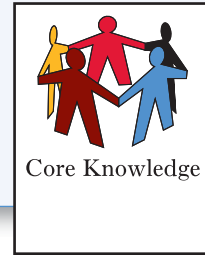


# I. Sierra Grande School District Blanca, Colorado



## Core Knowledge Grades K–8

**Enrollment: 229 (K–8)**

**Low-Income: 77%**

**Non-White: 69%**

Despite the snow-capped Rocky Mountain peaks towering to its northeast, Sierra Grande School District is as far removed from Colorado’s glamorous ski resorts as one could imagine. This tiny rural district serves one of the most economically depressed regions in the state. Many parents are agricultural workers with annual incomes hovering around \$7,000, and three quarters of the district’s K-8 students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. About two-thirds are Hispanic, and about one in four students speaks English as a second language.

The entire district is smaller than most elementary schools: All of Sierra Grande’s 300 students attend school in the same U-shaped building on highway 160. One wing houses grades K-7 and the other grades 8-12, with the gymnasium, library, and district offices in between. The two school principals both pull double duty as district officials overseeing various federal programs and reform projects.

Yet neither its small size nor its challenging demographics have kept Sierra Grande from an aggressive pursuit of excellence. When the elementary school was labeled “low-performing” by its state department of education early in the decade, the superintendent, principal, and teachers set a course for improvement. A federal Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration grant led them to Core Knowledge.

The staff approached implementation strategically, beginning with a target of 75 percent in year one, combined with a heavy focus on expanding the teaching of science and social studies. “We knew we couldn’t do everything at once, and teachers had to work hard to improve their science and social studies knowledge,” says Pamela Thompson, principal for K-6 and coordinator for Core Knowledge in K-8. “We knew we weren’t really teaching those subjects very much.”

But other subjects required hard work as well. For example, early in the process a staff member realized that the mathematics topics Sierra Grande was teaching in fourth grade matched what the Core Knowledge Sequence called for in third grade. “We were a year behind in math. Core Knowledge was that much more rigorous,” says Ms. Thompson.

Implementing the new curriculum required long hours of work outside the classroom and much collaboration. The district’s unusual weekly schedule helped. Sierra Grande students attend school



from Monday through Thursday, arriving at 7:30 am for breakfast and taking classes from 8 am to 4:30 pm. That leaves Fridays for professional development and other schoolwide collaboration.

The district's self-published accountability report lists 20 full Fridays devoted to professional development in Core Knowledge alone over the last four years. Staff members also participate in an extra curriculum planning session one Wednesday per month after school. And that doesn't count off-site professional development. For example, Ms. Thompson and her teachers also visited other Core Knowledge schools in Colorado and attended national and state Core Knowledge conferences.

The staff was exhausted but inspired. "Every year there's a point when my staff is ready to bail on me," says Ms. Thompson. "But we take a deep breath and plunge on."

Early on, teachers set a goal to become an official Core Knowledge school, which requires a serious commitment. Schools that achieve the "official" status implement 80 percent or more of the Core Knowledge Sequence and have the eventual goal of implementing 100 percent. They also submit a copy of their curriculum plan, an analysis of its alignment with state standards, and sample lessons on Core Knowledge topics for each grade level, along with other supporting documents. Sierra Grande met that goal, achieving official Core Knowledge designation in 2003-4.

That kind of intensive collaboration extends into the classroom as well. Of course, terms like "team teaching" take on a very different meaning in the school this small, where in all but one case the district employs only one teacher per elementary grade level. For example, Sierra Grande's K-3 teachers and a shared resource teacher all work together as one team, planning lessons and dividing children up for grouping and regrouping during math and reading time each morning. "I call them my SWAT team," says Ms. Thompson, who says her teachers have settled on a daily schedule that devotes mornings to math and reading and afternoons to science, social studies, art, and music.

Ms. Thompson confesses to some initial worries that such a broad, specific curriculum would prove too restrictive for teachers. But she says Core Knowledge has established a better balance between classroom "creativity" and coverage of important topics. "When I was teaching, thematic units were the big thing. It was what I wanted to teach as a teacher, but it was leaving a lot of content out. Our children and our teachers need a specific curriculum so they can have a basis for building knowledge from year to year."

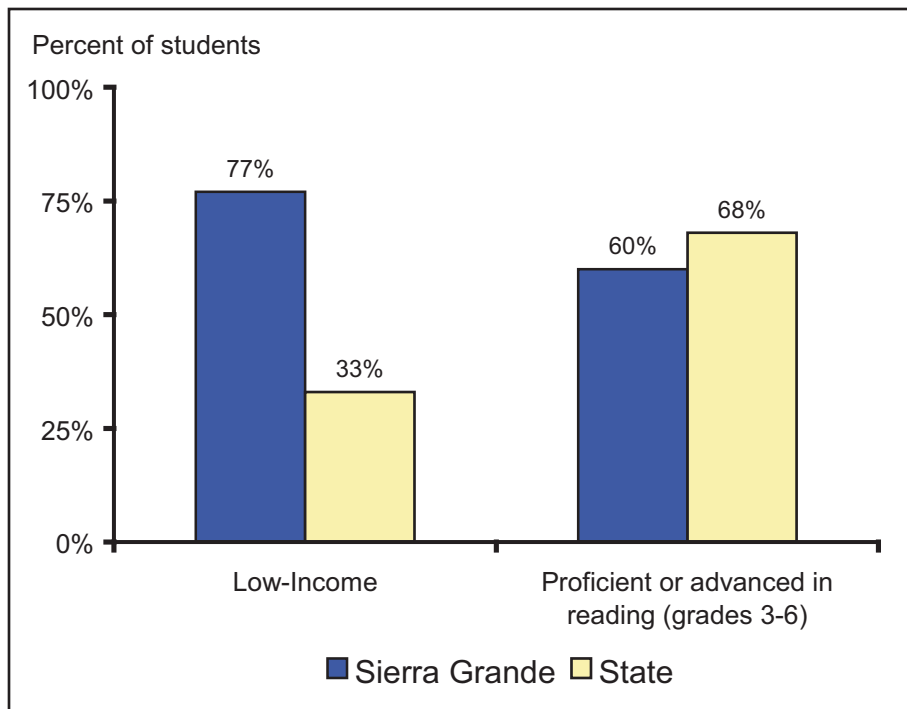
The effort has paid off. Far from being bored, students are more enthusiastic than ever, and the content has given them knowledge about the larger world they didn't have before

The district's adoption of Core Knowledge in grades K-8 has had indirect repercussions for upper grades as well. Ms. Thompson invited the high school staff to several Core Knowledge training sessions so they could see what was happening. "They said, 'Oh my gosh, you're going to send such different children to us.' They realized they can't teach the way they used to either. The kids would be bored to death." Last year Sierra Grande's high school began offering Advanced Placement classes for the first time ever.

But Ms. Thompson and her teachers are still far from satisfied, and they are honest about all the work still left to do. For example, mathematics remains a vexing trouble spot. "We've struggled with math more than any other subject," she says. "We're still struggling. We're still trying to find the magic for math, but we're working on it." There are some positive signs: In 2004-5 a number of seventh graders were ready for Algebra.

And last year K-6 teachers began intensive training in scientifically based reading instruction with support from a federal Reading First grant. Though the strategies have proven to be a good fit with Core Knowledge, the staff has had to work extra hard to find the energy and time for both. These days, by the time the monthly curriculum meetings have ended, the clock more often reads 7 pm than 5. But Sierra Grande remains strongly committed to Core Knowledge. "They will never go back to teaching the way they did before," says Ms. Thompson. "They will never let go of this curriculum."

## Despite Twice the Poverty, Sierra Grande Approaches State Average in Reading



## Sierra Grande's 5th Grade Achieves High Scores in Reading Despite High Poverty

