

reading  plus®

SUCCESS STORY

WALATOWA HIGH CHARTER SCHOOL



CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP
FOR NATIVE AMERICAN YOUTH

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Through a community-integrated experiential learning program, Walatowa High Charter School will prepare students to be academically successful, while promoting cultural awareness, community wellness, leadership, and college and career readiness.

Founded in 2002, Walatowa High Charter School is located on the Pueblo of Jemez Indian Reservation, a rural community about 45 miles northwest of Albuquerque, New Mexico. Walatowa High serves students from the Pueblo of Tsyia, Pueblo of Kewa Tribal communities, and students from the Jemez Valley Corridor of New Mexico. The school focuses on preparing students for academic success, while promoting cultural awareness, community wellness, and leadership. Walatowa offers a challenging pre-college curriculum and places an emphasis on post-secondary education and career readiness.

Nearly all students (98 percent), in grades 9–12, are Native American. Remarkably, this charter high school boasts a graduation rate of 91 percent, compared to a national average graduation rate of 50 percent for Native American students.

AT-A-GLANCE

WALATOWA CHARTER HIGH SCHOOL

in Pueblo of Jemez Indian Reservation

- ▶ Total enrollment: **51**
- ▶ Native American enrollment: **98%**
- ▶ Economically disadvantaged: **100%**
- ▶ Graduation rate: **91%**



DR. ARROW WILKINSON | EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dr. Arrow Wilkinson is the Executive Director of Walatowa High Charter School. Wilkinson supervises and facilitates the school’s daily operations. His duties include establishing and implementing academic goals and curricula and allocating financial resources. Wilkinson has found remarkable success in making sure Walatowa’s students graduate. According to Wilkinson, the key to the school’s success is the relationship between faculty and students and the belief that every student can achieve success.

Dr. Arrow Wilkinson (Arikara/Muscogee), Executive Director of Walatowa High Charter School, talks to us about the role Reading Plus plays in driving student success and preparing the community’s young adults for college and career.

Q: What prompted you to partner with Reading Plus?

Our students struggled to read. Most were coming to us at a fourth- or fifth-grade reading level and were lacking an academic vocabulary. Simply put, students could not access the curriculum.

Our educators have four years, a very small window of time, to close this dramatic achievement gap. The sooner we could get our kids at grade-appropriate reading levels, the sooner we could provide them with more challenging curriculum and educational opportunities.

Our language arts educator learned of Reading Plus through success stories from neighboring communities. With a Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) grant, we decided to give Reading Plus a try. That was seven years ago. Today, we have high expectations of our students, including participating in rigorous college coursework.

Q: Tell us about the progress your students are making with Reading Plus.

Our kids are making strong academic gains. On average, we see students grow more than 1.5 grade levels per year using the program. In some cases, we've seen students jump as many as five or six grade levels in one year.

Since integrating Reading Plus into our curriculum, we are witnessing increases in our students' ACT, SAT, and PARCC scores. We don't think that this is a coincidence. Before Reading Plus, Walatowa students had an average ACT score of 10. Today, our average ACT score is 16. Our students are showing great progress, even when compared to their peers nationwide.

I give Reading Plus a lot of credit for enabling our students to read at grade level and, in some cases, well beyond. Many of our kids are getting into some great colleges and securing terrific jobs. This would not be possible without the ability to read and comprehend complex content.

Q: What do you like most about Reading Plus?

There are many elements that make this a terrific program. First, I really like the way Reading Plus addresses the three areas critical to reading success – the physical (strengthening eye muscles to develop fluency and stamina); cognitive (building vocabulary to improve comprehension); and emotional (tapping students' interests to build confidence and motivation).

Second, Reading Plus is structured in a way that supports our individualized approach to education. We test our students' reading proficiency at the beginning of the school year to map out an

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education plan. We use weekly data to adjust lessons and personalize assignments based on each student's progress.

And third, our students have not had much academic success in their young lives. Reading Plus offers successes, big and small, almost daily.

Q. What would you tell other administrators considering Reading Plus?

I wish every school would take a chance on Reading Plus.

I would tell my peers that you need to implement fully and give it some time. Make the program part of your mandatory curriculum. Implement daily and really use the data to drive personalized education plans.

We have been working with Reading Plus for nearly a decade. The first year, we did not make the program mandatory and that was a mistake. Too

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many students were left behind. In year two, we integrated Reading Plus into our core curriculum so all students could reap the benefits of the program. Unless a student is reading at a college level, he or she must participate.

Q. What are your thoughts on introducing Reading Plus to students in middle school and elementary school?

The earlier the better. Implementing Reading Plus in the elementary grades and middle school is a great idea. If we could begin the program sooner, we could focus more on community, hands-on instruction rather than spending so much time trying to play catch-up. Earlier intervention using Reading Plus could really help close the academic achievement gap.

Q. How does Reading Plus motivate students?

As reading fluency and comprehension increase, students gain more confidence. The better they perform, the more they want to do well. Academic success becomes intrinsically driven. I can see this change in attitude when students come to my office to share a great report card or boast of a terrific grade on an exam.

From an external perspective, Reading Plus offers certificates of success and we supplement with magazines, t-shirts, water bottles, and other systems of rewards. It is just one more way to get our kids excited about reading.

Q: What is your experience getting your educators on board and comfortable with the program?

Valerie Cano, our Reading Plus representative, does an excellent job training our English Language

Arts educators. She has been with us since we first started using the program and she really understands the needs of our teachers and our student population. In fact, when we do go to her with questions or concerns, she often comes back with solid recommendations that we usually act on.

This year, we had all faculty members participate in a Reading Plus training. We wanted to make sure that everyone was on the same page. Now, in addition to our reading specialists, our history, math, and science teachers also understand how to interpret Reading Plus data and modify lessons, readings, and other assignments based on each student’s reading level.

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Q. Can you share a success story?

One student came to us after years of being told that he would never read at grade level. After participating in Reading Plus, he not only read at grade level, he graduated early and earned an 18 on his ACT.

Another student came to us at a second-grade reading level. Today, she is enrolled in a four-year nursing program. For every one of these students, there are countless others with similar stories of success.

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