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The WRITE stuff

Local teachers use data to help students hone their skills

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CANYON CITY - Above average is not good enough at Humbolt Elementary School.

With help from their teachers, students at the school have made great strides over the past school year, increasing their proficiency in writing.

In 2008-09 the students had math and reading scores that were above the state average, and writing scores were also above state average, but not by much.

Looking over a school project are Humbolt Elementary fifth-grade teacher Susie Garrison and student Makayla Audis.

The Eagle/Angel Carpenter

This is where fifth-grade teacher Susie Garrison stepped in.

As test coordinator for Grant School District 3 during the 2008-2009 school year, she received training through the Oregon DATA Project (Direct Access To Achievement).

There Garrison learned how teachers can make decisions for curriculum and instruction based on student data including test scores and informal observations. Teachers can then focus in on the trouble spots and improve student learning and raise test scores.

Putting the knowledge from the training to work, Garrison and other licensed Humbolt staff decided to tackle spelling, punctuation, grammar and capitalization last year.

"That was the biggest hangup affecting their ability to write well," she said, adding, "That's just one piece of their overall writing score, but we realized that was the area we needed to work on the most."

This year the focus was narrowed down even more to just spelling.

To achieve the improvements, teachers used a "No Excuse" word list for each grade level as well

as daily oral language lessons three times a week. A "Words Their Way" spelling program was also used in grades 3-5, and web-based program, "MY Access!," was implemented as an additional teacher tool - with it students can quickly measure their writing weaknesses and strengths.

Humbolt Principal Kris Beal was pleased with this year's results.

"We expected gains," she said, "but we were pretty wowed with the results we got."

For grades 1 and 2 the fall average percentage for spelling errors was 35.4 percent, mid-year that percent went to 19.7 and by the end of the year the students were at 15.7.

The staff goal was to decrease the errors by 10 percent, however, they nearly doubled that with a 19.7 percent difference.

Grades 3-5 also saw improvements.

Their fall average percentage for spelling errors was 12 percent, and by mid-year they improved to 6.3 percent. By the end of the year errors were down to 5.5 for a 6.5 percent improvement.

"It really shows that we have made a difference," Garrison said. "This staff really worked hard to plan and implement strategies to help students become more successful, and our data show the results of our dedication to our students."

The DATA training was used district-wide this year with language arts teacher Sandy Brown on board with the program and leading the training for middle school and high school teachers.

Helping to keep the project going is Paul Smith, school improvement specialist for the Grant County Education Service District, who serves as coordinator for the data teams.

He's successfully applied for a sustainability grant to allow for professional development which will pay for training expenses, and resources for data analysis and curriculum.

He noted that Seneca School is also involved with the data project as well.

Smith lauded Garrison's work.

"She's really made it happen over there," he said. "Students carry conventions all throughout their writing career. If they can master those things, that's the foundation to carry them through their school career and their entire life."

Garrison was appointed to be on Governor Ted Kulongoski's Quality Education Model (QEM) and Best Practices Panel. Also, after being a member of the Oregon Education Association's board of directors for eight years, Garrison was elected as Region 3 vice president in April.