

New Mexico education secretary touts 'A' schools in Gadsden district

LAS CRUCES - New Mexico's public education secretary on Thursday visited the Gadsden Independent School District to tout the successes of two elementary schools and the school system as a whole.

New Mexico education Secretary Christopher Ruszkowski stopped at Mesquite Elementary, one of two GISD schools that earned an "A" grade in the state's A-F school grading system. The yearly [school grades were released](#) in late August.

The achievements of Mesquite Elementary and the second school, Desert View Elementary in Sunland Park, show that "demographics are not destiny," Ruszkowski said during an afternoon school assembly. The schools have a high percentage of poverty and minority students, but those aren't barriers to earning an "A."

"That is a powerful thing," he said.



New Mexico Public Education Secretary Christopher Ruszkowski, right, told attendees at a Mesquite Elementary School assembly on Thursday, Sept. 7, 2017, that the school district should be seen as a "model" for the state because of its improvements in student performance. School Principal Angela Silvaggio looks on. (Photo: Diana Alba Soular)

'Model district'

Ruszkowski addressed parents, teachers, staff and students at Mesquite Elementary after a student choral performance. He described the two elementary schools and the district as "exemplary."

"Gadsden is not just a model district for the state of New Mexico; Gadsden is a model district for the state of America," he said.

Georgette Chacón of Mesquite, parent of two students who attend the elementary school, said she was pleased to see the school had received an "A."

"It's something to feel proud about," she said. "They've worked so hard to finally get (the grade) up here, and finally it was accomplished."

Chacón's daughter, 9-year-old Gisselle Rico, said she was proud of the school's achievement.

"It means a lot because we've tried our hardest to get this for years," she said.

Mesquite Elementary, which has about 290 students, has improved gradually over the past six years from an "F" to an "A," said Principal Angela Silvaggio. She credited the work of teachers, parents and staff in achieving the ranking.

"It takes a village to move forward to an 'A,' said Silvaggio, who's led the school about four years.

Across the district

In all, GISD received two "A's," 11 "B's," 7 "C's" and three "D's" in the 2017 state-issued report cards. That's three fewer "A's" than in 2016, but overall the grades are on par with last year's results.

A number of factors go into the rankings, including student performance on the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers standardized test, high school graduation rates, and student improvement.

Ruszkowski credited GISD for having no "F's" the past two years. Four schools received "F's" in 2015. He said the district is not among the top-performing in the state, but its growth each year is what's notable. And he said administrators and teachers create a culture that leads to continued improvement.

"Is Gadsden among the highest-performing large districts in the state? No," he said. "But does Gadsden believe they can be the highest-performing district in the state? Absolutely."

More: [Report card: More B's and D's, fewer A's and F's for Las Cruces schools](#)

Work ahead

Silvaggio said she agrees with Ruszkowski's assertion that "demographics are not destiny" and she promotes a no-excuses culture in the school. For years, she said, teachers and students were discouraged by continued poor performance, but she said they've begun believing that success is possible.

Still, Silvaggio said more improvement is needed. About 45 percent of Mesquite Elementary students were proficient in reading in the spring 2017 round of PARCC tests, while 30 percent were proficient in reading. The school hopes to perform better in 2017-18, she said.

"It's a constant work in progress," she said.

In the Las Cruces Public Schools, administrators and school board members have taken aim at the state's school grading system, contending it's not a valid measure of students' and schools' performance.

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New Mexico Public Education Secretary Christopher Ruszkowski, far right, visited Mesquite Elementary School on Thursday, Sept. 7, 2017, to recognize that school and Desert View Elementary in Sunland Park for earning "A's" in the state's school report card system. (Photo: Diana Alba Soular)