

DEL NORTE WORK-BASED LEARNING ECOSYSTEM

Executive Summary

The Del Norte Work-Based Learning (WBL) Ecosystem is an innovative partnership between Future Focused Education, Del Norte High School, nonprofits, employers, postsecondary institutions, and young people with a shared commitment to growing the robust social-sector workforce needed to address urgent community challenges.

Specifically, young people were inspired to address their student body's high rates of homelessness and provide support to peers and the community. This input informed three urgent directives:

1

Re-engage off-track students in school and work.

2

Prepare youth for careers needed to break free from poverty and homelessness.

3

Center youth voice in systemic change to address the challenges that face them.

To achieve these goals, the Ecosystem offers a continuum of scaffolded work-based learning experiences embedded into school courses from grades 9–12. Students engage in a **“pre-internship” WBL curriculum** to explore careers and workforce skills, **paid group internships** working alongside local nonprofits to develop youth-driven solutions to social issues, **career and life coaching** by program teachers and Future Focused staff, **capstone projects** to implement homeless-serving resources within the school, and **visits with young professionals, nonprofits, and colleges** within the region.

“School doesn’t need to be so rigid...it can be more open.”

– Capstone focus group participant

Since 2023, the project has proudly engaged **115 students, including:**

- 100% economically disadvantaged
- 82% racial/ethnic minorities
- 40% living with disabilities
- 8% English language learners
- 4% had experienced homelessness



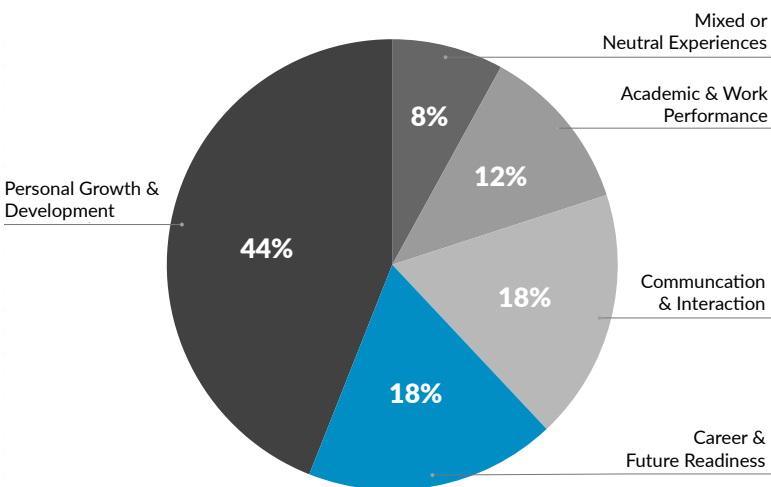
“Vision board” detailing one student’s dream of becoming a postpartum nurse

The Del Norte WBL Ecosystem demonstrated a new model of education: one in which youth thrive via meaningful contributions to community. Students explored opinions, worked independently, and earned real-world credentials. As one student noted, “My favorite part was the presentation itself—having the opportunity to voice what you want to voice, and have people listen.” Youths’ real-world impact is evident in Capstones:

- **In 2023**, Capstone students attended the Governor’s Summit on Youth Homelessness where they worked with other youth across the state to identify root causes of homelessness and present solutions to shape housing legislation.
- **In 2024**, Capstone students helped develop Del Norte’s Graduate Profile by facilitating focus groups, contributing to a total of over 500 co-creators across the high school, two elementary schools, and middle school.
- **In 2025**, Capstone students worked alongside ABQ Mutual Aid to identify and pitch to administrators a suite of school-based services including art-based mental health care, cooking classes, a fashion-forward clothing closet, a youth-led resource center—to be implemented in the 2025–26 school year.

Program impacts on students’ workplace and social-emotional competencies were also evident in grades 9–11, via “pre-internship” curriculum into the school’s AVID class.

Survey responses revealed a strong emphasis in self-awareness and understanding of others, perhaps due to the program’s focus on social issues.



For example, students reported,

“It taught me how to be more responsible with everything I do.”

“It made me take other feelings and thoughts into consideration.”

“I feel more confident when I have to present my work.”

Participants across all grades reported an improved awareness of career opportunities and a sense of investment in their future, often describing the program as providing glimpses into a professional world that students otherwise don’t have the opportunity to see.

For example, students wrote, **“It definitely gave me a look into the professional world outside of school”** and **“Made me understand how all of this works.”**

Ultimately:

- **81%** of pre-internship participants reported exploring career pathways;
- **92%** of pre-internship participants agreed that the class helped them think about their goals after high school; and
- **100%** of interns agreed or strongly agreed that the internship gave them at least 2 adult contacts for future reference.

Finally, the program’s strong value to students is evident in the program’s retention and graduation rate, with **100% of participants remaining engaged in their education and graduating.** To date, all 7 of the program’s 12th-grade participants have graduated and matriculated to postsecondary education programs, with plans ranging from dental assistance to truck driving to securing a scholarship to pursue fashion.

Del Norte WBL Ecosystem Partners:

- ABC Community Schools Partnership
- ABQ Mutual Aid
- Albuquerque Public Schools McKinney Vento
- Annie E. Casey Foundation
- City of Albuquerque Housing & Homelessness
- The Compassion Center
- East Central Ministries
- McCune Charitable Foundation
- New Day Youth & Family Services
- New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness
- New Mexico Highlands University School of Social Work
- New Mexico Solutions
- Off Center Community Arts Project
- Office of the Governor Special Projects Office
- US Department of Education Career Z Challenge
- University of New Mexico Health Science Center
- Wings for Life Internationals