



DARDEN SCHOOL
of BUSINESS



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Arsenio Romero **Student Loss in the Pandemic**

Community Challenge

Within the lowest-performing schools in New Mexico's 89 districts (and one school in the bottom five statewide) nearly 98% of students in the Deming school district were economically disadvantaged. In that environment 100% of students received free and reduced-price meals, 40% were English language learners, 50-60% of the student body had not shown consistency, yet Superintendent Arsenio Romero had what he had always wanted— "this is where I wanted to be."

Romero came from a family of teachers and grew up wanting to be one. "When I became a better teacher, I wanted to have a positive impact on other teachers," he said. Romero soon became a principal. Around the same time, Romero attended the University of Virginia Partnership for Leaders in Education (PLE) turnaround program designed to build district and school capacity to lead transformations. The desire to expand his range of influence continued. When given the chance, there was no hesitation to move to the Las Cruces district and work with seven elementary schools and some of the neediest students, families, and educators in the state. Within three years, Romeo and his teachers were able to bring one of the lowest-performing cohorts of students to one of the highest performance of cohorts students.

Then came the opportunity to scale his approach across an entire district as assistant superintendent in Roswell district. Around the same time, the Priority Schools Bureau was developing the processes and structures to implement a program for principals to become school turnaround leaders. Romero was tapped to help set up and implement it. "We didn't know what the end product was going to be like," Romero said. "The idea was to be able to support principals across the state, especially those with central offices and superintendents inexperienced in turnarounds and others with few resources." This became the Principals Pursuing Excellence (PPE) program. Romero took on the mentorship of 15 different school leaders providing feedback and tools such as building a core leadership team, prioritizing performance challenges, conducting root cause analyses, and defining critical actions. "I was in the middle of all of it and each of us had to learn as we went," Romero said. "Since then, every school I have worked with increased report card grades and now proficiencies." Indeed, with three years under his belt as Deming superintendent, the needle on student achievement had moved from single-digit proficiency to a range in the 40%. And the school labeled in the bottom five was now the district's highest-performing school and model for other states.

Then the Coronavirus pandemic struck. Schools closed doors and educators and students left the building at the end of March. “Now we had to think about redesigning every aspect of public education,” Romero said. This would be the largest performance challenge of his career.

Action Taken

New Mexico took a strong stance on public closures and stay at home orders. Educators had to quickly figure out how to provide instruction, communicate with parents, conduct staff meetings, feed students, transport students, and conduct remote PLCs; it was all different. Romero and his school leaders needed to rethink their priorities to improve instructional outcomes. Romero’s first goal was to locate students in his district; there were 100 students they couldn’t find—did they move, were they homeschooling, what happened? Then they put tools in place for technology to make sure everyone had a technology device. Curriculum goals and culture had to change. Among the most difficult parts was getting students to engage, and ensuring teachers kept relationships with their students’ emotional and social wellbeing. In addition, teachers and principals throughout the district needed reassurance and support. Romero approached this turnaround the same way as all the others—using the tools he helped develop for the PPE program.

Key Takeaway

From the day schools closed, education experts predicted learning losses especially among less privileged students living in areas affected by the digital divide. “We have this inequity we knew was there,” Romero said. “But now it is in our face and affects everyone.” New Mexico’s network of PPE helped alumni stay committed and shared best practices with each other.