

## West Mesa High sees a rise in its graduation rate

By Elaine D. Briseño

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West Mesa High School staff have been working for years to get more students to the finish line, and they're finally seeing the results of their efforts.

The school saw its 2012 graduation rate jump to 70 percent, a significant increase over its 58.2 percent rate in 2011.

West Mesa principal Ben Santistevan said a variety of new and ongoing efforts have led to the increase. The school, which has about 1,650 students, has seen another class graduate since those numbers were released in January, but 2013 rates have not been released yet.

The Albuquerque school district had an overall graduation rate of 70 percent in 2012.

Within the past few years, the school began offering free online credit recovery courses on campus. Students take the courses in a classroom after the school day ends, with a certified teacher who supervises and offers help. Santistevan said offering an alternative to night or summer school has made it easier for students to make up credits.



Last year, the school started a peer mentoring program, matching students who had done well on the state's Standardized Based Assessment during their junior year with those who did not test proficient and needed to retake the test to graduate. The students provided tutoring and "moral support" for their struggling peers.

He said 80 percent of the students in the mentoring program passed the SBA when they took it again.

The school has also started identifying students who, based on school assessments, are at risk of not passing the SBA their junior year. Those students are offered tutoring after school.

To address the emotional, social and family problems students face, the school has contracted with counselors to offer free campus services. Students can be sent there by school staff, but they can also go voluntarily.

“If they are picked up for drugs or alcohol (by school personnel) during school hours, we don’t take them to the detention center,” Santistevan said. “Instead, they may get suspended and be required to go to counseling.”



Also, while extracurricular activities are nothing new at the high school, Santistevan said they continue to play an important role in keeping students enrolled and showing up every day. He said the school values elective courses such as band, automotive, welding and choir.

Aiden Tracey saw his grades began to slip during his sophomore year, but he said it was the school’s Navy JROTC program that helped him feel connected and gave him the discipline he needed to graduate.

“My father died during my sophomore year, and I did not care about anything,” he said. “But I saw what my parents have been through because they did not have an education. I knew I needed to do better than that.”

Although many of West Mesa’s efforts have been data-driven, Santistevan said there is one reason for the success that data cannot capture or measure.

## **Attitude**

“Kids don’t care how much you know, but they know how much you care,” he said. “They know if they are being challenged.”

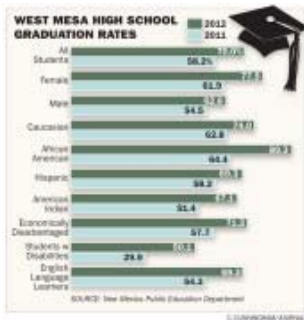
He said educators might feel sorry for a student and be tempted to make assignments a little easier or extend deadlines. But, he said the culture at West Mesa is changing, and he’s pushed his staff to adopt the philosophy that all students can learn at a higher level.

“Every single one of my teachers holds high expectations for these students,” he said. “If we believe kids are going to be successful and encourage them to utilize their full potential, they will rise to the occasion.”



Santistevan said he’s proud of his school’s progress, but there is still work to be done. Following state and national trends, graduation rates for the school’s Hispanic, poor and disabled students are still below that of their peers.

He said he hopes the current efforts and new ones, like the Quantum Opportunities Program, will translate into a solid graduation rate for 2013.



Quantum, a dropout prevention program that is run by the nonprofit Youth Development Inc., serves about 30 students. It's one reason Jessica Carbajal was able to graduate last month.

Carbajal said she was a freshman when her parents decided to divorce. That event, she said, sent her into a downward spiral that included drugs and unsavory company. Her grades plummeted and she was on the verge of giving up on school all together. An attentive teacher changed the direction of her life.

“My biology teacher noticed a change in me,” she said. “He said ‘What’s going on?’ ”

That question, she said, was a lifeline that led her to Quantum and enrollment in the school’s Navy JROTC, which helped her refocus.



Natalie Chavez, YDI education, employment and training program director, said Quantum offers tutoring, counseling, drug treatment and mentoring. Case managers make sure students’ grades are up and advocate for them, helping them navigate both school and their personal lives, as well as encouraging them to participate in community service. Chavez said she hopes to continue the program, but it will depend on funding.

“When we get them, they don’t feel a part of the community,” Chavez said. “Then they become a part of the community and then they learn to give back to the community.”