

High expectations for the lowest performers can lead to greater progress

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McKinley County is one of the poorest counties in the state, which means that it's also one of the poorest counties in the country. It sits near New Mexico's northern border with Arizona. There are roughly 75,000 residents and 77.5 percent are Native American. Census data notes that 73 percent of people living there graduated from high school and only 11 percent hold a Bachelor's degree.

The median household income is \$28,000 – well below the state's average. The average income per capita is about \$12,000, and 34 percent of the county is living in poverty. Part of the sprawling Navajo Indian Reservation runs through the county, as well as the Zuni Indian Reservation.

Statistics and research say that those components should add up to underachieving schools and low performing schools. But the reality is much different.

In the 2013-14 school year, the Gallup-McKinley County Schools had 11 schools that received a grade of F, as in failing. In 2015-16, there were zero failing schools. Critics would be wrong to suppose the district changed how it measures schools. The formulas are done by the state and based on five criteria, including standardized test scores, the growth of high- and low-performing students, and a survey of parents or guardians regarding whether the school presents an opportunity for students to learn. The individual breakdowns are impressive:

2013-14, zero A schools; 2015-16, 2 A schools.

2013-14, two B schools; 2015-16, nine B schools.

2013-14, 10 C schools; 2015-16, 17 C schools.

2013-14, 12 D schools; 2015-15, seven D schools.

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The improvement in student performance is equally impressive. From 2014-15 to 2015-16, there were 509 more students who earned a ranking of proficient in math and English-Language Arts on statewide tests. Nearly 95 percent of those students are economically disadvantaged. And 76 percent of the 509 were Native American, whose historical performance on assessments is underwhelming.

So what has Gallup-McKinley figured out that other struggling districts haven't?

"These are not accidents," Associate Superintendent Gerald Horacek said. "We believe in a system-wide approach at the district level that's sustainable. You use strategies that are best for kids, and it doesn't matter their ethnicity. We get caught up a lot in that. You just have to have good teaching."

You might also add good data. Gallup-McKinley students sit for district-level assessments every nine weeks. Known as interims, these tests regularly and methodically assess how well students have learned what they have been taught. When the results are in, students get a day off while educators and district officials sift through the results to study shortcomings that can be immediately corrected and strengths that can be built upon. Horacek noted that every question on the interim relates directly to what has been taught in the classroom.

"That's why we're able to move school grades and the number of students who are proficient," Horacek said.

The district is still among the lower performers in the state, something officials there acknowledge. "We have a ton of things we have to work on," Horacek admitted. They have more than doubled the growth rate on statewide scores – an early indicator of sustainable success – but still score almost 10 points lower than the state average on overall student proficiency. Still, Horacek said, "We're doing something well to help our struggling kids get better."

That's the ultimate goal – help struggling students succeed and make sure high-performing students remain challenged.

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Public Education Department Secretary Hanna Skandera expects that the work that's already been done to raise expectations, coupled with the aggressive goals in the ESSA plan, will mold confident students who are eager for success. No matter the pushback from unions or other naysayers, she is committed to seeing it through.

"We've had generations of struggle in regard to the outcomes in education," she said. "We're making progress, but we have a lot of work to do. Every generation, every year that goes by, they're either set up for success or they're not. They cannot wait. We need to set aside petty differences and remember who we serve. The future of New Mexico depends on our kids."

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