

# The Impact of the Reading First Teacher Education Network on Increasing the Reading Proficiency of American Indian Children—How a Summer Reading Institute Brought Together Educators, Parents, and a Community

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B. Denise Hawkins

**W**hen Oglala Lakota College faculty and administrators, trained in evidence-based reading instruction, set out to increase the reading proficiency of American Indian children on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, they knew first they had to build the capacity of teachers and empower parents to support their children in learning to read. The result was a two-week Reading Institute.

South Dakota's Oglala Lakota College,<sup>1</sup> located on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, is one of 38 minority-serving institutions partnering with the Reading First Teacher Education Network (RFTEN), a three-year grant project supporting professional development in scientifically-based reading instruction.<sup>2</sup> Oglala Lakota College, in collaboration with RFTEN, used the Reading Institute held June 13-23, 2005, at Pahin Sinte College Center in Porcupine, SD, to provide local teachers with tools for understanding and implementing evidence-based reading practices. The College plans to place interns and student teachers with collaborating teachers who have been trained in evidence-based reading instruction and who are using it in their classrooms. The Reading Institute also served to build relationships with parents, and to unite a community around reading, learning, and literacy.

The RFTEN project, aimed at raising P-12 student achievement in reading, works with faculty at nationally accredited, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-serving Institutions, and Tribal Colleges and Universities. To do this, RFTEN partners with the U.S. Department of Education, which awarded the grant; the scientific community, including the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development; and the National Council for

Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). NCATE,<sup>3</sup> a specialized accrediting body for teacher preparation in the United States, administers the RFTEN grant<sup>4</sup> which is now in its third and final year.

### **American Indian Children: Responding to a Growing Need**

The majority of low-income and racial and ethnic minority children are not reading at a basic level by grade four. Reading is key to helping close this achievement gap. RFTEN understands that successful reading instruction starts with successful teaching programs in college. That is why the RFTEN project is working to ensure that faculty and teacher candidates at its partner institutions are armed with the knowledge and skills they need to teach young students to read and succeed at higher levels. One such opportunity took RFTEN to Pine Ridge, the nation's second largest reservation.

The educational needs of American Indian children are great in South Dakota and on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. According to a 2003-2004 Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) report card (*see reference*),<sup>5</sup> only four of the 21 BIA-funded schools in South Dakota, met adequate yearly progress (AYP); two are facing restructuring; and the remaining 15 are on alert status. Of the seven BIA-funded schools on the Pine Ridge Reservation, only one, American Horse School, met AYP in accordance with the Bureau's goals under *No Child Left Behind*.

The impact of the reading instruction begun during the Institute has been far reaching in a community challenged and separated by vast distances and hungry for professional development in teaching. The initial impact, however, was having nearly 30 local educators representing six of the seven BIA-funded schools on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation trained in scientifically-based reading practices. Since launching the Reading Institute, RFTEN faculty at Oglala Lakota College are continuing to conduct a variety of follow-up outreach, support, and training activities for parents, teachers, and candidates during the fall and spring 2005-2006 school year, with the hope of extending the reach of this first-ever Reading Institute.

Using the Internet, streaming video, and transcription, the RFTEN project is making it possible for teachers, candidates, parents, and others to view, listen to, and read the instruction provided by Oglala Lakota College faculty and other national reading, language and literacy experts.<sup>6</sup> The professional development model used during the Institute created a forum for bringing together new and veteran teachers, parents, as well as reading experts, Native Lakota language scholars, and other linguists to share strategies for fostering children's reading and literacy development through effective classroom and home instruction. Shannon Amiotte, M.Ed. and Terri Bissonette, M.Ed., served as the lead RFTEN faculty instructors for the Reading Institute.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Reading Institute: Creating a Model for Change, Achievement, and Empowerment**

The Reading Institute sought to bring teachers together with parents, while offering parents simple but powerful ways to support their children in the essential

skills of language and literacy. During the two weeks, RFTEN faculty at Oglala Lakota College modeled instruction and presented a series of interactive language and literacy workshops on topics including:

- The five key components of reading instruction (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension)
- Assessment, analysis, and planning based on results and monitoring progress
- Planning effective instruction (effective lesson planning and classroom management)
- Three-Tier Reading Model
- Strategies for working with struggling readers and English-Language Learners
- Proven ideas and strategies for parents (simple, yet powerful everyday activities and interactions to reinforce literacy and writing)

The Reading Institute used a teaching model that incorporated a continuous cycle of planning, teaching, learning, and assessment. Using this model, scientifically-based reading research (SBRR) in the five components of reading, was addressed from the standpoint of a reflective practitioner using ongoing assessment to guide instructional planning paired with research-based instructional strategies. With a focus on understanding how Lakota children learn to read, instructors incorporated native tradition and culture in their instruction. There was an emphasis on *wolakolkiciyapi* or learning Lakota ways of life in the community, as participants constructed their knowledge and understanding of how students, especially Lakota children, learn to read. Faculty, teachers, candidates, and parents also applied *wolakota* (factors such as courage, caring, integrity, critical thinking, fortitude, interconnections, and community) as part of a circle of learning and interaction with each other, children, and the larger community. Administrators and faculty at Oglala Lakota College believe that highly qualified, professional, motivated, and reflective graduates and teachers should possess and teach *wolakolkiciyapi* in a multicultural and changing world.

New graduates, induction-year teachers, experienced teachers, and school administrators were among the 26 educators selected to participate in the Institute. The majority of participants were members of the Oglala Sioux Tribe and graduates of Oglala Lakota College. Since 2000, the number of Native American teachers on the Pine Ridge Reservation has climbed from 30 percent to 48 percent. The school population is 98 percent American Indian, primarily Lakota.

Parents participating in the Reading Institute—a total of 19—included those raising young children, parents with school-aged children, as well as grandparents raising their grandchildren. At the end of each week of the Reading Institute, teachers were asked to share and model the reading instruction they learned with parents using accessible teaching resources, creative activities, and interactive reading strategies. Instructors also incorporated a variety of accessible and low- or no-cost course and workshop materials during the RFTEN Reading Institute.<sup>8</sup>

## Extending RFTEN's Reach, Creating Impact

RFTEN faculty, Shannon Amiotte and Terri Bissonette, are using Blackboard online discussions to provide continuous instruction and feedback to teachers and to maintain the community of learners enrolled in the Reading Institute. This online tool which is only open to participants is a practical tool for reaching educators and parents spread out across the Reservation. The Institute's online discussion groups are modeled after RFTEN's HEC Online, a similar and required online forum for information sharing and discussion among participants at RFTEN institutions.

The Institute has also created opportunities for RFTEN-trained faculty at Oglala Lakota College to provide ongoing support to participants. Faculty are coaching classroom teachers in reading instruction, providing local in-service workshops, and serving as resources for teachers hosting monthly parents' night at their elementary schools.

Follow-up activities are also taking the RFTEN faculty into classrooms for where they are observing reading instruction and providing sought-after feedback and support to teachers who attended the Reading Institute. The instructors report that there is a growing demand for these visits from teachers and administrators who didn't participate in the Reading Institute. Feedback from the RFTEN faculty is provided confidentially and directly to the classroom teacher, not shared with his or her school administrator.

Since June, the instructors have fanned out across the Reservation, spending time with teachers trained at the summer Reading Institute and report that they are pleased with the level of energy and motivation they see occurring around reading instruction in the classroom. For example, faculty are observing teachers using explicit and systematic instruction for reviewing previous lessons and learning; identifying the object to be learned; activating and building on background knowledge, and effectively modeling reading procedures. Teachers are also using a variety of strategies to support retelling, and incorporating techniques for questioning and checking understanding throughout oral reading. They also observed that classroom teachers are delivering well organized, structured reading lessons; and making use of learning centers that support the five essential components of reading and allow students to pursue and complete literacy activities on their own.

Using a train-the-trainer model, teachers from Loneman, Crazy Horse, Little Wound, Porcupine, and Pine Ridge Schools who attended the Reading Institute, are passing on what they learned about evidence-based reading instruction to provide in-services to their colleagues, focusing on the five components of reading. Moving beyond the classroom, RFTEN faculty at Oglala Lakota College are sharing evidence-based reading instruction and strategies for increasing reading achievement among Lakota children with American Indian educators in South Dakota and with the broader higher education community.

Professors Amiotte and Bissonette discussed how teachers and communities can replicate the Reading Institute and model strategies for teaching

the five components of reading during a RFTEN pre-service clinic held in conjunction with the 2006 Association of Teacher Educators Annual Meeting in Atlanta, GA. Following the Reading Institute, they presented interactive workshops and papers on such topics as “Helping Children Become Successful Readers” and “Implementing a Comprehensive Reading Program without a Basal” at professional organizations including the South Dakota Indian Education Association, the South Dakota Association for Bilingual Bicultural Education Association, and the Association of Teacher Educators.<sup>9</sup>

**B. Denise Hawkins** is the editor and communications consultant for the Reading First Teacher Education Network, a three-year, U.S. Department of Education grant initiative that supports the training of teacher educators and teacher candidates using evidence-based reading research and instruction.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>To learn more about Oglala Lakota College and its Education Department, visit [www.olg.edu](http://www.olg.edu) or call (605) 455-6012.

<sup>2</sup>To learn more about the Reading First Teacher Education Network, visit [www.RFTEN.org](http://www.RFTEN.org) or call (202) 466-7496 or (202) 416-6174.

<sup>3</sup>To learn more about the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education visit [www.ncate.org](http://www.ncate.org) or call (202) 466-7496.

<sup>4</sup>U.S. Department of Education RFTEN Grant Award #U215U030004-05.

<sup>5</sup>Dr. Patricia Abeyta, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Office of Indian Education Programs, (505) 448-6966 or E-mail: [pabeyta@bia.edu](mailto:pabeyta@bia.edu).

<sup>6</sup>Visit [www.RFTEN.org](http://www.RFTEN.org) homepage and Training, to view instructional segments from the RFTEN/Oglala Lakota Reading Institute.

<sup>7</sup>Lead Instructors for the RFTEN/Oglala Lakota Reading Institute: Professors Shannon Amiotte ([samiotte@olg.edu](mailto:samiotte@olg.edu)) and Terri Bissonette ([tbissonette@olg.edu](mailto:tbissonette@olg.edu)). They can also be reached at (605) 455-6000 or (605) 455-6012.

<sup>8</sup>Contact Shannon Amiotte to learn more about resource materials used in the Reading Institute at [samiotte@olg.edu](mailto:samiotte@olg.edu) or (605) 455-6012. Sources for some instructional resources used include: Vaughn Gross Center for Reading and Language Arts, University of Texas at Austin ([www.texasreading.org/utcrcla](http://www.texasreading.org/utcrcla)); Just Read, Florida! ([www.jusreadflorida.com/](http://www.jusreadflorida.com/)); Oregon Reading First (<http://oregonreadingfirst.uoregon.edu/>); University of Oregon Big Ideas in Reading (<http://reading.uoregon.edu/>); National Reading Panel ([www.nationalreadingpanel.org/](http://www.nationalreadingpanel.org/)); and Reading Rockets ([www.readingrockets.org/](http://www.readingrockets.org/)).

<sup>9</sup>The South Dakota Indian Education Association, contact (s) Lowell Amiotte, Director of the Center for American Indian Studies and Assoc. Professor, Black Hills State University at (605) 642-6578 or [LowellAmiotte@bhsu.edu](mailto:LowellAmiotte@bhsu.edu) or Lorenzo “Junior” Bettelyoun, Asst. Professor, Black Hills State University at (605) 642-6243 or [juniorbettelyoun@bhsu.edu](mailto:juniorbettelyoun@bhsu.edu). The South Dakota Association for Bilingual Bicultural Education Association, for more information visit [www.scpschls.k12.sd.us/ss.html](http://www.scpschls.k12.sd.us/ss.html) and contact Terri Jo Gibbons. The Association of Teacher Educators, for more information visit [www.atel.org](http://www.atel.org).

### References

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