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Stimulus dollars fund training for teachers

Educators say working with consultant has changed every aspect of their jobs.

By Sarah Reese

Teaching consultant Brandon Mitchell sat at the center of a semicircle Thursday in a fourth-grade class at Colter Elementary School and asked the children to show him how much they understood the day's reading lesson.

The kids in the small group were to give him a thumbs-up if they really got it, a sideways-thumb if they sort of got it and a thumbs-down if they didn't understand.

Mitchell got sideways thumbs all around, so he delved into more review.

Behind the circle of children, a group of teachers watched and took notes.

The scene unfolded in part because of federal stimulus money Teton County School District is using to train teachers at all district schools.

Consultants from the University of Washington's Center for Educational Leadership worked last week with staff from Colter, Davey Jackson Elementary School, Jackson Hole Middle School, Summit High School and Jackson Hole High School. They're working this week with staff from Wilson, Kelly and Moran elementary schools and Alta School.

The district is funding the work with about \$400,000 from an American Recovery and Reinvestment Act grant totaling \$1.2 million, district grant coordinator Pier Trudelle said.

Some of the teachers at Colter said working with Mitchell has changed every aspect of how they do their jobs.

"It's good, thoughtful work that is beneficial to all students, no matter what reading level," fifth-grade teacher Amy Asbell said.

The work helps teachers dig into what kids know and understand, Colter principal Patty Coursey said. Teachers also focused on how to determine which kids to pull into small groups for additional instruction.

"It's not about teaching the story, it's about teaching the kids," Coursey said. "It's a big shift."

One of the concepts teachers focused on was differentiation, which is based on the idea of meeting students where they are and eliminating repetitiveness. Teachers who use differentiation identify which children have not mastered a skill and intervene with them instead of re-teaching the entire class.

Teachers watched Mitchell use differentiation Thursday afternoon. After a review of the morning's reading lesson, Mitchell pulled several students into a small group and gave the rest an assignment to work on independently.

After class, Mitchell and the teachers met to discuss how he chose the kids for the small group and other observations.

Working with Mitchell has helped teachers add depth to their lessons, Asbell said. Third-grade teacher Lisa Schumacher-Fifes said students learn to apply a skill not only to the reading material of the day, but to everything they read.

The training has changed the teacher/student relationship, third-grade teacher Buffy Allen said.

"I feel like we're appreciating them as readers, not just students who need to learn what the next thing is," she said.

Collaboration also has allowed the teachers to start exploring how skills are taught at various grade levels, Allen said.

"We know that the skills go across all grade levels, but this allows us to talk about how that happens," she said.

The work also has created a classroom culture where the students are excited about learning, Coursey said.

"The kids see the teachers as learners, which is very powerful," she said.

This is the first year in a three-year funding cycle for the grant. At Colter, the volunteer training group includes two teachers from the third, fourth and fifth grades, an English-language-learners teacher, a special-education teacher and the school's reading, writing and technology facilitators. All of the teachers volunteered for the training, Coursey said, which has taken place three times this year in fourth-grade teacher Stephanie Hardeman's classroom.

An all-staff meeting was scheduled for later Thursday so group members could share what they learned with the rest of the school staff.

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