

## Adams Elementary Demonstrates Writing Success

### Introduction

Arizona's third largest city, Mesa, is located about 15 miles east of Phoenix. Some 74,000 students are enrolled in the Mesa Public School System, the majority of them residents of the city of Mesa. This culturally diverse district also serves the areas of Gilbert, Tempe, and Chandler, AZ; along with two Native American communities and surrounding rural areas, for a total area of 200 sq. miles.

The Mesa Public School system represents 87 schools, including 58 elementary, 13 junior high schools, seven high schools, and nine focus schools. The district is largely middle class in an urban/suburban setting. A small farming area encompasses the northern-most section of the district. Just over 50% of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.

The ethnic majority in Mesa Public Schools is 51.5% white. Spanish-speaking students represent the major ethnic minority group with 37.7%, followed by Native American or Alaskan Native with 4.1%. Black students make up about 4% of the student population, and Asian students just over 2%.

### Challenges

For several years, teachers in Mesa's Adams Elementary School struggled with how to teach writing. Year after year, scores on state assessments were disappointing. According to Julie Burger, Adams' Title I School Improvement Specialist, "It was evident to our teachers we did not have a clear understanding of *how* to teach writing to our students. We were knowledgeable about the six traits – ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions – and how they improved writing, but what did that look like? What strategies did authors use to express voice

or create fluency, and how could we take the strategies and present them in a way that made sense to our children, many of whom were ESL students? We knew we needed help."

That help arrived during an education conference when Adams' then-principal, Devon Isherwood, met Dr. Diana Dumetz Carry, author of ETA/Cuisenaire's® exclusive Writing Destinations® solution. Upon hearing Dr. Carry's methodologies and discussing Writing Destinations, Isherwood realized immediately that this was what Adams Elementary needed to not only help students become more accomplished writers, but to guide teachers along the best path to improve and hone their skills as writing instructors.

Writing Destinations was thoroughly research-based and field tested during its development. Using open-ended strategies employing the gradual release of responsibility model, the process embeds assessment and re-assessment, along with peer editing, to build on a child's authentic work. The hands-on activities and language-based strategies, plus explicit conferring throughout the writing process, were enthusiastically received by both students and teachers throughout the developmental process.

### Implementation

Adams Elementary began piloting Writing Destinations in Grades K – 6 during the 2005-2006 school year. Additionally, the school invested in a comprehensive professional development plan for teachers. The plan called for Dr. Carry to be on site for personalized training with the teaching staff frequently during the pilot. Throughout that period, the staff remained committed to carrying out their own professional development program as well. Explains Burger: "The Writing Destinations Kit and Teacher's Resource Guide are very thorough. We followed them to the letter and

made a commitment to really work it! We now had a common language for writing that begins in kindergarten and stays consistent through sixth grade. This has been our key to success.”

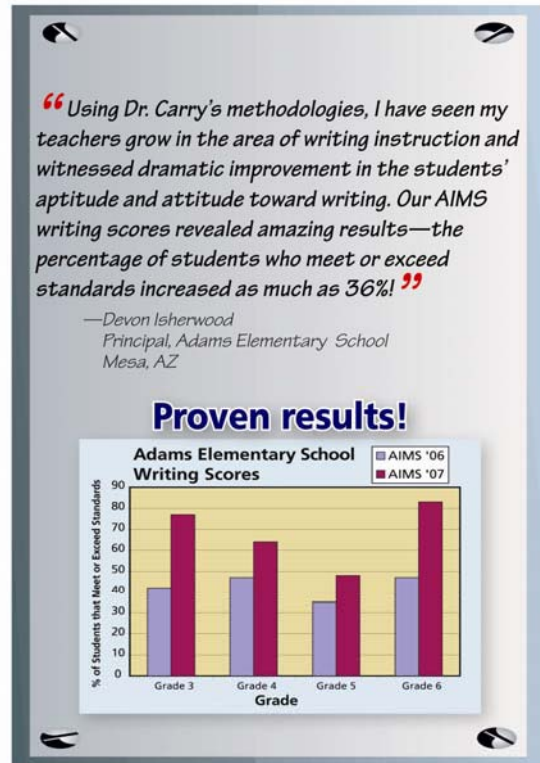
## Key Points

Writing Destinations engages students with total-physical-response manipulatives and activities that make editing and revising an intentional, meaningful process. A strong emphasis on pre-writing skills and producing multiple drafts allows students to develop a richer command of language and cohesiveness in writing.

Implementing step-by-step, research-proven strategies, the program uses exciting, engaging differentiated, tiered activities for the whole class, small groups, pairs, or independent practice. These manipulatives-based lessons help students master the critical writing skills of sentence combining, constructing meaning, word mapping, using robust vocabulary, and making text connections. Twelve basic strategy objectives revolve around thought-provoking word play and sentence construction and deconstruction activities. These strategies align with the writing process to strengthen each student’s link between “What I think” and “What I write.” Every lesson concludes with student observations to showcase mastery of strategies and concepts. And because the program is so focused on vocabulary and re-writing, it is perfect for ESL and ELL students.

## Results

Adams Elementary witnessed dramatic improvement in students’ writing aptitude and attitude. In 2006, test results showed that students in grades 3-6 who met or exceeded AIMS writing standards increased as much as 36% over the previous year. For 2008-2009, those results increased to **an average of 74% of students meeting or exceeding standards on the state assessment!** The good news of improved achievement from using Writing Destinations is spreading throughout the Mesa School District. Five more Mesa schools have implemented Writing Destinations and the program has the attention of several other schools as well. As Adams’ fifth grade teacher Lori Olberding points out: “Dr. Carry’s method of instruction puts enjoyment and zest into the writing process. Plus, it meets all of our state and district requirements. We love it!”



## Reflections

The implementation of Writing Destinations in Adams Elementary School has not only changed how writing is taught, it has raised expectations for students, given teachers more confidence and ease in the classroom, and equally important, it has improved test scores. Teachers report that the structured, easy-to-implement program and writing strategies are presented in such a way that it is not only enjoyable for the students, but for teachers, too. Staff members remark, “It’s exciting to hear first graders talking about and using parallel sentence structure and figurative language! Our students can now identify the writing strategies in a variety of mentor texts, and see the connection across the curriculum!”

Lori Olberding sums it up when she says: “I now have real tools and strategies to teach writing. The strategies naturally bring out the Six Traits. Writing Destinations has transformed my students’ writing *and* my writing! My students truly enjoy the whole process now. They have fun with the Tier Two words and the sentence transformers. They beg to participate in the lessons. When it comes to presenting in front of the class, each group yearns to go first!”●