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This year marked our first internal evaluation of Instituto del Puente.

In the past two years, we interviewed a few of our closest allies to determine if we had met their expectations. However, this year we chose to survey a broader set of collaborators in order to understand whether our strategy “Democratizing the Policy Making Process” had been successful. The survey was necessary because we have designed a variety of solutions backward from student experiences which has dramatically increased the number of collaborators and initiatives.



Below is a summary of the analysis.

As we shifted to a student-centered approach, do you believe that our policy areas effectively responded to the feedback we received from young people?

90 percent of the respondents stated that the policy areas reflected the sentiments of young people.

1. Widespread Support for Student-Centered Approach

Most respondents expressed clear agreement that policy areas reflected youth feedback and affirmed the shift as necessary and overdue.

“Absolutely. Yes, the policy areas clearly reflect the priorities voiced by young people and show a thoughtful shift toward addressing their real needs.”

2. Alignment with Specific Youth Priorities

Many noted that the policy areas (re-engagement, mental health, paid internships) align with themes that youth consistently raise.

“With young people involved at the convenings we are able to hear first hand about the benefits of paid internships and how this has inspired their interest in serving their communities as a behavioral health provider.”

3. Authentic Incorporation of Youth Voice

Respondents acknowledged the participatory role youth have played in shaping the agenda, including co-creation and visible leadership.

“I honestly believe seeds of transformation were planted when Future Focused Education and the policy arm that is Instituto del Puente shifted to centering young people in policy and practices.”

Support for the specific legislative agenda items and the community based approach toward advocacy: “The focus and input on building trust, listening for and respectfully capturing the community-based solutions, and then shaping policy from those areas.”

1. Behavioral Health Advocacy & Funding

Many highlighted behavioral health investments—both the policy momentum and the funding wins—as a standout success of the session.

“Senate Bill 3: the Behavioral Health Reform & Investment Act... harmonized with the development of the Community Care Collective.”

2. Graduation Requirements & Systems Change

The modernization of graduation requirements was seen as a concrete step toward student-centered and relevant learning experiences.

“GRIP! Many things, but most recently, the GRIP project enabled some of our struggling students to see both value in investing in the community...”

3. Sustainable & Equitable Work-Based Learning

Work-based learning, including paid internships and leveraging workforce dollars, was consistently cited as a major impact area.

“The continued emphasis on measurable positive outcomes for young people... Dialing up sustainable funding opportunities and strategies for paid internships make good sense.”

Influence on the policy development and advocacy field:

Has the experience with the Instituto had an impact on you and your organization? If so, could you describe how?

1. Strengthening Community Engagement and Relationships

“The community engagement has been tremendous and inspiring. The trust the Instituto has earned with so many stakeholders across the state is a model, in my mind.”

2. Amplifying Student Voice and Centering Youth

“It has strengthened our commitment to centering student voice in decision-making and inspired us to prioritize re-engagement strategies and mental health supports more intentionally.”

3. Enhancing Programmatic Impact and Funding Strategies

“Yes, we participated in the GRIP program, and 30 seniors graduated because of this program.”

4. Facilitating Strategic Partnerships and Broader Impact

Some respondents observed that the Instituto experience has deepened collaborative ties and advanced a shared vision with coalition partners, reinforcing efforts to influence policy and funding across the state.

“We are learning from the work the Instituto is doing. The collection of data, sharing, and convening power influence philanthropy’s strategy in NM.”

Concerns

1. Gap between intent of the policy and ability for schools to implement it (adult attitudes and preparation and systems alignment).

While implementation is not the role of the Instituto, this critique is very important for us to acknowledge while we create the changes we desire. It emphasizes the importance of the programs and staff at Future Focused.

2. Desire for Greater Reach and Inclusion by having young people as co-creators.

Moving from speaking on behalf of students to engaging students in the actual change they want to see in their schools is an explicit goal of Future Focused. The intersection of the Instituto and the youth initiatives is being planned now.