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Apache educators study Cache reading

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How important is it that children learn to read early in the education process?

“There are counties in California that use third-grade reading scores to plan their prison populations for 20 years down the road,” stated Alan Hofmeister, director of the Reading for All Learners project at Utah State University.

“So, if sociologists are looking at third-grade reading scores to predict prison populations, what students do in kindergarten and the first three grades is probably as important as anything they’ll do in their life.”

Because the Reading For All Learners program has been so successful in teaching children to read in the 10 years since it was first developed, it was the obvious answer when the White Mountain Apache School District in eastern Arizona requested help in raising the reading test scores of its students.

After being approached in January by White Mountain Apache Superintendent Kevin Skenandore, Christle Bearheels-Ricketts, a Native American schools consultant, suggested he contact Utah State.

The Reading for All Learners program

currently provides technical assistance and instructional materials to more than 160 school districts, including districts in Harlem, the Bronx, Puerto Rico and a number of predominantly Native American schools in the western United States.

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“They wanted a program that was effective but not expensive, and we were at the top of her list,” Hofmeister said.

White Mountain Apache administrators visited Utah State in late January, but as Hofmeister noted, “There’s really nothing to see on campus.”

Utah State, therefore, has become an intermediary between White Mountain Apache and Cache County school districts.

Ron Shaw, principal of Cibecue Community School in Cibecue, Ariz., and five teachers from White Mountain Apache, spent all day Thursday observing Cache educators putting the program into action as they taught reading to students in kindergarten and first, second and third grades.

The tour began at 8 a.m. at Park Elementary in Richmond. It then proceeded on to Nibley Elementary and Lincoln Elementary in

Hyrum, before ending with a follow-up workshop at Utah State.

“We’ve enjoyed it; it’s been very enlightening,” Shaw said during his contingent’s visit to Lincoln Elementary. “It’s exciting for us because we’ve just started the program, and we feel like it’s going to be a real complement to what we’re doing right now.

“Actually seeing is worth much more than words.”

But while the White Mountain Apache educators are learning from Cache County methods, the reverse is also true.

Hofmeister spent three days in Arizona in March, while Becky Wadsworth, Title 1 director for the Cache County School District, and Patty Willis, district reading instruction specialist, went down for a week.

“It was so neat for Patty and I to go down and see a different culture and how that culture enters into education,” Wadsworth said. “They have different styles, but also have a lot of the same programs that we have so we were able to see how they fit in and really get those kids to soar.”

Cache County schools are rapidly becoming more culturally diverse, and rather than sit back and wait for changes to come, the school district is trying to prepare for them.

“Cache district is very aware of the increasing variety in our clientele,” said Chad Downs, associate superintendent of the Cache County School District. “It is in the best interests of our patrons to support our staff as they work to increase their competence and confidence in addressing this increasing diversity.”

“We have much to benefit from in this ongoing collaboration with the White Mountain

Apache educators.”

During the White Mountain Apache delegation’s visit to Lincoln Elementary, principal Curt Hanks shared some of his school’s methods of monitoring the reading abilities of its students.

In advance of the state Legislature’s recent mandate that schools keep closer tabs on children’s progress, for the last year Lincoln has been testing its students on a quarterly basis.

“We’re able to see where a child is strong or weak, and then can target specific skills,” Hanks explained.

The goal is to try and make certain that by third grade, all students are reading above grade level.

Hofmeister said that studies show that children who are behind by the end of the third grade are much more likely to drop out of school and become involved in anti-social behavior like drugs and gangs.

“So it’s far better to put your money into training in those first three grades than having to spend large amounts of money in rehabilitation . . . [and other remedial programs],” Hofmeister said.