

## Dream Team Initiates Big Change

Henry Ford once said, “Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success.” The Swain County Middle School Literacy Leadership Team in Bryson City, North Carolina is living proof of Ford’s words. Under the leadership of Principal Brandon Sutton and SIM™ Professional Developer and ELA teacher Kim Jamison, the team came together three years ago to develop plans for implementing school-wide changes needed to support literacy. Since then the team has continued to work together to make change happen.



The school’s picturesque but isolated setting in the Smoky Mountains might mask the fact that many of the students live in poverty and face challenges as a result of limited background experiences. Currently, 30.5% of the school population is Native American from the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. Eighty-six percent of the county is federal land resulting in a limited tax base and fewer resources. Teachers work hard to motivate students, and staff members are like “family.” Teachers are willing to try new things to help their kids. However, three years ago, the biggest question they faced was, “What are the changes that would have the greatest impact on the success rate of our students?”

That was the question brought to the literacy leadership team. At the time, only thirty-nine percent of the students were proficient on the state’s English Language Arts/Reading test. The principal shared his vision with the team: Improve the scores on the state’s English Language Arts/Reading test from the current thirty-nine percent to sixty percent proficiency rate within a three-year period. At first, the goal seemed aggressive. How could the school make such dramatic improvements when scores had remained flat for years? But the team became 100% committed to the goal.

The team began by analyzing data from various sources and building a literacy profile of the school, which helped team members make decisions about needed actions. The team decided that the Xtreme Reading Program would be delivered to a targeted group of 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students in need of intensive reading instruction, and students’ reading scores increased. Recently, Xtreme Reading students demonstrated an average 2.4 years of growth on the Test of Silent Contextual Reading Fluency (TOSCRF), which was used as a pre and posttest measure for the one-year course. The LANGUAGE! Program was also delivered to an identified group of students in grades 6-8.

It was also decided that the reading specialists would join English/Language Arts teachers during certain periods of the day to help embed some of the reading strategies in English classes. English teachers became familiar with SIM™ learning strategies and began using them in their ELA curriculum.

Teachers throughout the school also used content enhancement routines to support content literacy, and the team recommended that PLCs begin discussing the use of their instructional practices such as unit organizers and frames during PLC meetings. It is common for the teacher to focus on their instruction and support each other.

This past year, fifty-four percent of students were proficient on the state English Language Arts/Reading assessment. The team’s hard work is paying off; scores are steadily increasing!

Currently, the team continues to work together to analyze data, adjust plans, communicate with staff, and recommend professional development for teachers. Henry Ford was right... a group of dedicated individuals working together can achieve success. As one staff member once said, “It’s the people who make this place special.” One might add that it’s actually the people working together that make Swain County Middle School a very special place.

