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Miles from Home

Transforming the Poorest, Most Expansive School
Districts in New Mexico

Gallup-McKinley County Schools

University of Virginia Partnership for Leaders in Education

Miles from Home: Transforming the Poorest, Most Expansive School Districts in New Mexico

Mike Hyatt's mentor was out.

It was 2016, and Gallup-McKinley County Schools district superintendent Frank Chiapetti, who'd made Hyatt his assistant superintendent just two years earlier, had clashed with several members of the local school board.

The superintendent who'd come in to shake everything up in the struggling New Mexico school district was being let go.

But there was good news. The turnaround process Chiapetti had started with the help of the University of Virginia's Darden-Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education (PLE) program in 2014 didn't have to be thrown out along with the superintendent.

The school board had decided on a new district head. And, due in part to advocacy from teachers and administrators who'd seen how the turnaround process had benefitted students, it happened to be someone who agreed with a lot of what Chiapetti had been doing instructionally.

Chiapetti was out. Hyatt was in.

And Gallup-McKinley was en route to becoming one of the fastest-improving school districts in New Mexico.

Two Hours to Tse' Yi' Gai

Hyatt has to drive about 100 miles to visit one of the schools in his district. Tse' Yi' Gai High School is indeed closer to several other district headquarters than to his office at 640 Boardman Avenue in Gallup.

That is a problem.

One of Hyatt's goals when he became superintendent—and one of Chiapetti's goals before him—was to have folks from the district central office spend more time in schools than they had previously. Driving two hours to do a school walkthrough or go on a classroom visit with a principal wasn't ideal.

Hyatt's desire to put more principals and district administrators in classrooms was in part due to his unique understanding of the Gallup-McKinley school district. He'd been a teacher in Gallup prior to moving to a neighboring district, Zuni, to serve as a

principal. He came back to his home district when Chiapetti offered him the job as assistant superintendent. And what he saw concerned him.

“I had a specific perspective of how things functioned. Everything was very top-down, ‘siloeed,’” Hyatt said. “In that situation, knowledge is job security, so you hold onto it. You don't share what you do with other people, because then you can be replaced. There is no collaboration.”¹

Research shows Hyatt’s instincts were correct. According to the Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, successful school turnarounds inevitably must deviate from standard operating procedures, and sharing results among administrators and teachers is a key to success.²

What’s more, time spent in classrooms has been shown to closely relate to better performance in schools, and the best turnaround leaders are those that provide staff with all types of support that is more targeted and relevant to improving learning—from financial resources all the way down to in-class guidance and performance reviews.³

“For years, there was no accountability,” in Gallup-McKinley, Chiapetti said. “And there were pockets of extremely poor leadership. As a teacher, I think I had a principal in eight years visit my classroom maybe three times. Professional development was always based on what the central office wanted. The schools were working for the central office, rather than the community. The pyramid was upside down.”

Bottom to the Top

It was in the top-down, siloeed environment Hyatt described that Gallup-McKinley County Schools became one of the poorest performing districts in one of the poorest academically performing states in the country. The National Assessment of Educational Progress has scored New Mexico among the lowest achieving of the 50 U.S. states, and the Education Week Research Center has ranked it 49th, last place, in its “Chance for Success” category.⁴

It doesn’t help that New Mexico is one of the poorest states in the nation on another measure—wealth—with a median household income of \$45,382, and its unemployment rate is the highest in the country.⁵ McKinley County, one of the

¹ All quotes are taken from interviews conducted by the case writers at the Gallup-McKinley central office on Sept. 6, 2017, unless otherwise indicated.

² Julie Kowal, Emily Ayscue Hassel, and Bryan C. Hassel, “Successful School Turnarounds: Seven Steps for District Leaders,” September 15, 2009.

³ Lauren Morando Rhim, Julie M. Kowal, Bryan C. Hassel, Emily Ayscue Hassel, and Sarah Crittenden, “School Turnarounds: A Review of the Cross-Sector Evidence on Dramatic Organizational Improvement,” Public Impact for the Center on Innovation & Improvement, 2007.

⁴ Jessica Towhey, “Education Rising in New Mexico,” Real Clear Education, May 22, 2017.

⁵ “Education Rising.”

state's least wealthy with a median income of \$28,000, has about 75,000 residents; 77.5 percent are Native American. A full 100% of the county's schools are eligible for the National School Lunch Program, which provides students with free and reduced price meals.

Census data from 2010 showed only 73 percent of Gallup-McKinley residents graduated high school, and 11 percent hold a Bachelor's degree.⁶ The district's schools were almost dead last in New Mexico by every measure prior to joining the Darden-Curry PLE turnaround partnership in 2014, with schools district wide consistently scoring in the failing range. Eleven schools earned Fs in the 2013-2014 school year; 12 earned Ds.⁷ Of the district's 19 elementary school, only two were graded at a C or higher.

But a few things happened in the early 2010s that paved the way to change. First, New Mexico enacted the multi-state Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) standards to measure student success. Second, the New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED) set new goals for achievement. Together, the changes highlighted Gallup-McKinley's substandard performance and made clear just how far the district needed to go to improve.

So when Chiapetti, urged by several NMPED administrators he met at a conference, decided Gallup-McKinley was the perfect candidate for the systemic change support provided by Darden-Curry PLE, almost everyone, from the district school board to administrators to teachers, was in agreement.

That didn't mean Gallup-McKinley would see no roadblocks to improvement. There would eventually be dissent among some teachers, led by the American Federation of Teachers' New Mexico chapter. There would eventually be contention from the school board. And changes in the school administrative and board structures, including Chiapetti's removal and replacement, would cause their own stir. Indeed, a Santa Fe-based paper would suggest the board actively undermined the school district's success. "Several board members are accused of violating open meetings statutes, among other things, as they push to replace Chiapetti with a stooge," the paper said in a 2016 op-ed.⁸

But at least for the moment, with a plan in place and the expertise of the Darden-Curry PLE turnaround team on its side, the road to success seemed shorter than ever for Gallup-McKinley County Schools.

⁶ "Education Rising."

⁷ All Gallup-McKinley school data is provided by the district unless otherwise indicated.

⁸ Santa Fe New Mexican Editorial Board, "Our view: A discouraging tale of two school districts," *The New Mexican*, August 24, 2016.

The PLE School Turnaround Approach

When Chiapetti took the Gallup-McKinley superintendent job in 2013, he had big ideas. His bachelor's degree was in business administration, and while collecting master's degrees in teaching and education leadership, he had always viewed things through a transactional lens.

"I was really looking to shake things up, from the leadership to the way we did business," Chiapetti said. "I was putting my business hat on and said, 'we need customer service.'"

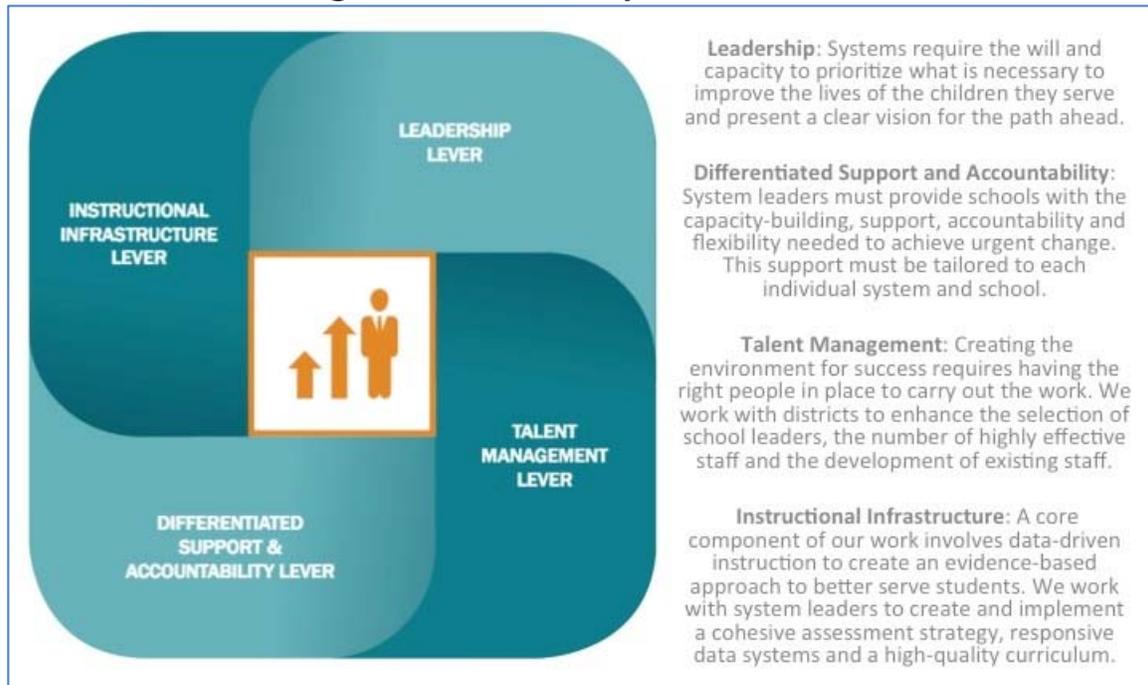
The customers? His principals. Where it seemed at the time the schools in the Gallup-McKinley district were doing what they thought the central office wanted, he wanted the central office to go out and guide the schools in the proper direction—to provide them the support they needed to improve instructional strategies and student outcomes.

Debbie Montoya and Elizabeth Nixon at NMPED had a lot of the same ideas when Chiapetti first spoke with them. They had seen several districts in New Mexico have success working with the University of Virginia's Darden-Curry PLE school turnaround program, a partnership originally made possible via a five-state consortium spearheaded by WestEd,⁹ and they thought it would be a perfect fit for Gallup-McKinley.

Specifically, Chiapetti, Montoya and Nixon believed the three-year Darden-Curry program focused on at least two things that would allow the district to give its schools the kind of support they needed: Leadership/talent management and instructional infrastructure and support to teachers to enable data-driven instruction (**Fig. 1**).

⁹ "Developing Leaders to Transform Troubled Schools," https://wested.org/rd_alert_online/education-leaders-transform-troubled-schools/, accessed on January 10, 2018.

Figure 1. Darden-Curry PLE Overview



Source: Darden-Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education

Through building collective leadership capacity with a focus on defining standards of school excellence and establishing a coaching, support and accountability system to meet them, improved working conditions that attract and retain quality instructional talent, and high-quality curriculum development and data-driven instruction, the PLE turnaround approach is intended to provide schools with conditions to transform them from low performing schools into high performing schools.¹⁰ PLE's stated goal is to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach, instead helping administrators identify and contextualize their most pressing issues and focus on cultivating sustainable change.

In their first year, districts engaging in the program begin planning—identifying their needs and developing strategies to address them. This includes selecting struggling schools for targeted improvements, improving structures to develop broad leadership in schools and determining if personnel changes are essential at the principal and instructor levels.

Participants are then invited to visit the University of Virginia for five executive education programs and retreats to discover strategies, often borrowed from commercial business models, to improve educational outcomes. Throughout the process, Darden-Curry PLE administrators and consultants who've experienced

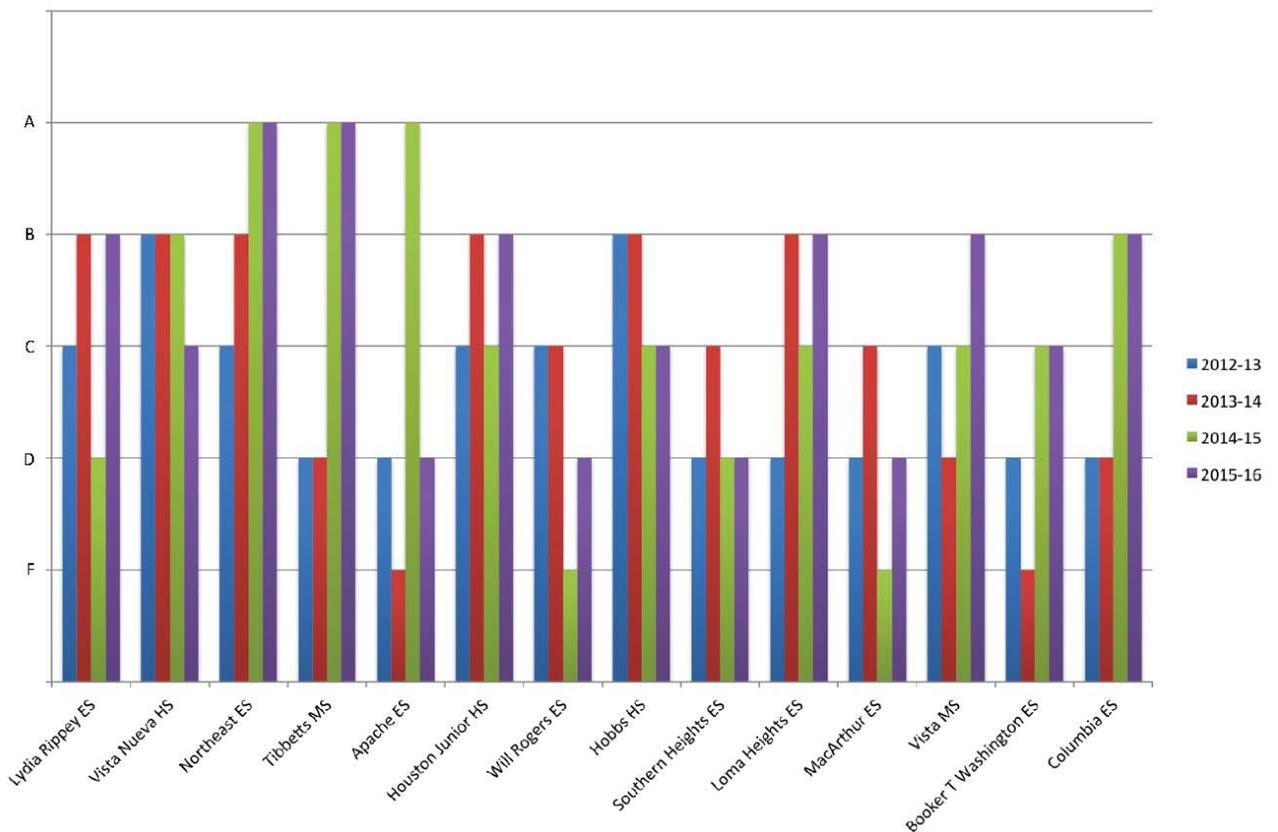
¹⁰ "UVA School Turnaround Approach," <http://www.darden.virginia.edu/darden-curry-ple/>, accessed on September 21, 2017.

success visit the district to reinforce changes and discuss successes and failures and provide tailored support to overcome hurdles.

Finally, the PLE program approach is broadened district-wide, so administrators can identify how all schools in the targeted school system will benefit from the lessons learned. District administrators and instructors are again invited to UVA in this optional additional year of the program to put in place the tools needed to sustain success.

The previous Gallup-McKinley County Schools administration had said no to teaming with PLE, despite the program’s success in other New Mexico school districts (**Fig. 2**). But the more Chiapetti heard—a needs-diagnostic would drive the initiative’s focus and a formative assessment process would allow schools to identify whether their students were learning key concepts in shorter cycles and reteach at-risk groups if they’d missed anything—the more he was convinced PLE was perfect for him and his district.

Figure 2. PLE Initial Partnership Impact: New Mexico Cohorts Started By 2013



Source: Created by case writer using publicly available data

Finding the Right Talent

According to Darden-Curry PLE administrators in a November 2013 pre-assessment of the conditions in the school district, Gallup-McKinley County Schools had “the potential to launch and implement a successful, bold school turnaround initiative.”

“We were impressed by the district’s willingness to make necessary changes regarding central office design, school leadership team composition, assessment rigor and teacher accountability to create an environment where turnaround is possible,” wrote the administrators.¹¹

Once the district was recognized as a viable candidate for sustainable turnaround, the team’s first order of business was to assess each of its schools and select six or seven to be targeted for improvement. With the district having almost two dozen schools receiving a failing D or F grade, the challenge was whittling the group to the required number for Gallup-McKinley’s first turnaround cohort.

Research has shown the best schools to target for transformation efforts are those where, in addition to suffering from chronically low student performance, incremental efforts to improve results have failed in the past.¹² Having the right leaders in place is also critical.¹³

In Gallup-McKinley, the first group of schools selected included Crownpoint Elementary, Juan de Oñate Elementary, Chee Dodge Elementary, David Skeet Elementary, Washington Elementary, Stagecoach Elementary, and Navajo Elementary. Juan de Oñate and David Skeet were D schools; the rest were Fs. (See **Fig. 3** for a list of schools involved in the multi-year PLE turnaround effort.)

Figure 3. Gallup-McKinley County Schools Turnaround Cohorts

Cohort 1 (2013-2014)	Cohort 2 (2014-2015)
Crownpoint Elementary	Crownpoint Middle
Juan de Oñate Elementary	Rocky View Elementary
Chee Dodge Elementary	Church Rock Elementary
David Skeet Elementary	Tohatchi Middle
Washington Elementary	Twin Lakes Elementary
Stagecoach Elementary	Ramah Elementary
Navajo Elementary	

Source: Created by case writer

¹¹ PLE Administrators, "Readiness Assessment Report: Gallup-McKinley County Schools Turnaround Initiative," November 2013.

¹² "Successful School Turnarounds."

¹³ Rebecca Herman, Priscilla Dawson, Thomas Dee, Jay Greene, Rebecca Maynard, Sam Redding, and Marlene Darwin S., "Turning around chronically low-performing schools: A practice guide," National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, May 2008.

The turnaround team determined four of the schools required new principals, while Kristen Bischoff would remain at Juan de Onate and Amy Hyatt would continue to lead Chee Dodge. For the four remaining schools, the goal was to either hire administrators from outside the district with experience in turnarounds and the right skills to help individual schools, or shift principals around within the district to find the appropriate mix for success.

A key to making the process work was the use of behavioral event interviews. Research shows that in selecting turnaround principals, such interviews can help find candidates with the correct competencies to lead.¹⁴ PLE emphasizes leveraging behavioral event interviews alongside other data to drive principal improvements, as the turnaround team often recommends retaining sitting school leaders.

Behavioral event interviews focus on questions designed to determine candidates' competencies and motivations.¹⁵ For example, the interviewer might ask a candidate to describe a group project he or she worked on or how they achieved success on a particularly difficult task. An objective, quantitative scoring system is then used to determine a final score.

For Wade Bell, now one of Gallup-McKinley's directors of instruction, the results of the behavioral event interview meant being transferred from a middle school where he was principal to David Skeet Elementary at the end of the 2013-14 school year. The new school where he would be principal frightened him, he said—it had a reputation for poor leadership and, in the 25 years since it was founded, had shown improvement on No Child Left Behind competency measures only once.

"When I got there, they had a lot of things going on—carnivals and other extracurricular activities," Bell said. "School was not the primary focus. The focus was making the students happy."

The behavioral event interview, it turns out, helped identify the right man for the turnaround at David Skeet. Bell, who said he was able to bring the aligned focus the elementary school had previously lacked, pushed David Skeet from a D school to a B school in only one year.

Bell wasn't the only principal who found his niche in the Gallup-McKinley turnaround process. According to Hyatt, it was the individual school leaders who took the instructional strategies shared by the district central office and distributed them to their teachers, equipping the instructors for success and allowing them to hold their schools to higher standards in each and every classroom. At Crownpoint Middle, a school in the second UVA cohort that was 99% Native American, principal

¹⁴ "Successful School Turnarounds"; Lyle Spencer and Signe Spencer, "Competence at Work: Models for Superior Performance," New York: John Wiley and Sons Inc. (1993).

¹⁵ Amit Kumar, "Behavioral Event Interviewing," Aon Hewitt Learning Center, <http://www.aon.com/india/attachments/AHLC-Catalog-Behavioral-Event-Interviewing.pdf>, accessed on October 26, 2017.

Michael Cubacub was able to move the school from a D to an A in the first year of the turnaround. The 42-point jump, he said, was due to a cultural shift.

“When I first started there, one of the needs was to develop the culture of the school between the staff, the community and the students. It was a negative culture,” Cubacub said. “What really helped us is, I am always there for the kids and I am always there for the teachers. The teachers know they can always come to me and ask for help. When I do my observations and feedback, I don’t just give them my observations, I help them find ways to develop their teaching strategies.”

Leading From the Middle

When principals were in place at each of the Gallup-McKinley schools targeted for improvement, Gallup’s turnaround team selected a district “shepherd” to move initiatives forward, engage district and school stakeholders that could contribute to success and coach school leaders to enhance their impact.¹⁶ Such change agents have been shown to be critical in the school district transformation process nationwide.¹⁷

Tim Bond, a career educator and administrator with classroom expertise in mathematics, was selected as shepherd for the first Gallup-McKinley cohort.

“They were looking for someone to help push the schools and who knew instruction,” Bond said. “I had been with the district a long time...and I had always wanted to oversee schools somehow. I said, ‘I want to get out into schools.’”

In the second year of the PLE program, six more schools made up the cohort of turnaround targets: Crownpoint Middle, Rocky View Elementary, Church Rock Elementary, Tohatchi Middle, Twin Lakes Elementary, and Ramah Elementary. Six new principals were installed, each selected to align his or her unique skill set with the deficiencies at the target schools. Gerald Horacek, who successfully helped lead efforts in a partnership with PLE at a neighboring district, was named the second cohort’s shepherd.

From the beginning of the program, however, Gallup-McKinley took a different approach from most districts involved with Darden-Curry PLE. While administrators at the University of Virginia believe it is important to focus energy on the schools selected for inclusion first to pilot improvements and start generating success, Gallup-McKinley suffered from poor performance so universally that Hyatt and Chiapetti wanted to broaden the scope of the program immediately.

“I didn’t want to do just six schools; we wanted to do all schools,” Chiapetti said. To that end, Chiapetti created five regional liaisons with the central office to act much

¹⁶ “Readiness Assessment Report.”

¹⁷ “Turning around.”

in the same way as the traditional PLE shepherd. These zone directors were intended to work together to develop curriculum and English language learners programs, perform assessments and make recommendations for instructional changes.

“I have a high school that is a two hour drive from this building,” Chiapetti said, referring to the Gallup-McKinley central office. “We needed to take a regional approach. The zone directors, they were like mini superintendents.”

Changing Assessment Strategies

Data-driven instruction has become a buzzword in modern education—if principals aren’t using it, they’re probably at least claiming to.¹⁸ But what does it really mean for a district like Gallup-McKinley?

Prior to engaging in the Darden-Curry PLE program, Chiapetti said the district had been performing long-cycle assessments. Teachers and school administrators stopped only once per quarter to determine what students were learning—and what they were missing.

But according to Hyatt, that was far too late to collect actionable information. By the time students were tested for competency, teachers had been moving past concepts that were never grasped and onto new things that couldn’t be understood. The quarterly assessments were summative, and the district was “testing students on stuff we [hadn’t] taught them,” Hyatt said.

Through the University of Virginia PLE turnaround process, Gallup-McKinley County Schools changed to a formative assessment strategy that would determine student achievement in tighter intervals, with interim assessments no more than nine weeks apart serving as anchors for deep dives to drive professional development and adjustments and more frequent assessments in between to understand student needs.

To ensure the formative assessments were as useful as possible, the district began not only collecting data on student performance throughout the year, but also setting aside blocks of time every day to go over the data. By pushing school start times back or letting kids go early, teachers and administrators were able to work together to devise new strategies for teaching concepts students missed or change the timing of teaching certain subjects.

“It goes back to collaboration—people being a part of things and having ownership,” Hyatt said. “Having that time set aside to look at data, we are focused on, what can

¹⁸ Ben Fenton and Mark Murphy, “Data-Driven Instruction,” Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, ASCD Express, <http://www.ascd.org/ascd-express/vol5/508-fenton.aspx>, accessed on November 10, 2017.

we do to help those students individually. They gain ownership, they collaborate, they have more buy-in.”

The strategies discussed in those meetings were then acted on during dedicated tutoring sessions, also held during blocks set aside, to help lagging students catch up and allow high performing students to work independently.

Hyatt said introducing data-driven instruction was a critical step to giving Gallup-McKinley County Schools something they had been missing for years—accountability. “There’s now a sense of urgency,” he said. “We had started saying, ‘we’re going to do these things,’ but we hadn’t done a good job figuring out whether we were doing it for everybody. I now have principals and teachers looking at individual student data.”

Meeting Resistance

Looking back, Chiapetti believes he knows where he went wrong. He violated a central tenant of the established framework for successful sustained turnarounds.

“We jumped into the learning and started implementing the system, and then we told our story, instead of telling the story up front,” he said. “UVA said to tell your own story and get that out there. We didn’t do that.”

The established turnaround literature and PLE administrators confirm this was a critical error. Turnaround leaders must “publicly commit to success and garner school board support for dramatic growth,” PLE says.¹⁹ But instead of getting the community on board with the changes they wanted to make, Chiapetti left the story to be told by the media, and the community felt it had been duped.

Fortunately, the error didn’t seem to matter at first. The Gallup-McKinley School Board as composed in 2014 “was 100% supportive” of the changes, according to Chiapetti. But new board members that joined the team in 2015 didn’t agree with some of the district’s turnaround strategies. “We hit a roadblock when the school board changed,” Chiapetti said. “They didn’t know the history. Everything I had previously explained to the board, they weren’t aware of.” (See **Fig. 4** for a timeline of the Gallup-McKinley County Schools turnaround effort.)

¹⁹ William Robinson and Lauren Morando Rhim, “Technical Brief 1: Creating Organizational Conditions for Success,” Partnership for Leaders in Education, updated May 23, 2016.

Figure 4. Gallup-McKinley Turnaround Timeline

2010	Census shows 73 percent of Gallup-McKinley residents graduate high school.
2011	New Mexico Public Education Department sets new statewide achievement goals.
Early 2013	Frank Chiapetti named Gallup-McKinley County Schools superintendent.
Mid-2013	Chiapetti begins discussing Darden-Curry PLE turnaround program.
2013-2014	Turnaround process planning year, selection of school participants.
Fall 2014	First turnaround cohort implements initial changes.
Fall 2015	Second turnaround cohort implements initial changes.
September 2015	PLE administrators deliver final report to Gallup-McKinley County Schools.
Early 2016	Frank Chiapetti removed as superintendent, Mike Hyatt installed.
Beyond 2016	District uses PLE foundation and state support to continue improvements.

Source: Created by case writer

Stakeholders at several schools in the district were immediately skeptical, Chiapetti said. Teachers in particular didn't want a far-flung university coming in to tell them how to run their classrooms, and the union backed them up.

Things really started to go off track as principals were replaced.

At one of the schools, for example, the turnaround team elected to move the existing principal to a new position. The principal's skill set didn't match the deficits the school was facing, and Chiapetti said its chronic low performance backed up the decision to move her.

But the community cried foul; some suggested the change was for reasons other than performance.

"They even called UVA and said, 'why are you getting rid of the principal?'" Chiapetti said, despite it being solely the district's decision.

Chiapetti offered to make the former principal a teacher at a different location. The educator declined and took a job in another district.

But the damage had been done. The community wasn't on team turnaround, and researchers have continually found a lack of support from local parents and

businesses can undermine the most well-intentioned efforts.²⁰ For sustainability of change efforts, research suggests intentional engagement of the community is necessary,²¹ and Gallup-McKinley has made strides over the last several years to connect its school improvement efforts to culturally responsive practices.

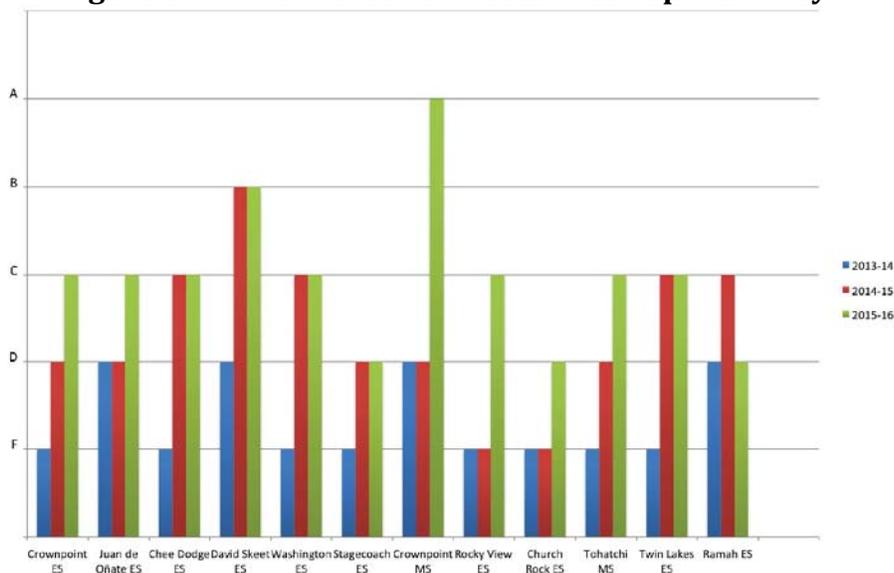
Some evidence suggests, however, that Chiapetti’s strategy of implementing the turnaround first and telling the story later may have worked in the district’s long-term favor. “Successful turnaround leaders often achieve results by working around rules, notoriously asking for forgiveness after their strategy has worked rather than seeking permission beforehand,” researchers say.²²

That makes it important for administrators to be empowered to make decisions and launch initiatives without seeking approval for every detail of the turnaround process—being given what some have referred to as the “big yes” up front.²³

Seeing Success

Whatever the pushback, the success of Gallup McKinley County Schools was undeniable (**Fig. 5**). In the 2013-14 school year, the pre-planning year for the school turnaround effort, 11 schools in the district received a failing F grade. The district had no F schools in the 2015-16 year. In the same period, the district’s number of A schools went from zero to two, Bs went from two to nine.

Figure 5. PLE Turnaround Effects in Gallup-McKinley



Source: Created by case writer using data from Gallup-McKinley County Schools

²⁰ “School Turnarounds.”

²¹ Dallas Hambrick Hitt and Coby V. Meyers, “Promising Leadership Practices for Rapid School Improvement That Lasts,” The Center on School Turnaround at WestEd, March 17, 2017.

²² “School Turnarounds.”

²³ Emily Hassel and Bryan Hassel, “The Big U-Turn: How to bring schools from the brink of doom to stellar success,” *Education Next*, Vol. 9 No. 1, Winter 2009.

Breaking the improvement down to the individual student level, from the 2014-15 school year to 2015-16, 509 more students were proficient in math and English language arts on statewide tests.²⁴ This trend continued in 2016-17 and 2017-18, with hundreds of additional students becoming proficient each year. Four years after the start of the PLE intervention, Gallup was number one among the 10 largest New Mexico districts in ELA two-year proficiency growth and number three in math two-year proficiency growth. Native American children improved by 8.2% from 2015 to 2018.²⁵

“UVA tells you what turnaround schools need to do, and then you figure out how the philosophies work in your district,” Horacek said. “At the end of the day, it’s great for kids because it really does make them better academic students. Good, research-based strategies are good for all kids, and that’s the approach we took. We’ve helped make kids more proficient in reading and math, and we’ve changed the climate of the schools principals and teachers and students.”

PLE starts with a general approach to building conditions and leadership capacity for all districts with which it works and helps leaders adapt focus based on context, but the case of Gallup-McKinley was especially unique because of how widely underperforming it was prior to the turnaround effort, Horacek said. Personnel concerns, for both principals and instructors, were pervasive. And while data-driven instruction strategies help teachers identify at-risk groups and keep them up to speed with other students, for Gallup-McKinley, those at risk groups were overwhelmingly large.

But those were challenge Gallup-McKinley was up to facing, as PLE administrators noted after a visit to the district in late 2015. Administrators in Gallup-McKinley seemed even more motivated than those in most PLE partner districts to do the hard work of identifying the root cause of their challenges and helping support teachers with translating lessons from data into changes in instructional approach.

“The commitment that Gallup-McKinley has made to the turnaround initiative is evident through the continued momentum of the initiative, most notably the rapid developments in data-driven practices and the movement towards developing a district support structure that exist through the weekly instructional team meetings,” the administrators wrote.²⁶

One of the reasons the program was able to overcome the naysayers and pushback from communities and administrators was the number of significant early wins it achieved. Not only did the district quickly correct its chronic instructor shortfalls of

²⁴ “Education Rising.”

²⁵ NMPED, “2017-18 Student Assessment Results,” July 2018.

²⁶ PLE Administrators “Gallup-McKinley District Site Visit Report,” September 2015.

around 50 vacancies per year, according to Hyatt, but most of the schools showed greater gains in their first year than in their second.

“These [improvements] are not accidents,” associate superintendent Gerald Horacek said in a May interview. “We believe in a system-wide approach at the district level that’s sustainable. You use strategies that are best for kids, and it doesn’t matter their ethnicity. We get caught up a lot in that. You just have to have good teaching.”²⁷

Not a Destination

Hyatt knows the improvements Gallup-McKinley has seen are only part of the district’s journey. The destination is far from reached. The difficult work is in maintaining the schools’ successes well into the future and continuing to make a difference in students’ lives.

The path forward has been obscured by recent funding concerns for Gallup-McKinley. With the Darden-Curry PLE program complete and little money left to finance other improvement projects, the district is now relying on statewide support programs like Principals Pursuing Excellence (PPE) and Teachers Pursuing Excellence to sustain its momentum. The good news is several schools that were not part of the partnership with UVA are now working with the state on the PPE program, which was modeled in large part after PLE, and are already seeing positive impacts.

And according to Jvana Hanks, Gallup-McKinley’s assistant superintendent of business services, the foundations laid by the PLE program are still in place, and the district has a better sense of how to allocate its resources than ever before.

“After the first trip to Virginia, we really looked at what we had always done and the decisions we had made,” she said. “We decided to look at how we were utilizing all our resources and how we could restructure those to best serve students. The program taught us to make sure we know the rules, actually look into it and know what you can do with your resources. Money only represents what we can do for students. We want to know how we can take these pots of money and make sure we are giving the best possible services.”

Hanks said the district is constantly looking for ways to improve, and that means the old silos have been broken down. No longer are administrators, principals and educators locked in their corner of the district, never to communicate.

What can administrators at schools around the country learn from Gallup McKinley’s turnaround experiences? Chiapetti has no difficulty putting his finger on it—supporting principals throughout the district.

²⁷ “Education Rising.”

“We have outperformed the student average for growth in the state the last four years, and it’s all about support,” he said. “Our zone directors, the shepherds, they visit schools weekly to break down barriers. I think the foundation of what we put in is going to continue. I want to see it continue. And I would love to be a part of it, but that’s a different story.”