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### **Danny Parker**

Assistant Superintendent of Secondary Education, Artesia Public Schools

### **Building Manager or Instructional Expert**

#### ***Community Challenge***

Four years into his elementary school principal experience, Danny Parker's school was at Grade D and only half a point away from an F on state testing. With all the work Parker and his teachers had put into instruction, how could they still be functioning at this level? "I was so disappointed," Parker said. "I knew how to teach and was ready for an administrative job and a chance to lead others." Now Parker's school was being audited. A few days later, an email caught his eye about a new program called the Principals Pursuing Excellence (PPE). "I applied for it thinking at least I would have a line on my resume," Parker said. A few weeks later he went to the first convening of the Priority Schools Bureau's flagship program.

As Parker sat in the first two PPE sessions, he felt like the deck was stacked against him. At the front of the room, instructors discussed the value behind principals doing more classroom visits and holding conferences with their teachers. "My phone was blowing up with problems," Parker said. "There was an assembly in the gym and the PA system wasn't working, there were problems with two buses, plumbing issues in the building, and all those things were coming to me." Parker was checking his phone while learning processes that were going to make him a better principal and improve his school. "I stood up and said: 'All I'm hearing is more stuff I'm going to have to do,'" Parker said. "I read out the list of what I'd received on the phone that hour and the room stopped."

#### ***Action Taken***

Immediately, experienced educators from around New Mexico peppered Parker with questions: Why is a principal having to solve issues with the PA system? Why is a principal called to fix a bus problem? Isn't instruction what a principal was supposed to be doing? Several ideas were thrown Parker's way. The other participants and instructors at the PPE helped Parker realize he was an instructional expert and needed to do that. Period.

"One of the big levers in leveraged leadership was changing the culture of the school," Parker said. "One of the elements to accomplish that meant doing something different about what was going on—and everyone being aware of it." Seeing students knock teachers' artwork off the walls in the hallway was his inspiration. Parker implemented a policy that when traveling in hallways

students had to cross their arms—even if no one else was there. At first, teachers thought it was silly and too regimented. Teachers weren't the only ones who pushed back, Parker heard from parents too. "One mother complained because when she sent her daughter to bed, the daughter would cross her arms and go," Parker said. "She was very upset as she saw the crossing of her arms as an act of defiance, so I took the mother in the hallway and showed her how the other students cross their arms in the hallways, and it has a calming effect." Within a year students and teachers celebrated a B grade rank by eating food starting with the letter B!

### ***Key Takeaway***

Reconnecting to purposeful leadership is a significant effort required to impact any organization. "I quit making discipline the most important thing and set priorities to improve education," Parker said. "Students quickly realized they were not getting attention for negative things. And Parker realized he had taken a major step to change the culture. "Examine what you need to stop doing, what you need to start doing, and what it will take to achieve world-class performance."