



DARDEN SCHOOL
of BUSINESS



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Turnaround

Community Challenge

Seven years ago, Gerald Horacek was an assistant principal in a struggling school when he first participated in the Principals Pursuing Excellence (PPE) program. Gallup is one of the poorest counties in New Mexico. It's also one of the 10 largest school districts, without the resources many of the other districts have. He's been assistant superintendent there overseeing all 34 schools for the past three years.

Horacek lets data tell his story; in 2014-15, Gallup proficiency in language arts was 14.6%, compared to the state average of 26.4%. Four years later, the state is at 32.7%, and Gallup averages 29.55%. "We have more than doubled our gain," he says. He points to similar gains in math, and in 2019, Gallup's 76.5% graduation rate passed the state's 74.9%. "We can attribute a lot of that to PPE, without question."

Action Taken

The 90-day plan is a bedrock of the PPE program. In the past, nine-week assessments weren't tied to the curriculum. "So really, teachers were throwing darts at a board hoping they were teaching the right things," he explained. "So then we knew here in Gallup we had to have a common curriculum that everyone taught" from kindergarten to grade 12. The assessments now match what is in the standards. "We don't tell them how to teach it. But we definitely tell them what to teach." Teachers are given the standards test before the nine weeks begin. "They have the test, and they know what level of rigor each question is. And they know how they have to teach that."

At every school, a poster detailing the school's gains is front and center for everyone who walks in the door. When parents come in, they know the school cares about their children and they know their child has a role in that data, he says. Horacek has seen parents show up at school board meetings, not to complain, but to tell the board, "We love the data. We love what you're doing. We're going to hold you accountable to that."

Key Takeaway

“The schools and districts that are in PPE outperform the other schools in the state that are not in the program, and the public education department has data to support that,” says Horacek. And he knows that the increased percentages mean an actual human being has become proficient in language arts or math, and that child has a better chance of being successful in the workforce. “If I have this knowledge that I've been blessed to have, why wouldn't I want to share that with other people in my own state?”