Nenahnezad Community School, NM

A New Mexico School Uses Data to Turn Around School Performance

The high desert of northwestern New Mexico is widely known as the Four Corners region, and for locals, it's also known as the Checkerboard area—a patchwork of sections owned by the federal government, private citizens, and the Navajo reservation. Oil and gas fields are spread out along the arid mesas, but below is fertile farmland, irrigated by the San Juan River. And situated among the farms is a Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) school, the Nenahnezad Community School for K–6 students.

Poverty is a way of life for Nenahnezad students, and many come from homes on the reservation with no running water or electricity. Most of the 180 students live in campus dormitories during the week. It's common for young Navajo parents to move into the region for a short-term position in the nearby town of Farmington, or to work in the coal mines, and to leave within a year or two. Student turnover at Nenahnezad is close to 50% each year.

When he started at Nenahnezad in 2007, Principal Dean Cunningham recalls, "We were the lowest performing elementary school on all of Navajo. On the NWEA™ test we gave that fall, we had one child that was benchmark— and that was from K all the way to sixth." Students were entering the school as much as four grades below level, and some were leaving without showing any growth. And though they were using MAP® Growth™ assessments, the

test data wasn't being used for instructional help. Says Cunningham, "That was unacceptable."

Even before the first day of school, Cunningham began building a data-driven culture at Nenahnezad. He sent key staff members to the NWEA summer conference to learn about using MAP data, and brought NWEA Professional Learning experts to New Mexico for intensive teacher training. As soon as testing began in the fall, he established a spreadsheet that classified students, based on their RIT scores, as intensive, strategic, benchmark, or advanced. He worked to change his teachers' concept of data-driven education. "We were going to start using MAP Growth as a teaching tool," Cunningham recalls. "And really that's basically what it is."

By balancing student need and teacher time, Cunningham and his teaching staff established a "replacement core" program for the lowest-performing students in each grade—grouping six students with one teacher for two to three hours of math and two to three hours of reading every day. Data from NWEA assessments was used to adjust instruction throughout the year. Cunningham and his team soon had solid data to show that the program was working: Students in the program gained as much as two and a half grade levels by the end of the year.

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Students who showed little growth year to year—regardless of their status—were also targeted. Cunningham established an additional program, called "Play it Forward," that used a Compass Learning® program to engage students in extra learning activities, and used RIT scores to track their progress. Some of them were high performing, advanced benchmark kids, Cunningham recalls, including one student named Ryan who started the year at 236 and gained only one RIT point by the middle of the year. After one semester in Play it Forward, however, his score was 245. "It was like wow," says Cunningham, "a huge jump from where he had started. And I think if we wouldn't have done that program, he would have been a very brilliant child that kind of fell through the cracks."

Today, five years after Cunningham began his data-based program, Nenahnezad has moved from the lowest-performing to one of the top-ranked BIE schools in all of New Mexico. At the end of the most recent school year, they had no students labeled as intensive in math, four students labeled as intensive in reading, and 24 students with advanced status—including several scoring in the 90th percentile on MAP Growth assessments. "It's all about growth," says Cunningham, "and we see tremendous growth every year, which is wonderful. We've taken NWEA, and we've used it to the point of excellence."

Nenahnezad has made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for several years, and it's a status they now expect to achieve every year. "We were the only AYP school in the whole San Juan County last year," Cunningham says proudly. "We were it, we were the ones. And so these little guys work hard, and the teachers work hard, and they deserve it. I've got wonderful teachers and coaches at my school that just made that happen."

"These kids love it," Cunningham says. "They know exactly what their goal is every time they walk in. And when you're walking on campus, you'll have a kid run up to you and say, 'I hit my goal!' It means a lot to them. They're into it. They understand it, and they know that they're getting better. They know they're smart."

School Snapshot

FRUITLAND, NM

K–6TH GRADE STUDENTS
200

LEARNING NEEDS

77%
OF STUDENTS ARE LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENT

15%
OF STUDENTS RECEIVE SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES

PRODUCT IMPLEMENTATION
IMPLEMENTED MAP GROWTH IN
2006

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