

School Support and Readiness Assessment Summary Report

School: Thoreau Middle School	LEA: Gallup-McKinley County Schools
School Leader: Nadine Gonzales	LEA Leader: Mike Hyatt
SSRA Team Leader: Bernadette Ellis	Date: October 26, 2023
School Description	
<p>Thoreau Middle School serves 244 students in grades six through eight. 97% of the students at Thoreau identify as Native American. 37% of students are designated as English language learners (ELs). 25% of students qualify for special education services. The school offers a Heritage language program and focuses on a Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program.</p> <p>The leadership team at Thoreau is led by Principal Nadine Gonzales, who started at the school as a teacher, then moved into the principal position. Before joining Gallup-McKinley County Schools, she was a principal in another district. This year, Principal Gonzales is joined by a dean of students and a parent liaison. The dean and parent liaison work together to address attendance issues, elevating any high-level needs to the principal’s attention.</p> <p>Thoreau Middle School Vision: <i>Thoreau Middle School is a safe community of shared strengths, which builds learners through personal success.</i></p> <p>Thoreau Middle School Mission: <i>Our mission is to challenge all students to meet and exceed their potential through engagement in purposeful, goal-driven learning. Thoreau Middle School will develop a community where students gain tools to evolve as individual learners through differentiated experiences.</i></p>	
School Successes and Celebrations	
<p>The school team at Thoreau Middle School is cohesive, with camaraderie between and among staff and leadership. They are a dynamic staff that includes 15 teachers. With six new teachers coming on board, Principal Gonzales wondered if everyone would mesh and observed that it worked because of the culture and leadership team. She stated that she loves the team.</p> <p>Principal Gonzales emphasized that the school’s students are their chief source of celebration. She shared, “We have some good kids. We allow them to be middle school kids. It’s humbling and adorable to see. They are great. It’s not just us. People who come to visit us say so, as well.”</p>	

While small, TMS provides several extracurricular offerings for its students. The school offers not just sports but a bike club. The school received a donation of about 20 new mountain bikes and, on Mondays, the staff takes students on the trails around the school.

Furthermore, the school offers Mathematics, Engineering, and Science Achievement (MESA), after-school tutoring, student council, yearbook, and is starting a film club. Broadcasting is offered to 8th graders as an elective course. The school prioritizes having a variety of extracurricular activities for students to be involved.

DOMAIN 1: CULTURE & EQUITY

To what degree has the school established equitable practices that ensure ALL students and staff have an opportunity to reach their full potential?

Promising Practices:

Thoreau Middle School provides a positive and supportive culture where the focus for *all* is to support student growth and achievement. This focus was evident during walkthroughs and interviews. There is an expectation that the culture of the students is respected and reflected in students' learning. Navajo culture is featured prominently, as most students identify as Navajo.

Principal Gonzales and the dean spend most of their days in classrooms. While the district sets the goal of 80% of their time in classrooms and 20% supporting student discipline, the ratio is about 70:30 at Thoreau Middle School due to the lack of a school counselor or information technology (IT) support.

Due to a strong emphasis on PBIS and clear expectations, discipline referrals have decreased at the school. All staff were observed to be warm and welcoming; students were receptive to visitors and friendly; all staff were willing to help wherever needed, and there was evidence of strong parent involvement. Students feel supported by staff and know they can go to teachers and the administration for support.

Opportunities for Growth:

Thoreau Middle School has an ongoing opportunity to leverage the strong school culture to support student achievement. Multiple interviews showed a positive and supportive school culture focused on student learning.

Potential Next Steps:

As one-third of the faculty are new this year, a primary focus is onboarding them into the existing culture. One facet of this is the ability to connect genuinely with students. One of the new faculty members has offered to sponsor MESA so they can build relationships with students. Teachers attend parent engagement nights, and that also helps.

Creating authentic, meaningful relationships between teachers, students, and families will continue to be a focus for the school. Similar to the emphasis on PBIS, positive student

interactions with teachers decrease incidences of disciplinary referrals and increase students' willingness to take academic risks. With its strong school culture, TMS is poised to challenge more students to reach grade-level proficiency.

DOMAIN 2: LEADERSHIP

To what degree does school leadership establish, communicate, support, and monitor schoolwide priorities?

Promising Practices:

The school's leadership is driving school improvement with a positive mindfulness of and responsiveness to the need for grace. While multiple interviews and observations evidenced that Principal Gonzales works with the understanding that teachers need to stay on pace to ensure that all students have access to all academic standards, she also ensures that teachers have a lot of support. Interviews stated that Principal Gonzales is caring and responsive to teachers' needs and makes a conscientious effort to balance the cognitive load on teachers, saying, "If there is a heavy brain day on Wednesday in PLCs, then we have a lighter day on Fridays."

Multiple interviews evidenced Principal Gonzales's goal of developing leaders within her staff. In addition to growing teachers, she is interested in building sustainable systems for school improvement and is persistent when her first attempts prove unsuccessful. One example during the site visit highlighting this persistence and creativity was Principal Gonzales's Coffee with the Principal events last year. To communicate more frequently and comprehensively with families, she hosted coffee chats and prepared presentations with information about student data and school initiatives. She wanted to solicit families' ideas and feedback. When these events were not well attended, Principal Gonzales decided to try another tactic: afternoon tea. She is auditioning this new model this year. Principal Gonzales's willingness to test multiple iterations of an idea is emblematic of her positive, systematic approach.

Opportunities for Growth:

The school's 90-Day Plan identifies Data Driven Instruction as a high-leverage method to further refine teachers' ability to use data to guide instruction, reteaching, and interventions. There is a schoolwide opportunity to provide more support for teachers to plan for differentiated small groups. Evidence to support these foci was provided in multiple interviews. During walkthroughs, teachers were observed reteaching specific skills and standards based on data analysis. Teachers worked with students in small groups in some settings using differentiated instruction and materials. This practice could be implemented in more classrooms.

Teachers will benefit from support in understanding vertical alignment within the state standards to help differentiate instruction for students and in scaffolding formative assessments. Teachers' fluency with data analysis, instructional practices, and differentiation supports all learners and can be especially beneficial for students with disabilities and English language learners.

There is also an opportunity for leadership to problem solve and seek support to meet the staffing needs to support social and emotional learning and special education math services. Interviews evidenced that there is “always room for growth in everything; [we] need more staff because everyone is trying to help with everything, so they are pulled in multiple directions.” The school’s previous counselor was also their test coordinator. Staffing is an ongoing challenge, especially in rural areas.

Potential Next Steps:

Principal Gonzales explained that the school is improving the Data-Driven Instruction. Teachers participated in professional development on this topic in the first 30 days. The next steps are to focus on data to use it to guide differentiation, small group, and layer two interventions. This is all detailed in the school’s 90-day plan.

In response to the staff shortage, the school is supposed to get a new counselor next week. In the meantime, to meet the current school needs, school leadership redistributed some of the duties (test coordinator, SAT coordinator, etc.) with teachers.

For special education, leadership has asked for the position to be advertised (rather than accepting virtual services) to better provide for the needs of the students. The administration is working with the special education department to fill the position. A library assistant with 19 years of experience in special education fulfills support as guided by special education teachers.

DOMAIN 3: INSTRUCTIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

To what degree is the school’s instructional infrastructure in place, understood, and utilized by school leaders and teachers?

Promising Practices:

Multiple interviews evidenced that Thoreau Middle School teachers participate in peer observations to learn from one another, and best practices are being implemented schoolwide. Teachers at TMS post student data on their classroom walls and students lead data conversations with their families.

Schoolwide expectations exist for instructional strategies at Thoreau Middle School, such as the gradual release model (I do, we do, you do), Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) strategies, and RACE. RACE is an acronym that many teachers use to support students in written responses: Restate the question. Answer the question. Cite evidence. Explain your answer. This acronym is helpful because it helps students reach proficiency on grade-level writing standards by improving the depth and specificity of text-based responses.

There is a schoolwide initiative called Partner Read, and the expectation is that all teachers, in all settings, are employing the strategy. Principal Gonzales explained that providing students with opportunities for expression is a priority, and the Partner Read strategy is one way they

address it. In walkthroughs, it was observed that there was not a lot of teacher talk; students were engaged in tasks, and teachers were facilitating.

Opportunities for Growth:

There is an opportunity to build more student discourse using strategies and protocols to hold all students accountable for participating. Observations indicated that students were on-task and engaged in their independent activities, but most discussion and discourse involved a small percentage of students. This is a common challenge, especially in heterogeneous classrooms and with middle school students who are still building academic confidence. There are multiple ways to structure speaking and participation protocols to engage more students to do more talking, more frequently.

Potential Next Steps:

Principal Gonzales and her leadership team have identified student engagement as a priority and target it when doing observations and walkthroughs. There is an opportunity to be an extra set of eyes in the classroom, helping teachers notice missed opportunities to nudge students to speak. By tracking data points like opportunities to respond and encouraging strategies like think-pair-share and small-group discussions in addition to or as a priming technique before full-class discussions, instructional leaders at Thoreau can support teachers in creating structures to monitor and promote more frequent and equitably distributed student talk.

Teachers already engage in peer observations and share a vocabulary for common instructional practices at TMS. As the school refines what student talk looks like and sounds like, peer observers can also be enlisted to track data on student interactions, as well as provide feedback on the strategies that encourage the most diversity of student voices. Finally, students can also be powerful thought partners. Teachers can encourage written responses when verbal ones are out of reach; similarly, students can tally and reflect on their participation patterns as a means through which to build metacognition and self-efficacy.