

# SIM & Muskegon High School

As Muskegon High School begins another school year, Principal Arlyn Zack strides through the hallways, peeking into nearly every classroom to see how his educational community fares. What he finds—universally—is teachers teaching and students learning. Everyone is engaged, committed, and excited about the possibilities the year holds.

Thanks to the dedicated efforts of teachers and administrators who have worked since the mid-1990s to improve literacy among the school's student population, reading comprehension rates have improved, writing skills are reinforced across the curriculum, and faculty from diverse departments frequently can be found collaborating on literacy issues.

Muskegon's success story began in the mid-1990s, when assessment tests indicated that half of the 400 ninth-graders at the school read below grade level. One-third of the 400 students read significantly below grade level, defined as two or more years below grade level.

At the same time, students with learning disabilities at the school were showing tremendous gains in reading comprehension, thanks to explicit instruction in Strategic Instruction Model (SIM) reading strategies developed and validated at the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning (KU-CRL).

Impressed, the School Improvement Team Reading Committee designed a SIM-based intervention as a way of reaching low-achieving poor readers. Students who had been identified as reading significantly below grade level were designated to receive 50 minutes of intensive instruction every day in the *Word Identification Strategy*, a strategy used to successfully decode and identify unknown words in reading material.

Students were taught in small groups (one teacher to four or five students). They were pulled out of their English classes for this instruction, which lasted three to eight weeks, depending on how many sessions each student required to reach mastery. After a student mastered the strategy, he or she returned to the English class.

The committee has documented substantial success among students who complete the SIM intervention. Reading comprehension gains of three or four grade levels are common.

From that narrowly focused beginning, Muskegon High School has implemented a comprehensive literacy program designed to reach all students. The program is based in part on KU-CRL's Content Literacy Continuum (CLC), a framework that describes five levels of literacy support that should be in place in every high school. The CLC emphasizes connections among the processes of reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and presenting.

"The continuum emphasizes how important it is to infuse literacy instruc-

To learn more about  
SIM, contact the  
University of Kansas  
Center for Research  
on Learning  
J.R. Pearson Hall  
1122 West Campus  
Road, Room 521,  
Lawrence, KS  
66045-3101  
(785) 864-4780  
crl@ku.edu  
www.kucrl.org



tion throughout the high school curriculum,” said Mike Hock, KU-CRL’s associate director of administration. “It emphasizes that a host of high school teachers with different types of expertise will be required to meet the needs of these adolescents who have not developed the literacy skills they need to learn and succeed.”

Muskegon teachers have carefully constructed their literacy program to meet pressing needs, including a rising number of English Language Learners and growing disparity in students’ academic abilities.

They spent a year developing a one-semester reading comprehension course, Strategic Reading. The course begins with full assessment during the first few weeks, then offers instruction in SIM’s *Vocabulary LINCing Strategy*, *Visual Imagery Strategy*, *Self-Questioning Strategy*, and *Paraphrasing Strategy*. Students read high-interest material and two novels in the class. Teachers have revised and tweaked the class at the end of each school year, assessing what went well and what needed to be changed.

To address concerns regarding students’ writing skills and lack of progress, every English teacher participated in professional development activities related to SIM’s writing strategies: the *Sentence Writing Strategy*, *Paragraph Writing Strategy*, and *Error Monitoring Strategy*. The writing strategies were written into the high school’s curriculum, and the school board adopted the plan. Now, when compared with schools of similar size and demographics, Muskegon High School consistently scores at or near the top on the state’s writing assessment given in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade.

Sue Woodruff, a retired Muskegon teacher and certified instructor for SIM interventions who continues to work closely with the school, said departments across the school have begun to fully embrace many aspects of SIM interventions and the Content Literacy Continuum. “Shared strategies” are being woven throughout the school within general education classes:

- Content teachers requested a writing strategies workshop to enable them to reinforce interventions students have learned in English classrooms and to develop consistent expectations for student writing throughout the school.
- The Social Studies Department requires the use of the *Paragraph Writing Strategy* in its classrooms.
- Science teachers support and encourage the use of reading comprehension strategies to help students understand their textbooks.

“We are integrating more and more parts of the CLC into what we do as everyday practices here,” Zack said. “No question in my mind that even though we have a long way to go, we’ll accomplish it because our teachers are seeing success in kids who have not previously been successful. Our staff is extremely excited about the improvement that they have seen in student achievement and participation.”

Both formal studies and informal observations bear out the benefits of Muskegon’s initiatives, providing fuel for the enthusiasm that is sweeping through the school.

“Teachers share ideas about instruction between departments and within departments,” Zack said. “Meetings are focusing on what can be done to improve students’ achievement. SIM ideas are the best ideas to come out of it. The teachers have embraced them, and we see this translated into what is happening in the classroom!”

Muskegon High School continues to nurture and refine its literacy initiative as teachers and administrators study what works in their SIM offerings. The Strategic

Reading class has been so successful that the school now offers three levels of Strategic Reading & Writing through its Special Education Department. Students have multiple opportunities to return to general education English classes once they have mastered the strategies they need to be successful. Another class is being developed to meet the needs of students who require more intensive reading instruction.

In addition, all English teachers are learning a second level of the reading comprehension strategies and will be incorporating them into their regular literature and novel reading instruction.

The array of services and supports offered to students at Muskegon High School and the corresponding gains in students' performance have combined to create powerful, positive changes for both students and teachers.

"Collaborating with KU-CRL has meant more to the students of Muskegon High School than anything else we have ever done," Zack said. "Finally, we are meeting the needs of *all* of our students."

---

• *This story appears on The Knowledge Loom: What Works in Teaching and Learning, a web site developed and maintained by the Education Alliance at Brown University. It is featured in the "Adolescent Literacy in the Content Areas" section of the site, [knowledgeloom.org](http://knowledgeloom.org).*