
On the Front Lines: How No Child Left Behind Is Affecting Schools

A Profile of Washington Middle School

*Albuquerque Public Schools
Albuquerque, New Mexico*



WASHINGTON MIDDLE SCHOOL

- Principal Cynthia Challberg-Hale
- Student Population: 581
- District Grades: 6–8
- Minority Population: 89.7% Hispanic; 3.6% African American; 3.1% Native American; 2.6% Caucasian, .2% Asian, and .9% Other
- Students With Disabilities: 16%
- Free and Reduced-Price Lunch: Above 95%
- Community: Urban

School Snapshot

“Change is ... the hardest thing for people ... even when what they are doing is not good for them. They’d rather stay with what’s familiar because it’s comfortable,” says Principal Cynthia Challberg-Hale, referring to the climate at Washington Middle School when she arrived. Challberg-Hale is in her second year as Principal of Washington Middle School, after two years at the K–5 elementary school that is working with Washington to create a joint magnet academy that focuses on dual language and fine arts. That resistance to change was evident when she first arrived at the middle school, which is located adjacent to a country club that serves some of the wealthiest residents of Albuquerque, New Mexico. Yet those wealthy residents do not send their children to Washington Middle School. Instead, the school is home to some of the poorest students in the city.

When Challberg-Hale arrived at Washington, the school was in a downward spiral, with enrollment dropping from 747 students in 1999–2000 to a low of 536 students, as students opted to attend other schools. Despite its label as “in need of improvement,” there was no large-scale effort to improve. “There was a lot of blaming going on—it was everybody else’s fault,” says Challberg-Hale. Teachers were isolated from decision-making and had little time for collaboration; students were following a seven-period schedule, which left them with little time to connect with their peers or adult role models, and staff were not using data to make improvement strategies—perpetuating a cycle of failure.

Principal Challberg-Hale introduced dramatic changes to the school, with support from district administrators. The school became a magnet, focusing on dual language and fine arts. Teachers and administrators began looking at data. Staff worked with state officials to examine how training could boost improvement. And, in the middle of the school year, students and staff moved to a five-period day, with “instructional families” sharing the same students. Students at Washington now have longer learning blocks, and teachers have more time for collaboration, including weekly sessions with Challberg-Hale to discuss improvement strategies such as professional development, teaching techniques and data usage.

What makes the school unique now, says Challberg-Hale, is the focus on enriching education for poor children and providing them with the same opportunities afforded to wealthy children. “What we’ve found through research is the more we enrich a program, the better the students do in reading and math,” says Challberg-Hale. She says the school is now a place “where learning happens,” pointing to improved test scores and a reversal of the downward-spiraling enrollment figures from previous years—a tremendous reversal in a short time.

Teacher Quality

Washington Middle School employs 32 teachers. All meet NCLB’s highly qualified definition, says Challberg-Hale. She adds that 15 of the school’s teachers also hold bilingual and ESL endorsements. Yet Challberg-Hale says it’s not always her most educated and credentialed teachers who are the best. Teacher quality, she says, has more to do with how they use their skills to reach the students and the heart they bring to the profession. “Their willingness to learn, change and adapt to the needs of the students,” is key, adds Challberg-Hale. She is quick to acknowledge the critical role teaching can play in student learning. “It’s the most important thing; what happens in that classroom between that teacher and students is really the only critical thing,” says Challberg-Hale.

Turnover is not a huge problem at Washington, says Challberg-Hale, at least not since the dust began to settle from the massive restructuring set in motion upon her arrival. Challberg-Hale is a firm believer in providing teachers with the necessary support to do their job. “I make sure they have training in how to be effective in what they’re doing,” says Challberg-Hale. Each teacher is given a laptop and provided with enough funds to order teaching supplies and materials. Mentoring also plays a role in supporting new teachers, through district and union partnerships. Collaboration and mentoring also occur as a result of restructuring into teams called instructional families, which allow for grade-level and subject-focused collaboration.

Recruiting for special education positions continues to be a problem for Challberg-Hale, but one that she acknowledges exists throughout the nation. She especially notes the challenge in finding candidates who are trained in special education and have subject-area expertise. “We’re competing within the system for people because in the elementary grades you don’t have to have the content expertise,” says Challberg-Hale.

Challberg-Hale says she would like to have data on individual student achievement growth from year to year to inform her assessments of teacher performance and decisions about professional development, mentoring and other needs. “I think it would be the most effective model,” she says. “Especially when you’re looking at how effective they are with English language learners and special education—if you have teachers that only teach to the very top of the class, you don’t have an effective teacher.”

And while she believes the No Child Left Behind Act’s (NCLB) teacher quality regulations are good, she says there is a need for provisions to help school leaders remove ineffective teachers from the classroom.

Assessments

State testing for students at Washington Middle School occurs during a three-week period in March. Students are tested using the New Mexico Standards Based Assessment in reading, mathematics and science in grades 6, 7 and 8. Students are also tested three times a year using a state-mandated short-cycle, computer-based assessment in mathematics and reading.

“We’ve had some very interesting comparative data,” says Challberg-Hale of the results of the state-mandated testing, especially the short-cycle assessments. And while she doesn’t the assessments are hurting student learning, she is quick to voice concern that there is a tipping point to the scale—“when you’re assessing more than you’re teaching.” Challberg-Hale would also like to see more of a focus on growth models, including a continued focus on disaggregating data by subgroups. She would also like to see testing expand to social studies.

Challberg-Hale also has concerns about the reporting of data to parents. “I think they would value it more if they understood it. . . . The way it’s reported is not parent-friendly.” The percentages and intervals are too complicated, she says, especially when parents are used to seeing the traditional grading scale of A, B, C, D and F.

As for students, Challberg-Hale says there has been a dramatic change in attitude about assessment. After examining honor roll data and comparing it with test scores, she noticed a troubling trend—students were not taking the tests seriously, a problem, she says, that was largely due to the lackadaisical attitude of the former administrators and staff at the school. “The students needed to know it was important to their teachers and important to them,” says Challberg-Hale, when talking about the state-mandated assessments. Once teachers began to encourage students to do their best, the staff noticed a change.

Data Systems

The staff members at Washington Middle School are in the early stages of using data in their day-to-day jobs. Some are farther along than others. Challberg-Hale says it is exciting that some teachers are now seeking out data on their own and making use of it, instead of waiting for the reports to come to them.

Current efforts are focusing on using data for continuous improvement in the classroom, with training to begin this year. Challberg-Hale is also asking teachers to look closely at how students’ coursework grades compare to the results from the state-mandated assessments.

Being part of a large school district is also helpful, says Challberg-Hale. She spent part of her career working as a teacher and principal in a rural area in New Mexico, giving her a unique perspective on the differences between working in a small, rural school and a large, urban district. Support from the Albuquerque district’s research and accountability division helps with data management, she says—something that is difficult to do in a rural district, where there is usually not a staff devoted to research and assessment.

Challberg-Hale would like to see a shorter time between administering exams and receiving the results. “I want to get our standards-based assessment and proficiency data faster,” says Challberg-Hale, who says she is still waiting for results from a language proficiency exam given last spring. “That’s completely useless data,” she says of the exams taken last year, adding that she depends much more on the results from the short-cycle data.

Accountability

The school’s accountability plan is based on data and site visits. The quality assurance plan, Challberg-Hale says, focuses on “a lot of data that doesn’t give you a lot of information.” Site visits that allow outside educators to observe the inner workings of the school day produce a mountain of paperwork, she says, and don’t necessarily result in data for effective change.

She is also concerned that NCLB accountability has placed a strain on the number of good education leaders because of the complicated, cumbersome and time-consuming requirements of the law. Instead, she wants to see adequate yearly progress (AYP) move to a growth model. “We’re only getting an indicator of how the school is performing. When you have different kids coming through each year, you don’t get an accurate measure,” says Challberg-Hale. “Without a growth model it makes it look as though my teachers aren’t doing their job.” She adds that many teachers in her school are making larger gains than those at the wealthier schools, but these gains are not recognized under the current system.

Until last year, she says, the law did more to discourage the staff than to motivate. But once it was tied to best practices and linked to the changes in scheduling and curriculum made during her first year as principal, the law became a motivator to staff, says Challberg-Hale. “The big stick of the federal government” became a motivation to improve, she adds.

As for AYP, with a Hispanic population reaching 90 percent, “the minority is the majority here,” says Challberg-Hale. For the first time in seven years—even with the dramatic changes in scheduling and curriculum—the school surpassed its targeted growth. The state set a target of 3 percent. Washington Middle School reached 4.7 percent in mathematics and 4.62 percent in reading.

School Improvement

Washington Middle School is meeting its AYP targets in reading—in all subgroups. Mathematics continues to be a struggle for the school, however, but the gap is closing. Last year the school was only 0.61 away from its AYP target. Challberg-Hale says the school continues to struggle with meeting targets for English language learners (ELLs) and students with disabilities, though.

The restructuring of the school schedule and curriculum to longer learning periods and a stronger focus on language and fine arts has helped to improve scores, says Challberg-Hale. “It was a move to a more personal form of education, which is more developmentally appropriate for middle school students,” she adds. Teachers are incorporating more integrated instruction, and professional development is focused on effective strategies. Collaboration is also helping to improve instruction. “Differentiated instruction by an effective teacher with afterschool support” and letting go of ineffective models all help improve learning, she adds.

Challberg-Hale expresses concern that the school improvement process does not involve parents effectively. “It’s limited to special interest groups ... usually made up of our more economically advantaged parents,” she says. Challberg-Hale wants the emphasis to shift to all parents. “We need to be able to have effective ways for parents to support their children,” she says. Translating report cards and school improvement information into different languages, along with getting funds to mail information to parents, would go a long way toward improving efforts to keep parents informed, says Challberg-Hale. Tutoring and other improvement activities present a hurdle to these parents, she says, who struggle with such basics as how to afford transportation to get to work.

To address some of these challenges, school officials try to find ways to provide additional assistance for things such as supplemental educational services (SES). “I allow the companies to use my facilities because my students don’t have transportation,” says Challberg-Hale. She also tries to piece together enough funds for an activities bus to take students home from the tutoring sessions. “It would be really effective if they would give us the funds to bus our kids away from our school for supplemental educational services,” says Challberg-Hale of the

improvement efforts set in motion by NCLB. She also expresses concern about the quality of tutors hired by SES companies. “I have one company that I won’t allow to use my site anymore because they were hiring unqualified people,” she says.

Choice was in place before Challberg-Hale took the helm—presenting her with an enormous expenditure as she is forced to bus 200 students to other schools. But enrollment is on the upswing, and as the school continues to make improvements, there is evidence that the trend may reverse.

Other Components of an Effective Education System

The whole-school changes instituted by Challberg-Hale are showing promise, as evidenced by the data from short-term assessments. “I have the data to show that dual-language programs are extremely effective and have a much lower rate of students being inappropriately identified for special education,” says Challberg-Hale. Of those students participating in dual-language programming, only four have been identified as special education, and the bulk of the gifted population—which totals 5 percent of the study body—come from the dual-language program as well.

The strong focus on “instructional families,” groups of about 100 students who spend much of their school day together in longer class periods, is a big change for school staff. Each grade has two instructional families—one dual language, one English only. And while the instructional families allow for grade-level cooperation, teachers are also a part of vertical departmental teams organized by the four core areas of language arts, humanities, science and mathematics. So far, the increase in collaboration among staff, coupled with the focus on instructional families, is paying off, as Washington Middle School is showing improvement in test scores for the first time in years.

About the Commission

The bipartisan, independent Commission on No Child Left Behind is examining the strengths and weaknesses of the No Child Left Behind Act and will make concrete and realistic recommendations to Congress, the Administration, state and local stakeholders, parents and the general public to ensure the law is an effective tool in spurring academic achievement and closing the achievement gap.

In seeking to accomplish its mission, the Commission is guided by these principles:

1. All children can learn and should be expected to reach high standards.
2. Accountability for public education systems in the United States must improve to enable students to excel.
3. The achievement gap between disadvantaged students and their non disadvantaged peers must be eliminated to ensure that all children have the opportunity to succeed.
4. Education results for all students must improve in order for the United States to remain competitive in the global marketplace.
5. Parents have a right to expect their children to be taught by a highly qualified teacher. Teachers have the right to be treated like professionals, including access to sound working conditions and high quality preparation and ongoing professional development opportunities.
6. Education reform must be coupled with additional resources, but federal, state, and local resources must be used more efficiently and effectively to ensure results in return for the increased investment.

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