



**2021–2025
Report**

The New Mexico Capstone Movement: **For Local Equity and Opportunity**



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Equipped for Equity Initiative

The New Mexico Capstone Movement

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The New Mexico Capstone Movement:

For Equity and Opportunity

The State of New Mexico is actively engaged in a massive, integrated overhaul of its high school system, directly challenging decades of systemic failure. This profound transformation, which is serving over 50,000 students across 49 Innovation Zone (IZ) districts and charter schools, is built upon the interconnected pillars of Graduate Profiles and Capstone Projects. This comprehensive effort is a mandated response to the 2018 Yazzie/Martinez court ruling, which required the state to provide an equitable, culturally relevant education for its historically underserved populations. The foundational reform effort has been collaboratively driven by the New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED) and Future Focused Education (FFE), an Albuquerque-based non-profit. Future Focused Education administers the Graduation Re-engagement Internship Program (GRIP) and co-leads the Innovation Zone initiative, providing the necessary technical assistance and on-the-ground support to realize systemic change. This support is largely channeled through extensive, multi-year Educator Communities of Learning (CoL), which have been pivotal in driving philosophical and practical shifts among teachers statewide since 2021.

This rapid, intentional shift has been powerfully supported by strategic philanthropic capital. The Chan Zuckerberg Initiative (CZI) provided crucial funding directly to FFE to accelerate the core Capstone and Graduate Profile work, aligning with the national R&D focus of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation, who co-founded the Innovations in Assessment and New Measure Grant Program. The New Mexico Capstone model perfectly validates this national agenda by establishing a rigorous, performance-based, and equitable addition to standardized testing for demonstrating student competency.

The FFE-administered framework has already produced striking results by scaling real-world learning across the state. Work-Based Learning (WBL) surged by a remarkable 336%, with 88% of internships now paid, ensuring that the need to work in high school does not bar students from career-aligned opportunities. WBL efforts generated a large number of internships in key sectors, including Health Care and Social Assistance (13.2%) and Educational Services (12.1%). Chronic absenteeism for the initial group of IZ schools (Cohort 1) saw a dramatic 70% decrease in two years, and 40% of Cohort 1 LEAs saw an increase in their overall graduation rates by Year 2,

showing early systemic success in re-engagement. The GRIP pilot further proved the model's efficacy for at-risk youth. The program, serving a cohort that was 99% economically disadvantaged, achieved a 77% graduation rate, nearly recovering the cohort of off-track seniors to the statewide average of 78%.

The success of this integrated system, moving from pilot to law, directly resulted in the passage of HB 171 in 2024, which codified this transformation, mandating the Graduate Profile for all schools and legally recognizing Capstone Projects and WBL as valid demonstrations of competency for graduation.

FFE's technical coordination supported the overall number of student internships across the IZ network, rising to 336% in two years. This growth was matched by a crucial commitment to financial equity: 88% of these experiences were paid, which educators emphasized helped students "choose their future, not merely their present". FFE further supports this by funding community nonprofits to co-design curricula and hire students for paid internships, which can count towards Capstone completion.

I. The Blueprint for Change: Graduate Profiles and Capstones

The New Mexico reform movement is defined by its deep commitment to local control and cultural relevance, which serves as a direct countermeasure to the standardized metrics that have historically failed many communities. Future Focused Education plays a vital, hands-on role in guiding this transition, translating the high-level policy mandate into actionable school-level practice. The primary goal is to build the field of educators and school leaders implementing graduate profiles and capstones. This approach is designed to create demand for capstones in schools across the state, expanding the existing LEA and Educator Communities of Practice.

A. Establishing the North Star: The Graduate Profile

The Graduate Profile provides the essential blueprint, articulating a shared community vision that moves beyond academic standards to encompass the whole person. At its core, the profile defines "the cognitive, personal and interpersonal competencies that students should have when they graduate," acting as a strong anchor to drive all corresponding structural and pedagogical shifts. The creation of these profiles is heavily facilitated by FFE, which utilizes a rigorous six-phase process involving multiple stakeholder groups. This engagement has led to a 333% increase in the number of schools implementing Graduate Profiles between 2021 and 2024, signaling growing

statewide integration of this model. As of the end of 2024, there were 39 schools in New Mexico with a completed Graduate Profile or actively in the process of developing one, in partnership with Future Focused Education. In comparison, in 2021, only 9 schools in the Innovative Assessment Community of Practice CoP reported having a Graduate Profile, and in 2023-2024, only 19 schools had a completed Graduate Profile. By the end of the 2025 school year, the target is for 44 schools in New Mexico to have developed a Graduate Profile or be in the process of developing one. The State of New Mexico is so invested in this model that the NMPED released an open RFP in September 2024 for an organization to support Graduate Profile development around the state, which includes developing guidance and quality criteria for Graduate Profiles—both elements FFE has been co-creating for the past four years with schools and districts.

These profiles are rigorously local, fostering cultural pride and relevance, directly addressing the *Yazzie/Martinez* mandates. For example, the Zuni Public School District's bilingual "Portrait of a Graduate" is deeply anchored in its A:Shiwi identity, with competencies including the ability to "Live intentionally in the A:Shiwi way," "Exemplifies proficiency in Zuni language, culture, and history," and "Balances and maintains a strong Shiwi identity". This cultural mandate drives instruction in every class. Similarly, ACE Leadership High School's profile, titled "A Bridge to Success," structures success around three key competency areas: "I know and believe in myself" (Identity, Confidence, Self-Advocacy), "I engage with my community" (Empathy, Communication, Critical Thinking), and "I am ready for next steps" (Financial Understanding, Lifelong Learning, Job-Seeking Skills).

B. The Proof of Competency: The Capstone Project

If the Graduate Profile is the blueprint, the Capstone Project is the definitive, performance-based assessment that proves its achievement. Capstones typically involve research, interviews, data collection, field study, and reflection over multiple drafts, culminating in a final presentation to a public evaluation panel. FFE champions this approach, emphasizing that it "completely shifts the student experience and mindset around what education can and should look like," by encouraging student agency and centering lived experience as a valid source of knowledge.

The program has seen explosive adoption, with the number of community capstone projects surging by 471% since the launch of the initiative, reaching 1,285 completed projects in Year 3. This high-impact approach has translated directly into student readiness metrics. Specifically, 74% of Capstone participants agreed that they could

apply what they learn in school to real-world problems in their community, compared to just 62% of non-participants. Capstone participants were also significantly more likely to believe their education gave them opportunities to positively impact their community (80% vs. 71% of non-participants). The Capstone model is proving particularly effective for students with complex needs: 44% of students with an IEP reported participating in a community capstone while in high school, compared to only 32% without an IEP.

Furthermore, 80% of students who participated in community capstones said their education gives them opportunities to positively impact their community, compared to 71% of non-participants. 80% of students who participated reported developing valuable relationships to support their personal and professional growth, compared to 74% of non-participants. Overall, 78% of students who participated in community capstones reported that their school experience was preparing them for their future career and education, compared to 68% of non-participants.

Examples demonstrate profound student ownership and civic contribution. A student at Health Leadership High School completed a public health internship and created a video documentary researching and proposing solutions to the dropout rate among students of color. Students at RFK Charter School created a multi-page website on "Healthy Ways To Use Social Media" to address youth anxiety and suicide rates. As of the 2023-24 school year, 958 students from the Innovation Zone schools participated in Community Capstones and 23 schools or districts in the Innovative Assessment CoP reported adopting a Capstone in Community model, up from only 8 schools in the Innovative Assessment CoP that reported having a Capstone in place in 2022.

II. Emerging Capstone Models

To develop a variety of capstone models that are developed with community and are informed by local context and student needs, FFE has supported the emergence of four core models from local practice, all of which integrate the Graduate Profile indicators in the assessment and learning experience. One model is Capstones for **Credit Recovery**, which has emerged as an interdisciplinary solution to the online learning modules purchased from online vendors that schools and districts are struggling to use to push students through. Another model is **Capstones for Special Education and IEP Transition Plans**, for which FFE is co-creating resources with Special Education teachers and transition specialists around the state to support students completing Capstones that will support a Standard Graduation pathway, allowing students to earn the NM Diploma of Excellence. The **Youth Civic Infrastructure Capstone Model** integrates work-based learning experiences in community projects. Finally, **Culturally**

and linguistically sustaining Capstones integrates language use and development in community and culturally-sustaining projects.

A. The Credit Recovery Capstone Model

The Graduation Re-engagement Internship Program (GRIP) pilot further validated the efficacy of this model for off-track seniors and has helped school and district leaders shift their thinking about what it means to award high school credit in a meaningful, community-connected way. Schools have adopted this model across the state for the past three years, starting in Santa Fe Public Schools.

This Capstone model is now funded by the New Mexico Public Education Department and administered by Future Focused Education; the program was launched as a pilot in Spring 2025. GRIP's core mission is to re-engage students through real-world, relevant experiences, specifically through paid internships and community-based capstone projects designed to facilitate credit recovery, promote career readiness, and foster personal growth. The program served a highly diverse and historically underserved population, including 99% of participants identified as economically disadvantaged, 29% as English Language Learners (ELLs), and 21% as students with disabilities.

The pilot program demonstrated a significant positive impact on key student outcomes. Attendance showed a statistically significant improvement, with average rates for participating students rising from 73% to 80%. Furthermore, 88% of students recovered at least 0.5 academic credits, with the overall group earning an average of 1.6 credits per student. Critically, among participants from the 2025 cohort who were initially off-track for graduation, 77% graduated in 2025, a rate that nearly matched the statewide average of 78%. Students overwhelmingly found the experience positive, with 87% stating the credit recovery program was "much better" than their original class.

Beyond academics, GRIP was highly effective in building career skills and social capital. A large majority of students, 83%, agreed that the program helped them build job or career skills. The program fostered mentorship and networking, with 85% of students reporting they built relationships with adults, mentors, or professionals, and 79% making connections that could aid future opportunities. Although stipends played a key role in sustaining engagement and reducing financial barriers, students consistently cited the desire to graduate on time (73%) as their primary motivation for participating. This intervention recovered 77% of the off-track seniors to graduation, with 84% of educators finding it "very effective" in increasing credit recovery. Students earned an average of 1.6 credits each through stipends and project work.

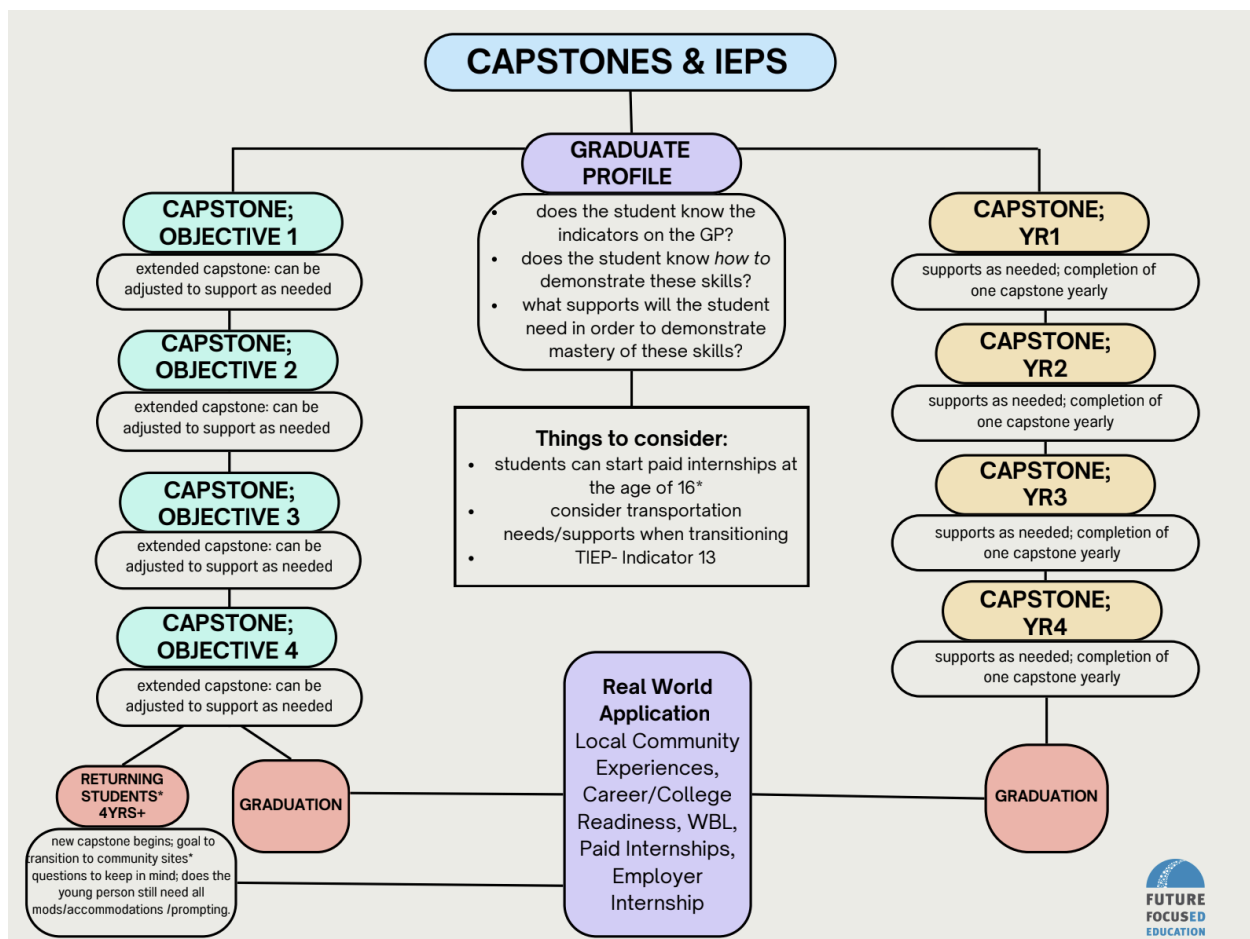
Despite FFE and its partners' best efforts, the evaluation highlighted that systemic barriers persist for students with the most complex needs. In the GRIP pilot, outcomes for minority groups lagged: Special Education Students and English Language Development students graduated at 65%, compared to 80-81% of their peers. Although the overall success of the GRIP pilot was undeniable, the evaluation noted disparities in outcomes, specifically citing that ELL students and students with disabilities graduated at lower rates (65%) than their non-ELL or non-disabled peers, highlighting the need for targeted instructional support and programming refinement. This indicates that while the integrated WBL and Capstone model successfully re-engages and retains these students, the state must implement more intensive, differentiated instructional strategies to close persistent academic achievement gaps.

B. Capstones for Special Education and IEP Transition Plans

The need for this Capstone model is rooted in the significant challenges young people with disabilities face in New Mexico, challenges that have been amplified by recent policy changes. The opportunity for Special Education students in New Mexico to graduate on time has been profoundly changed by the new graduation requirements in HB 171, signed into law in 2024, and the subsequent Rule change amendment in 6.29.1 NMAC, General Provisions. These policy changes resulted in the removal of the modified pathway for students with disabilities. This elimination poses a significant barrier for students, as it severely limits their access to timely graduation alongside their peers and restricts their ability to modify their learning or demonstrate their knowledge and skills in the most appropriate and effective ways. This change has caused uncertainty among many transition service-focused organizations that are now searching for clarity on how to best support graduating seniors.

The consequences of this transition gap are staggering, both financially and societally. The documents cite persistent and inequitable employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reports a 2024 unemployment rate of 62% for people with disabilities. Furthermore, in 2022, only 41.8% of New Mexicans with disabilities participated in the labor force, which is less than half the rate of their non-disabled peers, who participated at 77.3%. Even across all age groups in 2024, the BLS reported that people with a disability were much less likely to be employed (22.7%) than those without a disability (65.5%). These figures reflect not a lack of capability but a fundamental lack of systemic preparation, opportunity, and transitional support.

A significant and costly gap exists between the structured support students receive in high school through their IEPs/Section 504 Plans and the abrupt expectation of fully independent advocacy in post-secondary settings. The transition to college, where institutions operate under Section 504/ADA/Rehabilitation Act, requires students to self-disclose their eligibility, request accommodations, and provide their own documentation. This process is often reported as highly confusing and contributes significantly to dropout rates. FFE's capstone and IEP research confirms that students and families often face this transition with increased stress, disengagement, and underemployment.



FFE's Two-Year Capstone for IEP Transition Model

The Special Education Capstone Model aims to address this issue by supporting youth starting at age 14, empowering them to envision and achieve post-secondary success and competitive employment by engaging in a multi-year Capstone project. The ultimate goal is to bridge the gap between high school and postsecondary education/competitive employment for young people with disabilities. The project is aligned with the goals of

similar federal legislation, such as the Respond, Innovate, Succeed, and Empower (RISE Act H.R. 2401 & S. 1071), which addresses the burdensome requirements young people with disabilities must navigate post-high school.

The community-connected capstone projects—aligned directly with IEP transition plan requirements—is a powerful strategy to strengthen services and supports for young people with disabilities from ages 14 to 22. Capstones, which have been championed by the state's 2024 Graduation Requirements Modernization Act as performance-based assessments and a shift toward deeper, student-centered learning, enable students to meet the requirements of the IEP process and high school graduation requirements simultaneously.

This model provides students with the opportunity to apply their strengths, interests, and goals in real-world contexts, helping them develop work readiness, build self-advocacy skills, and engage with networks that support post-secondary success. By embedding structured transition planning through these capstones—now part of the two-course elective sequence required for graduation—into meaningful, hands-on experiences, the initiative aims to reduce student stress, increase engagement, and promote a future-focused mindset.

Community-connected capstones also offer a way to disrupt the deficit-based mindset that often limits expectations for students with disabilities. By designing capstones around students' abilities—not their limitations—the initiative aims to reframe how schools and communities view their potential, creating new narratives rooted in dignity, agency, and belonging. Research confirms that capstones are a proven, equity-focused strategy for unlocking potential and building futures, promoting self-advocacy, leadership, and confidence while aligning with the Yazzie-Martinez mandates for culturally and linguistically responsive education.

The outcomes of this program focus on building long-term capacity across schools and communities by providing targeted, inclusive training for educators, families, employers, and special education students. These trainings, leveraging the Community of Learning model developed by Future Focused, will equip stakeholders with the tools, knowledge, and mindsets needed to support meaningful, community-connected capstone projects that align with IEP transition plan goals.

In the Community of Learning, educators receive professional development on implementing capstones as vehicles for student voice, real-world learning, and self-advocacy. CoP meetings emphasize strength-based approaches, inclusive

instructional strategies, and how to embed structured transition planning into everyday learning experiences starting at age 14, providing opportunities for meaningful work-based learning experiences.

Future Focused has also partnered with Parents Reaching Out to engage with families and guardians to participate in training and listening sessions designed to help them better understand the IEP transition process, how to advocate alongside their child, and how to support capstone development at home and in the community. This model also includes engaging employers and community partners to receive training focusing on fostering inclusive work environments, understanding accommodations, and identifying ways to host or mentor students through their capstone projects.

To ensure long-term impact, the initiative includes cross-sector collaboration with post-secondary institutions, employers, service providers, and families. Through convenings, asset mapping, and communities of practice (CoP), FFE will align existing efforts, identify support gaps, and co-design sustainable structures that guide students from school to adulthood. This work aims to build a more connected, equitable transition system where no young person with a disability has to navigate their path alone.

FFE is actively working with a wide range of partners:

- Parents Reaching Out is identified as the primary and long-term partner, connecting FFE with their wide network of transition specialists around the state and co-hosting several convenings with families and transition specialists.
- FFE also works closely with several Bureaus within the NM Public Education Department and the majority of the districts and charter schools in the state through various initiatives.
- Furthermore, FFE is working with Tribal Consultation and Dr. Greyeyes, an Indigenous researcher, to understand the impact of capstones in Indigenous communities in New Mexico.

C. The Youth Civic Infrastructure Capstone Model

A strong example of the Youth Civic Infrastructure Capstone Model is the Del Norte Work-Based Learning (WBL) Ecosystem, an innovative partnership led by FFE, serves as a powerful model of community-driven, student-centered systemic change. The program's core purpose is to grow the social-sector workforce while addressing local challenges, particularly the high rates of student homelessness. Since 2023, the project

has engaged 115 students, who are 100% economically disadvantaged, 82% racial/ethnic minorities, and 40% living with disabilities. This high-need cohort reported strong engagement metrics: 81% of pre-internship participants explored career pathways, 92% agreed the class helped them think about goals, and 100% of interns gained at least two adult contacts for future reference.

The Capstone projects within the Del Norte Ecosystem demonstrate the direct civic power of this model. In 2023, Capstone students actively attended the Governor's Summit on Youth Homelessness, working to present solutions and shape housing legislation. In 2024, Capstone students played a key role in developing Del Norte's Graduate Profile, contributing to the perspectives of over 500 co-creators across their feeder schools. In 2025, students worked alongside community partners to identify and successfully pitched a suite of school-based services to administrators for implementation in 2025-2026. These services included art-based mental health care, cooking classes, a clothing closet, and a youth-led resource center—all focused on implementing homeless-serving resources within the school. The program successfully prepares youth for their futures, with 100% of participants remaining engaged in their education and graduating. Furthermore, all seven 12th-grade participants matriculated to postsecondary education programs in fields ranging from dental assistance to fashion.

a. YCI Growth and Impact

In the first year, the YCI supported three school and non-profit partnerships. The efforts in Santa Fe Public Schools, at Desert Sage academy, were stalled when the school closed, sending the non-profit, Earth Care, searching for a school site to partner with. Progress has since been made, and FFE is in the process of establishing an MOU with Capital High School in Santa Fe Public Schools. Cuba High School was also a site that did not begin with a clear non-profit partner, and while Cuba had both capstone and work-based learning opportunities, FFE was unable to support them to find a non-profit partner initially. However, they have since partnered with Nacimiento Community Foundation and are continuing their focused work on Food and Nutrition to integrate their Capstone and work-based learning experiences.

This foundational funding was critical in the first year to support Curriculum Development (designing project-based learning focused on action-oriented research and community needs) and Initial Engagement (launching student internships, capstone projects, and community engagement activities). This seed funding successfully validated the model, allowing the most committed and successful partnerships to apply

for the next phase of support.

The most recent cohort included 14 awardees (school/nonprofit partnerships), representing more than four times as many awardees as the previous year. In total, the fund has now awarded almost \$750,000 to community partners, demonstrating sustained commitment and growth from initial funding. The educators, working with interns in schools, and community partners will join a Community of Practice that is largely modeled after the Communities of Learning that have scaled capstones and equitable grading practices across the state.

Following the initial phase, grantees become eligible for extended funding—up to \$150,000 distributed over three years—allowing partners to further deepen and expand student involvement and community impact. This growth is further supported by a Community of Practice group, which facilitates shared learning and statewide collaboration among all partners.

The YCI program is successfully shifting student learning from the classroom to the community. For example, the work at Del Norte High School has now expanded to include a funded partnership between Del Norte High School and the Local 412 Outreach and Education Foundation, allowing students to participate in a unique, trade-based curriculum. Through hands-on learning in skills like welding, soldering, and construction math, students are gaining valuable education while contributing to community projects and preparing for long-term career success.

For the 2025-26 school year, the YCI has awarded a total of \$350,000 to the following 14 schools and organizations, seeing profound growth in the YCI.

The YCIF initial funding table demonstrates the initial investment and reach.

School	Community	Issues of Focus	Nonprofit Awardee	\$ Amount Granted/year	# of students interacting
Capital High School	Santa Fe	Housing and Homelessness	EarthCare	\$35,000/22-23, \$75,000/25-26	Capstone: 7, Interns: 7
Gordon Bernell Charter School	Albuquerque	Mental Health	Sanitary Tortilla Factory	\$35,000/22-23, \$75,000/23-24, \$75,000/24-25	Capstone: 45, Interns: 2, Group Interns: 6

Cuba High School	Cuba	Food and Nutrition	Nacimiento Community Foundation	\$25,000/25-26	Capstone: 25, Interns: 6
Vista Nueva High School	Aztec	Community Wellness following violence	Northwest New Mexico Arts Council	\$35,000/22-23, \$75,000/23-24, \$75,000/24-25	Capstone: 26, Interns: 6
Del Norte High School	Albuquerque	Youth Homelessness	Future Focused Education	N/A	Capstone: 23, Interns: 9
Peñasco High School	Peñasco	Youth Employment	Peñasco Valley Historic Preservation Society	\$35,000/24-25, \$75,000/25-26	Capstone: 14, Interns: 22
Robert F Kennedy Charter School	Albuquerque	Health and Wellbeing of Youth	Southwest Educational Partners for Training	\$35,000/24-25, \$75,000/25-26	Capstone: 53, Interns: 12

The expanded Exploration Grants 2025-2026 cohort demonstrates the programmatic reach across New Mexico.

Grantee	Focus Area	School Partner	Geography
New Mexico Dream Team	Safety and Social Issues	Siembra Leadership High School	ABQ
The Ben Initiative	Food and Nutrition	Dził Dít'ooí School of Empowerment, Action and Perseverance (DEAP)	Northwestern Navajo Nation
Fundamental Needs	Economic Engagement	Kirtland High School	Navajo Nation
Encuentro	Economic Engagement	South Valley Charter School	ABQ
Unlock Civics New Mexico	Safety and Social Issues	School on Wheels	ABQ

Northern New Mexico College	Mental Health and Well being	Espanola Valley High School	Northern, NM
Three Sisters Kitchen	Food and Nutrition	Gordon Bernell	ABQ
Nacimiento Community Foundation	Food and Nutrition	Cuba High School	Northwest, NM
River Source	Economic Engagement	West Las Vegas High School	Northern, NM
Upper Gila Watershed Alliance	Food and Nutrition	Aldo Leopold Charter School	Southwestern, NM
New Mexico Farmer's Association	Food and Nutrition	Polk Middle School	ABQ
Ngage New Mexico	Food and Nutrition	Mayfield High School	Southern, NM
Local 412 Outreach and Education Foundation	Economic Engagement	Del Norte High School	ABQ
Centro Savila	Mental Health and Well being	RFK Charter High School	ABQ

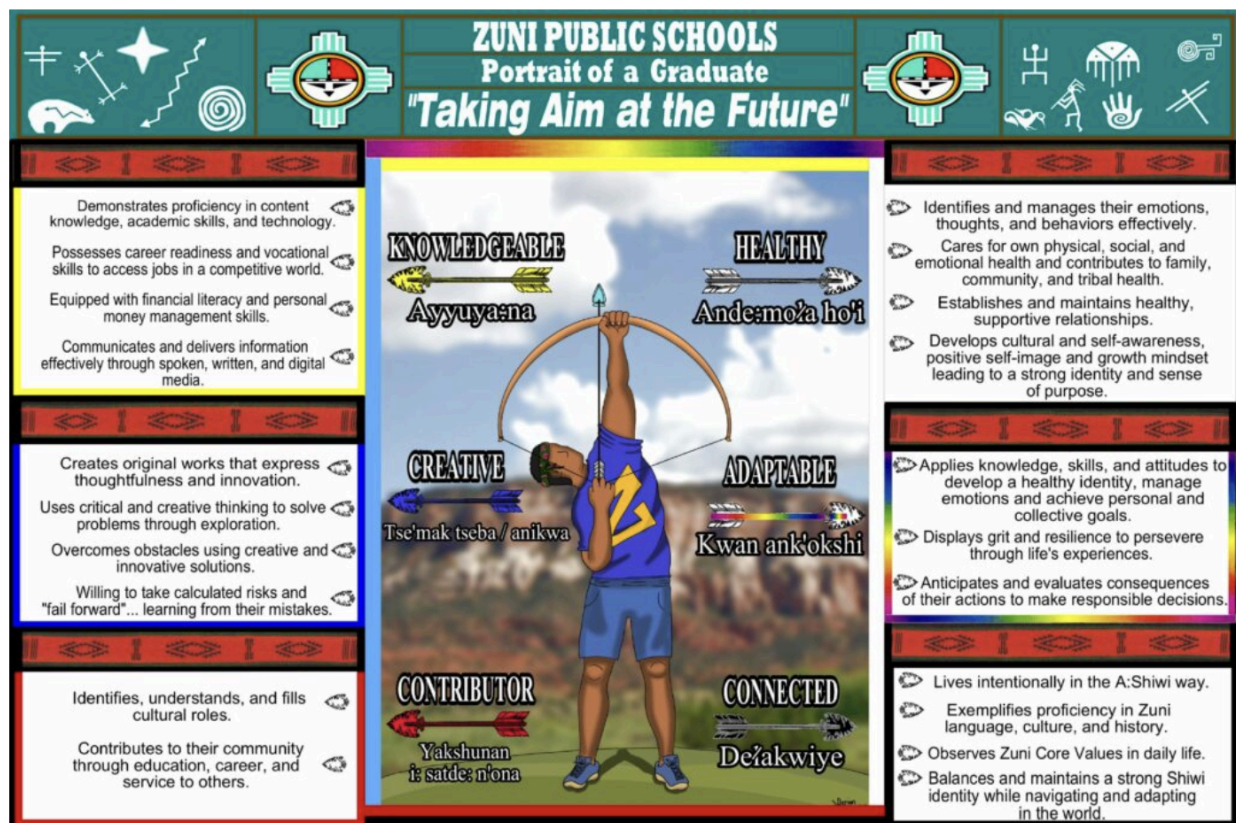
D. Culturally and Linguistically Sustaining Capstones

Several notable examples of culturally and linguistically sustaining capstone models have emerged throughout New Mexico in the past several years. Future Focused Education has worked closely with Zuni High School to uplift their good example and has partnered with Dr. Greyeyes, a notable Indigenous New Mexican researcher, to understand how other capstone models have evolved across the state. Much like Zuni High School's capstone projects existed before becoming involved with Future Focused Education, the Santa Fe Indian School has had a long-standing Senior Honors Project that closely resembles a community-connected capstone project.

a. Zuni High School

Zuni High School has embarked on a localized, student-centered approach and is not only setting a new standard for educational excellence in New Mexico but is also serving as a vital pathway for students to reclaim their cultural identity, build confidence, and envision a successful future in their homelands.

The Zuni Public Schools Portrait of a Graduate, titled “Taking Aim at the Future,” serves as the anchor for all educational efforts within the district. This profile is more than just a document; it's a community-driven roadmap that defines the knowledge, skills, and dispositions students should possess upon graduation, ensuring they align with local culture and community needs. The development of the profile was an extensive effort involving deep community engagement, including 20 focus groups and a survey of over 500 respondents. This collaborative process resulted in a profile that centers on Zuni language and culture. The visual representation, featured in both English and the Zuni language, shows a Zuni student with a bow and arrow "taking aim at their future," encapsulating the district's vision. The profile outlines key competencies, or traits, that resonate with Zuni values, making the shift to competency-based education (CBE) both relevant and equitable for their learners.



Zuni High School's Graduate Profile

The profile's six core traits—Knowledgeable, Healthy, Creative, Adaptable, Contributor, and Connected—integrate traditional Zuni concepts and language. For example, being "Connected" involves:

- Living intentionally in the A:Shiwi way.
- Exemplifying proficiency in Zuni language, culture, and history.
- Observing Zuni Core Values in daily life.
- Balancing and maintaining a strong Shiwi identity while navigating and adapting in the world.

This profile ensures that Zuni language and cultural competencies are integrated into every class, addressing the historical trauma inflicted by past educational systems which actively worked to strip Native children of their language and culture.

The capstone project is a crucial tool in implementing the Graduate Profile and serving as a catalyst for intergenerational healing. It provides students with a long-term, meaningful learning experience that directly connects them to personal, family, or community issues. In contrast to standardized testing, which the school realized wasn't working for their learners, capstones allow students to lead their learning and engage in exploration critical for envisioning their futures. The projects culminate in a final presentation before a panel of judges, demonstrating a student's learning and readiness for life after high school.

The capstones at Zuni High School are deeply rooted in cultural revitalization and tribal sovereignty. Examples of high-impact projects include:

- The 2021-2022 senior class building a curriculum and website to teach traditional garment construction, aiming to preserve Zuni artistry and craft for future generations.
- The Special Education class researching and recreating traditional games by interviewing community Elders and teaching Board members to play
- Students collaborating on a project focused on the Yazzie/Martinez ruling, with a problem statement arguing the ruling hadn't been implemented because teachers didn't recognize it as law.
- The dual-credit aspect allows students to take their college education seriously, which is especially important as many are first or second-generation graduates in their families.



Zuni High School seniors, Chasady Simplicio (left) and Kristyn Eriacho (right)

The capstone experience is deeply transformative on a personal level, boosting students' self-confidence and helping them realize their potential. Students are encouraged to use their native language in their introductions and wear their traditional Zuni regalia and jewelry during presentations to show pride in their culture. They also showcase talents like drawing, pottery, weaving, and achievements in sports, skills that are not measured by standardized tests.

The program brings in successful Zuni natives as community partners in their projects, such as a doctoral student in medicine at Brown University and a systems engineer at Boeing, as guest speakers. These role models emphasize the importance of perseverance, resiliency, and connecting to Zuni core values, culture, and language for success.

This exposure helps counter the students' initial hesitancy and financial fears about pursuing college, as they learn how to apply for colleges, universities, and scholarships available to Native American students. The profound support from family members, who attend the final presentations highlights the community's pride in seeing their children succeed and embodies the journey of reclaiming intergenerational harmony and healing.

The success of the capstone project at Zuni High School, along with other models in the state, has helped inform system-wide change in the state. This transformation aligns with a larger, national movement to acknowledge that competency-based education (CBE) shares similar principles with traditional Indigenous education—focusing on the whole child, real-world application, and learning in context. For the Zuni community,

whose prior education system was community-based and correlated with day-to-day living, the current capstone and graduate profile model is a powerful step in transforming education to honor their unique strengths and aspirations. The program's success led Principal Don Sparks to say, "If this is the next generation of Zuni leadership, you're in good hands."

b. Ongoing Research: New Mexico Native American Capstone and Graduation Profile Study: Leveraging Edu-Local Goals and Values

For the past two years, Dr. Greyeyes has explored the role of Graduate Profiles and Capstones in Indigenous communities; and seeks to uplift important practices of these capstones. The study monitored three schools selected due to their location and high population of Indigenous students, noting that all three schools were on different trajectories—from beginning to advanced—in terms of rolling out their graduate profiles and capstone initiatives.

Dr. Greyeyes' literature review strongly advocates for culturally sustaining pedagogy and community engagement as effective educational strategies, disputing claims that cultural engagement is ineffective in the K-12 environment. The research goals focused on examining three key areas: unique, district-level graduate profiles that meet state requirements while articulating what students should know, understand, and be able to do upon graduation; the extent to which these profiles reflect local cultural values and goals; and the presence of aligned community-based capstone projects that allow students to demonstrate college and career readiness and earn a diploma, including the guidance and professional development for teachers.

The research methodology was sensitive to the history of research being harmful to Native peoples, leading schools and tribes to establish their own research protocols. The three participating schools were Cuba Independent Schools (CISD), Peñasco Independent Schools, and Santa Fe Indian School (SFIS). CISD, though not on a reservation, serves a high percentage of Navajo, Jicarilla Apache, and Pueblo students. Peñasco Independent Schools operates on the Picuris Pueblo. All schools formally approved the study: Cuba School Board on December 20, 2023; Peñasco School Board on February 20, 2024 (following two presentations); and Santa Fe Indian School on May 1, 2024 (following its internal research review process). The study utilized semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face or online with superintendents, school board members, teachers/mentors, students, and alumni to understand the graduate profiles and capstones currently in use.

Santa Fe Indian School (SFIS) represents a long-term, established model. Their capstone, the Senior Honor's Project (SHP), is a year-long course focused on research and analysis of social issues. The curriculum is uniquely structured around goals that make the project specific to each student, requiring research in areas like Primary Community focus, Historical Overview, Legislative Research, Global Connections, Action Planning, and Future recommendations. Student reflections on the curriculum

cited learning about the history of their chosen topic, like anxiety or historical trauma, and engaging in global connections to see how other countries maintain cultural heritage. The instruction has evolved from a semester-long, group project to a year-long, individual one, with the teacher providing models and a detailed syllabus. The teacher works to normalize the complexity of the project by relating it to students' traditional lives, such as participating in annual feast days, dancing, and feeding tribal leaders, stating, "You're already doing that." Topics for the SHP were varied, with the highest counts in Substance Abuse or Alcohol (13), Mental Health (12), and Land Water Environment (10), followed by Cultural and Language Revitalization (6 each).

The SFIS graduate profile, called the Ideal Graduate Types (IGs), forms the basis for capstone assessment. These ten IGs originated from the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era's Common Core standards but were intentionally made SFIS's own, on their "own terms," to protect a core curriculum successful for their students. The IGs include skills like IGS2 (Gain Knowledge and Expertise through integration of Inquiry, Research, and Study) and IGS5 (Represent and Analyze Information to make sense of a problem and its possible solutions). The capstone assessment includes assigning a community mentor and a winter break assessment completed by families using a rubric, thus adding value through family and community inclusion. Students' post-reflections show they select one IG to focus on for improvement throughout their project, with IGS2 and IGS5 being the most popular choices.

Cuba Independent Schools (CISD) began their capstone program in 2021 by joining Future Focused Education's Innovative Assessment Community of Practice, adopting a project-based learning (PBL) approach that integrates multiple subjects and is culturally-based, stemming from a Kellogg Foundation grant. Capstones are required at the 5th, 8th, and 12th grade levels and are envisioned as career-centered. Students work with mentors, prepare an oral presentation, and are encouraged to use a program called Defined Careers to explore vocations and practice resume and interviewing skills. The biggest challenge has been finding appropriate mentors for diverse career interests, but teachers are seeing the benefits. The capstone components for 8th grade span the school year, from Project Proposals in October to the Oral Presentation in May, and serve as alternative assessments anchored in students' authentic experiences and passions. The CISD graduate profiles, which include Cultural Awareness, are designed around community needs and demands, reflecting the district's push for students to own and be proud of their identity and culture.

Peñasco Independent School is in the early stages, envisioning the Career and Technical Education (CTE) program as the basis for the capstone, possibly utilizing a portfolio starting in the freshman year. Peñasco graduate profiles (Engaged, Connected, Core Values, Proud, Empowered) were developed in collaboration with parents, teachers, and community members in a unified process, reflecting unique expectations such as "Contributing meaningfully to society" and "Promoting the school district positively."

The analysis concludes that the capstone framework is effective in building self-awareness as change agents by connecting theoretical knowledge to practical community engagement. Students' projects revealed the prevalence of social issues and trauma in their immediate circles, particularly Substance Abuse or Alcohol, Mental Health, Land and Water Stewardship/Recovery, and Cultural and Language Revitalization. By engaging with these topics, students enhance their understanding of social dynamics and cultivate a sense of responsibility. This self-awareness contributes to emotional resilience, better coping mechanisms in high-pressure environments, and the development of critical skills necessary for community involvement, such as effective communication and collaboration. The framework ultimately creates thoughtful, communicative, and knowledgeable individuals prepared to shape and lead our state.

III. The Engine of Professionalization: Educator Communities of Learning

The core of FFE's work is to build the field of educators and school leaders implementing graduate profiles and capstones. The engine driving the pedagogical adoption of these new standards is FFE's network of Educator Communities of Learning (CoL), which sustained participation across four years (2021-2025). These paid teacher-leader groups were designed to break down instructional silos, foster meaningful collaboration, and empower teachers to drive change by co-developing Capstone resources and assessment tools. The CoLs are structured in a tiered progression (Foundations, Explorations, and Practitioners) to build expertise.

A. Educator Communities of Learning Growth and Impact

Annually, FFE tracks the number of LEA and Educator Communities of Practice (CoP) in the state to identify the reach and growth of the capstone initiative, as measured by the number of new LEA and Educators engaged in a Community of Practice to develop or implement capstones. The sustained commitment to expanding the network is clear in the targets and growth.

The reach of this network is significant: there are 76 schools represented in the Educator Community of Learning groups, representing 34% of all high schools in New Mexico. Across all four years of the grant and the Innovation Zone, 57 Educators have participated for 3 years in a Community of Learning, joining different groups each year, and 68 Educators have participated for 2 years in a Community of Learning, joining different groups each year.

The annual engagement data reflects the expansion and diversification of the professional learning offerings.

Community of Learning	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24 Actuals	2024-25 Current
Capstone Practitioners Community of Learning	10	15	14	33
Capstone Foundations Community of Learning	0	85	32	20
Capstone Exploration Community of Learning	0	0	36	24
New Group: Capstone AI	0	0	0	10
New Group: Capstone Policy	0	0	0	9
LEA CoP (school and district administrators) participants	22 LEAs; 57 people	27 LEAs; 82 people	61 LEAs; 152 people	52; 337 people

B. Shifts in Classroom Practice: Cultural Affirmation and Curriculum

The philosophical shifts driven by the CoLs directly translated into new teaching methods focused on cultural and emotional safety. Educators in the Practitioners CoL (2024-2025) reported high levels of cultural responsiveness:

- 63% affirmed the racial, cultural, and linguistic identities of their students
- 88% reported honoring families' race, ethnicity, culture, language, and background in their classrooms.
- 75% of Practitioners actively tried to improve their teaching, and 88% were eager to try new ideas.

These instructional improvements focus on Capstone-style design, integrating community-informed assessment and moving away from isolated academic content. The engagement in the CoLs empowered teachers to drive curriculum change locally: in the Explorations CoL (2023-2024), 59% reported developing or selecting curriculum used in their classroom, and 41% reported influencing curriculum used in others' classrooms.

C. Assessment and Pedagogical Commitment

This sustained networking has resulted in measurable philosophical shifts among participating educators. The Practitioners CoL showed overwhelming consensus that Capstones and Graduate Profiles are relevant and meaningful responses to systemic inequities.

- 88% of Practitioners agreed that the Martinez/Yazzie court case is relevant to their students and community
- 75% agreed that Capstones are an important response to the case. Educators reported a fundamental shift in how they view student measurement
- 94% of Practitioners agreed that there are multiple ways to assess what students know and can do, moving away from a singular test-based approach.
- 63% of Practitioners agreed on the importance of grading students only on proficiency and growth, and not on behaviors related to life circumstances (e.g., participation grades).

This commitment to equitable assessment is foundational to making Capstones successful.

The Capstone Practitioners CoL facilitated a tuning model, one in which new and experienced Capstone educators are in a mixed group, bringing Problems of Practice and resources to tune and develop with their colleagues from around the state. The schools in the Youth Civic Infrastructure Fund are also included in this group, as they develop their own unique Capstone models and share their learning with their non-profit partners and with Capstone educators across the state. The Capstone Foundations and Capstone Exploration Communities of Learning have the same purpose as previous years, to focus on assessment literacy, competency and standards based grading practices, project-based learning, integrating SEL practices, and attending to the *Yazzie-Martinez* decision. The Capstone Exploration group continues to offer professional development for educators who are developing capstone offerings at their schools but have not yet taught capstones.

D. AI Developments in Teaching, Learning, and Assessment

The AI Capstone CoL piloted the AI Platform developed by FFE with guidance from educators in the Capstone Practitioners group in 2023-24. This group offered feedback on the tool, in order to iterate according to the needs expressed in the group and to develop a messaging campaign to assuage what concerns educators might have about using AI. This AI platform is also on a local server, limiting access to data, making sure that this data does not leave New Mexico, and creating a resource that includes only

Capstone models in New Mexico. This has been a priority in this work because of concerns about data sovereignty that continue to be raised in the state, and FFE understands that this may be one of the first local AI models in the US. Future Focused also participated in the AI Working Group and Report developed by the Legislative Education Study Committee, established by House Memorial 2. In the 2024-25 school year, the Capstone Policy Community of Learning has also evolved from the Capstone Practitioners group. There are 9 educators in this group who are current or former Capstone teachers, and the group is designed to support new capstone educators as they innovate and transform education and assessment in New Mexico. This group informs state and school policy and practice, co-creates and offers feedback on capstone resources to share across the state. They developed a definition of innovative assessment that FFE submitted to the Rule hearing to revise graduation requirements, according to House Bill 171, in January of 2024.

E. Measuring Assessment Literacy Growth and Positive Impact on Educator Attitudes and Practice

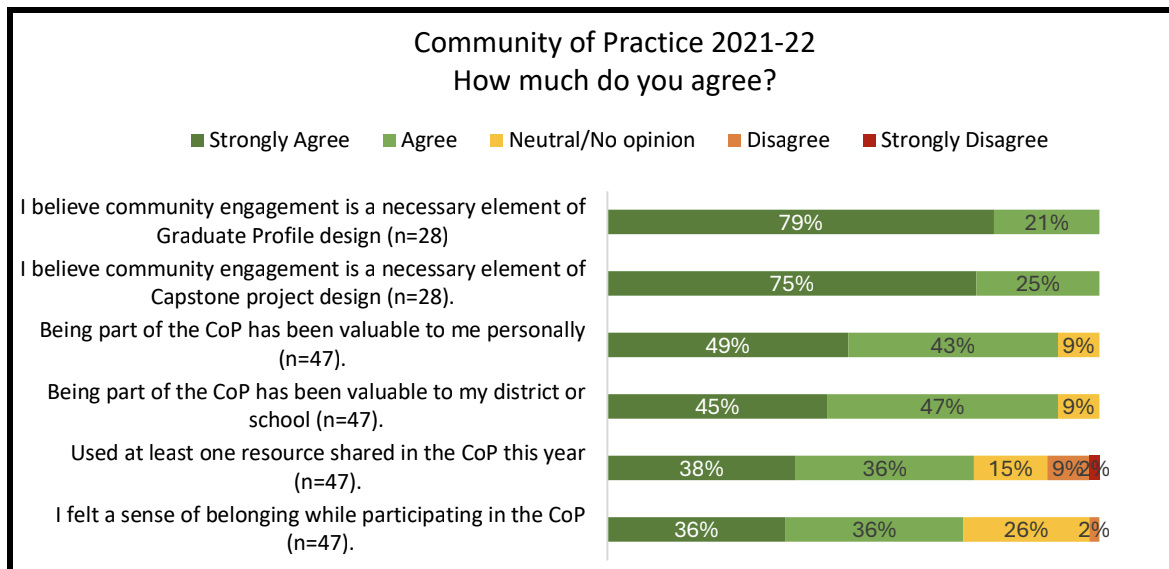
FFE aims to understand how to assess the knowledge, skills, attributes (KSAs), language, and cultural context of students' lived experiences alongside key high school competencies—marrying education and local wisdom—in core content classes or capstones as a required elective graduation pathway.

The Communities of Learning (CoL) initiative has successfully maintained and expanded participation among educators from 2021 to 2025. The total number of educators in the main CoL groups (Practitioners, Foundations, and Explorations, excluding LEA administration) grew from 10 in 2021-2022 to a peak of 100 in 2022-2023, before stabilizing at 82 in 2023-2024 and 80 in 2024-2025. This sustained engagement has led to the diversification of CoL offerings, with new, specialized groups like Capstone AI (9 participants) and Capstone Policy (9 participants) created in the 2024-2025 year. The growth among administrators in the Local Education Agency (LEA) Community of Practice (CoP) was also substantial, increasing from 22 LEAs and 57 individuals in 2021-2022 to 61 LEAs and 152 individuals in 2023-2024. The [brief](#) also highlights a clear advancement pipeline: of the 36 members in the 2023-2024 Capstone Practitioners group, 15 are returning, indicating sustained engagement. The noted decrease in Foundations and Exploration attendance after the 2022-2023 peak suggests a maturing pipeline of educators moving into the Practitioners or specializing into the new AI/Policy groups.

Survey data consistently shows high levels of agreement across all domains, indicating

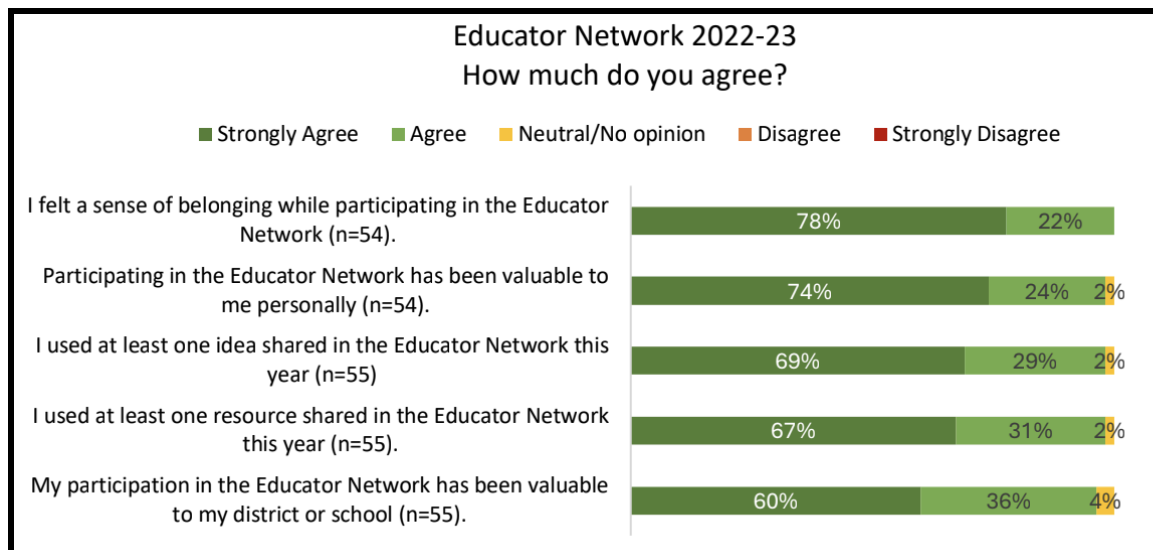
that the support structures for educators were continually refined. In the early 2021-2022 CoP survey (n=47):

- 92% (49% Strongly Agree, 43% Agree) reported being part of the CoP had been valuable to them personally
- 92% (45% Strongly Agree, 47% Agree) agreed the CoP was valuable to their district or school.

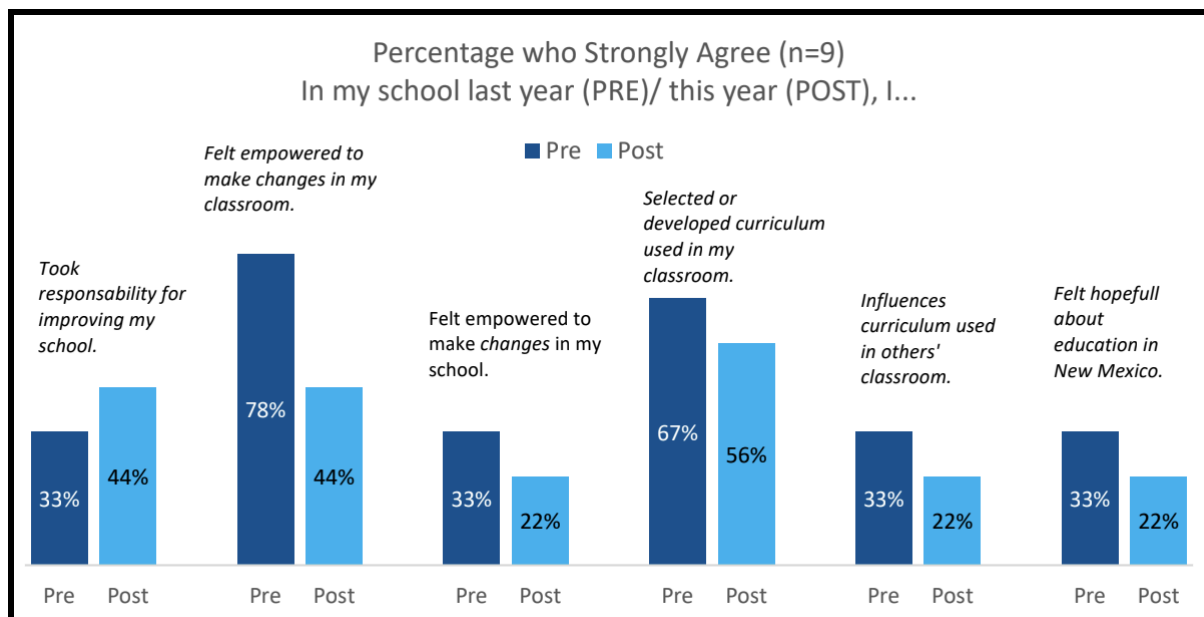


By the 2022-2023 Educator Network survey (n=54)

- 100% (78% Strongly Agree, 22% Agree) reported they felt a sense of belonging.
- 98% (56% Strongly Agree, 42% Agree, n=55) of the Educator Network in 2022-2023 felt empowered to make changes in their classroom, demonstrating a significant shift in self-efficacy.
- This feeling of empowerment was even stronger in the 2023-2024 Explorations group (n=17):
- 100% (65% Strongly Agree, 35% Agree) felt empowered to make changes in their classroom.
- 100% (65% Strongly Agree, 35% Agree, n=55) of the 2022-2023 Educator Network affirmed the racial, cultural, and linguistic identities of their students
- 100% (88% Strongly Agree, 13% Agree, n=8) of Practitioners in 2024-2025 honored families' race, ethnicity, culture, language, and background.



In 2023-24, the Community of Learning split into two differentiated Communities of Learning, the Foundation and Exploration groups.



2023-24 Foundation Survey Data

The Capstone Foundations Community of Practice (CoP) achieved high levels of engagement and completion among its participants. Of the 24 invited participants, attendance was strong throughout the year. An impressive 92% of individuals attended at least four of the eight monthly meetings, and 71% achieved perfect attendance. Furthermore, the majority of participants completed their requested monthly deliverables, known as Evidence of Learning (EoL). Three-quarters of participants

submitted a high number of EoL documents (seven or eight), and 58% completed all eight deliverables by the April deadline. Additionally, most participants, 79%, reported taking part in one of the CoP's orientations, indicating a strong initial commitment.

The community had a positive impact on participants' professional attitudes and beliefs. A core motivation for teachers was professional growth, enhancing student engagement, and implementing new educational strategies, with no one reporting participation merely to check a box. The CoP was successful in clarifying its mission, as the percentage of participants who "Strongly Agree" that "The Purpose of the Community of Learning is clear" rose from 46% to 59% by the post-survey. Information provided by the facilitators was consistently viewed as helpful by a large majority of respondents. Post-survey data also showed a belief shift, with more participants strongly agreeing that "There are multiple ways to assess what students know and can do" (67%) and that "It is important to grade students only on their proficiency and growth" (56%).

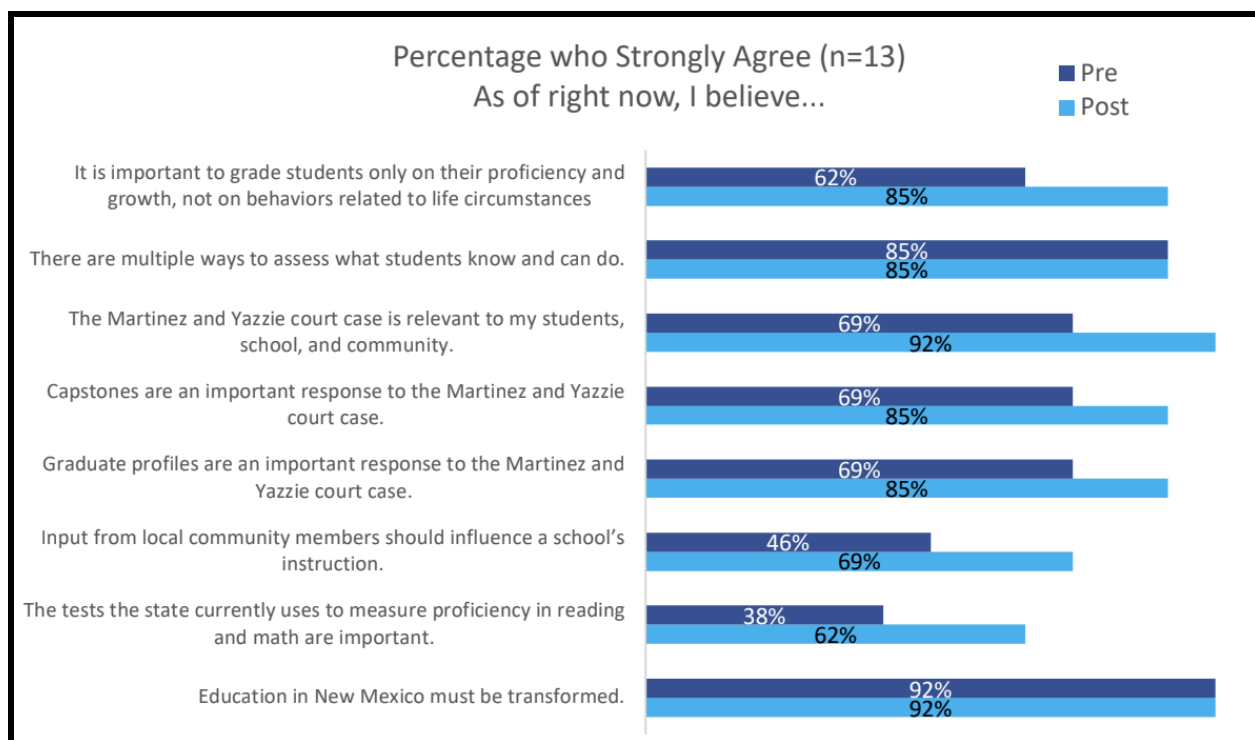
Perhaps the most significant positive outcome was the increase in teacher confidence across critical instructional practices. The percentage of participants who felt "Very Comfortable" implementing trauma-informed practices and competency-based learning both rose by over 20 percentage points. Confidence in using social-emotional learning jumped 23 points to 67%, and comfort with incorporating input from community members also increased substantially. This increased confidence correlates with a demonstrable growth in professional knowledge. Participants reported knowing significantly more about equitable assessment, the difference between language and content assessment, and how to plan instruction to address the Martinez and Yazzie court case, all showing increases of 11 to 22 percentage points.

The Capstone Exploration Community of Learning (CoL) for the 2023-2024 year demonstrated strong participant engagement and several positive outcomes regarding learning and attitudinal shifts. Regarding participation, all 34 individuals who were invited attended at least one monthly meeting. Commitment was high, with 97% of participants attending at least four meetings, and 68% achieving perfect attendance. A substantial 79% of respondents were categorized as having High attendance, attending 7-8 meetings. Furthermore, participants were diligent in completing the program's required work. An impressive 94% of participants completed at least four of the eight Evidence of Learning (EoL) deliverables, and 91% completed a High number (7-8) of the deliverables. Overall, 82% of participants completed all eight deliverables by the end of the program in April.

Participants consistently reported a positive experience and greater clarity after the program. On the post-survey, 100% of respondents either Agreed or Strongly Agreed that the purpose of the CoL was clear, showing a slight increase in confidence from the pre-survey. Similarly, all post-survey respondents Agreed or Strongly Agreed that the information provided by the facilitators had been helpful. A high level of enthusiasm was maintained, with 94% of post-survey respondents expressing excitement about participating in the Community of Learning. Qualitative feedback reinforced these numbers, with the most common valuable theme being a Positive Learning Experience, where participants specifically highlighted the supportive community, effective meetings, and the opportunity to expand their knowledge of project-based learning. Many participants expressed general satisfaction and eagerly anticipated continued learning in the future.

Using matched pre- and post-survey data for 13 participants, the brief documented noticeable positive changes in attitudes and classroom practice. The percentage of participants who Strongly Agreed they "Felt empowered to make changes in my classroom" rose from 54% to 69%. There was a similar increase in those who Strongly Agreed they "Selected or developed curriculum used in my classroom," moving from 54% to 69%. In their classroom practices, more teachers reported being an "innovator" (up from 46% to 54%) and being "eager to try new ideas" (up from 77% to 85%). Crucially, the belief in empowering students grew significantly, with the percentage of those who Strongly Agreed they "Empowered students as agents of social change" increasing from 46% to 62%. Confidence in Social-emotional learning also increased from 54% to 62%.

Perhaps the most significant outcomes were the positive shifts in beliefs regarding equitable educational practices and systemic change. The belief that "It is important to grade students only on their proficiency and growth, not on behaviors related to life circumstances" saw a sharp increase, rising from 62% to 85% Strong Agreement. Furthermore, there was a greater recognition of the broader educational context, with agreement that the Martinez and Yazzie court case is relevant to their students, school, and community increasing from 69% to 92%. This also correlated with increased belief in the program's core concepts, as agreement that "Capstones are an important response to the Martinez and Yazzie court case" climbed from 69% to 85%.



2023-24 Exploration Survey Data

In all, the Communities of Learning demonstrated clear success in driving system-level change and integrating new educational models statewide. The implementation of the Graduate Profile model has expanded dramatically across the state, increasing by 333%, growing from 9 schools in 2021 to 44 schools by 2024. Capstones have also been strategically adapted for diverse needs, including for Credit Recovery Capstones and SPED/IEP Transition Plans. Policy advocacy by the CoL was instrumental in the passage of HB 171 (2024), which eliminated the previous Demonstration of Competency (DOC) requirement and now mandates Graduate Profiles in every school or district across the state.

Furthermore, Capstone completion is being promoted as a new data metric for the state's school dashboard, and the New Mexico Public Education Department (NM PED) is launching micro-credentials co-developed with the Capstone team, recognizing their expertise. These systemic changes are driven by a growing understanding of key issues, as 100% (88% Strongly Agree, 13% Agree, n=16) of 2024-2025 Practitioners agreed that the Martinez and Yazzie court case is relevant to their students, school, and community, and 81% (56% Strongly Agree, 25% Agree, n=16) believed that input from local community members should influence a school's instruction.

F. Professional Learning Modules and Microcredentials

NMPED is still interested in offering a capstone micro-credential for educators, including content FFE is currently developing; this will eventually be housed within NMPED's LMS and is free to educators. FFE had to pause these efforts as the Graduation Requirements Bill did not pass until May of 2024. This project has been extended, given the fluctuating Graduation Requirements but will be released according to the Rule developed for House Bill 171. Given that the Graduation Guidance was released late last Spring, FFE is working with the NMPED's Assessment Bureau to create the microcredential for Capstones, leveraging the activities and deliverables of the Communities of Learning from the past several years. FFE is also developing webinars and resources that feature Capstones and resources for implementing Graduate Profiles that feature communities throughout the state.

IV. Harnessing AI for New Measures

New Mexico is shifting to a more holistic understanding of assessing student success, by requiring schools and districts to develop a Graduate Profile. This is a powerful step that rejects the one-size-fits-all approach and focuses on the unique values of New Mexican communities: producing graduates who can sustain their local language, culture, and economic well-being.

This transition to a community-centric assessment system coincides with the rapid emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in education, which presents both immense potential and critical challenges. Future Focused Education and the Instituto del Puente have convened students, teachers, administrators, and community members to discuss the implications of AI, recognizing its potential to support community-based learning and the newly established capstone projects. The key is developing sophisticated strategies informed by local wisdom to address the unique complexities faced by our state.

The most significant benefit of AI lies in its ability to address the overwhelming labor required for holistic assessment. While the community-based capstone projects and student portfolios—deep, multifaceted bodies of work—offer an insightful way to evaluate a student's journey, manually sifting through this evidence to align it with the qualities of the Graduate Profile requires an incredible amount of "people power."

This is where large language models (LLMs) provide a solution. AI can analyze a student's body of work, spanning from middle school through graduation, and identify patterns and themes that align with the specific indicators of their local Graduate Profile. By doing the heavy lifting of sifting through massive bodies of work, AI can dramatically reduce the time and effort required, making this holistic assessment far more manageable and scalable across the entire state. Importantly, the goal is not to have a

machine issue a final grade. Instead, the technology is meant to power up human judgment, ensuring that teachers and staff—those who know their students best—remain the final arbiters of a student's success, while the AI simply highlights the evidence of the qualities the community cares about.

The promise of AI is clear, but the threat to New Mexico's unique cultural heritage is equally so, revolving around the critical issue of data sovereignty. New Mexico's student work, rich with local language, culture, and context, is considered by some its greatest commodity in this new AI age. Giving this data away to global AI models carries the risk of losing the crucial, hyper-local nuances that define the state's communities and cultural identity.

AI tools trained on vast, global datasets are "normed" according to worldwide trends. If such a tool were to assess a New Mexico student's work, it might identify proficiency based on global standards, potentially overlooking or devaluing the unique cultural references, linguistic patterns, or community-specific knowledge. If educators rely on AI to assess based on a global standard, it could strip away the very essence of what the Graduate Profile is meant to foster: a person who can sustain their local community, language, and culture.

This concern is amplified by the looming threat of model collapse, where AI systems trained on synthetic or AI-generated data begin to lose their accuracy and connection to authentic human knowledge. Local experts have sounded the alarm, underscoring the need for extreme caution regarding how New Mexico's authentic data is used, ensuring it does not simply become feedstock for models that will ultimately undermine the cultural authenticity they were intended to preserve.

FFE's strategy to navigate this challenge is not to reject AI, but to control its use and preserve data sovereignty. The solution lies in building proprietary infrastructure: local, closed servers operating within schools, districts, or at the state level. This closed server environment is FFE's investment in safeguarding the state's cultural data.

This approach guarantees that the AI models operate exclusively within the boundaries of the community or state. Data from student capstone projects and portfolios would never be sent to a global cloud for analysis, ensuring it remains protected and that the AI's learning is confined solely to the specific New Mexican educational and cultural context.

FFE is currently developing a prototype database platform for capstone projects, which will incorporate a generative AI model to provide support and foster connections across the state. This initiative is designed to operate within a statewide AI policy framework that honors local culture, language, and history, ensuring that the state maintains sovereignty over its data and intellectual property. The path forward is a necessary one, empowering New Mexico to harness the potential of AI to create a more equitable assessment system on its own terms—by protecting its data and ensuring its students'

success is measured by the unique richness of their own communities.

V. Policy Influence and Systemic Sustainability

The policy work aims to identify policy barriers to capstone implementation and recommend appropriate policy change, to include a youth advocacy team. FFE is now also advocating for policy change with data collection and reporting systems at the PED. The PED is transitioning to a new school data dashboard and school “grading” system. FFE is leveraging the Legislative Education Study Committee (LESC) to prompt the PED to collect other metrics of school success, including capstone completion, in this new dashboard system.

Future Focused Education’s Instituto Del Puente has committed to advocating for and seeing meaningful state and district policy change happen in the state. The Instituto del Puente is the official policy arm of Future Focused Education (FFE), a significant development that was officially launched to address the persistent issue of educational programs running “out of gas” without a supportive policy framework. The core mission of Instituto is explicitly to use policy as a tool to bridge the gap between the current state of schools and communities and their aspirational future—one characterized by health, prosperity, and thriving communities. This policy initiative operates on a distinctive “bottom-up approach,” championed by Tony Monfiletto, the Director of Instituto del Puente, who asserts that the people most affected by the policy must be the ones informing its content. This philosophy ensures that policy decisions are not merely made by a select few but are instead shaped by an equal share of young people and their communities to imagine and build a different future for New Mexico’s education system. The work of Instituto del Puente is rooted in the belief held by Future Focused Education that the future health and prosperity of communities are intrinsically linked to the ambitions of young people.

The foundation of Instituto del Puente’s policy impact is its extensive “listening journey” and co-creation process, which spans across every area of New Mexico. This collaborative effort seeks to determine how young people envision success and what role advocates can play in supporting their futures. Through a year of convenings, the policy arm successfully organized 13 convenings, including nine Community Convenings that drew nearly 500 participants from across the state. These events were intentionally inclusive, involving private employers, community stakeholders, families, local nonprofits, Instituto del Puente nonprofit partners, students, educators, and school board members. Conversations were geographically widespread, taking place in towns and cities such as Aztec, Peñasco, Albuquerque, Santa Fe, Lake Arthur, Santa Rosa,

Hobbs, Alamogordo, and Las Cruces. Furthermore, each event showcased student panels, and many featured leadership from the New Mexico Public Education Department, the Legislative Education Study Committee, and the Legislative Finance Committee, ensuring direct interaction between policymakers and those they serve. The goal of these gatherings was to collect and synthesize community and youth knowledge with sustainable policy efforts.

During this comprehensive process, Instituto del Puente collected over 2,000 data points from participants. Participants were prompted to respond based on the hopes for the future shared by the youth attendees. The responses identified key themes which were then sent back to the community for review, a crucial step that ensured accuracy and alignment with their contributions, resulting in a rich and verified dataset of perspectives. From this extensive data, Future Focused Education categorized the themes into three key requests consistently shared by young people: hands-on learning with future relevance (or learning with purpose), mentorship for adulthood, and care and concern for their well-being (student well-being). This co-creation process successfully identified eight overarching themes, including Student-Centered Education, Experiential & Hands-on Learning, Equitable Access & Diversity, Policy & Structural Reforms, Mental Health & Wellbeing, Community & School Partnerships, Professional Development for Educators, and Youth Voice & Empowerment. These themes were then used to shape the policy recommendations, maximizing health and prosperity for communities. The entire methodology for Instituto del Puente involves a continuous cycle of Respond (listening to youth and collecting data), Adapt (connecting learning to community needs and values), and Sustain (advocating for a statewide ecosystem through policy).

This rigorous, community-centered process ultimately led to the co-creation of five specific policy recommendations for the 2025 legislative session:

- **Local District Policies:** The recommendation advocates for redesigning the school day to include more meaningful experiences for young people, such as implementing capstone projects, work-based learning, and other community-based initiatives. This aligns with student input that favors getting out of the classroom to apply learning.
- **Sustainable Funding for Work-Based Learning:** Addressing the reliance of New Mexico schools on temporary funding for paid internships, which is viewed as an unsustainable model. Instituto del Puente proposed legislation, specifically HB 528, as a long-term solution to help schools and employers maximize opportunities created under a prior law, HB 171.
- **State Artificial Intelligence (AI) Policy for Public Schools:** As Future Focused

develops an AI model for the statewide Capstone Initiative, the policy advocates for crucial protective measures: community data control, equitable AI access and representation, transparency, AI as a public good, and ensuring AI enhances—not replaces—human connection.

- PED Rule Making for HB 171 Implementation: Acknowledging the "great redesign promise" of state graduation requirements, the policy seeks to ensure the rulemaking process by the New Mexico Public Education Department (PED) allows districts to pursue the most innovative practices.
- Teen Mental Health: This is based on the success of a pilot program where Future Focused piloted Youth and Teen Mental Health First Aid training in five rural and two Albuquerque schools, providing school-wide training and paid internships for student support. The program highlighted the critical need for more mental health resources and exposed existing service gaps.

The impact of Instituto del Puente's advocacy was evident in the 2025 legislative outcomes to celebrate and the direct influence on local communities. Legislatively, Instituto played a supporting role in securing key appropriations and advancing significant bills: they secured a \$1.0 million appropriation to support Mental Health First Aid for students and staff, coupled with funding for paid Behavioral Health internships. They also supported a \$6.2 million appropriation aimed at dealing with absenteeism, which is intended to expand the reach of the Graduation Re-engagement, Internship, Program (GRIP) initiative. Furthermore, the organization supported HB 528, the legislation introduced to establish sustainable funding for work-based learning across the state, and advocated for a memorial to study the implications of Artificial Intelligence, a study that would receive research support from Future Focused. On the local level, the policy work was immediately actionable; for example, after the Lake Arthur Convening, the Municipal Schools used the information to create local school board policy and implement new graduation requirements, including the creation of a graduate profile outlining essential skills identified by the community. Similarly, the Hobbs Convening informed the local district's Strategic Plan, helping to improve and create new student-engaging pathways. The work is ongoing, with plans during the 2025 interim to expand the network of support for these initiatives by engaging young people, community members, and educators. Overall, Instituto del Puente strives to serve as a critical bridge from community input to sustainable, solution-based policy actions, deliberately including the voices of those most impacted. The long-term vision is that these investments will lead to greater health and prosperity for the community, rather than merely focusing on simple metrics of student success, such as standardized test scores or graduation rates.

A. The Policy Triumph of House Bill 171

In partnership with the NM Public Education Department, FFE has identified policy barriers to implementing capstones as a Demonstration of Competency (DOC) requirement for graduation. In 2023, House Bill 126 did not get signed by the Governor, which would have removed the DOC altogether, but in March of 2024, Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham signed HB 171 that removed the Demonstration of Competency and requires schools to develop a Graduate Profile. This is a success, but it is not enough given the concern that schools will not innovate their assessment systems and will continue to use standardized assessments that are still in place as a default.

B. Youth Advocacy and Civic Engagement

To ensure youth voice is centered in systemic change, the Youth Voice is a state-wide, paid internship launched in the spring semester in year 1. In 2024-25 FFE launched a new internship, titled Youth Voice, in which interns created podcasts about innovative educational practices in their own communities. This group, with new members, launched for the full year and included advocating during the spring legislative session. These interns represent 16 schools from around the state. These interns reported that “This internship aims to put our voice out there about matters that truly impact us. We are trying to make a stand about what’s going on in our communities,” and working together to “I feel like we are trying to embrace mutual understandings about the world and each other.” The 2025-26 Youth Voice Internship launched in September and is grounded in media creation and engagement with a community organizing focus.

VI. Conclusion

To truly secure the equity gains made and meet the evolving needs of New Mexico’s diverse students, our next phase must focus on two strategic pillars: closing residual equity gaps and safeguarding the integrity of the new assessment system. While programs like GRIP successfully re-engaged off-track youth, data highlights the persistent challenge for students with complex needs, particularly those in SPED and ELL groups, who showed lower graduation rates. The continuation of this work is therefore essential to fully implement the multi-year Capstone for Special Education model and ensure every student achieves the NM Diploma of Excellence. Simultaneously, we are building proprietary, local AI infrastructure to manage the overwhelming labor of holistically assessing culturally-rich student work, guaranteeing that New Mexico maintains data sovereignty and the Capstone model measures local, not global, definitions of student success.

The establishment of Instituto del Puente as FFE's policy arm ensures that this transformation is not only successful but sustainable. Our community-centered policy efforts have already translated into legislative appropriations for mental health and work-based learning, moving the state past temporary funding solutions. By leveraging our relationships to integrate capstone completion into the Public Education Department's new data dashboard, we are ensuring that these new measures of student competency become the permanent metrics for school success. We are deeply committed to continuing to build this self-sustaining, community-led, and culturally authentic educational system, maximizing health and prosperity for the next generation of New Mexico leaders.