

# DistrictProfile

KAYENTA (ARIZ.) UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

## Achieving against the Odds

By Ken Royal

KAYENTA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT is located in the Navajo Nation in Kayenta, Ariz., but is under Arizona Public Schools' jurisdiction. Some of its students travel as many as 48 miles by bus to school and come from homes without electricity or running water. The area is picturesque, but urban amenities do not exist. The Kayenta coal mine is the major employer, and the nearest shopping, outside of what is available on the reservation, is 90 miles away in Page, Ariz. The district provides housing for teachers, because land cannot be owned on the reservation.

Kayenta receives state budget monies as well as Federal Impact Aid but recently lost its Individuals with Disabilities Education Act money due to state cutbacks in that area, which helped pay for transportation for students with handicaps, as well as occupational, speech and physical therapists. Through reallocating funds and even modifying job descriptions, with the help of the teachers' organization, Kayenta's new team approach and curriculum changes have improved the odds for success in its remote Arizona school district.

"In an urban area, you can have your speech therapist come in from a local university, possibly graduate students. We don't have that luxury," says former naval officer and now Kayenta superintendent Alex Martinez.

"I think my administrators have aged about ten years in the two I've been here," jokes Martinez. He has given administrators site-based budgets and decision-making power.

### Agents for Change

Martinez wanted to get everyone on the same page. "There has to be K12 articulation for success," he says. He supported duplicating a program that had already shown success at the elementary school,



*Kayenta Middle School students wearing traditional outfits for the Miss KMS pageant (left), and three Kayenta sixth-graders enjoying a break in the shade on the school's playground.*

believing that if it succeeded at the middle school, it could work at the high school as well. He called upon Marti Gilmore, who has had experience at both the high school and elementary levels, to take the lead at the failing middle school, which had underachieving reading and math students and lacked a schoolwide curriculum.

### Kayenta (Ariz.) Unified School District #27

**Superintendent:** Alex Martinez

**No. of teachers:** 300

**No. of students:** 2,200

**No. of schools:** 4,  
plus a center for students' children

**Ethnicity:** 99% Native American

**Free and reduced lunch:** 84%

**Graduation rate:** 79%

**Transportation:** 38 buses transport 1,510 students 1,333 miles on dirt roads and 1,118 miles on paved roads each day, with the longest route traveling a total of 106 miles.

**Web site:** [www.kayenta.k12.az.us](http://www.kayenta.k12.az.us)

Gilmore mandated an immediate change to Voyager's Passport Reading Journeys program ([www.voyagerlearning.com](http://www.voyagerlearning.com)). "I had to, because we had no reading program, everyone was doing something different, and the average sixth-grader was at a 2.5 grade level," says Gilmore.

Gilmore credits the Carnegie Corporation of New York's *Reading Next: Visions for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy* report for her choice. This report identifies 15 characteristics of successful reading programs. Voyager's program had nine of these characteristics, and the other six were school attributes, such as leadership, teacher support, teaching with fidelity, and parent involvement—things administration controls. The remaining attributes were handled by weekly enquiry group meetings facilitated by literacy coaches, where teachers could give feedback to each other and to the administration.

In one year, test scores at the middle school increased 18 percent in sixth grade, 12 percent in seventh grade, and 8 percent in eighth grade. The majority of students scored well below 50 percent on the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standard exams (AIMS), but went to over a 50 per-

cent and higher success rate after using the program. Over 60 percent of seventh-graders met or exceeded AIMS requirements, and students made up two years of Lexile reading levels in one year.

Because of the AIMS schoolwide successful reading results, the middle school math team chose Voyager Math for its new supplemental program, and Glencoe McGraw-Hill's Mathematics Connects: Concepts for students who were on grade level. The school uses Vmath's assessments for all students.

"We now know what level every single child in the school is on for reading and math," says Gilmore.

### **Needs and Wishes**

Opportunities for students after graduation from Monument Valley High School are outside the reservation, unless they are teachers or are in the medical field. It's very difficult, if not impossible, to get a job when they return, because jobs are so limited. Many students leave for urban areas such as Phoenix upon graduation.

"We'd love more opportunities to get students to the university level," says Martinez. The district has already done this with Indiana State University, which places student teachers at reservation schools. Several preservice teachers have come back to Kayenta to teach.

Gilmore would simply like to share the world with Kayenta students. "I'd love to have more computers for our labs, and laptops for kids to help with our math and reading programs, as well as teleconferencing capabilities. Imagine checking in weekly with a partner school somewhere else in the world and working together on projects. That would teach other kids about our culture and experiences here on the reservation," says Gilmore. Visit the Kayenta Middle School Web site ([www.kayenta.k12.az.us/KMS](http://www.kayenta.k12.az.us/KMS)) for a video of the school, students and staff.

---

*Ken Royal is products editor.*