School Support and Readiness Assessment
Summary Report

School: Independence High School	**LEA:** Rio Rancho Public Schools
School Leader: Jessica Sanchez	**LEA Leader:** Dr. V. Sue Cleveland
SSRA Team Leader: Celeste Murray	**Date:** February 22, 2024

School Description

Independence High School is an alternative high school in Rio Rancho, NM. It is situated on the city's north side and housed in a former call center. Many classrooms are in an area called "The Well," a large, open-concept space with dividers separating classrooms. Some classrooms around "The Well" are also in more traditional, individual rooms. All leadership, counselor, and other support staff offices are conveniently located on one of the walls. To ensure staff and student safety, the front office provides security measures. Once inside, the brightly lit space is full of conversations and instruction, with a feeling of welcome and connectedness.

Independence High School has a diverse population of 176 students. Currently, 70% of students are identified as Hispanic/Latino, followed by 16% Caucasian, 10% American Indian, and 4% Black. Twenty-six students receive special education services; twenty-three are identified as English Learners (EL).

Independence's vision is *Cultivating an inclusive community that provides individualized support and resources to foster student's academic success and personal growth*. Their missiong is *IHS is dedicated to graduating students who strive, overcome, remain true to their authentic selves and who demonstrate resilience in the face of adversity*

School Successes and Celebrations

The culture is one of the school's successes. Independence serves students at risk of dropping out. When they get to Independence, they build relationships. They show up because of the people; if they don't, school staff notice and reach out. The culture is like a family. When students get to Independence, they aim to catch up on credits and return to their 'real school.' However, many find Independence is where they want to stay. It becomes their school of choice. As a result of the intensive, supportive environment at Independence, many students show improved willingness to attend, complete work, and take responsibility.

The school actively celebrates student success by recognizing students who complete the required credits in an all-school intercom shoutout with a ringing of the bell, and the entire school claps and cheers for the achievement. This creates a culture focused on graduation and support for each other. The staff is committed and goes above and beyond what is required to support students, working before and after school and on weekends.

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:

Independence is well-staffed to meet student needs, with two counselors, two social workers, and a registrar who monitors academic progress. Students meet with their assigned teacher mentors for credentialing once a week, where they set goals and monitor progress toward graduation, including grade checks, credits needed, attendance, and any other necessary check-ins to ensure academic progress. The credentialing teacher often becomes an advocate and will work with content teachers on support needed for student success. There is a positive culture of error, where students feel safe to show emotions and make mistakes.

Leadership and staff recognize the importance of students' social and emotional needs as foundational to student learning. Days start with greetings. Administrators and staff know the names of most, if not all, students. Relationships are priorities, and students feel supported by most of their teachers–even indicating they think they get a lot of counseling from some teachers. The staff has been provided with trauma-informed professional development to support this work. Research suggests that students who can connect with one adult in their school have a greater chance of being successful and graduating. Independence puts relationship-building at the forefront of each day.

Opportunities for Growth:

Although much work has been done to ensure students feel safe, seen, and supported, there is a need for better communication about all available supports and opportunities to enable a more proactive outreach protocol by staff. Students who seek support often get the help they need–academically, socially, and emotionally. However, students who do not seek support can be overlooked. Even when students show outward signs of distress, such as sleeping in class or not participating, some teachers do not ask for underlying causes.

There is also confusion about some of the supports available. Staff have conflicting information about the school's social workers; uncertainty exists about how many social workers are on staff. Students have vastly different understandings of what support is available to them. Detailed outlines of resources and support staff from whom students and teachers can receive help and locations of staff or offices of support would greatly benefit the work already in place to build more substantial access and maintain student success opportunities.

Rebranding Independence as a positive opportunity rather than a punitive alternative is another potential growth opportunity for the school. When presented with the opportunity to attend Independence, many students do not want to attend this school. Having to attend the school is sometimes used as a threat if students do not turn around their academics, so some students react adversely to moving to the school and leaving their neighborhood schools and friends. However, most students do not want to leave once they have attended, and some who initially

return to the comprehensive schools ultimately decide to reenroll at Independence. Students and families feel great appreciation and gratitude for the school. If the district can rebrand the school as a school of choice rather than a last option, it can draw students to it before they are in critical credit deficit situations. Promoting student and parent testimonials and reaching out to middle schools (for 8th grade) and high schools (for 9th grade) to identify students already showing signs of struggle might also be helpful.

Potential Next Steps:

Principal Sanchez plans to systematically share information about available programs and resources with teachers and students. She plans to post available resources in one central location, with timely updates and bulletin board displays throughout the school, to help students and teachers access this information quickly and readily. She plans to have counselors visit classrooms so students can identify and connect with them. This will be an efficient way to deliver information about support resources to a larger audience.

The principal knows the mindset shift required to identify struggling students earlier and invite them to attend Independence. This is an avenue she plans to explore while the school has the capacity to receive more students.

DOMAIN 2: LEADERSHIP
To what degree does school leadership establish, communicate, support, and monitor schoolwide priorities?

Promising Practices:

The leadership team at Independence reviews and addresses needed changes to the master schedule every quarter to ensure classes offered align with student credit needs. Because of its size, the school can be very responsive to student needs and adjust during the year—not just at the beginning or between semesters. Graduation happens three times during the year, and finals are offered to correlate to graduations.

The administration recognizes attendance's impact on student success and is working to address it. This year, there has been a concerted effort to increase attendance. Phone calls occur when a student is missing a lot of class time. Saturday school is available to help students catch up and to meet seat time requirements. The school tracks attendance through the students' personal education plans (PEPs), and meetings around attendance include family and students.

Opportunities for Growth:

There is an opportunity to establish and communicate clear school priorities and non-negotiables. There is some ambiguity about what is expected, except for the phone policy, which is well understood by all. Experienced and new teachers sometimes do not have the same understanding of expectations, and there are different behavior and academic expectations

within different classrooms. Identifying and communicating non-negotiables with instructional practices, behavior expectations, and policies can create an aligned vision and purpose and help build a culture around "This is how we do school."

Communication would also help families be involved in their students' learning. There is an opportunity to create a straightforward communication plan with multiple ways students, staff, and families can access information via the website, newsletters, robocalls, and weekly emails.

Potential Next Steps:

The administrative team has indicated that they wish to start over with specific priorities and processes next year. The process of reprioritizing has begun, and focusing on the end goal of student success and graduation is central to this process.

Because this is her first year as principal at Independence, Ms. Sanchez has spent this year learning and assessing the current climate and observing opportunities for improvement. As she does identify areas of highest need, she can work with her staff to co-create systems to monitor student learning outcomes. The 90-Day Plan can be a helpful tool for processing and communicating goals and next steps to her faculty and the larger school community.

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:

Most class offerings at Independence are in-person instruction led by a teacher in a traditional classroom rather than via a technology platform. Students at Independence prefer this type of learning, indicating that it is more effective in their education and engagement. They appreciate the real-time feedback and assistance when needed. They feel comfortable seeking help, which is another benefit of in-person learning.

Students engage in grade-level tasks and content using high-quality instructional materials and the adopted curriculum. Teachers use academic content-specific vocabulary. Students who cannot access grade-level texts are provided with technology to assist and ease the cognitive load while maintaining the complexity of the text and task.

Opportunities for Growth:

Current classroom practices provide limited opportunities for teachers to identify areas of understanding and confusion and increase student practice. Growth areas include questioning practices, structured class discussions, and wait time. Identifying ways to incorporate more student voices with low-stakes opportunities to respond, like prepared cold calls, turn and talk, and random name generators, may help present more opportunities for students to speak.

Some teachers would benefit from having multiple ways to assess and check for understanding. Instructional practices like "I do, we do, you do" and exit tickets provide quick check-ins before moving on to independent student work. When most classroom experience is teacher-led, students have little time to practice skills before assessment.

Potential Next Steps:

The school plans to identify critical classroom practices and provide training and professional development to its teachers with help from district curriculum and instruction specialists.

Formative assessments, embedded into daily lessons and conducted formally or informally, will allow teachers to gauge student understanding and adjust instruction accordingly. As the school leadership works with teachers to increase students' opportunities to respond, there must also be a focus on increasing student talk and chances for students to practice new skills before being summatively assessed.

DOMAIN 4: TALENT MANAGEMENT
To what degree does the school ensure effective teachers are hired, retained, developed, and leveraged to improve student outcomes?

Promising Practices:

Principal Sanchez and Ms. Yarbrough are visible presences throughout the school. Students know their administrators and understand that most of the administration's time is spent in classrooms, observing what students are learning. The constant presence allows for relationship building with teachers and students, and the administration is aware of instructional practices, allowing tailored and targeted opportunities for professional development based on teachers' strengths and areas for growth.

Opportunities for Growth:

Although administrators are in the halls and classrooms, there is an opportunity for them to provide teachers with more comprehensive feedback. All teachers can benefit from a structured observation and feedback cycle with specific areas to be observed and discussed before observation and a robust debrief session after the observation with data.

Teachers at Independence desire to hear what they are doing well and opportunities to improve. Consistent, scheduled observation, feedback, and coaching cycles can lead to continual improvement, focusing on small, bite-sized changes that lead to improved instruction and quick wins. As Principal Sanchez and her team encourage teachers to use more opportunities to respond, formative assessments, and engagement strategies, the observation, feedback, and coaching cycle can be a powerful lever to affect change.

Potential Next Steps:

Principal Sanchez plans to balance observation and feedback cycles by creating a consistent schedule. Teachers will be provided the time and opportunity to observe colleagues' teaching to improve practice and learn from each other. Peer observation establishes a culture of accountability and collaboration and can contribute to collective efficacy.

Principal Sanchez plans to use *Teach Like a Champion 3.0* to support improving classroom practice. Resources like this provide teachers with ready-to-use instructional strategies grounded in current research. They also give the administrators indicators to look for when conducting observations. Creating a shared school vocabulary through a book or chapter study can aid in aligning expectations and instructional practices.