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Elisa Begueria
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Root Cause!

Community Challenge Scenario

When Elisa Begueria moved to Lake Arthur School District to become superintendent, she left a large successful school system to lead in a small rural one. The district had 150 students in K through 12, all located on a single campus. She had been part of the original Principals Pursuing Education (PPE) group and also attended the University of Virginia Partnership for Leaders in Education program. The professional development experience taught Begueria how to mentor—“support people but hold them accountable, ask people to think instead of giving the answers, and be kind.” From time-to-time, Begueria pushed mentees— “so what are you going to do, when are you going to do it...”

Coming from a successful district to a struggling district, Begueria found a group of teachers working hard on turning around schools. But they didn’t seem to know how to have conversations around instruction. Despite an inclination to jump in with both feet, Begueria had to stop comparing a very high functioning district with one that was struggling. “I had to step back and ask, ‘where are the largest barriers?’” she said. “Where were the breakdowns in the systems and processes’—this was the superintendent’s job.” She was now in that position and needed to do something right away.

Action Taken

Begueria’s entire career has been an upward trajectory to this point, with considerable professional and personal growth. She had helped mentor several principals who became successful leaders. She could call any number of educators throughout New Mexico. Begueria reached out to her networks; her PPE connections were critical, and she no longer felt isolated. As a result, she recognized the need to work from the bottom up to fix things at Lake Arthur. She would focus on the issues, not what caused the problems. She set out to develop a 90-day plan; this meant looking at the data, prioritizing challenges, conducting a root analysis and choosing two things to put in place to fix the system. “Then we could have a conversation about what really mattered,” Begueria said. And the reward for her leadership was the first-year student math proficiencies at Lake Arthur were higher than the other three closest districts.

Key Takeaway

The mentor's role was to motivate principals to develop a high-performance team in each of their schools. "One of the biggest impacts of PPE mentorship on myself as a leader is being more aware of who I am as a leader," Begueria said. "And understand my strengths and how to use them to make changes." Part of being an effective mentor is making a fundamental and lasting difference in yourself too.