

Apache Junction School District Implements Secondary Literacy “Triage” Program



Overview

At Apache Junction Unified School District, passing the AIMS test is a graduation requirement. Many students were at-risk of not “walking across the stage” because of low-level literacy skills. The district decided to create a program to help these students acquire the necessary reading and writing skills to pass the graduation exam.

This new program, TRIAGE, couples master teachers and aligned curriculum with Apache Junction’s at-risk learners, allowing the district to “give their best to those whose need is the greatest.”

The basis of TRIAGE is differentiated instruction—an instructional methodology proven effective with at-risk and struggling learners. Motivation to succeed is built into the program, and students come with a positive attitude because they have a new opportunity to acquire missing skills and can see the possibility of graduation.

The need to help at-risk learners

Arizona requires students to successfully pass the AIMS criterion-referenced test for graduation. At Apache Junction, only 68 percent of 11th grade students were meeting reading standards, and 70 percent were meeting writing standards. “We could not let the 30 percent of students not meeting standards fall through the cracks and miss graduation,” said Sharon Smith, director of curriculum. “We needed to help these kids fast by providing a triage of some kind.”

The TRIAGE program

The district decided that the TRIAGE program must:

- Do things differently. The instruction these students received in the past wasn’t working. “We needed to take them back to foundational instruction but provide it in an age-appropriate, engaging manner,” said Smith.
- Teach students what they don’t know. “Using diagnostic assessment we must define the exact missing skills and focus instructional time on those areas.”
- Teach each student at his/her instructional level and provide differentiated learning.
- Provide more time for reading and writing instruction.
- Staff the program with master reading teachers who come equipped with the strategies and methods effective for students at lower skill levels.

INSTITUTION: Apache Junction USD, Apache Junction, AZ

TESTING: High-stakes graduation test in effect in 2006

DEMOGRAPHICS: 18 percent minority; 6 Title I schools

STUDENTS: 9 schools; 5,700 students

CONTACT: Sharon Smith, director of curriculum, Apache Junction School District

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SHARON SMITH,
DIRECTOR OF CURRICULUM,
APACHE JUNCTION USD

The selection

Eleventh grade students were the first group to participate in the TRIAGE program. TRIAGE reading included 120 student slots; students were placed in the slots based on 2004 AIMS reading scores. They were rank ordered and grouped for differentiated instruction:

- Reading A: Lowest 24
- Reading B: Middle 48
- Reading C: Top 48

The toolbox

The program the district designed was called TRIAGE, and it uses master elementary reading teachers to teach reading to middle and high school students, as the district believed the typical middle or high school English teacher would not be prepared to do this.

The basis of TRIAGE is an aligned curriculum and differentiated instruction—an instructional methodology proven effective with at-risk and struggling learners.

To meet the needs of these learners, Apache Junction created a literacy toolbox of standards-aligned resources and master faculty to address literacy needs. It included 2-hour block schedules, master reading teachers, instructional aides, leveled texts, Accelerated Reader, 12 computers, PLATO Learning reading courseware, a writing roadmap, test item bank, and a counselor/dean. PLATO® courseware helped to facilitate the acquisition of missing skills and student motivation to succeed—all steps to help students achieve graduation.

The instruction

Using appropriate assessment, the faculty grouped students based on skill level and diagnosed individual skill gaps. Using this diagnosis, specific instruction was prescribed using the tools in the toolbox. The daily activities for literacy instruction included guided reading groups, self-selected reading, working with words, mini-lessons, computer time, writing, and appropriate assessment with regrouping if necessary.

Success

The TRIAGE program is a 3-year commitment; the district is currently in year one. “The measure of success will be the number of students passing the high-stakes graduation test and receiving diplomas,” said Smith. Initial results from the fall show that the average student gain in the district in reading is 12 points, but in the TRIAGE program, that gain increased to 21 points. In writing, the district average gain is 34 points; with the TRIAGE program the gain is 44 points. In addition, 70 students in the program successfully passed the AIMS test and will now be able to graduate.

Smith and her colleagues attribute this success to a few key factors:

- Motivation: “Kids don’t want to return to the old way. Through the use of appropriate technology, they are coming in with a positive attitude. There is built-in motivation because acquisition of literacy skills is a requirement for graduation—something all participants want to attain,” said Smith.
- Assessment: “High school teachers are seeing the value of diagnostic, prescriptive assessment and instruction; small, flexible group instruction; and class management procedures.”
- Professional development. “The districts’ training plan proven effective for elementary teachers has now successfully moved into the upper grades. Research shows that embedded, ongoing professional development is a requirement for literacy instruction success, and we are seeing that in action.”

In the first year, 70 students in the program successfully passed the AIMS test and will now be able to graduate.