



DEMOCRATS *for*
EDUCATION REFORM

Governors Program **New Mexico**

A Note From Our CEO

Democrats face a critical juncture in education policy. Over the past decade, our party's traditional advantage on education has eroded—slipping from a 26-point lead over Republicans to now trailing by 3 points. The perception among voters is clear: Democrats have become entangled in ideological battles that distract from efforts to improve educational outcomes for students. Prolonged school closures damaged trust, leading voters—including many in New Mexico—to question our commitment to delivering real academic results for their children.



Responding to this crisis in education, New Mexico's leaders have taken meaningful steps to improve the quality of education in the state. Notable increases in teacher pay have put New Mexico [among the top 10 states for starting teacher salaries](#), and the state recently committed to a \$5,000 salary increase for all teachers. Teacher training programs now require aspiring educators to be [trained in the Science of Reading](#). Still, the state is battling decades of underperformance and underinvestment in the kinds of transformative approaches that engage and prepare young people for college, careers, and life. [New Mexico students rank last](#) on math and reading scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Chronic absenteeism is [nearly twice its pre-COVID rate](#). While top-performing students excel, those in the bottom quartile are increasingly falling behind, widening achievement gaps that threaten our collective future. Accountability for student outcomes is currently insufficient.

In the face of this education crisis, notable progress is happening in [several Republican-led states](#). While these gains highlight the urgency and possibility of reform, they also underscore the need for Democrats to put forward their own bold, future-focused vision for education. For Democratic gubernatorial candidates, education offers a powerful opportunity to redefine the party's vision and distinguish themselves from current leadership. To win voter trust again, Democratic candidates in New Mexico must boldly embrace a new education agenda—one centered unequivocally on results. This means prioritizing innovation by supporting new school models and technologies, insisting on accountability tied directly to student outcomes, and empowering families through meaningful school choice. This policy shift represents not only a political imperative but a moral one: It is our opportunity to show voters we are ready to lead with courage and clarity, setting ourselves apart as agents of transformative change dedicated to improving outcomes for every child.

Executive Summary

State of the Landscape

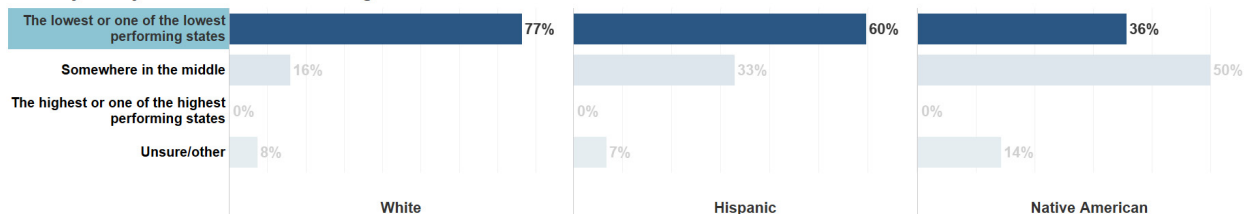
- New Mexico has **one of the highest-need student populations in the country**, with 75% eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, 19% English language learners, and 18% students with disabilities.
- The state **ranks last (51st) in the nation for NAEP scores**, with only marginal improvement after adjusting for demographically similar peers.
- New Mexico's high school graduation rate is **among the worst in the nation**. At **78%** overall, it is nine percentage points lower than the **national average**, with significant racial gaps (73% for Native American students and 69% for African American students).
- New Mexico has made **significant investments in teacher compensation** in recent years, bringing it above its peers and the national average.
- The state has also invested heavily in **free, universal early childhood education** as well as **tuition- and fee-free college** at public institutions.
- **Likely 2026 Democratic primary voters believe young people today will be worse off than previous generations:** By a 56-point margin (75% worse off / 19% better off), voters said today's young people will not do as well financially as their parents and grandparents. This pessimistic view is largely consistent across voters regardless of race, age, party affiliation, or parental status.

Do you think young people today will be better off or worse off financially than previous generations of Americans?



- **Voters know NM schools are behind the rest of the country:** 68% of likely 2026 Democratic primary voters said it was “the lowest or one of the lowest performing states” in math and reading proficiency. **Hispanic and Native American voters were much more likely to feel that NM schools were doing better:** 33% and 50% respectively said the state was “somewhere in the middle” when compared to other states in math and reading, while only 16% of White voters felt this way.

How well would you say students in New Mexico public schools are doing in subjects like math and reading compared to other states? Would you say New Mexico is on average....



- Recent legislative action and state investments suggest a growing **appetite for education reform** in New Mexico, and these changes may yield **improved outcomes over the next five to ten years**. 79% of NM Democrats want more public school choice options, and a majority are interested in potentially transformative strategies such as the use of AI to support learning and microschoools, small schools designed to emphasize personalized learning.

Recommendations

Innovation

- **Increase enrollment in dual enrollment courses and evaluate outcomes** for dual enrollment programs.
- **Invest in a range of innovative school models** by providing financial and regulatory support for charter schools, early college high schools, magnet schools, and microschools.
- **Reward great educators** through strategic staffing models, supplemental pay for teachers in hard-to-staff schools and subjects, and principal training pilot programs to improve school financial management, work cultures and outcomes.

Accountability

- **Emphasize outcomes in accountability** by requiring chronically low-performing schools and districts to enter a rigorous turnaround process that empowers experienced leaders with the flexibility to implement bold reforms to improve results.
- **Expand literacy support across K–12** through larger investments in early screening, coaching, interventions, and curriculum-aligned professional development, as well as greater emphasis on 3rd- and 4th-grade reading scores.
- **Measure and report on a broadened set of college-and-career readiness measures** to ensure youth and families understand their educational options and can advocate for positive change.

Choice

- **Enact policy mandating options for within- and cross-district enrollment**, based on an analysis of open enrollment policies and their effects on equity and access.
- **Review and eliminate regulatory barriers that may inhibit charter growth**, particularly around facilities access and funding parity.
- **Use ECCA to expand access to tutoring and other out-of-school time programs** by providing free services through scholarship granting organizations and identifying trusted community-based organizations and other institutions that provide academic and non-academic supports to K–12 students.

Key Communication Strategies for New Mexico Democratic Primary Electorate:

Connect Families' Aspirations for a Better Future to Better Schools

Although an overwhelming number of New Mexico Democratic primary voters (75%) believe young people today will be worse off financially than previous generations, they view improvements to public education as key to setting their children up for economic success and a better future.

- **Data Insights:** When asked to prioritize issues for elected leaders to focus on in order to improve economic outcomes for young people, likely 2026 Democratic primary voters rated “improving public schools” second overall (29%), only behind “reducing inflation and costs” (50%). Improving public schools rated higher than “reducing healthcare costs” (11%), “making higher education more affordable” (5%), and “stopping the outsourcing / automation of good-paying jobs” (3%).
- **Do:** Frame education as the bridge to a brighter future for every child and every family in New Mexico. Communicate a sense of urgency highlighting dismal engagement (high chronic absenteeism) and a low graduation rate, relative to the national average. Position your vision as one that isn't about managing decline or narrowing focus—but about growing potential, expanding horizons, and delivering more opportunity for young people.

Focus on Innovative School Models to Provide Families With Choice

- **Data Insights:** Nearly eight in ten (79%) NM Democratic primary voters in our survey said that improving access to high-quality public school choices such as magnet, charter, and tribal-compact schools is important to improving public education in NM.
- **Do:** Messaging should focus on **improving access to quality school options** that improve outcomes for all kids regardless of what kind of school they attend. Voters and parents are very sympathetic to the idea that schools and teachers are overburdened and external factors like public safety, housing, transportation, and all the things that surround kids every day impact what happens in the classroom. Voters don't just want new approaches to learning and additional school options for the sake of change—they want to know that the choices offered to them are being expanded because they are **effective and proven**. Parents and voters know that kids learn differently and are very open to the idea that schools need to be updated and new options should be offered—68% of Democratic primary voters felt NM was one of the lowest-performing states in the country in math and reading—but they want to know that the changes will be beneficial for all kids.

Insight #3: Voters want the next Governor to Opt-In to the Federal Tax Credit Scholarship Program

- **Data Insights:** An overwhelming majority of New Mexico primary voters support the federal school choice program: 69% of voters favor the Governor opting into the federal tax credit program, with 24% opposing. While there's strong support across all age groups and demographics, the strongest support came from voters 18-34 years old (79% support), Native Americans (93% support), and voters without a 4-year college degree (75% support).
- **Do:** Commit to opting New Mexico into the federal tax credit scholarship program as a way to deliver on voter priorities and expand pathways for every child to succeed. Now that ECCA has passed, the next Governor should lead in shaping how it is implemented so that underserved communities and families truly benefit. This positions the governor as a leader who listens to diverse communities—including those most enthusiastic about choice—and ensures these new resources are deployed equitably to serve families who need them the most.

The Opportunity

A new governor will have the opportunity to set and execute a vision that drives not just academic recovery, but long-term excellence for all students. Under strong leadership, every student in New Mexico will:

- Attend a school that receives fair funding, regardless of school type, and have funding allocated to increase access to excellent schools that are responsive to student needs.
- Learn from a highly qualified and well-prepared educator.
- Demonstrate proficiency in grade-level standards, regardless of socioeconomic status, with students furthest behind experiencing accelerated growth.
- Graduate prepared for a high-wage, high-demand career in New Mexico with relevant skills, credentials, and academic credits.

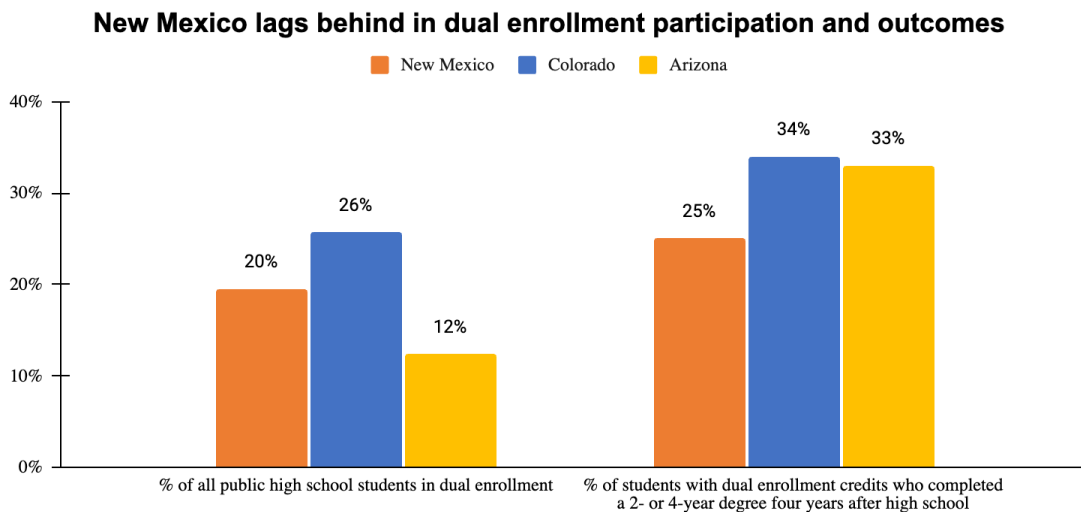
Through reforms focused on holding schools accountable for academic and postsecondary success, high-quality public school choices for all families, and innovative solutions led by educators, New Mexico can build a world-class educational system that cements the state’s position not just as a high performer but as a national model and leader.

Innovation

New Mexico’s next governor has the opportunity to ensure that the state becomes the best place in the country for students to prepare for college, career, and life.

New Mexico must strengthen how schools prepare students for success in the workforce and in life. The state’s educational attainment rate—measured by the share of adults holding a degree or credential—is among the lowest in the nation. New Mexico adults hold a bachelor’s degree or higher at a rate below the national average. Attainment also varies widely within the state, with Santa Fe having a relatively high percentage of adults holding a bachelor’s degree or higher, while rates in many rural counties are far lower. Racial and ethnic disparities are equally stark, with attainment ranging substantially across groups.

- New Mexico has the [second-lowest percentage](#) of 18- to 24-year-olds enrolled in degree-granting postsecondary institutions (21%) in the nation, with only Alaska lower.



Sources: [Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System \(IPEDS\)](#); [Community College Research Center](#)

The Next Governor Should:

- Increase Enrollment in Dual Enrollment Courses and Evaluate Outcomes for Dual Enrollment Programs
- Invest in a Range of Innovative School Models
- Reward Great Educators

Increase Enrollment in Dual Enrollment Courses and Evaluate Outcomes for Dual Enrollment Programs

Given New Mexico's relatively low enrollment and postsecondary degree completion rate for dual enrollment, the state should implement an annual evaluation of dual enrollment programs, participation, and outcomes—disaggregated by race, socioeconomic status, and school district—and make the findings easily accessible. The next governor should increase efforts to broaden access to dual enrollment programs. Efforts should prioritize expanding opportunities for rural, Black, and Indigenous learners. We also recommend developing structured pathways that lead students toward college credentials or degrees, paired with strong advising and counseling to ensure quality and alignment.

For example, [key policies recently enacted in Indiana](#) have catalyzed the development of a robust career pathways program that links learning in high school to college and career options, leading to positive outcomes for learners. Key features and support for their pathways programs include: 1) Clearly defined course sequences, competency standards, and alignment of dual credit with postsecondary institutions; 2) grants for early exploration before entering high schools; 3) investments in career counseling/coaching; and 4) support transparency for communities, families, and learners.

Invest in a Range of Innovative School Models

We recommend providing financial and regulatory support for high-quality charter schools, early college high schools, magnet schools, microschools, and other models outside traditional schools that allow for faster, community-driven, more iterative innovation. The next governor of New Mexico should create a task force to craft a deliberate strategy to build these learning ecosystems, aligning all partners around shared K–12 goals.

For instance, graduates of Early College High Schools (ECHS) are [considerably more likely](#) to earn some form of college degree over the next ten years than non-participants and get there faster, allowing them to begin earning wages earlier than they otherwise would. In Massachusetts, ECHS graduates are [14 percentage points more likely](#) (68% versus 54%) to go on to college compared to control-matched peers, and [14 percentage points more likely](#) (58% versus 44%) to persist into a second year of college—a strong predictor of eventual graduation.

Reward Great Educators

We are glad to see that New Mexico's legislature has increased the minimum pay for teachers and other school staff. In order to create incentives to increase equity and excellence, we recommend the use of strategic staffing models to accelerate learning and shrink outcome gaps, supplemental pay for teachers in hard-to-staff schools and subjects, and additional pay incentives tied to academic and other student outcomes. An example of innovative policy directly impacting teaching and learning, North Carolina's [comprehensive redesign](#) of the state's teaching profession has included the

adoption of a strategic staffing model, [BEST NC Advanced Teaching Roles](#), which has [significantly improved](#) student outcomes and teacher experiences in participating schools.

Accountability

New Mexico’s next governor must ensure that the public school system achieves positive outcomes for all students, especially those from historically underserved groups.

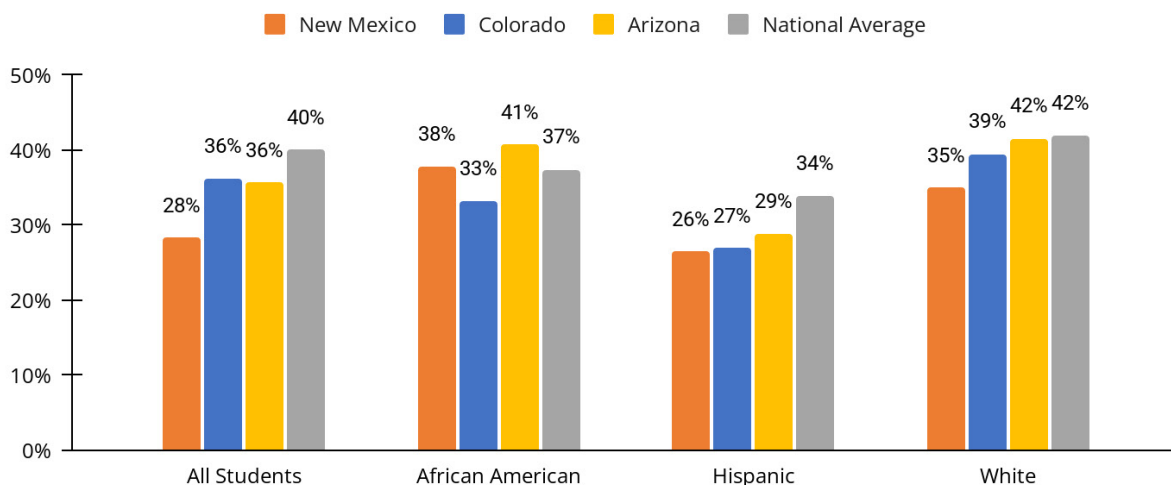
The current system is still falling short, failing learners: Despite making historic investments in educators by passing bills for much-needed increases in teacher pay, New Mexico’s national test scores remain below 2013 levels, highlighting persistent challenges both before and after the pandemic. When adjusted to compare with students in other states with similar demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, New Mexico’s NAEP score rankings sit in the bottom half of states, indicating much more room for improvement.

Demographically Adjusted NAEP Rankings (2024)				
	4th Grade Reading	4th Grade Math	8th Grade Reading	8th Grade Math
Arizona	48th	46th	36th	34th
Colorado	11th	23rd	7th	34th
New Mexico	30th	37th	30th	37th

Source: [Urban Institute](#)

New Mexico also trails other states in the share of 18–24-year-olds enrolled in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, underscoring persistent challenges preparing students for life after high school. Earning a postsecondary degree remains one of the most reliable ways to increase lifetime earnings and must be a focus of the next administration.

New Mexico lags behind its peers in the percentage of 18- to 24-year-olds enrolled in degree-granting postsecondary institutions



Source: [National Center for Education Statistics](#)

The Next Governor Should:

- Expand Literacy Support Across K–12 ensuring every student has access to evidence-based materials and instruction that prepares them for the next grade and beyond.
- Emphasize Outcomes in Accountability by introducing stronger accountability measures and increasing investment in public reporting of school quality measures.
- Measure and report on a broadened set of college-and-career readiness measures to ensure youth and families understand their educational options and can advocate for positive change.

[New Mexico ranked last \(51st\) among states](#) for 4th- and 8th-grade reading and math. [Adjusting for demographic characteristics](#), New Mexico still ranks in the bottom half of states.

Expand Literacy Support Across K–12

We applaud the new requirement that educator preparation programs include science of reading requirements. Larger investments in early literacy and high-school reading mastery, including screening, coaching, and interventions can help ensure all students develop and maintain age-appropriate reading and writing skills. We recommend placing greater emphasis on 3rd-grade reading scores, as earlier interventions are more effective in supporting learners and driving long-term improvements across the system. The next governor should also mandate targeted, intensive support (i.e., [evidence-based tutoring](#)) to the lowest-performing students to make up for lost ground. New Mexico can also adopt strategic staffing policies to improve early-literacy rates in the state, empowering highly-rated teachers and training additional literacy specialists to provide additional support to high-needs schools.

[Mississippi's](#) spectacular improvement in NAEP reading scores should be a model for New Mexico. Relying on federally supported research from the Institute of Education Sciences, the state invested in a curriculum based on the science of reading, provided K–3 teachers with training and support to help students master reading by the end of third grade, and provided targeted support for struggling readers. Mississippi's [Literacy-Based Promotion Act](#) also included provisions for reading coaches, parent communication, individual reading plans and other supportive measures, some of which may be funded through scholarship-granting organizations supported by ECCA.

Emphasize Outcomes in Accountability

The next governor should introduce stronger reporting requirements and accountability measures for all schools but especially chronically underperforming schools. Legislation should provide clearer, more stringent guidance, aligned with the conditions for entering into and out of various levels of state support or intervention. Lasting improvements in education depend on centering the affected community, so that families who have too often been left out of decision-making can play a meaningful role in shaping the development of a better educational ecosystem.

Turnaround laws in states like [Massachusetts](#) and takeover efforts in cities like [New Orleans](#) tend to be more successful when paired with a broader reform agenda including funding reform, tracking outcomes beyond high school, and innovative approaches like New Orleans's creation of the nation's most intensive market-based school system.

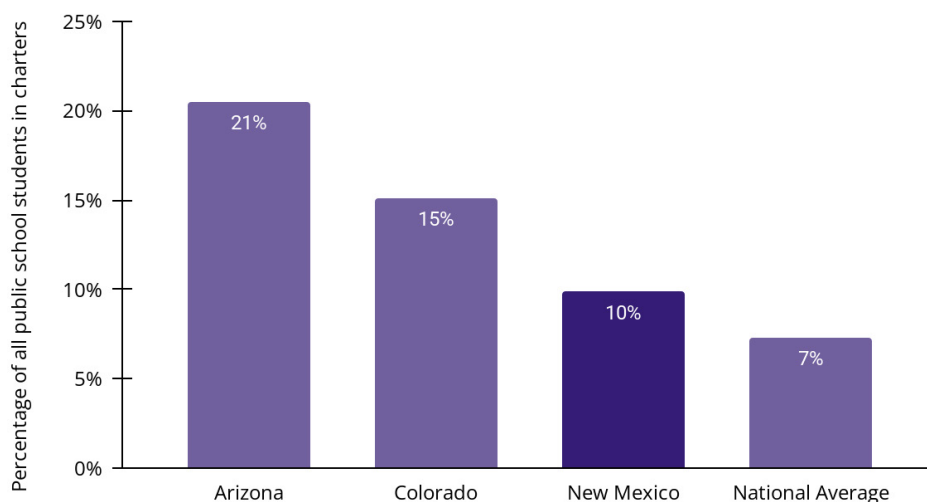
Measure and Report on a Broadened Set of College-and-Career Readiness Measures

While we applaud the creation and growth of NM Vistas public reporting platform, we call on the next governor to link additional workforce readiness measures and explore ways to measure and hold the education system accountable for the acquisition of durable skills such as adaptability, communication, and critical thinking among learners. Having developed 'Portraits of a Graduate' that highlight future-ready skills, several states, including North Carolina, Indiana, Rhode Island and Wisconsin are currently working to develop assessments to measure these skills. The next governor of New Mexico should follow these states' leads and take bold steps to reshape the way students learn and demonstrate mastery. The next governor has a critical opportunity to demand more than test scores and to create an education system that truly engages and delivers for every learner.

Choice

New Mexico lacks a strong ecosystem of school options, due in part to restrictive policies and regulations that make it difficult for innovative models to scale and limit family choice. For example, while the state has a high share of students enrolled in charter schools (**10%**), it lags behind choice-rich states such as **Arizona (21%)** and **Colorado (15%)**. Allowing for multi-site charters would enable high-quality operators to open additional schools, including microschoools, under the same charter. This would reduce administrative burden and allow for charter providers to serve more families where need and interest converge. New Mexico also has the chance to expand options for learners by opting into the Educational Choice for Children (ECCA) federal tax credit program. For example, charter schools would be able to start their own scholarship granting organizations that could use donations to further support both academic achievement and drive the development of durable skills through experiential learning opportunities in partnership with community organizations and businesses.

New Mexico has fewer students in charter schools than its peers



New Mexico does not currently mandate that schools and districts allow families to enroll their children in another public school within the same district, nor does it have a mandate for inter or cross-district enrollment. Furthermore, the state does not bar charging tuition for out-of-district enrollment, presenting yet another barrier to working and middle-class families looking for better educational options. One example of an ambitious inter-district enrollment model that could be adopted with shifts to state policy has arisen in Connecticut in response to the state *Sheff v. O'Neill* court case. The Greater Hartford region has developed one of the country's more ambitious

approaches to inter-district enrollment. The system includes nearly 40 magnet schools along with an inter-district transfer program that together serve over 40,000 students in magnets and about 3,000 through open choice. More than half of Hartford’s students participate. Families pay nothing for transportation, and enrollment processes are designed to promote socioeconomic diversity. Additionally, many of the magnet schools are located in Hartford and New Haven, where large numbers of students of color live, creating new educational opportunities within city neighborhoods while also drawing in suburban students. [Results indicate positive outcomes](#) for students attending these magnet schools.

By strengthening and diversifying options, applying innovative strategies to address historical inequity, and implementing policies that give families more options—whether charter schools, magnets, or innovative district-led options—New Mexico can ensure that families have meaningful opportunities to select schools that best support their children’s success.

Source: [National Center for Education Statistics](#)

The next governor should:

- **Enact policy mandating options for within- and cross-district enrollment**, based on an analysis of open enrollment policies and their current effects on equity and access.
- **Review and eliminate regulatory barriers that may inhibit charter growth**, particularly around facilities access and funding parity.
- **Use ECCA to expand access to tutoring and other out-of-school time programs** by providing free services through scholarship granting organizations and identifying trusted community-based organizations and other institutions.

Enact policy mandating options for within- and cross-district enrollment

Zip code should not dictate what school you attend. New Mexico should make it easier for families to choose the public school that works best for their child, no matter where they live. However, the state does not currently mandate that schools and districts allow families to enroll their children in another public school within the same district, nor does it have a mandate for inter or cross-district enrollment. New Mexico also does not bar charging tuition for out-of-district enrollment, presenting yet another barrier to families looking for better educational options. One example of an ambitious inter-district enrollment model that could be adopted with shifts to state policy has arisen in Connecticut in response to the state *Sheff v. O’Neill* court case. The Greater Hartford region has developed one of the country’s more ambitious approaches to inter-district enrollment. The system includes nearly 40 magnet schools along with an inter-district transfer program that together serve over 40,000 students in magnets and about 3,000 through open choice. More than half of Hartford’s students participate. Families pay nothing for transportation, and enrollment processes are designed to promote socioeconomic diversity. Many of the magnet schools are located in Hartford and New Haven, where large numbers of students of color live, creating new educational opportunities within city neighborhoods while also drawing in suburban students to achieve greater

integration. [Results indicate positive outcomes for students attending these magnet schools.](#) By strengthening and diversifying options, applying innovative strategies to address historical inequity and implementing policies that give families more options—whether charter schools, magnets, or innovative district options—New Mexico can ensure that families have meaningful opportunities to select schools that best support their children’s success.

Review and eliminate regulatory barriers that may inhibit charter growth

The next governor should lead on implementing policies and regulatory reforms to support the growth of more high-quality charter schools. Charters are public schools that can offer innovative programs and learning approaches while being held accountable for results. Expanding access to strong charter schools means more families—especially those in communities with limited high-quality options—can find schools that match their child’s needs and set them up for success in college, career, and life.

Expanding access to high-quality charter schools requires a focus on both enabling policy and strategic support. Direct support for high-performing charter operators—especially in securing or developing facilities—should be a priority. For example, New Mexico leaders should consider putting in place more robust weighted funding models that give extra resources to charters successfully serving high-need populations.

Use ECCA to Expand Access to Tutoring and Out-of-School Time Programs

The Educational Choice for Children Act (ECCA) represents an opportunity to expand access to high-quality out-of-school time programs and for accelerating learning through evidence-based tutoring for students who need it the most. We recommend embracing ECCA and designing it to serve under-resourced students and families in public and private schools by providing free services through scholarship granting organizations and identifying trusted community-based organizations and other institutions that provide academic and non-academic support to K–12 students. Out-of-school time programming provides academic enrichment and opportunities for young people to build durable skills. It also provides working-class families with additional child care support, ensuring their children are in safe, supportive environments after school and on the weekends.

Moving **Forward**

The next governor has a chance to transform education in New Mexico, from the first day a child enters school to the skills and opportunities they leave with upon graduation. By ensuring schools deliver results, expanding high-quality options for families, and embracing innovation that opens doors for every student, the next governor can build a brighter future. This is how children, families, educators, and communities across New Mexico will thrive for generations to come.