



[Guest Blog: Momentum and high expectations in Ajo, AZ](#)

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Some say Ajo is in the “middle of nowhere,” while others say Ajo is a small town with a big backyard. Either way you look at it, this town of over 3,700 people, situated just 43 miles from the Mexican border, is having an outsized impact on its educational outcomes.

This past Friday, several members of the [Teach For America-Phoenix](#) staff had the opportunity to join the *A for Arizona* crew on the third stop of their Summer Statewide Roadshow trip to Ajo. Teach For America was excited to join for a few reasons, including learning from best practices in an “A” school serving a low-income community, and to support the efforts of 2008 Teach For America - Phoenix alumna, Lauren Carriere, who is the school leader at the [Ajo Unified School](#).

The Ajo Unified School District, founded in 1896, consists of one pre-K – 12 campus, which serves the entire town of Ajo, as well some nearby borderland communities and students from the Tohono O’odham Nation. The school has approximately 430 students, and is truly diverse, as its student population is made up of 57% Latino, 23% Native American, 16% White, and 4% Asian students.

Upon arriving on campus, we had a warm welcome from a variety of parent and community supporters of the school, demonstrating the strong community support the school enjoys. We had a chance to hear from representatives of groups including the International Sonoran Desert Alliance, the Sherriff’s Department, Desert Senita Community Health Center, and the local parent group, SOS (Support Our Schools). All of these groups are clearly invested in revitalizing their community and school to provide a bright future for their students.

During our tour of the campus, we had a chance to stop at the school garden, which is run by the health center, as part of an effort to encourage healthy eating habits in a city where rates of diabetes and obesity run high. The garden is only one of a handful of certified gardens in Arizona, which allows its produce to be used in school lunches – we even had a chance to sample some delicious basil-infused water from the garden!

Ajo was once a thriving mining town, but the copper mine closed in 1985. The absence of the mine still looms large over the town, both figuratively and literally, as the abandoned mine is visible from the school. When the mine closed, many left the city, and with it came lowered expectations for those that were left behind in Ajo. Yet, there is now a palpable sense of momentum and high expectations in Ajo, particularly at the school, where at every classroom door you are greeted with a sign stating, “Welcome to [Ajo High School](#), where every student graduates prepared for college and career.” In the past year 57% of the graduating class was admitted to a college or university, and the graduation rate hovers between 90-93%.

The challenges certainly remain for Ajo Unified School, as it struggles with limited finances and recruiting teachers to its community. Much like many other Arizona communities, Ajo has struggled with a teacher shortage, a problem it is tackling through a combination of recruiting international teachers, primarily from the Philippines and Jamaica, and encouraging homegrown teachers to commit to their community. Nonetheless, what Ajo proves is that community support, plus high expectations from school leadership can lead to tremendous opportunity for students, and create transformational change in a community that is hoping to preserve its past, while re-writing its future.

<http://www.aforaz.org/blog/guest-blog-momentum-and-high-expectations-in-ajo-az>