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*November 26, 2002 Feature Story*

## **"Reading for All Learners Program" Helps Nation's Children Learn to Read**

It's what most Americans take for granted each and every day, yet what millions of school children struggle with the first three or four years of their educational careers: the ability to read.

Reading is a part of everyday life for almost all people, but statistics show that many school children are not getting the proper start they need in developing this basic skill. Alan Hofmeister, director of the Center for Information Technology at Utah State University and the Reading for All Learners Program (RALP), is leading a charge to combat this problem.



From Harlem to Puerto Rico to the White Mountain Apache Indian Reservation, RALP is helping struggling students learn how to read and helping them get their lives on track.

And history and statistics show that the program works.

Since its introduction in Harlem, for instance, RALP has been aiding educators in reversing the trend of poor reading achievement. According to Karin Binner, executive director of the tutoring program, students who were learning only half a grade level are now learning more than one grade level a year in the after school tutoring program. Most students in the summer tutoring program improve a full grade level during the summer.

RALP is a program designed around 140 "little books" that students read in succession, each book building upon the skills developed in the previous one. The program relies heavily on small group interaction as the mode of instruction. As its name suggests, it is designed to help all children develop reading skills, regardless of social class, learning ability or geographic location.

"Our program is designed to help young children get a jump on reading no matter

who they are," Hofmeister said. "We believe that if you can give school children this basic skill early on, not only will they have a head start in their education, but they are less likely to exhibit anti-social behavior later in life."

Hofmeister added that anyone can develop a reading program, take it to a private or high performing public school and have success. Instead, he looks for challenging areas of the nation in which to test his program.

"You've got to be able to go into the most challenging settings and deliver," he said. "It's a real test for us."

Hofmeister seems to have a knack for finding those tough areas. Over the past five years, RALP has been introduced in Harlem, Puerto Rico and several Native American reservations where achievement test scores plainly showed young children were struggling with reading.

"In many school districts, achievement scores are highly related to the income level of the neighborhood," Hofmeister said. "For instance, in low-income areas like Harlem and on the reservations, more than 20 percent of elementary students end up in special education programs. And the only reason it's just 20 is that the law won't allow anymore to be placed there."

Hofmeister's latest effort to overcome such statistics involves the White Mountain Apache Indian Reservation in Arizona. The Center for Information Technology at Utah State University, the Cache County School District in northern Utah and the Apache Reservation are collaborating to help one another. This three-pronged effort is yielding benefits on all sides, Hofmeister said.

First, the reservation is getting much needed help with the education of their children. According to Hofmeister, the White Mountain Apache Reservation faces many struggles.

"The National Bureau of Indian Affairs reported last year that not one of the grade school students on the reservation was reading at grade level, so administrators and teachers went on a nationwide search for solutions," he said. "Since kids weren't getting the basic skills of reading and writing, later in life they found the world had little to offer them."

According to Hofmeister, the reservation has one of the highest unemployment rates in the nation. He also said that due to limited educational and employment opportunities, suicide rates are very high, particularly among high school students.

School officials on the reservation are now counting on RALP and the Center for Information Technology staff to help change this picture. Already, teaching aides have been trained and are ready to help the full-time teachers implement RALP. Since the aides are drawn from the local population, they give the schools and the program a link to the community that proves vital to the program's success.

The second prong of the effort involves the Cache County School District. Diversity is on the rise in this northern Utah district and administrators are preparing for potential diversity issues before they arise. Since the district implemented RALP five years ago, it has the program running smoothly and can serve as a good model for other districts trying to implement the program.

During the past year one of Cache District's Title 1 schools had the highest reading achievement scores among Utah's Title 1 schools. The school's third grade students reached the 80th percentile on the state-wide Standardized Achievement Test.

"The Cache County District is our model school for the reservation," Hofmeister said. "As the two districts interact, Cache administrators get a chance to view diversity up close as they immerse themselves in another culture for a week or two on site and communicate with the reservation for years to come."

Apache administrators were invited to northern Utah to observe RALP in action in Cache County schools in January 2002, and Cache administrators then had a chance to help on the reservation as the program was implemented in the Apache schools in March. Since then, several visits have been made by personnel from both districts.

Last, Utah State students and staff are benefiting from the cooperative effort. The Center for Information Technology has two interns working on the project. Thomas Johnson is getting hands-on training in his major, business information systems, and also handles much of the marketing duties for the project. Emilee Call is learning strategies for use in special education and is also working on a project to get RALP into public libraries.

In short, all three entities are benefiting from this effort. None of those involved has lost sight of the ultimate goal, however.

"Everyone cares about the kids," Hofmeister said. "That's what this program is all about."

In an effort to make the program more widely available, RALP is a non-profit operation. It is available to school districts and individual families alike for a small fee that only covers the cost of production.

"This is really non profit," said Hofmeister. "Cost effectiveness is the key. If you've got a great program but it's very expensive, you're still discriminating against the group that needs help the most."

As Hofmeister and his staff continue to seek those groups and help them through the implementation of RALP, it seems quite certain that more and more American children will be able to take reading for granted just like the rest of the nation often does.

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