



New Mexico Rising

Engaging our Communities for Excellence in Education

LAS CRUCES MEETING REPORT

- Community meetings on the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) occurred throughout New Mexico in fall 2016.
- This report summarizes the Las Cruces meetings, held November 15, 2016.
- A separate, statewide report includes all community feedback.

CONVENER

New Mexico Public Education Department

FACILITATOR

New Mexico First



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New Mexico First
P. O. Box 56549
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87187
Phone: 505-225-2140
Website: www.nmfirst.org

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

New Mexico students have made gains in test scores in recent years for math and reading, and more students are graduating from high school. These achievements, while positive, have not yet moved the state's near-bottom ranking in the U.S. for student performance including some of the lowest math and reading scores in the nation.

Providing all New Mexico children with a quality education is the key to our state's future. In a continuing effort to ensure better student outcomes, the federal government passed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This new law replaces the federal law "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) in governing K-12 education.

The New Mexico Public Education Department (PED) convened six regional meetings throughout the state in Gallup, Farmington, Santa Fe, Albuquerque, Rowell and Las Cruces as well as a Tribal Government to Government session, to solicit input about how to best implement the state's ESSA plan to support student learning. The PED partnered with the nonpartisan, nonprofit New Mexico First to facilitate the meetings.

Participants received information on the following main areas of potential ESSA reform:

- School accountability and report cards
- Student assessment and coursework requirements
- English language learners
- Support for low-performing schools
- Support and evaluation of teachers and other school leaders

Keeping those main topics in mind, participants were asked what was working well in their school or district, not working well, and how to improve.

Three facilitated meetings occurred in Las Cruces with one session tailored for teachers. Approximately 100 people attended the Las Cruces meetings held on November 15, 2016. They represented a diverse array of stakeholders including teachers, school and district administrators, parents and families, community, tribal and civic leaders, and economic development leaders.

In Las Cruces, themes that emerged from the meetings included the following:

Positive themes:

- The positive impact of community collaboration and support for the whole child
- Programs that support teachers and administrators
- Collaboration among educators

Major concerns:

- Teacher evaluations and student assessments
- Education system accountability
- Funding

PED will use the input received from the community meetings to inform the development of its ESSA plan for improving education in New Mexico. Individual reports for each community, along with a statewide summary report, are published at nmfirst.org.

FORWARD

Purpose of the Community Meetings

The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is the primary law governing K-12 education in the United States. Passed in December 2015, the new law replaces the previous federal education policy known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Throughout the country, states are holding public meetings about ESSA – providing an opportunity for parents, educators, district leaders, employers and other community members to offer input on education systems.

In fall 2016, the New Mexico Public Education Department (PED) partnered with New Mexico First to facilitate a series of 19 meetings in six communities throughout the state, including a Tribal Government to Government session. The goal was to solicit input about how New Mexico's future ESSA plan could best support student learning, teachers, and schools. New Mexico First also issued an online survey in English and Spanish for those unable to attend a community meeting. Before the meetings all participants received a background report on ESSA and the status of student learning in New Mexico; it can be accessed at nmfirst.org.

PED engaged in additional outreach activities, including district visits and meetings, teacher feedback through summit and advisory groups, and technical working groups.

What Happened at the Meetings?

These meetings provided participants a chance to learn about ESSA and share with PED their priorities, expectations, and concerns. In each community, three meetings took place throughout the day and evening, thus accommodating different schedules of community members. One of the three meetings was specifically designed for teachers. Each session offered some brief opening remarks to set the context, but the bulk of the time was devoted to small group discussions about how to ensure educational success for New Mexico students.

What Happens Next?

PED will use the input received to inform the development of its ESSA plan for improving education in New Mexico. According to PED, participants' suggestions will play a major role in guiding the state public education system to support our students and teachers better. Suggestions will also inform which aspects of New Mexico's existing system should be retained or revised.

Convener

The ESSA community meetings were convened by PED. The department serves as New Mexico's State Education Agency (SEA) and provides oversight to New Mexico's Local Education Agencies (LEAs). The series is funded by the Council of Chief State School Officers and administered by HCM Strategists, LLC.

Facilitator

New Mexico First engages people in important issues facing their state or community. Established in 1986, the public policy organization offers unique forums that bring together people to develop ideas for policymakers and the public. New Mexico First also produces nonpartisan public policy reports on critical issues facing the

state. These reports – on topics like education, healthcare, the economy, water, and energy – are available at nmfirst.org.

Our state’s two U.S. Senators, Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich, serve as New Mexico First’s honorary co-chairs. The organization was co-founded in 1986 by retired U.S. Senators Jeff Bingaman and Pete Domenici.

The community reports were prepared by Elizabeth Perrachione and the tribal government to government report was prepared by Sharon Berman. All reports were edited by Pamela Blackwell and Heather Balas.

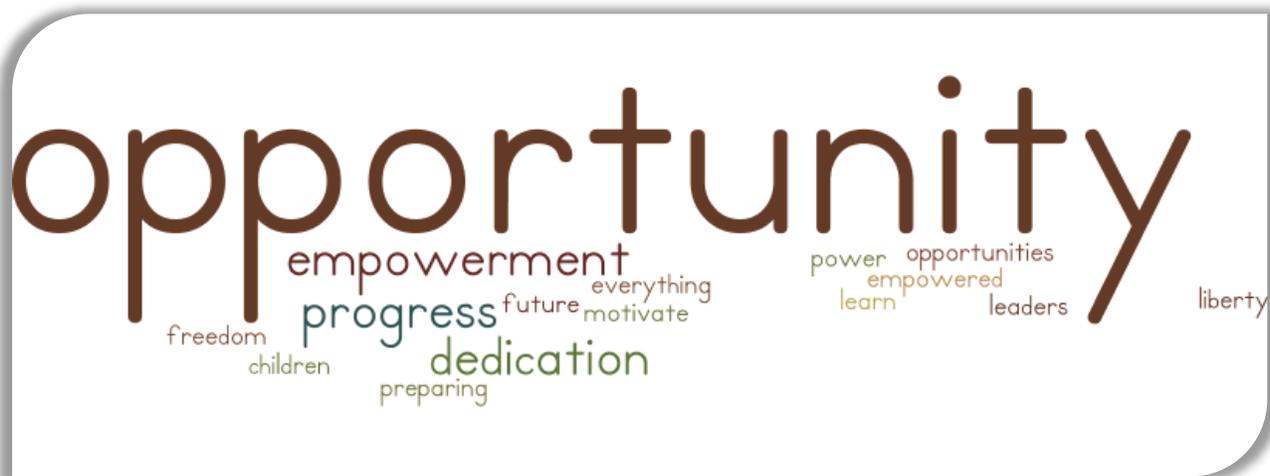
Las Cruces

COMMUNITY FEEDBACK

A diverse array of stakeholders took part in the three meetings held in Las Cruces, NM. Participants included teachers, school and district administrators, parents and families, community, tribal and civic leaders, and economic development leaders. The rich cultural diversity of the region was reflected in both the mix of participants as well as the range of ideas shared. Approximately 140 people attended the Las Cruces meetings held on November 15, 2016.

New Mexico First facilitated all three ESSA meetings in Las Cruces. Participants offered input on what they felt was working well, areas in need of improvement, and suggestions for ESSA implementation. They were asked, where possible, to focus on the essential variables associated with ESSA reform:

- School accountability and report cards
- Student assessment and coursework requirements
- Identification and support for English language learners (ELLs)
- Support for low-performing schools
- Support and evaluation of teachers and school leaders



Word Cloud

At the beginning of the community meetings, participants were asked to answer the question, “In one word, what does education mean to you?” Participants submitted their one-word responses into a “word cloud” application that makes the most frequent submissions larger. Above is the word cloud from the combined Las Cruces meetings.

Communication and Coordination

Overwhelmingly, community members had much to say about communication and coordination. Some communities lauded the work their districts and other education leaders have done in this arena while others called for improvements. For participants, optimal communication meant that information is transparent,

informative, accessible, appropriate, applicable and consistently provided. Because of how cross-cutting these two themes were, any comments and suggestions about communication and coordination are included under the more specific items in the sections below.

What Works Well

Community members identified several areas that are working well in the Las Cruces region, with top priorities including the following.

COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

Participants shared that districts in the Las Cruces area are doing an excellent job in leveraging assets and creating collaborations between business sectors, communities, schools, nonprofits, and teachers – helping the whole community have a voice and contribute to education in the community. Examples of collaboration cited include those between the schools and juvenile justice system, master and student teachers, and principals and teachers specifically through the use of leadership teams. Bringing leaders from all sectors together for multiple meetings to focus on a shared set of goals to help the long-term development of children has been a considerable success, said participants. Community members felt that this has created a backbone structure for education while providing resources that reflect the goals of their communities.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR THE WHOLE CHILD

Participants commented that the community schools model helps prepare students for success while providing social services to the students and their families. Also, participants noted that individualized attention for students allows schools to recognize what their students and communities need. Students and parents have choices in what type of school would work best for their children (e.g. charter, public, etc.) felt many participants. Libraries are reportedly becoming the center of the school, and participants appreciate that ESSA includes a focus on continuing to improve schools as community hubs.

According to participants, increased awareness of the benefits of early childhood education has led to its expansion. In one district, four schools have reportedly added a PreK program and are preparing to bring the program to the remaining schools. Participants feel that schools are prepared to support younger children and that there is an increased project-based learning focus resulting in children who are better prepared for elementary school. Home-visits for children under three-years-old have helped to build a strong foundation for these kids before attending preschool shared some community members.

Other effective programs mentioned included:

- Dual credit courses and virtual learning academy (helps students identify their academic and careers goal and offers a path to actualizing their targets)
- Principals Pursuing Excellence (PPE) program, with its focus on data-driven instruction, trains teachers how to present data to their students and provides weekly and biweekly formative formal and informal assessments including diagnostic testing that offer instant feedback
- Programs to pay for student enrollment and classroom fees has resulted in more students moving on to higher education/postsecondary education after high school
- Advanced placement

- Capture Kids’ Hearts (program that has increased student attendance and school performance)
- Special Education Program
- Art (with a perceived better balance than in other states)
- Institute for Parent Engagement (offered in English and Spanish)
- Engaging Latino Communities in Education (ENLACE) has a powerful influence on the students and results in a 94 percent graduation rate when implemented
- Borderlands Writing Project
- General partnerships with New Mexico State University (NMSU)
- NGAGE New Mexico community collaboration

TEACHER AND ADMINISTRATOR SUPPORT

Described by one group as the heart and soul of the district, teachers bring dedication, passion, and excitement to their work. Participants said that this inspires students who are excited to learn – arriving at school full of energy and creativity.

Participants felt that professional development is going well, with the Teachers Pursuing Excellence (TPE) and Principals Pursuing Excellence (PPE) programs helping to support educators and administrators and contribute to their growth. Participants noted that programs like the teacher career ladder program which pays a percentage of tuition for teachers’ schooling, and the Educators Rising New Mexico program at NMSU are helping to cultivate a pipeline of future teachers to address the teacher shortage.

COLLABORATION AMONG EDUCATORS

Collaboration among educators, school and district leaders was noted as a top item by participants that is working well. From teachers to administrators to school board members, community members expressed that there is an overall sense of support and accountability aided by quality communication. Student-focused educators are honoring their pupils’ voices and teachers work collaboratively together and with administrators in sharing best practices, noted participants. As an example, participants appreciated that school administrators provide teachers with some autonomy and decision-making room when developing program content to match students’ needs. Participants also suggested that the level of focus and purposeful accountability drives effectiveness in education. Finally, community members felt that the implementation by multiple levels of education staff of the common core for state standards was good.

What Needs Improvement and Suggestions

Community members identified several areas that are not working well in the Las Cruces region, with top priorities including the following.

TEACHER AND ADMINISTRATOR SUPPORT AND EVALUATIONS

Concerns about teacher evaluations were expressed across the board. All groups felt the attendance portion of the teacher evaluation is punitive, and that the assessments are too complex. Additionally, lack of training on the evaluation process and the absence of administrator accountability to ensure impartial and objective evaluations has reportedly caused frustration for educators. Participants were concerned that many times the teacher evaluation data is incorrect and also that student scores account for too high a percentage in the evaluation rubric.

Participants suggested that teachers also need more training on utilizing data from student assessments to inform classroom instruction. Many groups commented that there is not enough time for teachers to teach, plan, test and complete their administrative work. Many teachers expressed that they feel they have no voice in education policy – rather, that policy is being set “by the numbers.” According to some participants, the combination of these issues can reportedly leave teachers feeling demoralized.

Suggestions to improve teacher and administrator support and evaluations include:

- Teacher evaluations should be used as a support system and opportunity for growth
- Reduce the percentage of student performance in teacher evaluations
- Minimize the impact of teacher absences on evaluations
- Include master teachers as part of the evaluation process, especially for new teachers
- Train teachers and administrators on the evaluation process and how to use evaluations to inform classroom instruction
- Provide opportunities for peer-to-peer collaboration time during the school day
- Simplify the evaluation process
- Value more highly what principals say about their teachers, rather than focusing on the evaluation results
- Reduce class size
- Establish a four-day school week with longer school days which allows for teacher prep, peer to peer collaboration or for educators to attend to personal commitments on the fifth day, and is viewed a benefit or way to reward teachers
- Amend standards for teachers that better reflect the training and preparation required for teachers to respond to their communities and students
- Utilize New Mexico’s in-state master teachers to provide professional development, rather than out-of-state trainers
- Create a stronger connection between educators who provide professional development and those who receive it

STUDENT ASSESSMENTS

Participants are concerned that the correct tools are not being used to measure students’ academic progress, and increased time spent on testing and re-testing students cuts into valuable instruction time. Those in rural districts expressed that time dedicated to testing is especially problematic for schools that lack the technology – both regarding the number of computers and a reliable internet connection for useful, non-disruptive test taking.

Additional suggestions include:

- Discontinue standardized testing in the lowest elementary grades
- Use ACT/SAT as the standardized tests
- Ensure that schools have the technology they need to make the assessment process as easy as possible for students

COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR THE WHOLE CHILD

Community members feel that teachers need to be better prepared to meet the needs of the whole child and the community. Increased focus and funding for career readiness programs to meet the interests, abilities, and resources of individual students are required according to participants. Participants felt that special education and ELL programs are not funded adequately to support these students and their teachers.

Suggestions to improve community support for the whole child includes:

- Career readiness programs should have a developmentally appropriate curriculum and additional funding
- Schools need to focus equally on career bound and college bound students
- Implement more play-based and project-based learning
- Improve quality of student meals at school
- Add more time for recess
- Build infrastructure in rural school districts to facilitate more online learning to meet needs of individual students and limited community resources (this allows rural schools to provide remote lectures from expert teachers and professionals, saves on teacher salary and time, and cost of teacher recruitment, and class size disparity, similar to the community college model)
- Fees for enrollment need to be reviewed and reconsidered
- Hire additional mental health professionals for students
- Develop student intervention programs – particularly in afterschool programs
- Educate parents about all aspects of their children’s education, including common core, goals, and required paperwork – this will promote parents to partner with teachers
- Conduct a study on how to better engage parents
- Make more of an effort to include parents who have less formal education
- Provide more early learning supports
- Recognize that an investment in early childhood education creates a strong foundation for the rest of the student’s life
- Implement a community program to foster healthier families – one that emphasizes the importance of education
- Ensure that preschool programs promote play-based and project-based learning
- Provide additional resources to support students and teachers in low-performing schools including trauma affected students, especially in rural areas, ELL students, special education, and at-risk students.

EDUCATION SYSTEM ACCOUNTABILITY

While some groups noted that the ESSA regional meetings were a positive way for the PED to learn about what was and was not working throughout the state, one group expressed the concern that their feedback would not be considered or implemented.

Suggestions to improve education system include:

- Schools should have more localized control to meet the needs of the students and communities
- Direct resources to the local level
- Shift the PED’s role from a policy direction to support provider

- PED should continue building fellowship, bringing teachers together for community meetings and communicating more openly with teachers
- Clarify whether charter schools are accountable to the public education commission or PED
- Streamline coordination between schools, legislators, educators and communities
- Create more collaboration between community schools, private schools, and PED
- Reduce the number of administrators distributing funds to the classroom
- Switch from data analysis to root cause analysis
- Create a clear, unified vision among all districts in the state

FUNDING

Adequate funding to support schools and student learning continues to pose a substantial challenge for most school districts commented participants. Suggestions for funding include:

- Increase funds to improve rural schools' infrastructure for additional online learning and the technology to support it similar to the community college model (This can help save on teacher salaries and address class size disparity.)
- Increase funds for rural district transportation costs (Rural districts spend more of their budget on transportation leaving very little for other classroom related programs like dual credit programs, textbooks, and materials as well as necessary infrastructure upgrades.)
- Increase the amount of above-the-line funding as opposed to below-the-line funding to divert funding to local control. Allow more local control of funding.
- Create a savings account so that effective school programs do not lose funding
- Increase funding for career readiness education
- Increase funding for teacher salaries
- Be transparent in how education funds are spent

EFFECTIVE CLASSROOMS AND SCHOOL PROGRAMS

Many participants were concerned that the most important aspect of education, inspiring and teaching students, is lost amid testing, policy decisions, and politics. Class size, in particular, was cited as negatively impacting class management and the quality of instruction.

Participants commented that many students lack access to promising opportunities like dual college credit programs for example. Participants suggested that for students who are career or trade profession driven versus college-bound, unrealistic GPA requirements, a lack of access to higher education facilities, and the inability to transport these students to classes collectively inhibits students – especially those in rural communities – from accessing dual credit programs.

Conclusion

Implementation of ESSA provides an opportunity for education stakeholders throughout New Mexico to continue to work together to provide all New Mexico children with a quality education that will shape their future, allowing students to reach their full potential and our state's economic future for decades to come.

The Public Education Department and New Mexico First appreciate the time, effort and commitment to education of those who participated in the Las Cruces community meetings. The PED will use the input received from the community meetings to inform the development of its ESSA plan for improving education in New Mexico.

Comments from these meetings will be combined with the other community engagement meetings into a final report. The final report highlights those ideas that received the most support throughout the full community meeting engagement process. All reports are available on the New Mexico First website at www.nmfirst.org.