

Setting and Reaching Even Higher Goals

*Chinle Unified School District
Chinle, Arizona*

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Summary

Chinle Unified School District, located in northeastern Arizona in the heart of the Navajo Nation and The Land of the Diné, or Navajo People, stands out as a district that transformed from one of the worst-performing reservation districts in the state to the highest performing reservation district. Students in Chinle are closing historic achievement gaps, and in some grades and subjects, students have reached the statewide average level of proficiency.

They are now setting their sights on even higher goals. Chinle's success is based on many factors, but one of the most important was the decision to invest in a cadre of teacher leaders who play a central role in supporting improvements in classroom instruction and student learning.

"I want to put Chinle on the map," Superintendent Quincy Natay says. "People need to hear our story."

District Context and Challenge

Chinle Unified serves 3,700 students. 98% are Native American, and most of these students are members of the Navajo Nation. The district includes seven schools: one high school, one junior high school, five elementary schools, and one pre-K center. The school district has been in existence since 1961 and is a mainstay of the community.

The district is one of largest employers in the area and has a long history of working

with the community to advance Navajo language and culture. The school district's immersion in Navajo philosophy, culture, and language provides a powerful connection to the community and enriches students' learning experiences.

At the same time, Chinle faces myriad challenges. Its remote setting means that students live as far as 50 miles from school with some students living in areas without running water or electricity. District buses cover over a million miles a year, including a significant number over unpaved roads. About three quarters of students qualify for free or reduced price lunch. Many students need food, clothing, and outside support.

In the past, teachers felt isolated in their classrooms and struggled to help their students to excel. Academic achievement levels were significantly below state averages and lagged other reservation districts. The district has struggled to meet multiple, sometimes conflicting, expectations from tribal government, state, and federal accountability systems.

Deputy Superintendent Doug Clauschee summarized the challenges they faced: seven superintendents in 12 years led to inconsistent leadership; there was no clear vision, beliefs, or guiding principles; no valid or reliable curriculum; no systematic process for communications and evaluation of programs; and a lack of trust in district leadership. In short, Chinle needed a strategic plan.

The New Approach

Creating a Strategic Plan

Stepping in as superintendent, Quincy Natay launched a five-year strategic planning process with a focus on building ownership over decision making and goal setting among district staff, the school board, and the community. Natay grew up in Chinle and had worked at multiple different positions in the school system. He created a broad-based, inclusive process for developing a new vision for the school system.

The focus was on empowering students to become more global citizens and effective decision-makers, as well as on developing students' ability to manage their emotions and beliefs about what they can do and accomplish. The strategic planning process brought into sharper focus the importance of family and community in educating young people and fostering their dreams to become leaders and community builders themselves.

Chinle's new vision is "to empower all students to be competitive, unique, successful, and driven through an effective team of teachers, staff, school board, parents, and community; in an environment dedicated to the value of continuous learning."

Strengthening the School-to-Home Connection

One of the first steps in improving the school-to-home connection was to engage with families, identify needs, and find

practical and immediate ways to address those needs. For example, a pressing need was food, particularly over the weekend. Superintendent Natay worked with a local food bank to create a program for schools to offer a food bag for families each week. This was followed by other steps to engage parents and community members with the schools, and make clear that the district was committed to families and students as a true partner in their growth and success.

Engaging the School Board

District leaders worked to build a shared vision and understanding with the school board, recognizing that the new strategic vision and goals for student success required schools to do things that had never been done before.

"The superintendent made the case that if we are going to meet our goals for students, we aren't going to get there with gimmicks or fads," Clauschee said. **"We needed to invest in research-based strategies and in growing the skills of our faculty."**



Building High-Quality Classroom Instruction

The district partnered with the non-profit National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) to build a culture of high-quality, shared instructional practices and a structure for collective leadership. This included developing school leadership teams, job-embedded professional learning led by teacher leaders in each building, and the use of research-based teaching standards.

Teachers are now supported by school leaders and a cadre of teacher leaders trained as academic coaches. These coaching roles were taken on by some of the most effective teachers, whose role is to grow other teachers. Two academic coaches lead professional learning in each building and serve on the school leadership team.

School-based coaches also meet at the district level, building collaboration and networking across schools. Additionally, coaches plan and implement weekly ongoing, job-embedded professional learning to model effective instructional practices.

District and school leadership teams have focused on identifying and growing exemplars within their own system and raising up those mastery-level practices for every teacher. This practical and focused approach was rooted in student and teacher data.

One significant challenge was creating consistent and rigorous instructional practices and a strong culture of professional learning.

Observation and feedback on classroom instruction built a common understanding of strong instructional practices across classrooms and schools. Initially, observation and feedback came from principals and academic coaches, but over time leadership teams worked to create opportunities for classroom teachers to observe and provide feedback to each other.

Direct observation of strong instructional practices within their own building and the opportunity for frequent peer-to-peer discussion on instructional practices, student work, and student learning growth has been essential in building a common vision for strong instruction.

Introducing a High-Quality Curriculum

Building on the foundation of collective leadership, collaborative learning, and instructional expertise that was developed with support from NIET in each building, the district moved to put in place high-quality instructional materials and a new curriculum. The system for teacher classroom support was critical in helping teachers to understand how to deliver new, more challenging content in ways that supported student mastery.

Academic coach Cammie Natay explains, “Before partnering with NIET, we were a very textbook dependent school – we taught page to page. Our level of student engagement was not good, and we didn’t have a focused direction – which was reflective of our curriculum. Our instruction needed to be tighter, more consistent.”

Her fellow academic coach Melissa Martin agreed. “We were teaching in isolation, and we were each doing our own thing,” she said. “Some teachers would work together, but that was by choice. The result was teaching in silos with no consistency across classrooms.”

The district adopted a new curriculum to address these challenges, and teachers immediately saw the difference. “It was just what we needed,” Martin said. **“We had built the foundation for strong instructional practices with support from NIET and the use of the NIET Teaching Standards. We knew what good teaching was, and we saw the problems with our old curriculum.”**

The new curriculum is more structured with the ability to go deeper into the content. “Before, we had standards to teach in each quarter. Each teacher decided what to do in their classroom, often extending the amount of time on a standard, and running out of time to hit all the standards,” Martin said.

“Now they say, ‘Wow! We only have five days for this standard?’ and our job as academic coaches is to help them work out how to make that happen, how their students can master each standard, how to stretch their higher performing students, and how to support those who are struggling. We help them build their knowledge of the standard and then work through, step by step, how to help every student to master it, based on their specific needs. The rigor has changed. The way we ask students to think is at a higher level.”

Cammie Natay agrees. “It has given organization to what we were doing by scaffolding the learning into meaningful steps instead of just moving from one page of the textbook to the next,” she said. “It gives meaning to the learning, and student engagement has shot up.”

Extra Support for New Teachers

As Chinle teachers increased the effectiveness of their instruction and paired this with high-quality curriculum, it raised expectations across the district. New teachers were expected to step in at a higher level of practice than in the past.

To support new teachers to be more effective in their first year, the 14 academic coaches from across the district developed a focused four-day program for new teachers, called STEP UP (Supporting Teachers in Examining Practices and Uncovering Potential).

The intensive training they delivered gave new teachers a deeper understanding of the curriculum and of district expectations for instructional practices.

The training also introduced new teachers to the embedded support system of weekly professional learning communities, individual coaching in classrooms, and the resources available for classroom teachers. **New teachers commented, “I felt more ready to start the school year. I know where to go, where to ask for help.”**

District Supports for the School-Based Leadership Structure

Higher expectations for teachers and the development of teacher leadership roles were backed up with additional compensation.

Teacher leaders receive a stipend for taking on new roles and responsibilities



and all teachers are eligible for additional compensation based on effectiveness. By prioritizing funding for teacher leadership roles in its budget, Chinle is continuing to invest in instructional excellence and building the skills of all teachers to address challenges.

To maintain the high level of effort and motivation required to do this work well, Superintendent Natay holds focus group meetings with teachers at each school every month, providing an opportunity to raise challenges and work together on solutions.

“The hardest thing three years ago was bringing the student data to teachers and having an open and transparent conversation about results and the urgency of improving those results. We discussed, ‘How are we going to move to where we want to be?’ We set clear goals,” Clauschee said.

“Now, our data meetings are truly transparent and open about learning gaps, and we put our ideas together around what will work to address specific needs illustrated in the data. There are still plenty of different ideas about how to do that, but we are working together on the challenges and building a shared understanding and a shared practice around excellent instruction.”

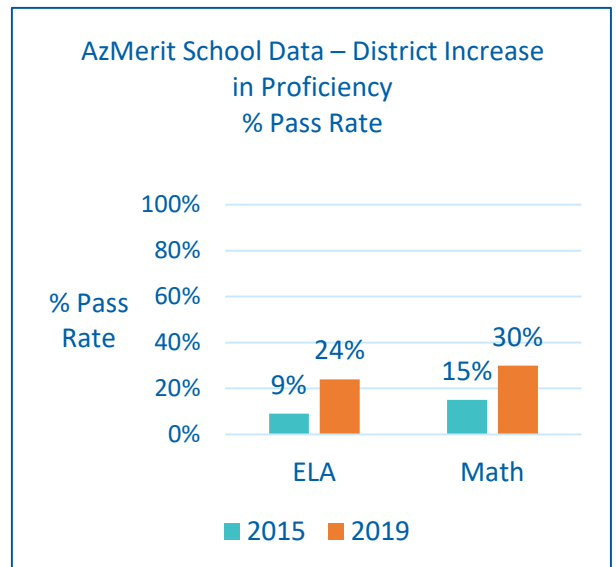
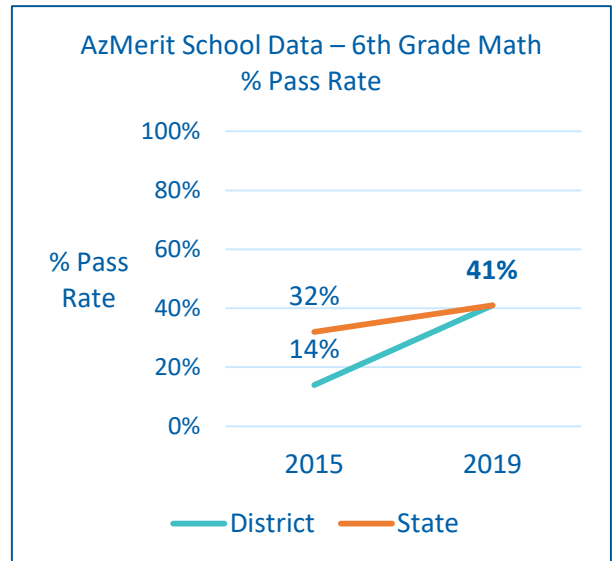
The Results

Chinle students have made substantial academic gains. Three years ago, only six classrooms approached state averages in reading and math in Chinle. This year, 34 classes were recognized for approaching mastery, with 24 of those classrooms meeting or exceeding state averages on the state test.

These gains have helped close achievement gaps. For example, the passing rate for 6th grade math students in Chinle increased from 14% in 2015 to 41% in 2019 – reaching the 41% proficiency average achieved by students statewide.

From 2015-2019, Chinle students increased their proficiency in every area, as measured using AzMERIT results. For example, in English language arts, 9% of Chinle students districtwide achieved the passing rate in 2015. By 2019, 24% of students reached this level on the state ELA exam. In math, 15% of students achieved the passing rate in 2015, while by 2019, 30% of students achieved this level.

Between 2015 and 2019, the district's student passing rates nearly tripled in ELA and doubled in math. This helped move Chinle to the highest performing reservation district and is closing the achievement gap between students in this high-need district and students in more affluent districts across the state.



“Our partnership with NIET helped us to establish the foundation for this improvement,” Clauschee said. “It enabled us to put in place the school leadership team, job-embedded professional development for teachers, and a research-based instructional rubric. This helped us create a system where teachers are effective and growing, so student achievement is growing.”

Believing Students Can Achieve at High Levels

One of the most important changes in Chinle has been the growing confidence among teachers in the potential of their students, coupled with a clear understanding of how to get there. Chinle has looked within its own ranks to find, support, and raise up exemplars of excellence: teachers who work with the same students and who show students achieving at higher rates.



The structure of support and professional learning is enabling teachers to learn from their peers, to see the results they are able to accomplish with the same students, and to identify, learn, and successfully incorporate those strategies in their own classrooms. This approach is providing every teacher, including the most effective, with regular feedback for improvement.

“We are proud of the learning environment we are creating for all students,” Superintendent Natay said. “Our teachers, principals, and staff work hard to make things possible for our students. We believe that this combined with our students’ efforts will set them on the right path for success. Their efforts significantly improve with parental involvement.”

Chinle’s success in setting and reaching ever higher goals is powered by the skills, knowledge, commitment, and collaboration of its teachers, school, and district leaders. Together they have helped to engage the community, families, and students in partnership to achieve at high levels and believe in their vision for the future.

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