



Community Schools the New Mexico Way

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Executive Summary

For more than a year, the Learning Policy Institute (LPI) conducted research in New Mexico, including interviews, site visits, document review, and new analyses of data provided by the New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED). The purpose of the study was to provide New Mexico leaders a research perspective on the challenges facing education and identify evidence-based ways that state policy can address them. This report is part of a larger road map for helping New Mexico leaders focus on both short-term and long-term improvement as the state recovers from the COVID-19 setbacks.

One central finding of LPI’s research is that key to systemic improvement in New Mexico is recognizing that students who face barriers to school success—including poverty and systemic racism—are not exceptions in the state; rather, they are the norm. In 2018, 75% of New Mexico’s public school students qualified for federally subsidized meals because of their families’ low incomes and 46% of New Mexico’s 834 state-supported schools served student bodies where 80% or more of children come from low-income backgrounds. Approximately 77% of students are students of color, including 10% Native American, and 16% are English learners. Accordingly, the state must design a system that places these students at the center and builds the state and local capacity to meet their diverse needs.

Evidence shows that many New Mexico students live in communities of concentrated poverty that are associated not only with food and housing insecurity and lack of health care, but also with lower-quality learning resources and supports, including less-qualified and less-experienced teachers and less access to high-quality curriculum. Fortunately, these conditions are amenable to policy solutions.

This report focuses on community schools as an evidence-based approach that can help the state improve the educational success of New Mexico children growing up in poverty, even as the state recovers from the COVID-19 crisis. A community schools approach involves schools partnering with the local community to provide high-quality teaching and learning and additional resources and supports to help mitigate the barriers to school success that poverty erects. Community schools are built with four pillars—integrated health and social supports, expanded learning time and opportunities, strong family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership and practice—in a way that meets community needs and uses community assets. Together, these pillars provide more than wraparound services. Collaborating with local partners, community schools use a whole child, whole school, whole community approach to redesign schools in ways that promote learning.

National research finds that, when well designed and fully implemented, community schools increase student success and reduce gaps in both opportunity and achievement. Although schools alone cannot “fix” widespread poverty, interventions that provide additional supports and resources can mitigate its disadvantages by reducing gaps in students’ learning opportunities, improve students’ outcomes, create more positive school climates, and foster trusting relationships among adults and children that are crucial for learning. In a study examining community schools in Albuquerque Public Schools, Las Cruces Public Schools, and Santa Fe Public Schools, the Legislative

Education Study Committee (LESC) found results similar to those of other studies. Community schools that had been in operation for more than 5 years and that had fully implemented the pillars showed better-than-average growth in student achievement scores.

Moreover, community schools address the 2018 findings of *Martinez/Yazzie*, a lawsuit ruling that New Mexico’s education system failed to provide public school students a sufficient education. These findings outlined the need for and shortage of expanded learning time, including after-school programs and tutoring, and the lack of social and health services available to all at-risk students (i.e., socioeconomically disadvantaged children, English learners, Native American students, and children with disabilities). Community schools are also promising sites for developing culturally and linguistically responsive programs collaboratively with tribal governments, given their close connections with communities.

Community schools are not new to New Mexico, and educators, advocates, and the general public increasingly support scaling them with state support. In 2013, New Mexico’s Legislature adopted the Community Schools Act, which allowed any public school to be transformed into a community school. However, no funds were appropriated. In 2019, three policy actions made resources available for community schools. First, the state’s new administration implemented amendments to the state’s Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plan (specifying how the state will use federal funding from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act). With these amendments, any school identified as needing “comprehensive support and improvement” or “targeted support and improvement” under ESSA was allowed to use the community schools initiative as part of an evidence-based intervention. Second, the Legislature increased the “at-risk” index in 2019 and 2020. This action resulted in districts receiving additional funding for their students who are classified as at risk according to the school funding formula (students from low-income families, English learners, and students who are highly mobile) in order to meet their additional educational needs. Community schools are named in the statute as an evidence-based service for which these funds can be spent. Third, the 2019 Legislature amended the 2013 Community Schools Act to better define community schools and provide \$2 million in grant funding to be administered by the New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED).

The response was extraordinary. In September 2019, 111 applications representing 119 schools were submitted to NMPED, representing about 12% of the state’s schools and all regions of the state—urban and rural. The 2020 Legislature doubled the amount of funding to \$4 million, although that was reduced in the COVID-19 special session to \$3.3 million. Together, in 2020–21, those funds supported 29 community schools.

Most recently, New Mexico community schools—like others around the country—have demonstrated their potential for supporting students and families in times of crisis. In response to school closures in the COVID-19 pandemic, they have helped move teaching and learning online, worked with partners to equip students with technology for distance learning, shared food and essential supplies from their food pantries, monitored students’ well-being by phone and video conferencing, and even tapped into an emergency fund to address the most dire financial needs of their communities. In this report, we offer a set of short-term and longer-term recommendations that build on New Mexico’s progress and respond to widespread support. These recommendations focus on creating the capacity and infrastructure required to scale, over time, the community schools strategy (including expanded learning time) to all schools in which at least 80% of students come from low-income families.

Immediate, low-cost steps that could be taken during the COVID-19 recovery period include:

- Support districts, tribally controlled schools, and Bureau of Indian Education schools to **blend and braid funds to support community schools**, including state funding for at-risk students, expanded learning time, and state grants through the Indian Education Act, as well as federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers grants and school improvement funding. This could include permitting combined applications, budgets, and reporting.
- Position community schools **to become hubs for aligned and coordinated programs across agencies** by providing leadership and guidance from a cross-agency body, such as the governor’s Children’s Cabinet and the Department of Indian Affairs. This approach would increase access, as well as create funding efficiencies by avoiding duplication of essential supports for children and families.
- Develop **targeted educator professional development programs** that teach the competencies required for managing successful community schools and expanded learning time, planning and implementing services and strategies in collaboration with communities and tribes, and blending and braiding funding.
- Collect **sufficient data to enable oversight of community schools and to inform ongoing school improvement**. In addition to the comprehensive data required of all schools, the state could collect leading indicators and process data to better understand the degree to which the community schools framework is being implemented.

In the longer term, the state can adopt policies and make new investments that enable all of New Mexico’s highest-poverty schools to become comprehensive community schools:

- Reinstate **funding for K–5 Plus and Extended Learning Time programs and increase investments** in community schools. These funds can be combined and supplemented with related state and federal funding (e.g., funds from the at-risk index in the state formula and federal Title I allocations) to ensure that every school in which at least 80% of students come from low-income families has a sustainable community schools infrastructure, including a full-time coordinator and funding for expanded learning.
- **Establish a system of regional supports** to offer technical assistance and professional development to help districts implement community schools and expanded learning effectively, including tribal collaboration where appropriate. This could be part of a larger state effort to increase the regional capacity of NMPED.
- **Create incentives for local nonprofit and business partnerships** to ensure local participation and communitywide ownership.

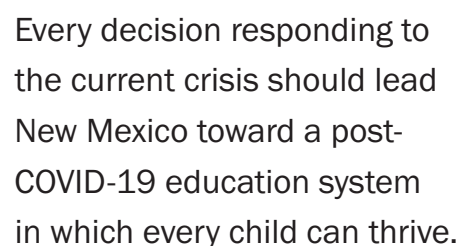
Introduction

Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, New Mexico had taken important steps toward revamping its education system, confronting and seeking remedies to long-standing adequacy and equity challenges that have diminished the lives and schooling of its children. Launching and funding a statewide community schools initiative was one promising action, initiated by the Legislature and implemented by the New Mexico Public Education Department in 2019.

For most of the state's history, the education system in New Mexico has struggled in a social and economic context that has been unable to lift a large proportion of young people out of poverty or address the barriers that poverty creates to school success. Weaknesses in the education system, together with the state's extraordinarily high poverty and limited economic opportunity, have undermined the state's stability, health, and quality of life. This grim circumstance helps explain the state's bottom rankings on nearly every index of childhood and adult well-being. For example, after reviewing multiple family, school, and socioeconomic indicators that play into students' prospects for positive adult outcomes, *Education Week* in 2020 ranked New Mexico 50th nationally on its Chance-for-Success Index.¹

However, in the past 2 years—in part as a result of the court decree in the *Martinez/Yazzie* lawsuit challenging educational inequalities, and in part as a result of new revenues flowing into the state from an oil and gas boom—these issues have been put front and center. The state has begun to address many of the long-standing adequacy and equity challenges that have characterized the education of its children and to make progress toward a stronger, more equitable system.

The current moment is precarious. The state's poorest, most vulnerable children are experiencing the direst effects of closed schools, job losses, and declines in state revenue. Now is not the time to settle for just restarting the state's demonstrably inadequate education system. Even with cutbacks to education funding, as well as to other social and economic supports, now is the time to continue efforts to make things right. Although changes requiring big new investments cannot be made now, every decision responding to the current crisis should lead New Mexico toward a post-COVID-19 education system in which every child can thrive. As implausible as it may sound, there is much that can be done now to lay the groundwork for a more equitable and effective system to emerge as the economy recovers and funds flow back into schools.



Every decision responding to the current crisis should lead New Mexico toward a post-COVID-19 education system in which every child can thrive.

Key to New Mexico's education's successful recovery and to long-term improvement is recognizing that children and young people who face barriers to school success from poverty and systemic racism are the norm in the state, rather than exceptions. Accordingly, the state must design its education system with their diverse needs at the center, rather than placing them at the periphery, where they might get "special" help. That means developing, adopting, adequately resourcing, and implementing education policies, structures, and practices that both foster high levels of meaningful learning and counterbalance the out-of-school barriers most New Mexico children face.

Such an approach aligns with the state’s pledge—already established in statute—that “no education system can be sufficient for the education of all children unless it is founded on the sound principle that every child can learn and succeed.”²

This report focuses on community schools as one such approach that can help the state improve the education success of New Mexico children growing up in poverty, even as the state recovers from the COVID-19 crisis. Based on a yearlong study of the challenges facing New Mexico schools, we recommend that New Mexico adopt a community schools approach as the norm in communities of concentrated poverty.³

A community schools approach involves schools partnering with the local community to provide high-quality teaching and learning and additional resources and supports to help mitigate the barriers to school success that poverty erects. Indeed, community schools have shown themselves to be well positioned to support student learning and well-being during the COVID-19 shutdowns because they were already deeply rooted in their students’ lives, with well-established relationships and communication approaches in place that enable them to stay aware of and responsive to the needs of students and their families.

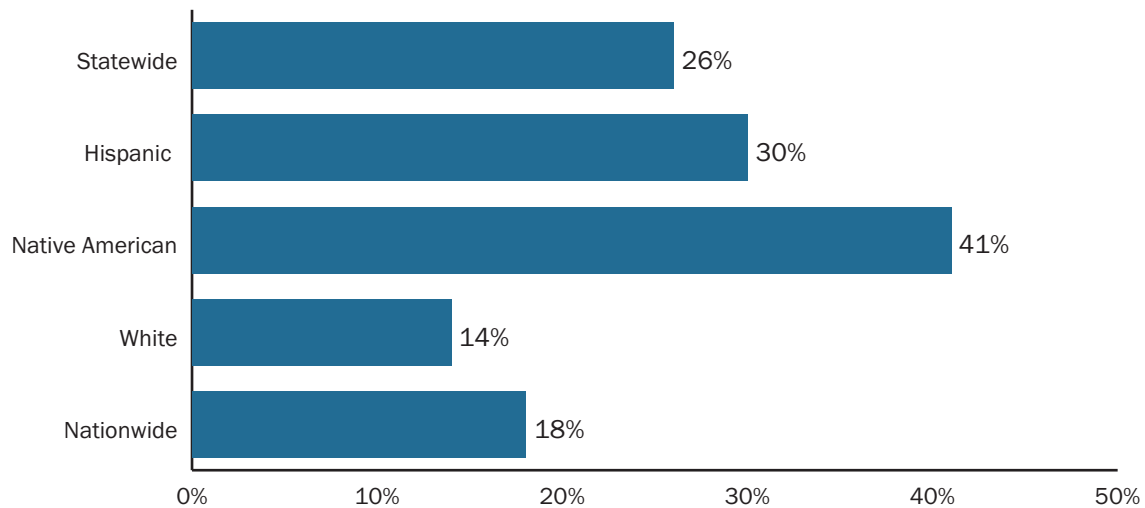
In the sections that follow, this report lays out the state’s clear need for a community schools approach, provides the evidence base for its effectiveness, and describes the state’s first steps in this direction. We conclude with specific recommendations for accelerating progress toward making community schools available to students from low-income families at scale across the state. These recommendations build on New Mexico’s prior support for community schools. They focus on creating the capacity and infrastructure required for the state to employ the strategy statewide. These recommendations include ensuring sufficient resources, blending and braiding multiple state and federal programs and funding, providing technical assistance for full implementation, and strengthening accountability. Certainly, the current recession will not be the time to make the investments that some of these recommendations require. For the near term, we offer a set of recommendations for what could be done without an infusion of new funds. However, all of the recommendations should become part of the state’s long-term plan for fundamental improvement.

Poverty Constrains Teaching and Learning in New Mexico

In 2018, 75% of New Mexico’s students qualified for federally subsidized meals because of their families’ low incomes.⁴ More than a quarter of children under age 18 (142,448) lived below the federal poverty line, and 35% lived in families where no parent had secure employment.⁵ A quarter lived in households that were food insecure,⁶ and 37% lived with families receiving public assistance. Twelve percent of New Mexico teens between 16 and 19 were neither in school nor working. All of these were among the highest rates in the nation.⁷ These statewide rates mask even higher poverty rates for New Mexico’s Native American (41%) and Hispanic children (35%). (See Figure 1).

Figure 1
Poverty Impacts Many New Mexico Children of Color

Children in poverty by race/ethnicity, 2018



Data source: Annie E. Casey Foundation. (n.d.). Kids Count Data Center. <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/> (accessed 05/02/20).

Poverty triggers a constellation of conditions that negatively impact children’s school success and well-being—food insecurity, substandard housing or homelessness, unsafe neighborhoods, lack of access to social and health services, and a range of traumatic experiences. Studies document the negative effects of growing up in poverty on children’s academic performance and behavior in school.⁸ Hunger and poor nutrition, housing instability and homelessness, physical disability, lack of health care, trauma, and stress all take a toll on students’ well-being and school success.⁹

These conditions (life experiences) tend not to exist in isolation; they compound exponentially, as do the barriers they create.¹⁰ Children in poor families also have less access to enriched or supplemental learning opportunities that wealthier parents can provide to their children; these include books, tutors, computers, summer camps, and more.¹¹ Together, these economic and education disparities contribute to the lower educational outcomes of children in low-income families and communities.

Although students disadvantaged by poverty are found everywhere in the state, 21% of all New Mexico children live in census tracts with poverty rates of 30% or more, including many in urban areas.¹² These are neighborhoods that are more likely than others to have high rates of crime and violence, physical and mental health issues, unemployment, and other problems. In fact, 8% of New Mexico parents and guardians reported that they “somewhat disagree” or “definitely disagree” that their child is “safe in our neighborhood”—the highest rate of any state.¹³

Concentrated poverty is the norm in rural communities with significant Native American populations, such as in McKinley County, where 46% of children live below the poverty line. Most New Mexico schools have high concentrations of students living in poverty. A full 87% qualify for federal Title I funding that is targeted at schools.

Although it is widely understood that children from low-income families perform less well on standardized tests than their better-off peers, research also makes clear that “concentrated poverty” makes matters worse. The negative effects of living in a community of concentrated poverty compound the impact of students’ own socioeconomic status. Hundreds of studies have shown that students from low-income families who attend more advantaged schools do better than students from low-income families who attend schools where most students are also from low-income families. A school’s *average* socioeconomic status has as much of an influence on a student’s academic achievement as his or her individual socioeconomic status.¹⁴

In New Mexico, students from low-income families are heavily concentrated in about 46% of public schools. These high-poverty schools are those in which 80% or more of students qualify for federally subsidized meals. These schools, on average, struggle to provide students a high-quality education. Consequently, large proportions of students in high-poverty schools are not learning at grade level (see Figure 2).¹⁵ For example, on average, 40% fewer students were learning at grade level in mathematics in high-poverty schools compared to their peers in schools serving lower concentrations of students from low-income backgrounds.

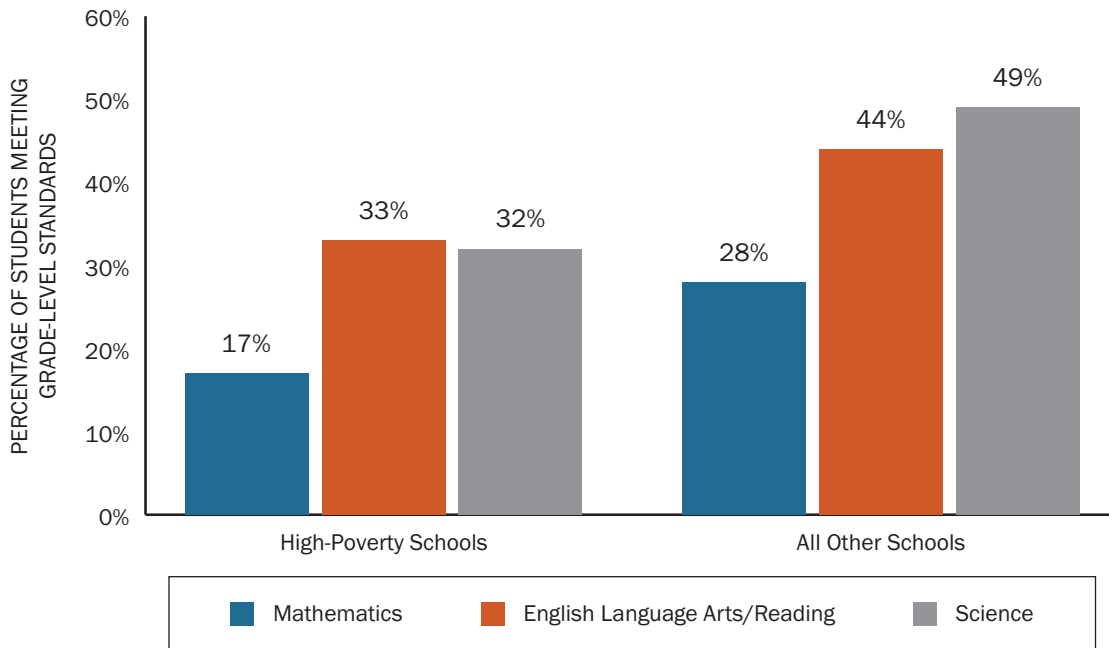
One reason for this is that schools with high concentrations of students from low-income families have less access to high-quality learning resources and supports than schools with fewer such students. This is clearly demonstrated in New Mexico by disparities in access to experienced teachers (Figure 3). On average, 36% of teachers in schools where at least 75% of students come from low-income families were first- or second-year teachers. This is far higher than the 19% average at schools with the lowest poverty rates (schools with poverty rates of 25% or less).¹⁶ Note, too, that all of these percentages are far higher than the national average of 9% first- and second-year teachers.¹⁷

In poor communities, such as those in New Mexico, the multiple well-documented barriers to learning cannot be well addressed on a child-by-child, crisis-by-crisis basis. Yet aside from minimal screening, attending to children’s crises or disruptiveness, and best efforts to refer students to outside providers (when such are available), schools are rarely equipped with the time, money, trained personnel, or institutional mission required to address the learning obstacles associated with poverty. The need for schoolwide approaches and coordination with other child- and family-serving agencies could not be clearer.

New Mexico has begun to address these needs with the at-risk weighting in the State Equalization Guarantee, or funding formula, that provides additional funding for students from low-income families. However, the funds currently available are not enough to address all of the many needs. Moreover, it is more than a problem of insufficient funding. Many districts are unaware of what they can do to provide students with the right kinds of supports to offset barriers to their learning.

Figure 2 High Concentration of Poverty Harms Student Learning

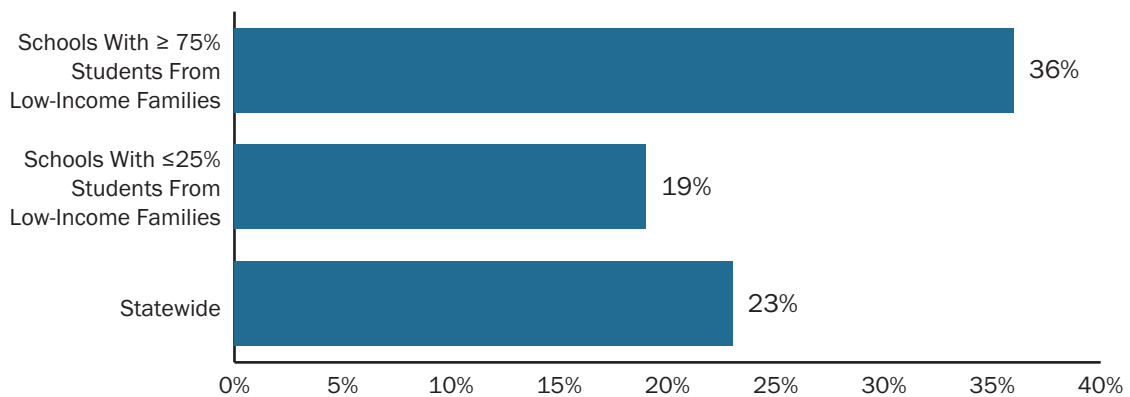
Average percentage of students meeting grade-level standards, 2017–18



Note: High-poverty schools are those in which 80% or more of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch through the National School Lunch Program.

Data sources: New Mexico Public Education Department. (n.d.). District Report Card 2018: Proficiencies by school. <https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/bureaus/accountability/district-report-cards/> (accessed 05/02/20); New Mexico Public Education Department. (2020). Student success and wellness data: FRL Eligibility Report SY 2017–2018. <https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/bureaus/student-success-wellness/student-success-wellness-data/> (accessed 05/04/20).

Figure 3 Average Percentage of Inexperienced Teachers by Schools Serving the Most and the Fewest Students From Low-Income Families, 2018–19



Note: Analysis defines students from low-income families as students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch through the National School Lunch Program.

Data source: New Mexico Public Education Department. (n.d.). New Mexico Vistas. <https://newmexicoschools.com/> (accessed 07/24/20).

Why Community Schools?

Schools alone cannot “fix” widespread poverty, but evidence-based interventions that provide additional supports and resources can mitigate the disadvantages associated with poverty so that all students can approach having the opportunities and safety nets that are comparable to those of more advantaged students.¹⁸ Effective strategies to address the needs of students growing up in poverty include high-quality prekindergarten programs, whole-child approaches to k–12 schooling, wraparound services, school support personnel available at ratios that meet national standards, and additional learning time and opportunities beyond the regular school day. These supports help counter the harms of the cumulative disadvantages associated with poverty described above.¹⁹

Community schools is one such intervention. Community schools is a research-based strategy for mitigating the educational disadvantages associated with poverty and for improving students’ attendance, behavior, and achievement by making schools the hub of community resources using a whole-child approach. Like every good school, community schools must have a foundation of powerful teaching of challenging academic content and support for students’ mastery of 21st-century competencies. Community schools also create opportunities to enrich teaching and learning during the school day by aligning out-of-school time and the real world of communities to classroom instruction.

Community schools is an approach to schooling based on evidence-based principles, rather than a “program” that must be implemented uniformly across locales. They are built with four pillars—integrated health and social supports, expanded learning time and opportunities, strong family and community

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engagement, and collaborative leadership and practice—in a way that meets community needs and uses community assets (see Figure 4). Together, these pillars provide more than wraparound services.²⁰ Collaborating with local partners, community schools provide health and social supports, expanded learning opportunities, and strong family and community engagement.

Community schools are particularly effective in communities of concentrated poverty where few families and neighborhoods are able to supplement what traditional schools provide. Notably, however, the approach is not designed only for schools in low-income communities. Rather, the approach can be used to establish and sustain best practices in any school. There is little in the community schools strategy that does not promise to benefit all schools. In fact, many schools in more advantaged communities already provide many of the features of community schools.²¹

An Evidence-Based Approach

National research finds that, when well designed and fully implemented, these schools increase student success and reduce gaps in both opportunity and achievement. They reduce gaps in students’ learning opportunities, improve students’ outcomes, create more positive school climates, and foster trusting relationships among adults and children that are crucial for learning.²²

Figure 4
Four Community Schools Pillars



Source: Maier, A, Daniel, J., Oakes, J. & Lam, L. (2017). *Community schools as an effective school improvement strategy: A review of the evidence*. Learning Policy Institute.

The Learning Policy Institute’s review of 143 research studies of community schools found that community schools can meet the needs of students in high-poverty schools by improving student attendance, academic achievement, and behavior, in addition to providing more positive school climates.²³ Community schools can help close opportunity and achievement gaps for students from low-income families, students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities. These studies of community school effectiveness are strong enough that the community schools approach meets the evidence-based standard for school improvement interventions under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).²⁴ Most recently, research from the RAND Corporation has focused on the community schools effort in New York City. New York City Community Schools, an initiative of the city’s Department of Education, has scaled up more than 250 of these schools and has seen notable gains in early indicators of student success, such as attendance rates, grade advancement, and graduation. Also notable is that the study reports that these schools have significantly lowered disciplinary incidents.²⁵ Significantly, the most effective community schools have the four key features identified in the New Mexico Community Schools Act: (1) integrated student supports, (2) expanded learning time and opportunities, (3) family and community engagement, and (4) collaborative leadership and practice.²⁶

Notably, some of the positive evidence about expanded learning time, specifically, comes from New Mexico. New Mexico has piloted a program (formerly K–3 Plus, now called K–5 Plus) that provides 25 additional days of instruction during the summer for students in the early grades. This instruction is focused on reading, writing, and mathematics. Although there have been implementation problems in New Mexico, a careful evaluation of the program showed that, when it was implemented with fidelity to the program principles (e.g., having teachers teach the students they have during the regular year), participating students were far more likely than others to score as proficient, and the positive impact was greatest on students from low-income families.²⁷ Specifically, an independent, scientific evaluation found that students enrolled in K–3 Plus in the summer prior to kindergarten were more ready for school and outperformed their peers. They continued to have higher levels of achievement 4 years later.²⁸ Embedding expanded learning time within robust community schools could ease the implementation challenges.

New knowledge about human learning and development also demonstrates that a positive school environment that supports children’s social and emotional development is not a frill to be attended to after academics and discipline are taken care of. Instead, it is the primary pathway to effective learning.²⁹ This whole-child approach to learning is powerful for all children. For children who experience trauma in their lives, this approach helps mitigate its negative effects on learning and development. It also can reduce the negative effects of poverty on achievement, boosting grades, test scores, and student engagement.³⁰

The whole-child approach to learning is powerful for all children. For children who experience trauma in their lives, this approach helps mitigate its negative effects on learning and development. It also can reduce the negative effects of poverty on achievement, boosting grades, test scores, and student engagement.

Given the extent of concentrated poverty in New Mexico, the priority should be to enable all high-poverty schools to become community schools that provide integrated supports to meet the extraordinary needs of children and families in those settings. Providing such services and interventions will not bankrupt an already poor state. Cost analyses find a return on investment ranging from \$3 to \$15 for every dollar spent, accruing from less grade retention, lower dropout rates, and higher graduation rates, and—in the long term—higher wages and taxpayer savings from higher employment and lower incarceration rates.³¹

New Mexico Has Made a Good Start

Community schools are not new to New Mexico. In 1939, the University of New Mexico published *Nambé*—a book documenting a community school in the Spanish-speaking northern New Mexico village adjacent to Nambé tribal land, using the following approach:

A school should be the center of the community. It should be sensitive to the needs of the community, and in cooperation with parents, plan a program that will make the best use of all available resources. Such an environment should stimulate pupils to engage in many activities. Through participating in planning, executing, and evaluating their work, they will learn to think and learn the facts and tools of learning. They should find the school a vital place in which to live.³²

Community schools garnered renewed interest within the state in 2007, when the Atlantic Philanthropies chose New Mexico as one of four sites in which to launch Elev8, a national community-schools model for the middle grades in low-income communities. Elev8 was aimed at demonstrating that school systems can build their capacity to serve students from low-income families by linking public, private, and nonprofit resources and activities in the community. With Atlantic’s support, five middle schools located in diverse communities across New Mexico and their partners expanded learning during the school year and summers; established school-based health centers to address students’ physical and emotional needs; and supported families and communities to create healthy and stable neighborhoods, as well as improving school success.

Partly as a result, New Mexico educators, advocates, and the general public grew eager to see community schools go to scale in the state. LPI’s analysis of 13 recent education reform reports in the state found that all 13 point to the need for New Mexico to incorporate whole-child supports into the education system.³³ The most frequently cited recommendations include increasing access to high-quality early childhood programs, providing wraparound services and supportive community partnerships, integrating social and emotional learning and strengthening school climate, increasing parent and family engagement, and extending and enriching learning through after-school and out-of-school programs. Specific recommendations for wraparound services include access to nutritious food, transportation, assistance with expenses, parental support and training, community wellness and health programs, nursing services, school counseling, and/or mental health services. Acknowledging that wraparound services must recognize both in-school and out-of-school challenges, the superintendents’ association, for example, calls for a comprehensive conversation about social services and supports and how social services may coordinate with schools to serve children in New Mexico.³⁴

In 2013, in response to the growing support for community schools, New Mexico adopted the Community Schools Act, which allowed any public school to be transformed into a community school, with goals to improve school climate, improve student achievement and growth, and create incentives to grow and sustain community partnerships. Although the act defined community schools, identified strategies for their implementation, and set forth eligibility criteria for state grants, no funds were appropriated for the act until the 2019 legislative session.

The absence of state resources and technical assistance has meant that community schools have been implemented only as a result of local efforts. Even so, those efforts have grown. In 2019, the Legislative Education Study Committee (LESC) identified 39 community schools in the Albuquerque, Las Cruces, and Santa Fe districts. However, due to limited resources and capacity, many of these schools are unable to provide the types and amounts of support needed by students.

Moreover, the supports and interventions that do exist are not fully integrated into the public education system. Nearly all are voluntary, funded by philanthropy and charities, or dependent upon an informal partnership. Although these outside actors all make important contributions to community schools, sustainability requires that community schools also be part of a guaranteed public infrastructure supported by public resources.

Outside actors make important contributions to community schools, but sustainability requires that community schools be part of a guaranteed public infrastructure supported by public resources.

In a study examining community schools in Albuquerque Public Schools, Las Cruces Public Schools, and Santa Fe Public Schools, the LESC found results similar to those of other studies. Community schools that had been in operation for more than 5 years and that had fully implemented integrated student supports, expanded learning time, family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership showed better-than-average growth in student achievement scores. Many had a higher proportion of classrooms with highly effective teachers, higher attendance rates, and higher opportunity-to-learn scores than district schools not using the community schools approach.³⁵ Significantly, the comparison of achievement growth in community schools with those in other district schools created a very high bar for community schools, given what we know about the effect of poverty on student achievement. That the community schools kept pace with and exceeded other district schools is a notable accomplishment, specifically because they enrolled far greater proportions of students from low-income families than other schools.³⁶ Moreover, although state data did not permit assessing the impact on other key outcomes, local evaluations of community schools in Santa Fe and Albuquerque using district and school data show higher attendance, grades, and graduation rates, as well as positive impacts on student behavior and well-being.³⁷ Notably, however, New Mexico's community schools vary considerably in the extent and quality of their implementation and, as a consequence, in their achievements.³⁸

2019 Policy Actions for Community Schools

In 2019, three policy actions altered the landscape significantly by initiating state support for community schools. First, the new administration's amendments to the state's ESSA plan (specifying how the state will use federal funding from the Elementary and Secondary Education

Act) establish that any school identified as needing “comprehensive support and improvement” or “targeted support and improvement” under ESSA may elect to use the community schools initiative as part of an evidence-based intervention.

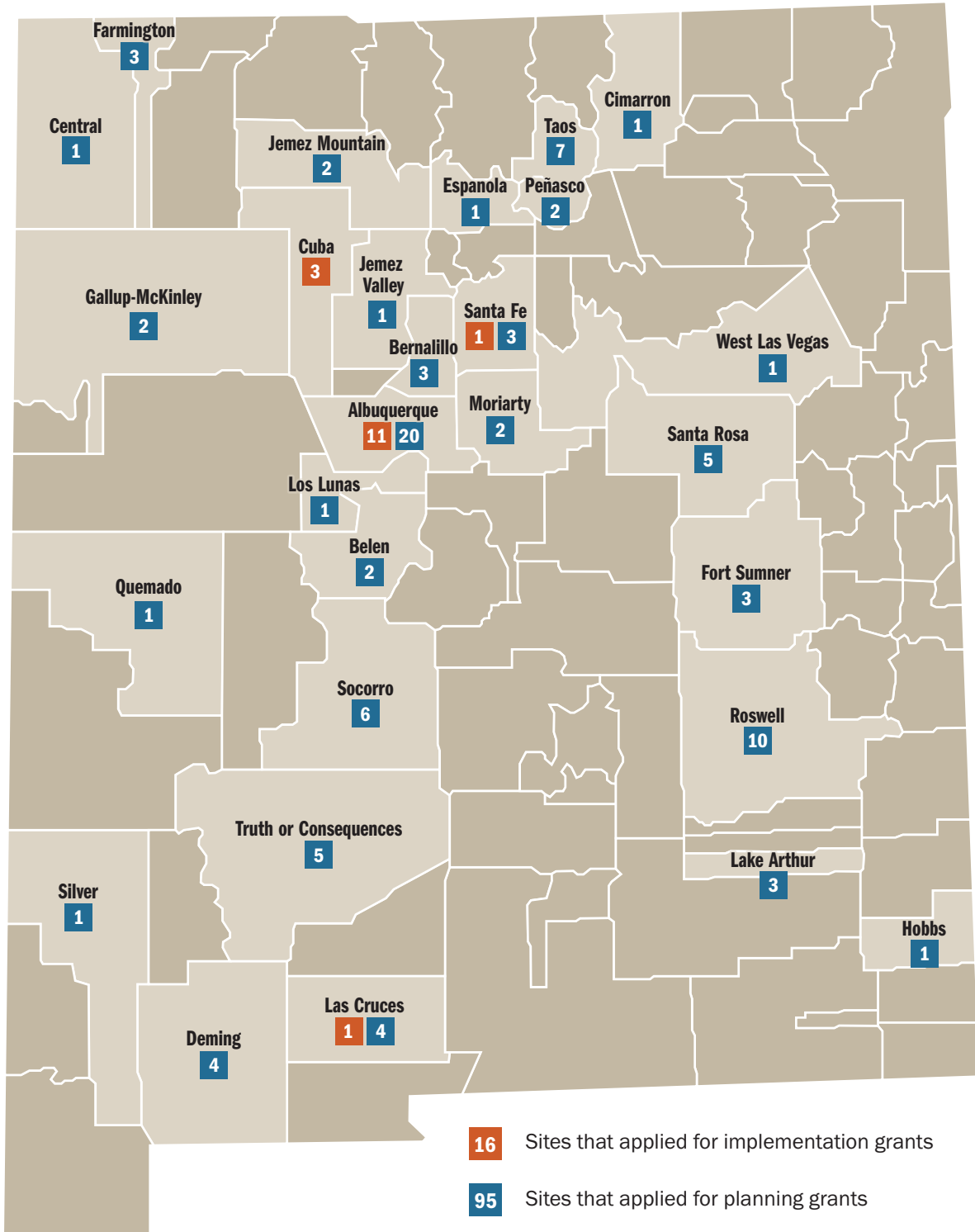
Second, the Legislature increased its “at-risk” index in 2019 and 2020 to .30. That means that districts receive additional funding for their students who are classified as at risk (those who are low-income, English learners, or highly mobile) in order to meet their additional educational needs. Community schools are named in the statute as an evidence-based service for which these funds can be spent.

Third, the 2019 Legislature amended the 2013 Community Schools Act to better define community schools and provide \$2 million in grant funding to be administered by the New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED). New Mexico statute now identifies a community school as “a public school that partners with families and the community, including tribal partners, nonprofit community-based organizations and local businesses, to provide well-rounded educational opportunities and supports for student success.” It specifies that community schools include “culturally and linguistically responsive instruction, programs and services and restorative practices that focus on building and maintaining relationships” and “the use of research- and evidence-based strategies and best practices that support students, families and communities in ensuring student success.” The Community Schools Act also encourages federal, state, local, and tribal governments to work with community-based organizations to improve the coordination, delivery, effectiveness, and efficiency of services provided to students and families. These strategies all build the four pillars of community schools identified in the research literature and depicted earlier in this report.³⁹

The 2019 amendments also required that NMPED appoint a New Mexico Coalition for Community Schools to support implementation. This group includes representatives from the New Mexico affiliates of the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, as well as leaders of organizations such as the ABC-Community School Partnership in Albuquerque and Bernalillo County; the Las Cruces Partnership for Community Schools; and Communities in Schools of New Mexico, located in Santa Fe; among others. NMPED worked with the coalition to establish a detailed rule to implement the program, develop applications, and define an awards process to ensure that funded community schools meet the statute’s definition of community schools.

The response was quite extraordinary. In September 2019, 111 applications representing 119 schools were submitted to NMPED, representing about 12% of the state’s schools and all regions of the state—urban and rural. As depicted on the map in Figure 5, 95 of the applications were for 1-year \$50,000 planning grants to establish new comprehensive community schools. The other 16 (representing 19 schools) were for 3-year \$150,000-per-year implementation grants to strengthen existing community schools. The implementation grant enables the school to hire a full-time coordinator to be responsible for joint planning with the principal and school leadership team; recruitment, facilitation, and convening of partners; collaboration with school staff; facilitating regular partner meetings; and using data to determine services and program needs and gaps and to recruit partners to fill gaps. The \$2 million in 2019 funded less than a third of the applicants in each category: 26 planning grants and 6 implementation grants. The NMPED prioritized underperforming schools that were identified under ESSA as needing improvement.

Figure 5
Demand for Community Schools in New Mexico



Source: New Mexico Public Education Department. (2019).

The 2020 Legislature doubled the amount of funding to \$4 million, although that was reduced in the special session to \$3.3 million. That is still far too little to support all of schools with planning grants to move into implementation and to bring more than a few new schools into the program. The NMPED received 44 applications in spring 2020. It decided to support implementation in 23 of the original grant recipients (totaling 27 schools) and bring three new schools into the program. It also funded three additional schools that were seeking to use Title I school improvement funding to implement a community schools approach. Therefore, the state is supporting 33 community schools in 2020–21.

In addition to providing less funding than is needed for direct support to schools, the Legislature did not commit any funds for providing the technical assistance and professional development that is needed to ensure strong and sustainable implementation. The NMPED has redirected some staff positions to provide support to the schools receiving state grants, but this support has focused mostly on fulfilling the grant requirements.

Notably, some grantees are tailoring their community schools approach to New Mexico’s unique context and the need for culturally and linguistically responsive practices. For example, in the southern part of the state, Raíces del Saber Xinachtli Community School in the Las Cruces Public School District is using its state grant to implement a community school rooted in an indigenous curriculum.

Cuba Independent School District (CISD) in northern New Mexico is using the community schools approach in all three of its schools. CISD’s plan is to offer expanded learning time programs focused on Navajo culture and integrated supports for its mostly rural and impoverished students. The high school will offer Bilingual Seal classes for two world languages: Spanish and Navajo. It also plans to partner with Navajo leaders to use a large hogan (traditional Navajo dwelling) that was built on CISD property in spring 2020 for offering cultural programs and services such as traditional Native counseling. Seasonal activities are planned, including sweat lodge ceremonies, hogan talking circles, and storytelling. After-school programs will be offered as well, such as basket-weaving, silversmithing, moccasin making, jewelry making, farming/agriculture, horticulture, and studies of cultures and languages. Notably, CISD sees the approach as a way to address the challenge of building bridges culturally and geographically with the tribal communities from which a majority of its students come. CISD is also supporting this effort with grant funding under the Indian Education Act. Additionally, CISD participates in the state-funded K–5 Plus and expanded learning time programs.

Most recently, New Mexico community schools—like others around the country—have demonstrated their potential for supporting students and families in times of crisis. In response to school closures in the COVID-19 pandemic, they have helped move teaching and learning online, worked with partners to equip students with technology for distance learning, shared food and essential supplies from their food pantries, monitored students’ well-being by phone and video conferencing, and even tapped into an emergency fund to address the most dire financial needs of their communities.⁴⁰

Building on all these steps, much more can be done to realize the promise of community schools across the state’s high-poverty communities.

Next Steps for Community Schools

Below we offer a set of short-term and longer-term recommendations that build on New Mexico's progress. These recommendations focus on creating the capacity and infrastructure required for the state to employ the community schools strategy for sustainable school improvement in high-poverty schools statewide. These recommendations include ensuring sufficient resources, blending and braiding multiple state and federal programs and funding, providing technical assistance for full implementation, and guaranteeing accountability. Importantly, they avoid creating a blizzard of uncoordinated categorical programs in order to expand mental health services, increase learning time, and provide other needed supports.

Immediate, Low-Cost Steps That Could Be Taken During the COVID-19 Recovery Period

1. NMPED could support districts, tribally controlled schools, and Bureau of Indian Education schools to **blend and braid education-related funds** to support community schools, including state funding for at-risk students, expanded learning time, and state grants through the Indian Education Act, as well as federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers grants and Title I school improvement funding. This could include permitting combined applications, budgets, and reporting. The Legislature could remove any statutory constraints to such consolidation and alignment.
2. A cross-agency body, such as the governor's Children's Cabinet, in collaboration with the Department of Indian Affairs and NMPED, could provide leadership and guidance to districts and other state agencies to **blend and braid state and federal funds across agencies** to support integrated supports and a community schools approach. This would enable the state to use community schools as hubs for aligned and coordinated programs across agencies, which would increase children's and families' access to services, as well as create funding efficiencies by avoiding duplication of essential supports. The Children's Cabinet could adopt a set of shared indicators of progress and results in increasing educational success and child well-being, including agencies' support for and engagement with community schools.⁴¹
3. NMPED could, in collaboration with educators and educator preparation programs, develop targeted **educator professional learning programs that teach the competencies required for managing successful community schools and expanded learning time**, planning and implementing services and strategies in collaboration with communities and tribes, and blending and braiding funding. For example, one strategy might be to develop a "micro-credential" teacher and administrator professional development program modeled after the National Education Association's set of eight Community Schools Improvement Science Micro-Credentials⁴² designed to provide knowledge and skills to implement a best practice version of the community schools strategy.
4. The NMPED could **collect sufficient data to enable oversight** of community schools and to inform ongoing school improvement. NMPED could require that each school receiving state community schools funds conduct and submit an annual assessment on the progress of the programs and services of the community school. That assessment should include metrics related to (1) community school culture and climate; (2) student academic achievement and community-based learning; (3) student attendance; (4) student behavior; (5) quality family engagement; and (6) for high schools, graduation rates and readiness

for college or a career. In addition to outcome data, the state should collect process and implementation data to better understand the degree to which the community schools framework is being implemented at community schools and, where appropriate, how tribal collaboration is adding value to the approach.

Longer-Term Steps to Be Taken When Funding Returns

1. The Legislature could **reinstate funding for the K–5 Plus and Expanded Learning Time programs and increase investments in community schools**. These new funds can be combined and supplemented with related state and federal funding (e.g., funds from the at-risk index in the state formula and federal Title I allocations) to ensure that every school in which at least 80% of students come from low-income families has a sustainable community schools infrastructure, including a full-time coordinator and funding for expanded learning.

Specific actions could include increasing the “concentration of poverty” weight in the State Equalization Guarantee, or funding formula, which would supplement the formula’s current allocation of funding for at-risk students to enable all schools with at least 80% students from low-income families to use a community schools approach with expanded learning time. Alternatively, the state could convert its community schools grants to an entitlement for all high-poverty schools, as Maryland and New York have done, in which every high-poverty district receives an annual formula allocation for community schools (\$250,000 per school in Maryland; \$150,000 per school in New York).⁴³

2. The Legislature could fund, and the NMPED could implement (in collaboration with the state-appointed Coalition of Community Schools), **a system of regional supports to help districts implement community schools** and expanded learning time in ways that match the needs of diverse locales, including forging local partnerships. This could include a small number of specialized technical assistance centers in the state housed at regional education cooperatives, universities, or large districts that assist with blending and braiding funding across programs and agencies, reporting and accountability, professional development, and structured opportunities to make high-quality teaching and learning the foundation of community schools. Here, too, New York provides an example. It provides state-funded technical assistance to support districts’ and schools’ use of community schools set-aside funds. Three community schools Technical Assistance Centers (TACs) are dedicated to helping start and sustain community schools initiatives. The responsibilities of the TACs include statewide dissemination of information on effective and promising practices in the establishment and ongoing management of community schools strategies through professional development and technical assistance.⁴⁴
3. **Create incentives for local nonprofit and business partnerships** to ensure local participation and communitywide ownership. A statewide task force on school–community partnerships, with representation from businesses, mayors, and the nonprofit sector, could make recommendations and provide guidance to the NMPED and to the community schools regional support centers about engaging partners to provide well-rounded educational opportunities and supports for student success through the community schools framework. This should include connecting middle school and high school community schools with state and local efforts to develop college and career pathways, including by leveraging local and regional partners from key industry sectors, such as health care, agriculture, engineering, and construction.

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