



[Let's Face It.](#)

8/29/2016 By: *Lisa Graham Keegan, A for Arizona*

Last week, honest accountability looked like about 450 photos of children pasted to index cards around a room.

We were in the southern Arizona city of Ajo to visit the Red Raiders, whose achievement gains have been spectacular over the past five years. The visit would have been a great help to those who pepper us with questions about what an excellent school “looks like”.

Excellence in Ajo looks like a lot of people who are deeply engaged with each other and the children they serve. We were met by not only the school and district leadership, but also by several community members who are working not just at the school, but more broadly in the community to bring about a renaissance in their city. They are heavily focused on art – and on the art of food! –, on student health support, on raising funds for their school, on rewarding their teachers with weekly treats delivered by the local [Support Our Schools](#) organization, and on constantly raising the bar on their performance and their students’ achievement. Great stuff. It is clear that nobody feels that “where they are” is where they will stay. But I love where they are.

[Ajo High School](#) has all the buzz and energy that you feel in any great school...deeply focused classrooms popping with activity and interaction. Walls full of student work and inspiration – and every room had today’s goals in terms clearly focused toward students. Teachers and students were clearly used to visitors and lost no time being distracted by our motley crew of about a dozen folks.

What blew most of us away was their data room, which we were allowed to view from a respectful distance, as they had a card with a photograph of every student in the school affixed to the wall according to their grade and current performance level. There were color bands all around the room which matched a certain level of performance, and you could see the spaces where cards had been moved up over time.

Generally, the students begin their careers at the school in the lower levels of the color bands and rise up over time and grade. It’s an easy way to see the school making great gains...but also to see where attention needs to be paid. It’s an honest space.

I have seen lots of data rooms. What I do not see often, and my personal “aha” moment about Ajo, was the face of a student on every card along with additional information that told a better, fuller story about the child.

There is no way to look at those cards and not feel personally responsible for the progress of a real live person.

That is what accountability really looks like.

I am a fan of high academic standards and of assessments that tell us how every child, every classroom, and every school perform against those standards. But that is not really accountability.

Accountability is a personal commitment to use whatever talent I have in service of my work. And when somebody is a teacher, their work is the academic, social, physical, and emotional well being of a small person who turns into a bigger, and then a big, person. That is just incredibly daunting to me.

And the reason I know that the Ajo team will continue to excel beyond all expectation is because I saw that these teachers and leaders are willing to face the children and their stories right next to the evidence of how well they are doing on the child's behalf. Every day.

I don't think most of us are asked to deploy that kind of face-to-face courage on a daily basis. And I am grateful to be in Arizona where this kind of courageous action is on the rise and spreading fast. Hats off to you, Ajo. You're an inspiration.

<http://www.aforaz.org/blog/lets-face-it>