

Tuesday, May 24, 2005

School Has New Way to See Results

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Fifth-grader Manuel Enriquez started the school year on a bad note.

"I used to mess around a lot," Manuel, 12, said.

He was reading at the second-grade level when he started fifth grade at Armijo Elementary this year, he said.

Normally, he and his parents would have had to wait until report cards came out to find out just how he was doing.

But this year, Armijo students are keeping track of their progress through graphs and folders.

When Manuel could open his folder each day and see that those low scores weren't going to get him into middle school, he decided to do something about it.

"I knew that if I kept messing around, I wouldn't go to sixth grade," he said.

Changing plans

The school has adopted the Baldrige system, a business-based method that uses data to help guide decisions and make improvements. In Albuquerque, top-performing schools such as Georgia O'Keeffe Elementary in the Far Northeast Heights have been using the system for years to evaluate student progress.

There are 120 schools in the state active in the Baldrige method, said Laurel Moore, a Sandia National Laboratories employee who heads the Baldrige initiative statewide.

The method is named for Malcolm Baldrige, a former Secretary of Commerce and proponent of quality management.

Armijo, which has low test scores, initiated the system schoolwide this year. It has seen scores of visitors touring the classrooms to see how students are doing.

Manuel's teacher, Antoinette Valenzuela, said she has been using data for the last four years to teach students, but this is the first year the students have used the method.

"The kids are in charge of their learning," Valenzuela said. "They see the areas they need to improve."

Principal Dolores Vigil-Frank said she had been trained in the Baldrige method before coming to Armijo and wanted the South Valley school to use the method. The staff has been training for the last four years.

Melodie Wade started teaching at Armijo this year and had not been trained

in Baldrige. The other kindergarten teachers used the system to help her plan the lessons and chart progress.

Wade— who observers said is using the system correctly despite a lack of formal Baldrige training— said it's made a big difference in her effort to teach students to read.

"This was a tool that made it easier for me," she said.

In her kindergarten class, the youngsters are quick to spout the class goals or "vision," which they helped to write themselves. For instance, the class tries to achieve the vision that "everyone is happy" by cheering "each other on and helping each other out."

Armijo officials have used student performance data to find weaknesses in the schoolwide reading program materials, Vigil-Frank said, and learned that the math program needed to be updated. The data showed that students moving into the school later in the year needed extra tutoring to catch up to their classmates.

State Secretary of Education Veronica Garcia visited the school last week with members of the Governor's Business Executives for Education. She said her plan is for all the state's schools to use the system to guide instruction and to help counter what she described as "a sense of hopelessness" in low-performing schools.

"I feel we're ready to make a big breakthrough," Garcia said.

The governor's group includes current and retired executives from universities and employers such as Intel and PNM who emphasize quality in schools, such as with the Baldrige method.



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