

# Schools Beat the Odds, raise AIMS scores

2 GPS facilities achieve gold status from institute by reaching their goals

By Hayley Ringle

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Over the past three years, students at Gilbert Junior High and Harris Elementary schools have increased their scores in AIMS reading, math and writing after the principals and staff participated in the Beat the Odds Institute.

Both Gilbert Public Schools facilities, located in Gilbert and Mesa, respectively, were named as Beat the Odds Schools with gold medal status last month among 10 metro Phoenix schools with predominantly high-poverty, high-minority students.

The Beat the Odds program is a rigorous, multiyear school improvement program based on the Center for the Future of Arizona's nationally recognized research.

The program gives principals the tools to develop an improvement plan with the goal of student academic achievement exceeding expectations. Principals work with mentors monthly and engage in training sessions to achieve their goals.

Gilbert Junior High Principal Kevin Rainey made his students aware of their AIMS scores, showing them what it would take to do better.

Students were enticed to meet a schoolwide goal of improving AIMS scores by being treated to rewards that encouraged them during the tough test-taking period. Rewards included a favorite band performing during lunch and a week where students were

allowed during a break to bash an old car with baseball bats on an outdoor basketball court.

"It was all about improving scores," said Rainey, adding that the strategies worked for the school's 710 seventh- and eighth-graders.

Harris Elementary Principal Becky Henderson and teams of teachers worked in professional learning communities to focus on reading. They changed the reading program at the kindergarten and first-grade levels, focusing more on practicing reading paragraphs without pictures. This improved reading scores because it removed the distraction of pictures, Henderson said.

"Our third-graders were struggling with comprehension," said Henderson, who has 520 K-6 students. "We built the program, put the activities together to have the students read real-world things, and it worked."

Henderson said she wasn't surprised with the results because part of the Beat the Odds program is becoming aware of and focusing on a specific goal.

"My mentor helped me focus a lot," Henderson said. The Beat the Odds research study works on six elements associated with successful minority schools, including: a strong and steady principal, clear bottom line, ongoing assessment, collaboration, individual student needs, and a commitment to stay with successful instructional programs.

Schools are encouraged to participate for at least three years, and can earn recognition on different levels, said Marjorie Kaplan, director of the Beat the Odds Institute.

"We focus on teaching leadership to principals," said Kaplan, a former superintendent in the Paradise Valley Unified School District. "The original BTO (Beat the Odds) study showed if the principal's leadership skills improved, that would improve the students' academic progress. Our students have proved that. We teach the principals, and then we teach them how to teach the teachers."

When a participating school receives a performing AZ LEARNS label from the Arizona Department of Education, the school reaches the bronze level. When the school demonstrates academic growth in school tests with the majority of students showing growth in reading and math, the school earns a silver award.

The gold award goes to schools that show consistent growth in AIMS reading and math scores over three years. This is the first year the program issued gold awards since the Beat the Odds Institute began four years ago, Kaplan said.

Schools volunteer to participate. To join, schools must have at least 50 percent of their students on free or reduced lunches, and around 50 percent of the student population must be non-White.

Since 2007, the Beat the Odds program has grown from 27 Phoenix-area K-12 public schools to 82 metro Phoenix, Tucson and Yuma schools this year.

University of Phoenix, which is a sponsor, has committed \$600,000 to help fund the implementation of the Beat the Odds program.



This year, schools that entered the program had to pay a fee of \$7,500 a year, although many of the schools qualify for federal Title I funds to cover the cost, Kaplan said. There was no cost for

See **BEAT THE ODDS** Page 4 the original participants, so both Gilbert Junior High and Harris didn't have to pay a fee for the past three years, she added.

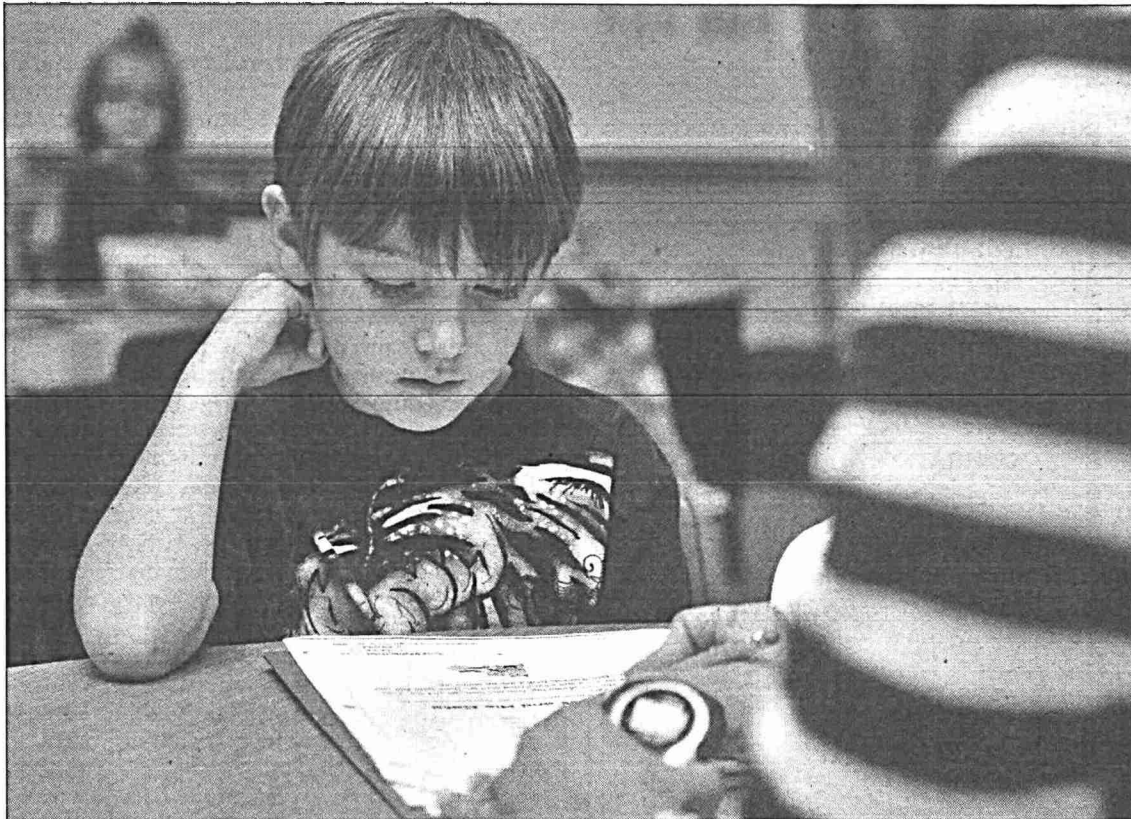
Now that 10 schools have reached that gold status, those principals become a part of the Beat the Odds Alumni Network. They come together to focus on education issues and challenges.

"The sharing of information and collaboration with colleagues is one of the most valuable opportunities provided by the program," Kaplan said. "They hear how other principals are dealing with issues, such as teacher cuts, and it helps them at their school."

Henderson said the most beneficial part of the program was the monthly meetings with principals.

"It gave us opportunities to learn from other colleagues in similar situations," she said.

The cost to be a part of the alumni network is \$2,500 per principal per year.



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J.J. Austin, 6, practices reading with first-grade teacher Maria Durazo at Harris Elementary School in Mesa. The school improved reading and has been honored as a Beat the Odds school.

### **Beating the odds**

Harris Elementary School's AIMS results:

- » Fifth-grade reading scores: in 2008, 71 percent of students passed; in 2010, 88 percent passed.
- » Fifth-grade math scores: in 2008, 72 percent passed; in 2010, 82 percent passed.
- » Fifth-grade writing scores: in 2008, 76 percent passed; in 2010, 82 percent passed.

Southeast Valley schools that received Beat the Odds awards:

- » Gold Level — Gilbert Public Schools' Gilbert Junior High School and Harris Elementary; Tempe Elementary School District's Gililand Middle School and Holdeman Elementary.
- » Silver Level — Tempe Elementary School District's Arredondo, Carminati, Frank and Meyer.