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Develop Leaders

Community Challenge

Geographically, the largest school district in New Mexico encompassed slightly less than 5,000 square miles. Among the over 70,000 people who lived in Gallup McKinley County Schools district, almost 80% were Native American. When compared to the US average, levels of unemployment were high. Student performance was poor, almost all were economically disadvantaged, and 100% were eligible for free and reduced-price meals. Carrie Lovato had been a teacher at one of the high schools in the county twenty years earlier. Attracting quality teachers and administrators in several of the district's schools was next to impossible. In her experience, schools with the most struggling students ended up with the poorest instruction and leadership. "There were natural leaders who found some success without a huge amount of support," Lovato said. "And our district had pockets of success from that." For the most part though, teacher reaction to student underperformance was "what are they going to do, fire me?"

Action Taken

The district made very purposeful decisions under new leadership to embrace change and agreed to be part of programs like the University of Virginia Partnership for Leaders in Education and the Principals Pursuing Excellence (PPE) programs. Those actions would assist in moving leaders in a new and improved direction with accountability. Achievement scores started moving upwards in various schools throughout the district.

"We stopped worrying about adult comforts, stopped blaming [external issues] outside of school factors, and we really looked at actions within the building—actions that impacted student learning and achievement," Lovato said. With what she'd learned in the PPE and tools the district put in place to pinpoint what was working, student achievement increased. And Lovato wasn't alone. All schools supported at PPE saw significant growth.

The middle school Lovato was the principal of was able to raise achievement scores by 16 points. The secretary of education came to present an award and recognize Lovato, her teachers, and their students. "By purposefully giving all leaders continuous training on research-based strategies and powerful levers that have been proven to improve achievement and teacher learning," Lovato said. "We have started to diminish the equity gaps within our schools."

Key Takeaway

Utilizing district tools, developing leaders to implement processes and procedures, and providing coaching support were all crucial to validate that leaders in education were doing the right thing. Lovato noted that without support, thought partners, access to quality research, and high yield strategies, leaders can “wander around for a long time wondering if they are doing the right thing but never really pinpointing what was working or not.”