



Grow Your Own Economic Development Strategy

Increasing Workforce Participation for Young Adults in New Mexico

Context for Young People

Over an 18 month period in 2024 and 2025, Instituto del Puente, an initiative of Future Focused Education, convened young people in 13 different communities across New Mexico to learn about their hopes for the future and challenges along the way. We analyzed over 2,000 comments and found three themes were true in every geographic region of the state. Young people were asking for:

1. Relevant learning with purpose and meaning
2. Mentorship from caring and knowledgeable adults
3. Care for their well being

New Mexico had the fifth highest chronic absenteeism rate ([30 percent](#)) in the United States in 2023-24. It is vital that any workforce preparation strategy must include solutions to the disengagement of our young people. Our state is unique in the national landscape for dealing with chronic absenteeism by beginning to change the learning experience for young people through Work Based Learning.

Context for Communities

During our visits across the state, we learned that communities are looking for local “grow your own” strategies that can help ensure health and prosperity for the future by growing and retaining young talent. These communities have partnered with local school districts to provide [an unprecedented number of paid internships](#) and continue to collaborate to build the future health and prosperity of their own communities.

Future Focused Education will propose a policy framework that has been endorsed by Transform Education New Mexico (TENM) as remedies to the Martinez-Yazzie Lawsuit. Realizing these two mutually reinforcing contexts will ultimately result in better outcomes for New Mexico.

Future Vision for New Mexico

- Graduate ____ additional students who are in danger of not graduating and transition them to college and work to increase workforce participation.
- Increase the workforce participation or college enrollment rate among young people ages 18-22 in New Mexico by ___% by 2030.

Building Blocks: A Policy Framework that Realizes the Potential of Work Based Learning

- Students with Disabilities: providing capstone projects and paid internships that align with IEPs.
- School based behavioral health supports and career pathways.
- Re-engagement for students off-track for graduation through capstones and paid internships.
- Sustainable funding for paid internships resulting from public and private partnerships.

Students with Disabilities

The new graduation requirements in HB 171 that were signed into law in 2024 and the subsequent rule change amendment in 6.29.1 NMAC, General Provisions, have created more opportunities for Special Education students to be able to graduate in New Mexico with the Diploma of Excellence.

However, these changes also mean there will be a critical gap in transition services for young people with disabilities as they move from secondary to post-secondary education and employment. To address this gap, we propose a collaborative, community-based initiative that supports youth starting at age 14, empowering them to envision and achieve post-secondary success and competitive employment.



[Unemployment rates](#) for people with disabilities are intolerable and we desperately need to address this issue. Scalable prototypes will build networks of support, enhance educator and employer capacity, and provide training for higher education advisors. Activities include asset mapping, co-trainings, convenings, and community of practice (CoP) development with a focus on sustainable systems change.

Assuming that current workforce trends hold, if 200 students were served in the IEP Capstone Initiative:

- 138 would graduate and 88 students would be working before the intervention (based on 69.3 percent graduation rate for students with disabilities and 44 percent workforce participation rates)
- 154 would graduate and 127 would be working after the intervention (based on the 77 percent Graduation Re-Engagement Internship Program (GRIP) graduation rate and average workforce participation rates for high school graduates)

Future Focused Education and Transform Education New Mexico Funding Recommendation:

\$558,000 to provide paid pre-apprenticeships for students with disabilities determined by their IEP transition plans.

Scan the QR Code for Resources:	
Ngage NM Supported Success Internship Program Report	State of the Workforce Report
	

Behavioral Health Supports and Career Pathways

Through partnerships with higher education, local community-based providers, and educators, Future Focused has created the Community Care Collective. This initiative is directly focused on establishing schools as vital components of behavioral health infrastructure in the state.

Future Focused leads an internship program that provides assistance to schools through training and peer support—addressing [Behavioral Health Deserts](#) in many communities by creating pathways for youth to enter behavioral health professions. The Collective imagines a robust ecosystem of behavioral health services across our state through meaningful partnerships.



The initiative is funded by the New Mexico Public Education Department and Department of Health and Philanthropy. It was formerly funded by the Central Regional Education Cooperative with a US Department of Education grant before it was rescinded in 2025.

Since 2024, Future Focused has provided 36 paid internships across New Mexico. Over 40 percent were in communities that had one or less social workers for every 1,000 residents (national average is 2.38 per 1,000). Most others were in Bernalillo County, where there is more capacity to host interns.

Counties	Interns	Population	Social Workers	Current Rate	Potential Social Workers	New Rate
Eddy	4	60,275	61	1.0	65	1.1
McKinley	1	68,797	40	0.6	41	0.6
Rio Arriba	1	39,867	37	0.9	38	1.0
Socorro	1	15,963	14	0.9	15	1.0
Torrance	8	15,633	13	0.8	21	1.3
Union	1	3,964	4	1.0	5	1.3
Bernalillo	14	671,586	1,747	2.6	1,761	2.6
Chavez	2	63,561	102	1.6	104	1.6
Dona Ana	1	225,210	84	2.4	85	3.7
Guadalupe	2	4,292	6	1.4	8	1.9
San Juan	1	120,675	169	1.4	170	1.4

Future Focused Education and Transform Education New Mexico Funding Recommendation:

\$2,000,000 provided to the Department of Health for behavioral health career development programs including Youth Mental Health First Aid training and behavioral health internships.

Scan the QR Code for Resources:	
2024 Social Workers of New Mexico Survey	Community Care Collective Outcomes
	

Re-Engagement for Students Off-Track for Graduation

The Graduation Re-Engagement Internship Program (GRIP) brings together school and community partners with innovative instruction and assessment techniques to engage students and prepare them for the future.

Implemented Spring of 2025, GRIP served 343 students in 19 schools across the state. In 2026-27, it is expected to serve nearly 1,000 students.

Facilitated by Future Focused, GRIP increases graduation rates, attendance, credit recovery and overall satisfaction of educators, students and community partners.

- Offers credit recovery for core classes through community based projects to students who are off-track to graduate.
- Provides on-going technical assistance to educators designed to assist with implementing new types of assessment, instruction, and collaboration with partners.
- Distributes a stipend to educators who participate in the program.

In response, schools have re-designed the school day responding to students' individual needs, freeing them up to work in the community or intern with local employers. Traditional teaching and learning is changing as educators collaborate with their community and adopt new assessment and teaching methods.

Imagined for students chronically absent, GRIP is an example of the transformative potential of applied learning in community. Based on NMSU's Center for Community Analysis' [Program Evaluation](#), GRIP is a proven antidote to disengagement. By providing cutting edge professional development to educators and giving young people "learning by doing" opportunities that connect them to the futures they desire, we can address New Mexico's population level dilemmas (poverty, workforce participation rates, tax revenues, etc.).

In Spring 2025, the GRIP pilot supported 343 students who were at risk of disengaging, connecting them to credit-recovery capstones and internships. As a result, 77% graduated—nearly matching the 78% statewide rate. Graduation rates ripple into economic prosperity, boosting labor-force participation by roughly 10% according to the [State of the Workforce Report for 2024](#).

We propose that if 1,000 students were to participate, none of those students would graduate on time and 565 would enter the workforce without the intervention (based on a 56.5% workforce participation rate without a high school diploma). However, 770 students would graduate high school and 640 would enter the workforce based on the increased number of GRIP students graduating (66.3% workforce participation with diploma).

If we were to serve:

- 2,000 students, then 1,540 graduate and 1,280 would enter into the workforce
- 3,000 students, then 2,310 graduate and 1,977 would enter into the workforce
- 4,000 students, then 3,080 graduate and 2,561 would enter into the workforce

Future Focused Education and Transform Education New Mexico Funding Recommendation:

\$4,000,000 provided to the New Mexico Public Education Department to increase attendance, graduation rates, and credit recovery through capstones and paid internships.

Scan the QR Code for Resources:



[Grip Program Evaluation](#)

Sustainable Funding for Paid Internships

There has been a significant increase in paid internships across New Mexico since the advent of the Innovation Zone (IZ) initiative. In 2022, there were roughly 500 paid internships compared to 2,800 in 2025. Nearly all of the 47 schools and districts participating in IZ use their funding to provide paid internships. Schools are actively building internal structures to ensure young people are ready and able to participate in these opportunities. Sustainable and increased funding for internships is the top priority for IZ members.

When supplemented by a high quality Career and Technical Education (CTE) program, internships can provide certifications and skills that help give students an informed vision of their future and will open doors to meaningful experiences and employment.

Internships are a home grown initiative that grows our local district capacity and expertise to scale internships. In its role as a facilitator of IZ, Future Focused provided technical assistance to schools as they implemented and scaled the initiative and build their capacity to run their own programs.

According to the [New Mexico 2025 State of the Workforce Report](#), the workforce participation rate for high school graduates is 66.3 percent. While we do not have data on the workforce participation rates of students participating in paid internships, we predict that their rates are higher than those who have not participated. We assume the “Some College” designation would be the best comparison.

Given 1,000 student participants, we have made the following estimates:

- 663 would be working without the intervention (66.3 percent workforce participation rate for high school graduates)
- 743 would be working with the intervention (74.3 percent workforce participation rate for some college)

Future Focused Education Funding Recommendation:

\$250,000 provided to Workforce Solutions to establish a fund for paid internships.

Scan the QR Code for Resources:

[House Bill 528](#)



[Innovation Zone Evaluation](#)

