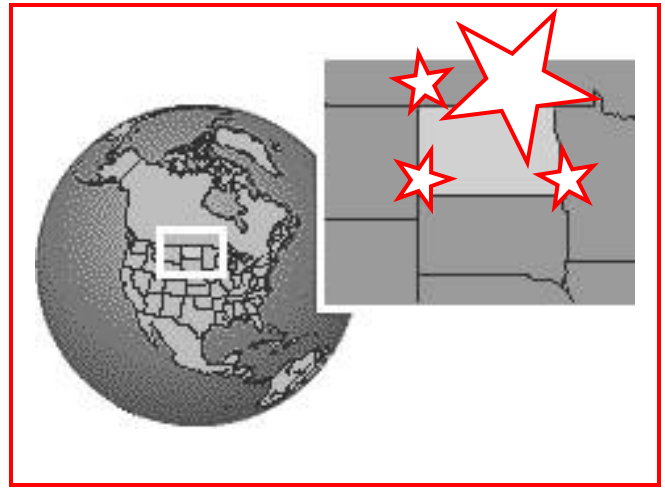

From Hopeless to Amazing in North Dakota



**By Karen Tarvestad, Title I Math Teacher
Minnie H. Elementary School – SFA Year 5, MathWings Year 3
Devils Lake, North Dakota**

In 1996, Minnie H Elementary School was a school with a hopeless environment. Only 23 percent of the students were reading at grade level. Behavior problems were terrible; partly because students felt the hopelessness and low morale the teachers were experiencing. Many teachers were unhappy with their careers and some asked to transfer out of the school every year. There was no structured reading program and no accountability for students or teachers. The lowest point came when, in 1998, the school was designated as one needing improvement. A new, young administrator was a part of the decision at that time to contact SFA to inquire about the process of making major changes in the reading program. Much work was done by many staff members, including Lynn Goodwill and Bev Westphal, to write grants to secure funding for a high-quality program such as SFA.

No one would have believed, at that time, the changes that would occur in the school. SFA trainers came and teachers began using cooperative learning in a structured way. Students were tested and grouped by reading level. Teachers learned that phonemic awareness was crucial to success in reading, and all Kindergarten and first-grade children who were below grade level received extra tutoring by trained paraprofessionals and teachers during

the school day. Ninety minutes of uninterrupted reading became the highest priority and most of the staff discussion and focus was about reading strategies, student progress and assessments.

The training continued, and Minnie H teachers and paraprofessionals began to feel like expert reading teachers. Test scores didn't improve dramatically at first, but staff members were feeling empowered. Shortly after the program began, I remember Mrs. Westphal telling me, **“All our first graders are reading on grade level – it's amazing!”**

Over the next five years, morale changed dramatically and now the atmosphere at Minnie H is so amazing. Staff members are a family who truly love going to work every day. The pride and feeling that we make a huge difference for our children is so evident in each adult at Minnie H, and I know that exhilaration rubs off on our students. The leadership of Darren Sheldon and Bev Westphal continues to grow and glue our little staff together into a place where now over 79% of our students are reading at grade level. **Our humble little building is truly an amazing success story, where in spite of high poverty levels and high numbers of minority students, we have now shown adequate yearly progress for two years, and we are no longer under program**

improvement. The community of Devils Lake is blessed to have an outstanding school for its highest risk children. It is also blessed to have a school where so many adults can feel so rewarded every day in their jobs.

Here are some specific success stories from teachers at Minnie H:

Dawn Paulson: “I’ve had a student in my reading groups off and on through the past three years. His home reading has greatly improved [and] he hardly misses a day. His fluency and expression have also drastically improved. I marvel at his accomplishments and hard work.”

Kathy Lovseth: “I am constantly amazed by how students as young as five can explain their thinking process and tell why or how they got the answer. SFA strategies encourage not only oral language skills, but also provide opportunities for students to interact with each other. This helps them to express themselves often and many times they get ideas from each other and can expand on those ideas.”

Editor’s note: For more information about Minnie H., visit their website at: <http://www.devils-lake.k12.nd.us/MH/index.htm>.

**Percent of Students Reading At Grade Level
Minnie H Elementary, Devil’s Lake, ND
1996 – 2003**

