



ARIZONA DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION

CHINLE UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

A CASE STUDY IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

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We are a service organization committed to raising academic outcomes and empowering parents.



Welcome

Superintendent Quincy Natay

From Challenges to Vision,
and Action to Success



CHINLE
UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 24

The Chinle Context

- More than 3,000 students
- Approximately 2,300 square miles on the Navajo Nation in Apache County
- More than 98% of students are Navajo
- About 80% of teachers are Navajo
- Since 2016, CUSD has demonstrated substantial improvement in academic performance, prompting ADE to study the district's practices and strategies.



Challenges Chinle Was Facing

Basic Needs Unmet



Historical Trauma



Poverty



Food Insecurity



Infrastructure



Challenges Chinle Was Facing

School Culture



Toxic Culture

- ***No common vision***
- Division among district stakeholders
- ***Little belief in students*** ability to perform academically
- ***Status quo*** was acceptable

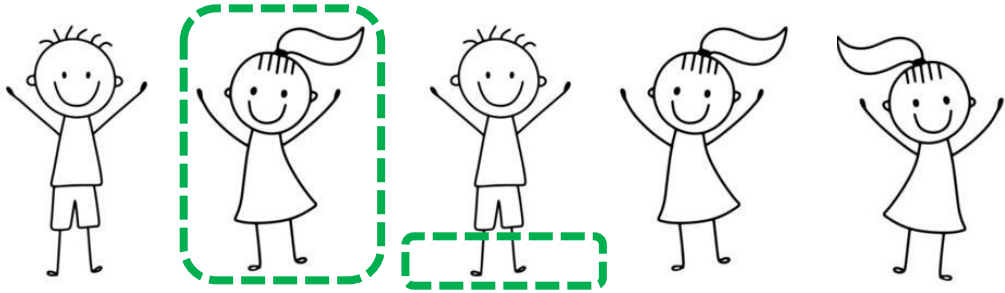
Failing Schools

- ***Two F's, two D's***, three C's
- ***Three schools in federal school improvement***
- One of the ***worst academically performing reservation districts in Arizona***

Dismal Student Achievement

- Absence of guaranteed & viable curriculum
- ***9% pass rate in ELA***
- ***15% pass rate in Math***
- 67% graduation rate (2017 baseline)
- 11% dropout rate (2017 baseline)

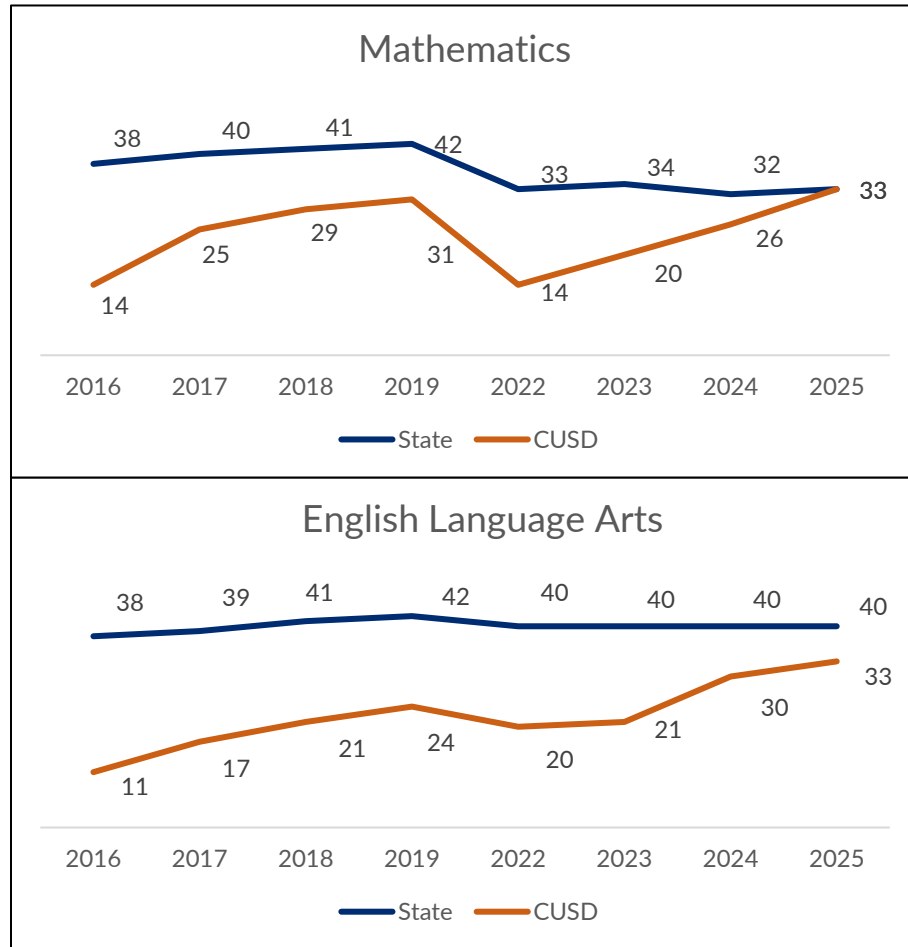
Why Action Was Necessary



At the beginning of our journey 1.2 out of every 10 students were proficient on math and ELA combined.



Identifying the Problem

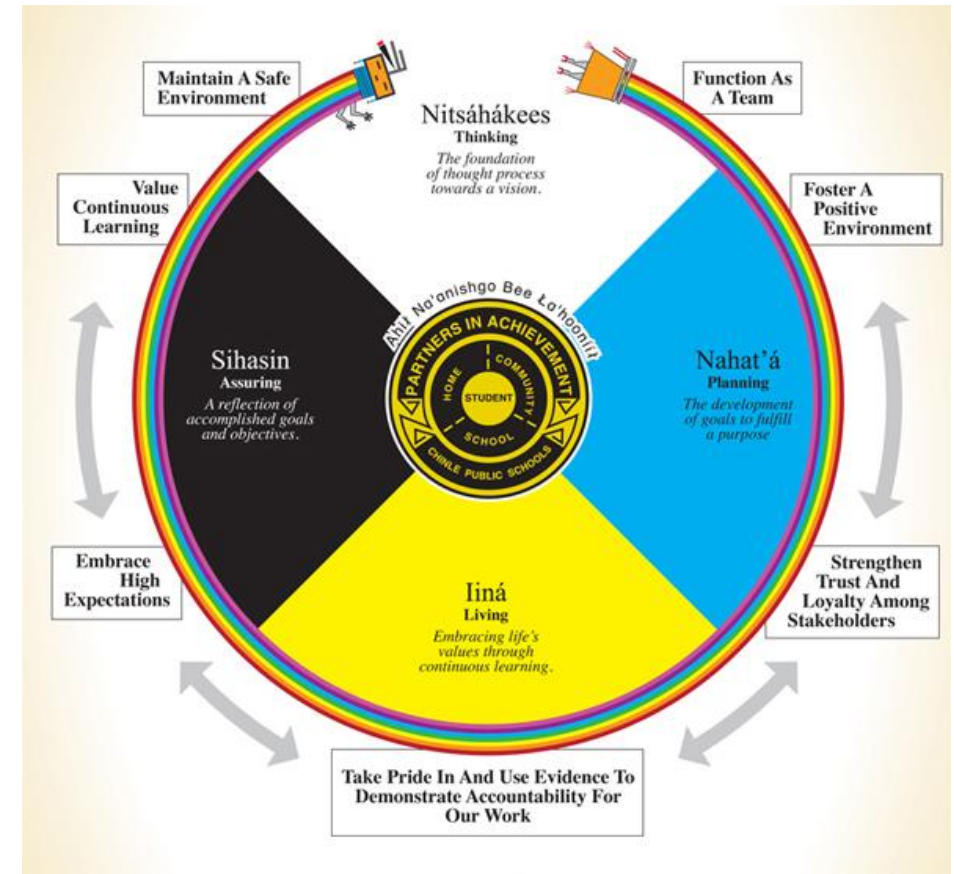


- District leaders: academics were not the primary focus, with athletics receiving greater attention from schools and the community.
- Student achievement significantly lagged state averages, with 2016 CUSD proficiency rates:
 - 24 percentage points below the state average in mathematics
 - 27 percentage points below in English Language Arts (ELA) in 2016

The Mixed Methodology

How has Chinle Unified School District supported improving student outcomes and academic performance since 2016?

- In-depth qualitative interviews with district and school administrators
- Survey of kindergarten through eighth-grade teachers



Four Themes to Success

Strategic planning and vision

- Develop a uniform, district-wide vision focused on academic achievement and student outcomes

Data-driven decisions

- Identify high-need students, target supports, track progress, and measure success

Professional development

- Continuous improvement, weekly support, and aligned curricular clusters to provide strategies and promote professional growth

Collaboration across schools

- Empower elementary to junior high transition, developed cross-campus lesson planning and instructional strategies, combined extracurriculars

Evidence of Success

School	2016- 2017	2017- 2018	2018- 2019	2019- 2020 ¹	2022- 2023	2023- 2024	2024- 2025
Canyon de Chelly Elementary	B	C	D	D	B	B	A
Chinle Elementary	B	B	B	B	B	A	B
Mesa View Elementary	C	C	C	C	B	B	B
Many Farms Elementary School	D	C	C	C	C	B	B
Tsaile Elementary School	B	B	B	B	B	A	A
Chinle Junior High	D	C	D	D	B	B	B

- Mathematics proficiency improved from 14% in 2016 to 33% in 2025, matching the statewide average.
- ELA proficiency improved from 11% in 2016 to 33% in 2025, reducing the statewide gap from 27 percentage points to 7 percentage points.
- By 2024-25, all K-8 schools in the district earned either an A or B Arizona State Letter Grade, with two schools receiving A ratings.

Findings: Big Picture

- CUSD successfully narrowed achievement gaps and improved school accountability outcomes through a district-wide culture shift centered on academics.
- Improvement efforts were supported by strong leadership alignment, consistent instructional practices, extensive teacher support systems, and community engagement.
- The district demonstrated that rural and tribal schools can achieve significant academic gains through coordinated, long-term improvement strategies.

Findings: Rationale

- **Strategic Planning & Vision:** District leaders established a shared academic vision and aligned schools around common goals.
- **Professional Development:** Teachers received ongoing support through academic coaches, weekly collaborative learning sessions, and monthly professional development days.
- **Data-Driven Decision-Making:** Schools regularly analyze performance data and target support toward minimally proficient students to accelerate growth.
- **Collaboration Across Schools:** Principals, academic coaches, and teachers share best practices and worked together to strengthen instructional consistency and student transitions across grade levels.

Strategic Planning & Vision



- A lack of common vision was contributing to a toxic culture
- Stakeholder participation in developing vision and plan ensures a broad base of support and ownership.
- Objective 3rd party to for current state assessment facilitates “facing the brutal facts”



- More than the written document, the power of strategic planning is in the process, conversations and resulting common understanding
- Regularly revisiting and energizing the strategic plan is critical



- Monitor and evaluate -- inspect what we expect.
- Be prepared for push back in the early stages of 2nd order change and stay the course.



- These are all best practices across organization types and sizes for strategic planning.

Professional Development



- The structure at the time for professional development (PD) was viewed by teachers as **disconnected** from classroom practice.
- ***Student results had not improved***
- Had to evaluate what to:
Stop – Start – Continue



- Professional development had to be intentionally aligned to curriculum and instruction.
- Differentiation by grade level, content and teacher need matters.
- Student learning is the key metric



- Added a second Academic Coach to create a lower ratio of coaches to teachers
- Specifically aligned their work & other PD to district non-negotiables for curriculum delivery and PLC practice



- Professional development intentionally aligned to curriculum and instruction.
- Student learning as the key metric for evaluating professional learning.

Data-Driven Decision Making

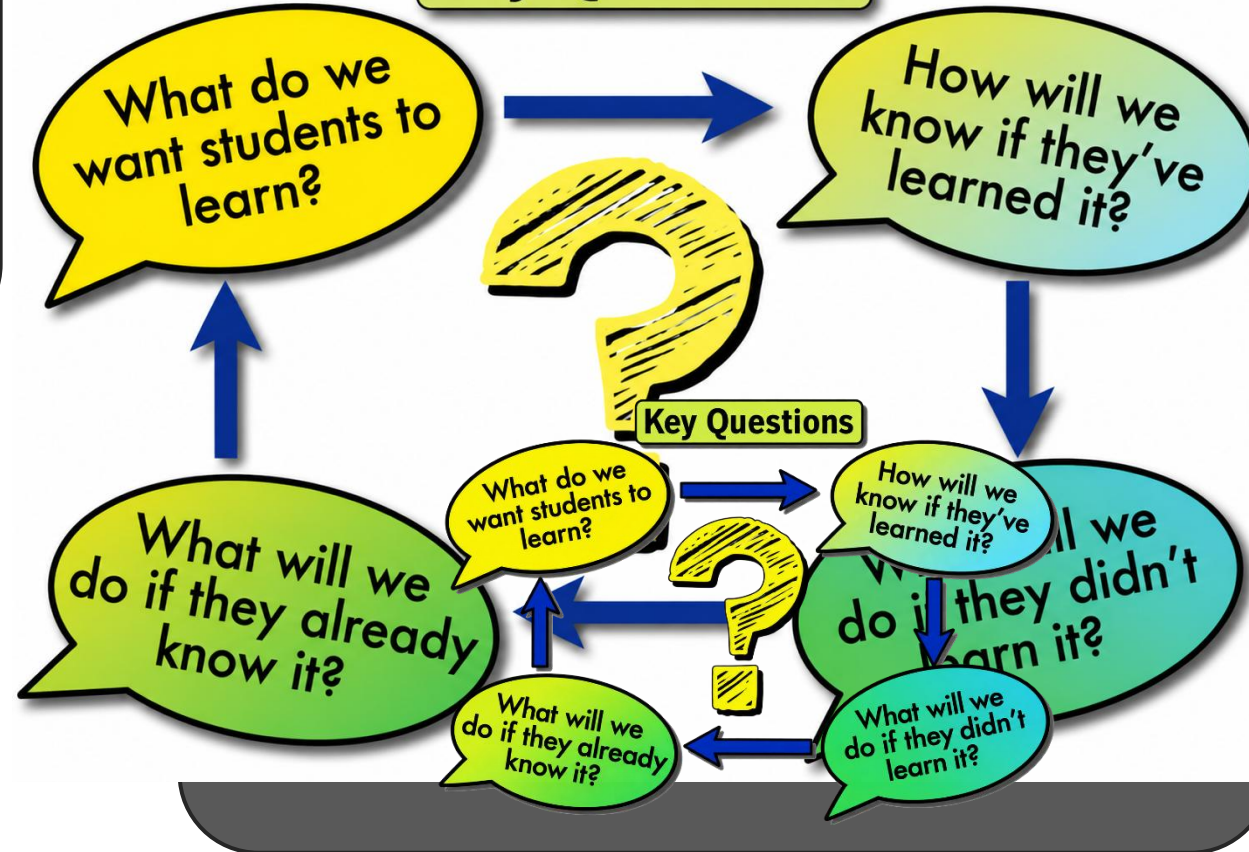
WHY?

- DuFour's 4 Questions drive teaching, assessment and data collection/analysis
- Implemented master schedules that facilitate response to the 4 Questions
 - e.g. Reteach/Enrich, data meetings, common planning time

- We spent time training principals to understand Letter Grade formulas/data *and* the connection to our data collection and metrics for student learning



Key Questions



Collaboration Across Schools



- District non-negotiables establish common expectations for districtwide, high fidelity implementation of best practices
- “Loose and Tight” controls create the opportunity for autonomy within the boundaries of district non-negotiables



- Non-negotiables are the foundation for effective and focused districtwide collaboration
- Central office must prioritize and often facilitate districtwide collaboration
- Culture and climate must change for impactful collaboration



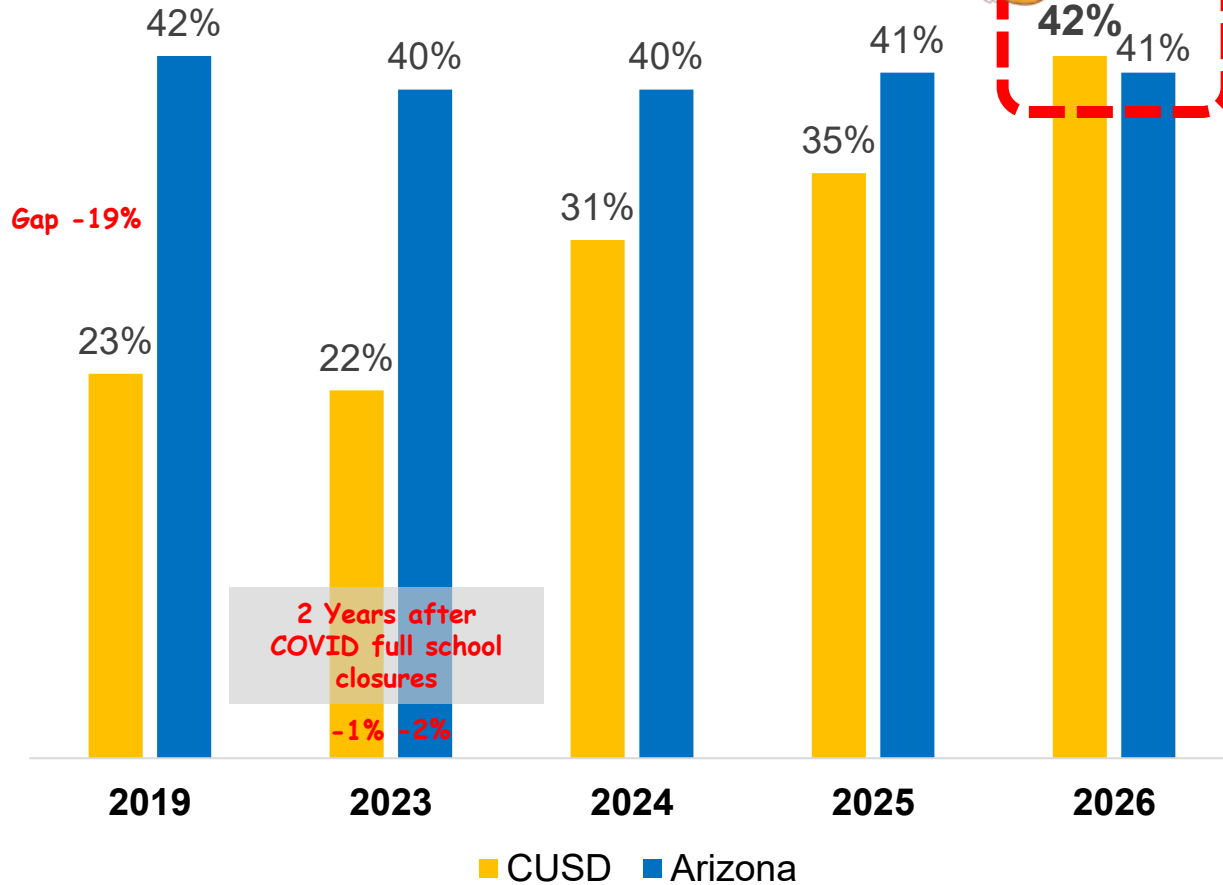
- Schedule time on Professional Involvement Days for districtwide grade level collaboration
- We facilitate collaboration for projects that require school and department leader collaboration



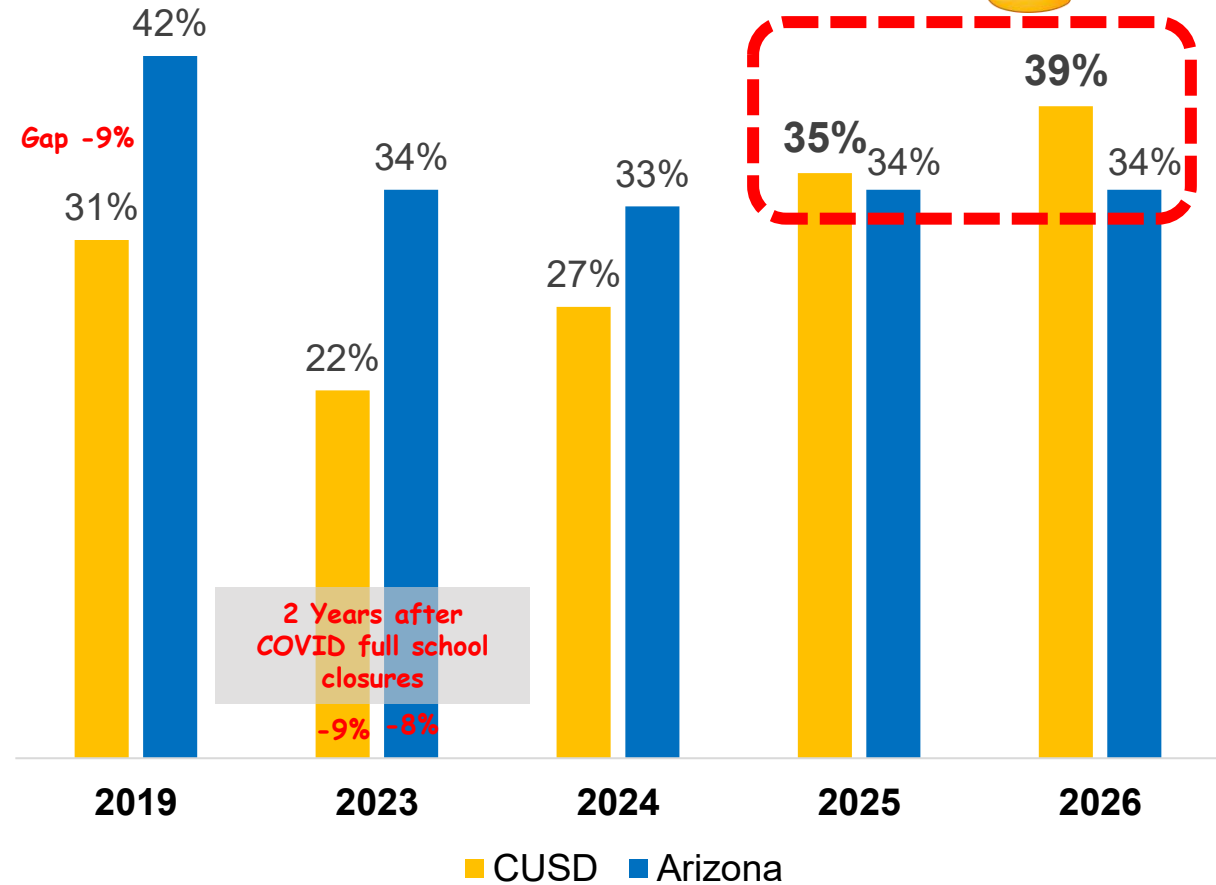
- District non-negotiables
- Loose and Tight controls
- Results oriented school culture

Closing the Gap! Stay the Course!

AASA ELA Historical Data
3rd – 8th Grade Percent Proficient



AASA Math Historical Data
3rd – 8th Grade Percent Proficient



Considerations

- Context
- Commitment
- Community
- Collaboration

Professional Development	Percent
Instructional strategies	83.6
Content knowledge and curriculum	59.0
Classroom management	45.9
Educational technology	44.3
Assessment and evaluation	39.3
Leadership	11.5

Key Takeaways

- A clear, district-wide vision can unite schools around academic improvement goals.
- Continuous professional learning and instructional coaching create capacity for sustained improvement.
- Effective use of student performance data helps schools target interventions and monitor progress.
- Collaboration among educators strengthens implementation and consistency across schools.
- CUSD's experience shows that rural and tribal districts can achieve substantial academic gains through strategic leadership, community engagement, and organizational alignment.

Thank you!

Reflection

What challenge in your district most closely resembles the challenges Chinle faced?

Reflection

Which strategy from the case study has the greatest potential impact in your context?

Reflection

What is one concrete next step your team can take to move from identifying needs to taking action?