



## Thoreau High School, Gallup-McKinley County Schools

### **District Overview:**

Gallup, NM, with a population of 19,200, lies on Interstate 40 (Historic Route 66), 139 miles west of Albuquerque and 25 miles east of the Arizona border. The city is the seat of McKinley County in northwestern New Mexico and serves as the tourist hub for the famous Four Corners region.

The largest industries in Gallup, NM, are Health Care & Social Assistance (1,711 people), Educational Services (1,156 people), and Public Administration (823 people). Gallup is also the most prominent Native American center in the Southwest and the ceremonial capital of Native America. There are many American peoples in the Gallup/Four Corners region. By far, the most numerous are the Navajo.

McKinley County has a population of approximately 75,000 residents, with 11,631 students enrolled in 34 schools. McKinley County includes the Navajo Nation and the Zuni Pueblo.

### **School Information:**

Thoreau High School (THS) serves approximately 390 students in grades 9-12. The school is within the Navajo Nation and has a solid connection to the area's culture and history. At THS, 96% of students identified as American Indian/Alaskan Native, 2% identified as Hispanic, and 2% included various student demographic groups. Approximately 99% of the student population is identified as Economically Disadvantaged.

### **Project Lead:**

Lawrence Sena, Principal

### ***School Challenge***

Chronic absenteeism plagued Thoreau High with a 55% absentee rate reported in the 2019-2020 Summary Report. The school also suffered from low graduation rates, with 66% in the 2019-2020 Summary Report. Principal Sena entered High School Redesign with the hope of finding strategies to address these problems effectively.

After reviewing the design of the grant program, Sena thought it was a good fit for his school. He noticed a problem; students did not see the connection between their classes in high school and their future. The students viewed their classes as individual courses that they may or may not enjoy with no real relevance for their future. Sena considered one of the models presented in the grant, cross-curricular, project-based learning, as an opportunity for the students of Thoreau High. As he stated, "*The grant provided us an opportunity to create a new sense of relevance and a new approach.*"

The grant program design helped Sena begin to see a systems-level perspective of his school and view his school as a system rather than a separate set of programs, courses, and resources. He

described it this way, *“I’ve always had an idea of what I felt was a student-centered approach, but as I learned more about the model promoted by the grant, it caused me to see it more holistically ... A whole school look — not just an individual student perspective. It helped me see how every class is relevant to their future and ties into a bigger picture.”*

### ***Actions Taken***

One of Principal Sena’s first steps was establishing a redesign team that included six teachers and himself. As the team attended the various NM PED convenings offered during their design year, they began to build their vision for a robust approach to cross-curricular content connections. Previously, these connections were within individual departments rather than school-wide or cross-departmental. For example, once the planning for cross-curricular connections began, the math department connected with the carpentry course. As Ms. Yazzie-West, a geometry teacher, stated, *“Both myself and the carpentry teacher are using the same terms and making connections between the content I teach and the projects in the carpentry class.”*

Sena and his redesign team also reevaluated their approach to career pathways as an organizer for student courses. They described their past approach as one of “tinkering” with pathways. As a result of the grant program, they now have a more coherent approach and have established new pathways reflective of student interests and more responsive to area employment opportunities. A great example was the new arts and media pathway. The school established this pathway to honor the artistic talents of their students and be reflective of area employment opportunities. Students were also learning how to create podcasts and acquiring other digital media skills. One project of particular interest captured stories of the Navajo community to honor the storytelling culture of the Navajo people using 21st-century technology. Students interviewed community elders and family members and produced podcasts that captured the oral history of their people.

The arts and media career pathway also offered multiple opportunities for cross-curricular and cross-departmental connections. For example, the band, music, and media teacher Ms. Newkirk shared, *“I teach the media and film pathways, and I’ve never taught a pathway before...it has changed my thinking as a teacher, I’m more aware of the connections across the school, and I see ways that I can partner with other teachers around courses.”*

### ***Successes***

THS established three new career pathways: Arts & Media, Health Industry, and Teaching as a win for their students.

The school is particularly proud of the teaching pathway as an example of a “grow-your-own” approach to building a pipeline of future teachers equipped to deal with the seclusion and limited resources of the local Thoreau community. Teachers raised in the culture of the Navajo Nation better understand the needs of their students and are a source of a more stable teacher workforce.

The health industry pathway is reflective of the needs of the county and the surrounding Navajo Nation. THS partnered with Project Lead the Way through the grant, a non-profit organization that develops STEM curricula for schools to make strong course connections to the bio-medical industry.

### ***Challenges***

One of the primary challenges to Thoreau's redesign was connecting with the business community and providing internship and work opportunities for students. Given the rural geography, this was an area where the district had to take a leadership role. Sena explained, *"Our community is spread across the area – so when we were trying to do business outreach, it's very challenging. We're working with the district on this as there are nine high schools in the area...we don't want to be competing with each other."*

Another challenge the THS team encountered was finding the right external partners to help advise, guide, and support their work around project-based learning. For example, when the pandemic caused schools to move to remote learning, one of their early partners could not shift to remote professional development and support, requiring the team to terminate the relationship and select a new partner. Through the connections provided by the grant program network, they identified a partner who could work and support the school from a virtual space. Once the school resumed in-person learning, they transitioned to a hybrid model of professional development and support.

### ***Key Takeaways***

Principal Sena and representatives of the redesign team shared several takeaways from the grant program. Ms. Yazzie-West, a math teacher, stated, *"One of my biggest takeaways is that before we started career pathways, I was trying to build in career-related questions into homework and classroom assignments. With career pathways, I love how the students now get to do hands-on work and see how they're going to use it in the future."* The ELA teacher spoke to the time it took to change the mindset of teachers and parents. She noted that as the pathways began to develop and the components came together, the teachers and community embraced it. The students' excitement and engagement proved contagious and helped to reduce resistance.

Principal Sena highlighted the value of working in a network of like-minded schools supported by skillful leadership. He gave strong praise to the program leaders at the NM PED and is hopeful that there will be opportunities to continue to learn together as a network of high schools regardless of grant funding. While the funds gave a "boost" to their programs, he noted that the opportunity to think "beyond the box" expanded his vision for what was possible for Thoreau High School and its students.