with every student, regardless of their performance, because the goal was for each student to improve, whether they had previously scored low, high or in the middle.

To overcome the time crunch created by starting in January, Mr. Luitjens expressed a need to start goal setting earlier in the school year. Also, in the 2011-12 school year, the staff is considering ways to relieve the burden on the principal and make teachers responsible for a smaller group of students that they would set goals with.

## **Improved Student Outcomes**

Kiowa High School improved their writing Median Growth Percentile (MGP) scores from 64 in 2008 to 79 in 2011. The percentage of students scoring Proficient or Advanced on CSAP increased from 62% in 2009 to 72% in 2011. Mr. Luitjens and Mr. Cayou attribute their increased growth scores in large part to the promising practices profiled above.

Mr. Luitjens notes that during the second year, when they implemented the school-wide focus on writing, he noticed a bigger change in student achievement. “It took a little time to adjust to the addition of academic assistance and adding a second class of math and writing. In the second year of implementing the new schedule, when we added the component of teachers collaborating and everyone was focused on writing, that’s when I noticed the increase in student achievement.”

“We now have an influx of new students to the district, in large part due to the district’s improvement,” reports Mr. Cayou.

## **Acknowledgments**

Written by: Heather Chikoore, Colorado Legacy Foundation

Thank you to the staff of Kiowa High School and for your willingness to open your school and classroom doors to CLF and to share your promising practices with schools and districts throughout the state.