
National Blue Ribbon Schools Program

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Ladera Del Norte Elementary School
Farmington Municipal Schools District
Farmington, New Mexico

Audio: Overcoming Challenges to Close the Achievement Gap

Phyllis Maestas: I'm Phyllis Maestas and I'm the principal at Ladera Elementary in Farmington, New Mexico. We sit in the Four Corners area, bordering Arizona, Utah and Colorado. So we have many families who come from the nearby reservations here in the county and also farming population as well.

So, seven years I began my journey as the Ladera leader, and the first challenge was starting the year with 17 new staff members. Also, the school was still at the beginning stages of new district boundaries, meaning new students with diverse economic and ethnic backgrounds had recently joined the school community.

Some key improvements we knew we needed to make were the change of mindsets of working with all students and being responsible for the learning of everyone. There was a belief by many that students on IEP's were not classroom teachers' responsibilities. It was misunderstood that they were responsibility of special education teachers.

The work of PLC's was our first big step to closing the achievement gap. I knew that improvement needed to be made by, observing the conversations happening in professional learning communities. These sessions weren't necessarily about student learning at first. They were focused on activities or discussions about students' issues outside of the classroom. It took defining norms, scheduling times to have consistent meetings, a commitment to the purpose of the meeting.

Having specific topics we were going to discuss has really helped support our success in closing achievement gaps, and it starts with bringing student work and the data to the table. Teachers bringing common formative assessments to see where the students are, not just waiting for summative assessments, but to track students and intervene quickly. Also looking at what supports we give students that are already meeting those learning goals, whether that means giving them certain enrichment activities that extend their learning.

Every student in our building has a data notebook binder. Students know what they're supposed to learn and how they're going to get there.

Teachers meet with their students to discuss their individual progress and update their learning growth and/or mastery and have those one-to-one discussions with the students.

Also, those data notebooks are shared with parents and students are able to explain their growth to parents during student-led conferences. we've also taken time to give parent presentations, and teach them about the student learning as well.

Looking at student data and supporting students with their understanding of what they're learning and what goals they have yet to meet does take a lot of time. It is something that we have decided as a school that we are committed to because we have really seen improvement in achievement.

One of our priorities at Ladera, is we try to actively involve our community members. We have a teacher who leads a stock market game, which students go out to our local retailers to help them with that project. We also have Native American families that come in to teach about the Native American culture. We have a couple of staff members that have led a heritage dance group, for heritage Hispanic dancing. We have parents that come in and share their art talents.

For other schools who want to learn from our closing the achievement gap success, I believe it's imperative that relationships are built within the staff first. You have to trust that everyone brings fresh ideas and knowledge to the table.

The second step would be to embrace the individuality of every child. A lot of our hard work has been spent, in PLC work, not just looking at data as numbers, but supporting those social/emotional needs first, building kids up, so that they know that they all have strengths, and then breaking things down into intervention groups. And as you work with intervention groups, they're not tied to that specific group all the time. Your intervention groups may change weekly or monthly, whatever the need may be.