

# Standing with the 20% of Young People Disconnected from School and the Workplace



To Improve Student Attendance and Increase High School Graduation Rates in New Mexico



## The Strategies:

New Mexico needs a comprehensive, student-centered strategy for dealing with chronic absenteeism and low graduation rates. Rather than repeating existing educational practices, we must reconnect young people with high schools by emphasizing a holistic approach that prepares them for post-secondary education, career pathways, civic engagement, and nurtures their well-being.

The NM Public Education Department has a plan for doing this, specifically focusing on:

**Student Empowerment and Well-Being:** Prioritizing student input in decision-making for a more inclusive and supportive educational environment.

**Hands-On Community-Connected Learning:** Emphasizing the importance of experiential learning by connecting schools and communities, offering internships, and integrating real-life experiences into education.

**Culture of Belonging, Safety, and Care:** Addressing social issues affecting students' well-being by fostering strong relationships and embedding cultural assets within the learning environment.

**Building Infrastructure Between Schools and Communities:** Co-designing systems, policies, and partnerships to engage young people and meet economic and cultural demands.

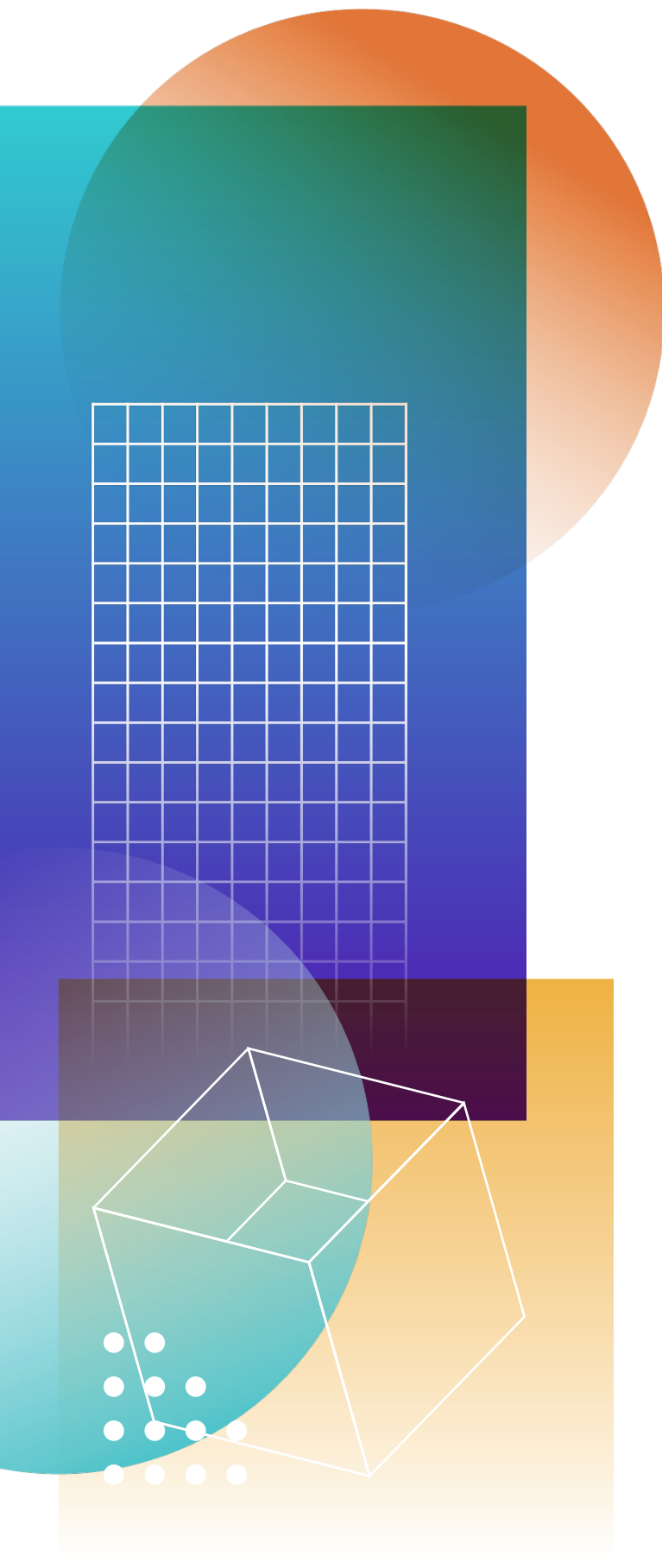


## The Initiatives:

The following initiatives aim to create an educational landscape that values student empowerment, holistic development, community integration, and innovative learning experiences to re-engage disconnected youth and improve student outcomes in New Mexico:

- **Attendance, Special Education, and Behavioral Health Initiatives (\$18M):** Includes Attendance Interventions, Mental Health First Aid, ReEngagement Strategies, Credit Recovery, Equitable Graduation Pathways for Students with Disabilities.
- **Innovation Zones and Work-Based Learning Initiative (\$48M):** Funding for Career Technical Education programs, high school transformation, and community engagement.
- **Community Schools Initiative (\$12.5M):** Transforming schools into collaborative hubs involving educators, communities, families, and students to enhance learning conditions and student development.





## The Details

In the pursuit of reconnecting young people with high schools in New Mexico, it is imperative to develop a holistic approach that prepares students for post-secondary education, career pathways, and civic engagement while nurturing their well-being. The 20% of young people who are sorted out of high school by the current system will not be persuaded to return for more of the same, and any effort to improve chronic absenteeism and increase graduation rates begins and ends with the voices of the young people who have voted with their feet by disconnecting from high school and the workplace. New Mexican students deserve a comprehensive strategy aimed at transforming the educational landscape in New Mexico, emphasizing student empowerment and well-being. The success of this strategy depends upon quality infrastructure between schools and community to provide hands-on community-connected learning experiences aligned with the graduate profile designed by the local community. The New Mexico Public Education Department has a plan to provide the infrastructure necessary for this vision to become a reality, sooner rather than later, by investing in **Innovation Zones** to reimagine the student experience of learning in High School, **Work-Based Learning and Capstone Projects to re-engage disconnected youth** and provide hands-on community-connected learning, and the **Community Schools Strategy** to transform schools into places where educators, local community members, families, and students work together to strengthen conditions for student learning and healthy development.

## Student Empowerment and Well-Being

Prioritizing student voice and empowering students to be active participants in decision-making processes about their learning lays the foundation for a more inclusive, supportive, and relevant educational environment. **The answer to why students are leaving is not found in a spreadsheet or a staff meeting**, but in the lived realities of the young people in our state. By integrating their input into the decision-making fabric, we create a space where students feel valued and heard, and develop solutions that are responsive to the genuine root-causes of disengagement. Students across the state have been clear that reconnecting with high schools necessitates access to relevant, hands-on, learning experiences as well as a school culture of belonging, safety, and care—a culture that values young people for who they are and where they are from.

## Hands-On Community-Connected Learning Opportunities

Learning is not a passive activity but a dynamic process that involves hands-on experiences. Learning is the residue of experience. Great schools foster hands-on learning experiences that contribute to the community, preparing students not just for exams but for the challenges they'll face in real life. High school students are asking for collaborative, hands-on learning opportunities that acknowledge and celebrate their progress to make education a vibrant and engaging experience. These experiences should also extend beyond the classroom walls. New data in New Mexico shows that when schools and communities connect young people to paid internships with local employers, they have more access to career connections and professional networks and build, on average, over three new and meaningful relationships. Additionally, early and promising analysis shows these interns are more likely to stay in school. Learning both in school and in the community not only enriches students' learning experiences but also instills a sense of belonging and inclusivity. These community-connected learning experiences, like work-based learning and capstone projects, are far too often disconnected from a student's academic journey and seen as supplemental rather than a core element of teaching and learning.

## Culture of Belonging, Safety, and Care

When designing environments to re-engage young people, acknowledging and addressing social issues such as mental health, social media addiction, and drug abuse is integral to creating a safe and conducive learning environment. The counterbalance to these traumatic societal conditions begins with healthy relationships between adults and young people. Fostering strong relationships with adults, both in the school and in the community, creates a support system that extends beyond the classroom, addressing the emotional and mental well-being of students. This state of well-being is a critical enabling condition for successfully developing social and emotional skills. These skills prepare students for the complexities of life by enhancing their emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills. To develop a culture of belonging, schools must also build upon the vast cultural and linguistic assets young people bring to learning and build strong systems, policies, and partnerships with the local community to utilize these hyper-local assets as the ingredients for ensuring a positive culture and climate, both in the school building and the community.

## Building Infrastructure Between High Schools and Community in New Mexico

New Mexico has a once in a generation opportunity for schools and communities to codesign systems, policies, and partnerships that allow for, and incentivize, reciprocal youth-civic infrastructure assets to both re-engage young people and meet the economic and cultural demands of communities. By reconnecting with just over 2,000 off-track and disconnected youth, attendance and graduation rates in New Mexico will soar. Providing community-connected opportunities for students to explore their passions and interests contributes to a well-rounded and fulfilled individual and simultaneously improves community well-being. Education should be a journey of self-discovery that makes clear connections to how young people's potential and personal aspirations are matched with an opportunity to contribute to their community.



## The Initiatives: a Breakdown NMPED ATTENDANCE (\$6M), SPECIAL EDUCATION (\$6M), AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH (\$6M) INITIATIVES

**Who:** Chronically Absent Students, Students with Disabilities, Students Off Track for Graduation, and Disconnected Youth

**What:** Attendance Interventions, Mental Health First Aid, ReEngagement Strategies, Credit Recovery, Equitable Graduation Pathways for Students with Disabilities, and non-profit grants for schools and communities to co-design systems, policies, and partnerships that allow for, and incentivize, youth engagement and wellbeing assets such as hands-on and work-based learning, capstone projects, and graduate profiles.

- Funding for Attendance Improvement Interventions - Attendance coaches, internships, and capstone experiences for off track and disconnected youth - \$6M
- Funding for Mental Health First Aid certifications and behavioral health training and supports for staff, students and families - \$6M
- Funding for Special Education initiatives and technical support, building capacity in capstone experiences to develop equitable graduation pathways - \$6M

## NMPED INNOVATION ZONES (\$14M), WORK BASED-LEARNING (\$10.5M), AND CTE (\$23.5M) INITIATIVES

**Who:** New Mexico High Schools

**What:** Formula funding for Career Technical Education programs, work-based learning and a PED Initiative for high school transformation designed to support a cohort of High Schools in building community-connected graduate profiles and redesigning the student experience of learning by leveraging local assets to address the root causes of unmet needs expressed by young people in the community. In piloting the Innovation Zones initiative last year, data clearly shows a relationship between the depth of engagement with the community of practice and an increase in hands-on learning experiences in Innovation Zone schools..

## NEW MEXICO COMMUNITY SCHOOLS INITIATIVE - \$15M

**Who:** New Mexico Communities

**What:** The community schools strategy transforms a school into a place where educators, local community members, families, and students work together to strengthen conditions for student learning and healthy development. As partners, they organize in and out-of-school resources, supports, and opportunities so that young people thrive. [Evidence](#) shows that when community schools are implemented well, they lead to improvements in student outcomes, including attendance, academic achievement, high school graduation rates, and reduced racial and economic achievement gaps.

