

SALT Center Focus: Learning-Disabled K-12 Students

The ambitious project will help students who are learning disabled, at risk and have attention challenges.

By La Monica Everett-Haynes, University Communications
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The Strategic Alternative Learning Techniques Center has long supported the community through outreach projects to help students who are learned disabled or have attention challenges – but never like this.

The center's newest project got its start during a "demonstration period last year, when SALT and other from The University of Arizona joined with Catalina Magnet High School to help some of the lowest performing students. SALT worked with nearly 40 students and teachers and provided mentoring, coaching and instruction, applying the same methods it uses to help UA students.



Jeff Orgera, SALT Center
director

The result: Catalina Magnet students tested higher and had better grade point averages and graduation rates. In fact, five of the six seniors who had not been able to pass the Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards, or AIMS, exam either moved on to the UA or to Pima Community College, said Lisa Lovallo, the UA's student affairs development and advancement director.

Now SALT, which is nationally known for its efforts, is working with educators and families to initiate a pilot program next fall involving 150 high school students with learning disabilities or who perform low in school.

"The Catalina project is probably the most formalized outreach effort we have made to date, and the one that has the most potential long range in the schools," said Jeff Orgera, the SALT Center's director.

The team working on the pilot decided to incorporate the program into the high school curriculum, allowing student participants to get about five hours of instruction and support each week, Lovallo said.

The UA has begun pursuing funding from educational foundations, the business sector and government entities that will allow the project to move beyond next year's pilot and into an ambitious multiyear longitudinal project involving hundreds more at Catalina Magnet plus students in middle and elementary schools.

The project already has a commitment with Doolen Middle School for a 2009 expansion to include 90 students and plans to expand again into an elementary school in 2010 to include 60 youth.

"The core of this project is about a culture change within a school as an organization and changing how all educators think about learning and the ways they approach learning," Orgera said.

The UA's College of Education is working with the group and will begin reviewing the program design and assessing its process.

"It's about connecting students with new and innovative resources so they can have a better chance of success," Orgera said. "We're overall really excited. We feel it is part of SALT's mission to serve the community."

The project is one of many examples of how the UA is attempting to address community challenges, a priority UA President Robert N. Shelton has established for the University and detailed in the recently approved 2009-2013 strategic plan.

Addressing Statewide Concerns



Lisa Lovallo, UA student affairs development and advancement director

The project was initiated after those on and off campus began to take a hard look at challenges at Catalina, in Southern Arizona and across the state, Lovallo said. Some statistics were unsettling, she said, pointing out that:

- Arizona has the nation's highest dropout rate.
- 1 in 5 people in Southern Arizona are living in poverty.
- Fewer than 50 percent of Arizona's high school graduates go immediately to college.
- Fewer than 20 percent of Pima County residents age 25 and older have earned a bachelor's degree.
- 30 percent of UA students cannot pass freshman-level college algebra and require remediation. The case is true for Pima Community College.

“We knew there would be some very complex issues in the community,” Lovallo said. “With us being a land grant institution, we began to look at the issues.”

The partners targeted Catalina’s learning disabled students and those with poor attendance and low performance on AIMS and TerraNova, a measure of academic success that compares student performance locally and with other countries.

SALT provided mentors and conducted workshops with students and teachers on topics including math, writing, studying habits, test-taking strategies and learning styles. Teachers also learned ways to make classroom instruction more active and interactive.

The planning group is currently fleshing out the pilot phase to expand on all of those offerings, while customizing the SALT program to fit the high school’s needs. Teachers will also get professional development workshops and training.

“This is a pretty traditionally taught high school where teachers lecture and kids take notes. As we all know, that’s pretty outdated for the 21st century,” Linda Patterson, the high school’s principal said. She also said Catalina is pairing SALT’s teaching with other programs to become more adaptive of modern practices and to maximize the learning and performance of the student body.

“We feel like we are wrapping a safety net around these students and that they can’t do anything less than succeed,” she said. “We are thrilled to be working with the SALT center. They are data and research driven, and those are the practices Catalina wants to bring.”

Public and Private Support

The collaboration has captured the interest of policymakers and others who say this kind of work is a promising attempt to resolve challenges in the education system.

“Catalina is a terrific, but very challenged high school. To be able to give some of these young people not just the dream but also the tools to achieve that dream is very important,” said Tucson Vice Mayor Nina Trasoff, who represents Ward 6, which includes both the UA and Catalina.

Trasoff provided \$10,000 of the funds allocated to her office – which are granted to community programs – to the SALT project as startup funding.

“It’s one of the larger gifts I’ve given,” she said. “The University is stellar. I have so much respect for it. If we can help establish partnerships between the university and middle city schools, that strengthens all of us. In the long run, it will pay great dividends to the community.”