

GIVING STUDENTS A VOICE TO SPEAK



Indian Oasis Elementary School rises to the challenge of Native American students unfamiliar with English and written language, using SFA to give them learning tools and confidence.

THE CHALLENGE

When Dr. Edna Morris became principal of Indian Oasis Elementary School, in the Sonoran Desert southwest of Tucson, in 2011, she inherited a school in a community rich with history and culture. Located on a reservation along the U.S.-Mexico border, it serves the children of the Tohono O'odham Nation.

The job was also rife with challenges. The rural area is impoverished, vulnerable to issues related to immigration and illegal aliens, drug and human trafficking and substance and alcohol abuse.

Indian Oasis had just received a school improvement grant because it fell among the lowest 5% of schools in Arizona. Only 18% of students in grades 3 to 5 passed AIMS in reading. Students were being sent from elementary school to middle school and high school, thoroughly unprepared for academic life.

There was the added problem of language. The Tohono O'odham Nation didn't have a written language until 1986 and its tribal language is light years away from English. As a result, students did not want to speak in class, leaving long, unfilled silences.

THE SOLUTION

Morris credits the choice of Success for All to Dr. Toni Allen, a former principal herself and an SFA Facilitator at Phoenix Elementary School. Allen suggested that the district invest in a program like SFA's to improve reading scores.

With this advice, Principal Morris attended the SFA New Leaders Institute. "The importance of SFA became very clear to me," she recalls. "I realized that it wasn't just a reading intervention program. We purchased the whole thing. In addition to KinderCorner, Reading Roots and



Reading Wings, we got PowerTeaching Math and Getting Along Together [SFA's social, emotional and cognitive learning program]."

Morris had challenges at first implementing the program, trying to get administrators and teachers to understand its full scope. But hard work paid off. "Today everybody is part of the program," she says. "For example, our Solutions committees are not just made up of teachers. Every single staff member, including our custodians and front-office staff, is part of a Solutions committee."

Allen, who serves as Indian Oasis's SFA Facilitator, adds: "We've come a long way. When children are not used to having conversations or they're shy or just afraid to speak out, the SFA collaborative learning strategies are really useful. When we started walking into rooms and seeing some of our students stand up and speak out, tears were rolling down my face, and I said, 'Yes! This can happen.'"

Morris particularly commends the SFA coaches for helping to train teachers and staff in particular areas of need. For example, the administrative team was supported in its decision to focus on student achievement and on building teachers' pedagogical skills.

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SFA HAS MADE THE BIGGEST DIFFERENCE FOR US IN THE AREAS OF PHONEMIC AWARENESS AND DECODING. THE FOUNDATION ALONE HAS CATAPULTED OUR CHILDREN TO ACTUALLY BE ABLE TO READ.

DR. EDNA MORRIS, Principal

Engaging the Community

For Dr. Toni Allen, the SFA Facilitator at Indian Oasis Elementary School, one of the great benefits of the Success for All program is how it involves local community. The school, for example, employs local storytellers to tell tales to students, and it recruits community members to serve as listeners for students who retell what they've heard.

"It's such a wonderful feeling to go to a store or some other community location and have someone stop and tell you what a wonderful job you are doing at the school and that they're so pleased," says Allen. "I think the best part for me is to see how SFA has influenced our entire community."

THE RESULTS

Today much has changed at this school once coping with low test scores and reticent students. Recently, 63% of students passed the AIM reading tests (up from 18%). As the Indian Oasis posts overall improvements in student reading and math abilities, and school safety, it is prompting more families in the area to send their children to this school. Despite the tremendous influx of new students, 70% of pupils are now reading on grade level.

The school makes every possible effort to reach out to parents and share student growth with progress reports. Staff has coffee with parents in the morning to discuss the role they can play in their kids' education and also invites them to come to the school to act as listeners in classes.

SFA's Getting Along Together program has helped Indian Oasis create a more positive cooperative culture with improved behavior. "Three years ago, students were carrying small handguns, knives and chains to school, and we're talking elementary kids here," says Morris. "We had well over 500 referrals. This year we ended up with 35 referrals total for the whole year."

Because of Indian Oasis's unique situation on the reservation, part of the school's vision is to ensure that students maintain their culture. Lessons in the nation's tribal language, its ceremonies, stories and himdag (way of life) are all incorporated into the curriculum. The Community Connections committee also brings in storytellers at least once a month and, utilizing SFA strategy, children retell what they hear.

When asked about the greatest area of improvement, Morris says that "SFA has made the biggest difference for us in the areas of phonemic awareness and decoding. That foundation alone has catapulted our children to actually be able to read. It will support the reading and fluency that must occur when they're an older reader."

From Allen's perspective, "it is really apparent to me that the future of this entire Tohono O'odham Nation depends on educating their children and doing it well. They absolutely must learn to just not read but to think, to analyze and to be able to protect themselves, so I feel what we are doing is a very high calling. I believe that through SFA we have found a key to getting us on the right track for what we need to do for our children."

FOUNDED IN 1987, the nonprofit Success for All Foundation is dedicated to ensuring that every child, from pre-kindergarten to grade 8, becomes proficient in reading and learning – opening up new doors for a lifetime of achievement. Not only has SFA been proven time and again to help with student reading ability and math performance, it also addresses non-academic concerns, improving behavior, attendance and parental involvement. Please contact us for more information.

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