



DARDEN SCHOOL  
of BUSINESS



**Gerry Yemen**  
*Senior Researcher*  
*Director, Darden Case Writing Research Group*

**James Schapekahn**  
Principal, Onate High School  
**Tools in the Toolbox—Virtually**

### *Community Challenge*

How are teachers supposed to get to know their students through a webcam? That was just one of the numerous challenges that educators were grappling with as Covid-19 rendered traditional classrooms closed. For Principal James Schapekahn, he had to figure out whether good teachers in the building could translate into good virtual teachers. Early in the lockdown, Schapekahn received a call from one of his better classroom instructors. A student in the class, without his video camera on, said nothing throughout the class, and when class ended didn't "leave the meeting." She asked if he was doing okay and heard nothing back. The teacher called a parent to follow up. The father knocked on the son's bedroom door and was told he was in a class. "No, you aren't," the father said. "I'm on the phone with your teacher." There was a growing number of teachers who wanted Schapekahn to institute a "cameras on" policy for all students. But it wasn't that easy.

"It just depends on the situation," Schapekahn said. Most of those in the school won't have a problem, but there are others with real-life hindering their ability to be present on camera. Some were at home watching younger brothers and sisters when their parents had to work. Others didn't want their classmates to see they didn't have broadband and were huddling around a hotspot on a phone. Or they didn't want anyone to see how or where they actually lived. Would turning on cameras help students learn? There was limited data around whether students with cameras on performed better than those with cameras off. "I don't want to lose those kids because I forced them to turn their cameras on," Schapekahn said. "I don't want students to disappear."

### *Action Taken*

As principal of 1,700 students at Ornate High School, Schapekahn had mentored others through the Principals Pursuing Excellence (PPE) program. In addition to mentoring, he brought different ideas back to his own school and one of the biggest pieces was to shift staff culture. "It took three years to really function and dig into the instructional pieces instead of talk about bell schedules and hallways," Schapekahn said. "That whole dynamic changed in March with the pandemic." To think about the cameras on or off policy, he reached out to his PPE network. Some hadn't run into the same issue, while others had made it a policy to keep cameras on, and one

school allowed an opt-out form, depending on the situation. “That was second to none as far as hearing people’s stories,” Schapekalm said. “The Navajo Nation was struggling like we are—we are not alone anymore in this pandemic—this little town in Las Cruces—it was tremendous.”

### *Key Takeaway*

Leading is complex and when done in a vacuum, you have nothing to compare with your approach. Relationships with other leaders unlocks potential. Schapekalm learned to draw upon multiple sources of information to succeed. The PPE community became a testing ground around a variety of issues as educators tried to adapt to different environments. The collaborative nature of the PPE created a safe place for education leaders to have off-line conversations.