

School goes from worst to among best in 3 years

New Mexico school uses praise and pizza to encourage student success

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TOHATCHI, N.M. - Fifth grader Darius Yazzie's after-school chores include hauling water for horses and feeding chickens, while his classmate, Shanika Begay, rides a bus 15 miles each way through the rolling hills of this impoverished corner of the Navajo Nation.

Some students travel a much greater distance, as far as 45 miles on dirt roads that become impassable in bad weather. Some of their homes lack electricity and running water. About 83 percent of Shanika's and Darius' classmates are poor, according to state data, with about 80 percent designated as English language learners.

While Tohatchi Elementary School is a new building this year, with walls decorated with Navajo language posters and student artwork, the demographics of poverty and language have added up in the past to some of the worst test scores in New Mexico.

But about four years ago, Shanika, Darius and other students noticed a change.

Turning academics into a challenge

A bespectacled, mustachioed man with a buoyant character was there to greet them each morning. George Bickert, who as a first-year principal had to get a special waiver to take the job, immediately learned his students' names. He gave them smiles, hugs and high fives. He led early morning basketball games, which Darius loved.

Like those games, Bickert turned academics into a challenge, one that he believed these students could win. And win they did.

Tohatchi boosted its math scores from 15 percent of the students being proficient in 2006 to nearly 78 percent this year. Reading scores rose from nearly 28 percent of the students being proficient to almost 71 percent this year, according to state data.

Ask Darius and Shanika, both 10, about making "adequate yearly progress" a year ago and they break into wide grins when they recall how Bickert shaved his head as his part of the bargain.

State Public Education Secretary Veronica Garcia described Tohatchi's progress as "astonishing."

"It is astonishing and it is amazing," she said. "And, I hope that his success is able to grow even more success."

Daria Hall, director of K-12 policies with The Education Trust, based in Washington, D.C., said that schools like Tohatchi "are proof positive that when we organize for student success, low-income and English language learning students can perform at high levels."

Test scores highlight disparities

Nationally, Native American and low-income fourth graders score lower than their peers in reading and math, Hall said.

A 2007 National Assessment Education Progress report shows 49 percent of Native American fourth graders tested are not proficient in reading, compared to 34 percent of fourth graders of all ethnicities. Disparities also appear in math scores.

Bickert, who was promoted this school year to principal of Crownpoint High School 40 miles east of Tohatchi, insists that his character and motivational skills were not the only reasons for the school's success.

"I do think several staff members thought I was crazy, but I believed in the faculty and staff that we had, and more importantly I believed in our students and parents," he said.

Data drives Bickert's methods. He knew who his English learners were, which students were poor, what skills they were missing, what their reading and math scores were.

"Know your students," he said. "Everybody around the country is struggling with English language learners and students with disabilities, but you need to know what categories your students fit into and find out what your students need."

Bickert also made learning fun and competitive.

The eye-drooping "curriculum based measures" — weekly tests to measure students' progress — became "Math Monsters" and "Cougar Readers."

Pizza parties to celebrate success

Classroom scores were posted. Students who got perfect scores on the weekly 10-question tests heard their names read during Monday morning announcements and classes that scored 100 percent got pizza parties.

Darius still remembers his classroom's party.

"We worked so hard on it, and I'm proud of myself because I amaze myself by what I can do," he said. Darius wants to be a doctor and live in Los Angeles or Atlanta.

Parent Margie Leonard, whose three sons attend Tohatchi, noticed changes when Bickert became principal, though she was initially unaware of the rising math and reading scores.

Suddenly, homework was brought home. Teachers were available to parents. Weekly tests measured her sons' progress.

"The kids liked it," Leonard said. "They liked the way he praised him."

Bickert said he was fortunate that "the teachers and community rallied around the vision of excellence."

Tohatchi's new principal, Vanesa Holly, says she plans on maintaining Bickert's success.

"I don't know if we'll make the huge jumps that we've made in AYP (adequate yearly progress)," she said, "but I think we'll continue making AYP and just move farther and farther along that road."

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