

The Secondary Literacy Network in Colorado

Colorado's Secondary Literacy Network (SLN) consists of educators at the university, district, and school levels who are dedicated to improving adolescent literacy across the state. Members of the network meet once a month to discuss how to direct their combined efforts toward reaching their goal of helping teachers effectively teach reading and writing skills across the secondary school curriculum. The SLN hopes to assist teachers in improving students' literacy skills and applying these skills to new and more challenging tasks and classes. They are attempting to achieve this goal through providing a variety of professional development opportunities as well as consulting on a variety of other literacy interventions initiated in the state. The SLN is sponsored by the School of Education and Human Development (SEHD) at the University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center (UCDHSC).

Adolescent Literacy Certificate

In 2002, the SLN started to offer an adolescent literacy certification program for middle and high school teachers. First, the SLN worked with St. Vrain Public Schools, Aurora Public Schools, Adams 12 Five Star Public Schools, Jefferson County Public Schools, and others to deliver the Adolescent Literacy Certificate Program to groups of teachers. In January 2005, in order to reach a larger population in a timely manner, they expanded the program into an online course offering. In order to earn a certificate, teachers must take three graduate courses or spend 9 credit hours earning their certificate online through the UCDHSC. The certification requires that educators familiarize themselves with the No Child Left Behind Act and Colorado's Basic Literacy Act guidelines. Teachers learn a variety of strategies to identify and then assist struggling readers, such as using technology to track data about struggling readers or developing personalized reading plans for individual students. Though teachers have to pay for the certificate, often districts or schools pay or reimburse part of participants' costs.

The Colorado Reading Project

In the summer of 2004, the SLN launched the Colorado Reading Project, a 2-week workshop for teachers that allows them to explore their own reading strategies and how to teach reading comprehension when students read texts on a variety of topics in the various subject areas. Teachers themselves read fiction and nonfiction works and carefully document and analyze their own strategies for understanding and interpreting these texts. These experiences allow them to model strategies later for their students. They also develop lessons that help deepen students' comprehension of texts when they return to their classrooms in the fall.

Professional Development

In addition to the workshop, the SLN hosts four all-day meetings a year and a fall colloquium for districts across Colorado. The quarterly meetings focus on infrastructural improvements that will improve adolescent literacy. The agendas include such topics as: coordination of special education lessons within mainstream content classrooms; hiring and professional development for literacy coaches; and uniform formats for individual literacy plans throughout entire districts.

The fall colloquium addresses adolescent literacy at the classroom level by suggesting strategies, such as incorporating writing assignments and reading materials at a range of difficulty levels. Teachers also learn how to use classroom time to teach literacy most effectively, balancing the explicit instruction they deliver with student-directed group or individual learning. The SLN also conducts shorter, 2-day modules throughout the year. These sessions focus on more specific topics, such as teaching vocabulary, increasing students' reading fluency, and closing the gender gap in student achievement.

Collaboration with Districts and Other Interventions

The SLN partners with individual districts, the Colorado Department of Education, foundations, bookstores, and other agencies in the state. In recent years, SLN has worked with Boulder Valley Public Schools and Sheridan Middle School to train teachers to effectively teach and assign writing. SLN has also collaborated with Jefferson County Schools and Cherry Creek Public Schools to help teachers earn master's degrees in reading at the UCDHSC. Currently, SLN is working with Denver Public Schools to help its English teachers rewrite their English curriculum. In addition to its own work, SLN also collaborates on projects with the Colorado and Denver Writing Projects, as well as with Colorado Critical Friends, a project that supports teacher professional development and teacher renewal efforts in public schools. The Literacy and Responsive Teaching Doctoral Lab at UCDHSC works with the SLN on research projects and provides an avenue for interested teachers to pursue doctoral degrees in adolescent literacy.

Results

At this point most results concerning the SLN are about increases in interest and attendance:

- Attendance at SLN meetings has increased from 10 original members in the Front Range of Colorado to an average attendance of 40 participants from across the state.
- The SLN has a growing number of collaborations for curriculum development and research.
- The SLN is increasingly consulted about educational policy around adolescent literacy.

- There have been growing numbers of teachers entering the master's program in literacy and English education from collaborations with Cherry Creek and Jefferson County Public Schools as well as those transitioning from the Adolescent Literacy Certificate Program.

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