

CASE STUDY

Zuni Public Schools: A Role Model for Fostering a Culturally Relevant School Culture

DISTRICT PROFILE

Location | Zuni Public Schools
Number of schools | 4 schools
Number of students | 900 students
Percentage Receiving Free and Reduced Price Meals

Located in western New Mexico, Zuni Pueblo has a rich history that extends over thousands of years. The Zuni people are committed to keeping their culture and traditions alive for future generations. One way they are sharing this knowledge is through their schools. About thirty years ago, Zuni Public Schools (ZPS) became an independent school district. This change allowed ZPS to do more to connect students to the Zuni language and culture.

THE PROBLEM

By 2018, ZPS had hired grade-level language and culture teachers, added cultural heritage days to the school calendar, and started incorporating Zuni core values (known as A:Shiwi core values) into the district's culture. However, the superintendent wasn't satisfied. He wanted to further integrate A:Shiwi core values into the curriculum, including a focus on building social-emotional learning (SEL) competencies. Around this time, the superintendent learned about David DenHartog's school transformation work. He invited David (then working independently and now serving as GSNN's Lead District and School Strategy Consultant) to help ZPS kick off an initiative that would integrate the A:Shiwi core values in teaching and learning.

OUR IMPACT

Since 2018, David and GSNN have been working with ZPS to integrate A:Shiwi core values into daily teaching practices using the 4PBL (phenomena-, place-, project-, and problem-based learning) model and make connections between these values and SEL competencies drawn from the CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) framework. A key step was helping ZPS teachers better understand the A:Shiwi core values and think strategically about how to build skills and knowledge around SEL competencies to support integration of those values.

To facilitate this, David assembled a team of teachers, counselors, and instructional coaches to lead the work and act as advocates and mentors on behalf of their colleagues. David meets with this team regularly, in-person and virtually, to check-in, review progress, and consider next steps. In addition, David and GSNN support ZPS by:

- Identifying resources to guide 4PBL and SEL lesson planning.
- Holding workshops on topics like what 4PBL is and how it connects to content and standards, what a good project looks like, and how to model SEL lessons for teachers.
- Collecting data that measures how well teachers are integrating SEL and 4PBL in their classrooms.



RESULTS

With GSNN's help, ZPS is creating resources, structures, and systems that support the teaching of SEL and 4PBL.

SEL

The ZPS team has created a SEL lesson design framework that informs lesson development across grade levels. This framework ensures lessons share a similar structure, which creates consistency, allows for flexibility, and promotes quality. ZPS is also dedicating time during the school day for intentional instruction and development of SEL competencies and connections to A:Shiwi core values. This work started in the middle school and was introduced in the high schools (TBird time at Zuni High School and Panther period at Twin Buttes Cyber Academy) during the 2021 – 2022 school year.

To inspire confidence and participation, ZPS is providing professional learning opportunities, pairing struggling teachers with peer mentors, and using videos that demonstrate how to teach SEL. For example, ZPS established an after-school TBird time for teachers to facilitate skill building in areas such as mindfulness activities, emotional regulation skills, and using different modalities while teaching SEL.

4PBL

Prior to working with GSNN, much of the teaching and learning at ZPS had little to no connection to the local community. Now, teachers are using the 4PBL model to work across disciplines to create curriculum that's connected to A:Shiwi core values, is place-based, and incorporates SEL competencies. Lessons also include more opportunities for students to connect with their community and the surrounding environment, highlighting the importance of their culture and sense of place. Student portfolios and senior exhibits often feature elements of problem- or place-based learning and focus on topics that students are excited about, such as learning about ancestral farming methods and foodways and adobe construction practices.

While most data collected so far has been anecdotal, over the last four years, ZPS has seen a drop in disciplinary issues and behavioral referrals and an improvement in student social-emotional relations with themselves, each other, their teachers, and the community.