

Story of Success

CHINLE UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT,
APACHE COUNTY, ARIZONA

District Context

Chinle Unified School District, located in northeastern Arizona in the heart of The Land of the Diné, is a cornerstone of its community.

Almost all of its 3,500 students are Native American, primarily 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. Chinle's immersion in Navajo philosophy, culture, and language provides a powerful connection to families in the community and enriches students' learning experiences.

Despite its prominent role in the local culture, Chinle faces a myriad of challenges. Its remote setting means that students live as far as 50 miles from school, and some students live in areas without running water or electricity. District buses cover over 1 million miles a year, including a significant number on unpaved roads. Many students rely on the school district for clothing, outside support, and food – and about three-quarters of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

In the past, Chinle teachers felt isolated in their classrooms and struggled to help their students to excel. Academic achievement levels were significantly below state averages and lagged behind other reservation districts. The district struggled to meet multiple, sometimes conflicting,



Chinle Elementary School; Chinle Unified School District; Chinle, AZ

expectations from tribal government, state, and federal accountability systems. Superintendent Quincy Natay summarized the challenges they faced: inconsistent leadership; no clear vision or reliable curriculum; and no processes for communications or evaluation of programs. In short, Chinle needed a strategic plan.

Key Lessons



PARTNERS

In partnership with NIET, Superintendent Quincy Natay launched a five-year strategic planning process with a focus on building staff ownership in the district and empowering students to become more global citizens and effective decision-makers. The strategic planning process brought into sharper focus the importance of family and community in educating young people and supporting their dreams to become leaders and community builders. The following takeaways were critical to Chinle's success:

ENGAGE FAMILIES AND THE COMMUNITY:

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 weekly food bag for families. 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.

BUILD A CULTURE OF HIGH-QUALITY INSTRUCTION:

Chinle worked with NIET to build a culture of high-quality, shared instructional practices and a structure for collective leadership. This included developing school leadership teams, 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. School-based coaches also meet at the district level, building collaboration across schools.

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

What's Next?

Chinle students have made substantial academic gains.

Three years ago, only six classrooms approached state averages in reading and math. In 2019, 34 classes were recognized for approaching mastery, with 24 of those classrooms meeting or exceeding state averages on the state test. Between 2015 and 2019, student passing rates nearly tripled in ELA and doubled in math. This helped move Chinle to be 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.

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 continue to engage the community, families, and students to achieve at high levels and support their vision for the future. ●