

**Peña Blanca Elementary School
SANTA CRUZ VALLEY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT
Reading/Writing Connections**

Introduction

Peña Blanca Elementary School in Rio Rico, Arizona is part of the Santa Cruz School District, a diverse district. Under the leadership of Principal Sandra Figueroa, the school began their work with *Regie Routman in Residence: Reading/Writing Connections* in 2008, when Ms. Figueroa became principal. Located in rural Arizona, 95% of the students are English Language Learners, and 77% of the students participate in the free and reduced lunch program. Most students come from homes where Spanish is the predominant language. During the first year, the school set goals with a commitment to high expectations for all students. Moving from “underperforming” and not meeting AYP (Annual Yearly Progress), the school not only met “Arizona Learns” and AYP standards during the 2008-09 school year, they made enormous progress in reclassifying English Language Learners, moving from 31% to 39% in one year as measured on the Arizona Language Assessment Test. Creating a culture dedicated to both staff and student learning made the difference.

Student Performance Data

Peña Blanca Elementary demonstrated growth in reading and writing on AIMS (Arizona’s Instrument to Measure Success). The following chart captures the growth students made in one school year. The school’s commitment to high expectations and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and their implementation of *RRIR* played a key role in boosting achievement and realizing the goals of moving from underperforming to performing/performing+ and meeting AYP. In addition to improved performance in reading and writing, students increased in math achievement due to their growth as readers.

Grade	Reading		Writing		Math	
	2007-08	2008-09	2007-08	2008-09	2007-08	2008-09
3 rd	45%	58% (+13)	58%	67% (+9)	46%	59% (+13)
4 th	59%	52%	52%	76(+24)	41%	61% (+20)
5 th	64%	72% (+8)	64%	77% (+13)	59%	56%*

Lessons Learned

- Celebrate and highlight strengths and joy in learning; model mutual love and respect.
- Find out what others know and do well; empower one another, and hold each other accountable.
- Teach in meaningful, authentic, and relevant ways, and focus on results.
- Knowledgeable teachers increase student learning; at best, programs are a resource.
- Teach in ways where actions become—and are anchored in—shared school beliefs.
- Provide time for learning and reflection; include demonstrations, time for guided and independent practice, and application of new learning.

Testimonials

Principal, Sandra Figueroa: *The Reading/Writing Connections Project was the tool I used to institute our professional learning community and the vehicle for empowering all my teachers to become instructional leaders in their own classrooms. As a novice principal in a new and diverse school community, I encountered many challenges. However, everyone in our school community was amazed at how quickly our staff came together as a PLC in only the first seven sessions. The culture of our school changed before my eyes. When I first began, I could only hear doubt, fear, and I often would be asked: “What are your mandates?” Our conversations are now centered on student learning, and the Optimal Learning Model (gradual release of responsibility) has become the framework for our teaching and learning regardless of programs, district, and/or state political agendas.*

Arizona Department of Education, Paulette Hirshman: *The number one thing we saw was a community of learners of both of teachers and students. When the state monitoring team went in, they were “wowed.” Visiting classrooms, we saw application of learning principles and strategies of effective teaching. Having been in this business for 30 years, Sandra’s leadership skills were highly visible, even on the pre-visit.*

Preschool Teacher, Christina Kane: *Through our PLCs, I have been able to apply what I learned to transform my teaching. I now identify students’ needs and offer authentic activities that extend each child’s knowledge. Through our daily, shared writing, all students (all are ELLs) are able to contribute something meaningful about their lives and begin to learn to read through their own writing. I never knew preschoolers could accomplish so much so soon!*

**Note that the fourth- and fifth-grade cohort groups who did not meet the state benchmarks actually made at least a 10% gain from the previous year.*

