



School Improvement: New Mexico's Recipe

In the mix are supports for principals and teachers, accountability, and school choice.

As anyone would readily agree, no child should be trapped in a persistently failing school. When Governor Susana Martinez appointed me New Mexico's secretary of education in 2011, we committed to never settle for failure and never stop pursuing equity and opportunity for all students. Many of New Mexico's students live in poverty or are students of color and attending low-performing schools, but demographics must not be destiny. A great education cannot be reserved for the "lucky ones."

To serve all students well, state leaders must be able to measure progress. Said another way, you have to know where you are to get to where you want to go. As a result, one of our first priorities in New Mexico was to establish a strong

foundation: implementing high standards, adopting an assessment aligned to those standards, and revamping the school accountability system. New Mexico adopted a school grading system that measured growth and proficiency so everyone in the state could understand and compare school performance, with honest conversations about where we were and clear targets to help move forward.

Before diving into the details of how New Mexico turned around its low-performing schools, I want to be clear: State leadership matters. It was an absolute prerequisite to the success of this work. If that commitment is not firmly entrenched at the top, school improvement strategies are bound to fail. But where leaders are true believers,

by Hanna Skandera

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remarkable things can happen—whether the governor, state education chief, or the state board of education is leading the charge or all are of one mind and actively working together with their districts and schools.¹

By the time Congress passed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in December 2015, New Mexico had already entered its fifth year of using college- and career-ready standards in English language arts and math and its fourth year of giving schools A–F letter grades. Rather than viewing ESSA as a burdensome new federal requirement, New Mexico saw an opportunity to build on strong foundations already laid and strategic goals already developed with stakeholders. In its review of the state’s ESSA plan for Bellwether Education Partners, the Collaborative for Student Success gave New Mexico’s plan high marks for its commitment to high-quality standards and assessments, its accountability system, and its articulation of how it will address its low-performing schools.

New Mexico’s school grades, published annually, enable the state to identify schools that have been consistently struggling and need intensive support as well as those that are excelling and should be replicated. Schools that are failing can select from three options for intensive supports:

- implement state-sponsored, school-based interventions (such as Principals Pursuing Excellence);
- apply for competitive grants for district-chosen and state-approved evidence-based strategies; or
- construct a transformation plan for the school in partnership with New Mexico’s Public Education Department.

Since New Mexico began using letter grades for schools, the number of A and B schools has increased by 25 percent, and 30,000 more students are attending A and B schools now than were in 2011.² Further, students in schools that earned an F in any two of the last four years can choose to attend a better-performing school.

New Mexico education leaders believe that investments in four areas were key to this result: 1) high-quality school choice options for parents and students, 2) school leaders, 3) educators, and 4) data and evidence.

High-Quality School Choice

New Mexico received a \$22 million grant in 2017 from the U.S. Department of Education to expand its charter sector and replicate excellent schools. New Mexico plans to use the grant to implement high-quality systems of choice that ensure equity of access for all students, equitable funding across sectors, and transparent markers of quality. Charter schools receive the same letter grades as traditional public schools so that families can make apples-to-apples comparisons. Choice is part and parcel of the state’s accountability system—a means to ensure that students in persistently struggling schools have options.

School Leaders

Participation in the state’s Principals Pursuing Excellence (PPE) program is one of the turnaround options underperforming schools can choose (see box).³ Launched in 2013, the program recognizes school leaders’ role in driving student success and seeks to shape leadership capacity through professional development and mentorship. If a school has earned a C, D, or F, its principal can opt in to intensive supports that include coaching from successful turnaround leaders in the state and on-site visits. The program aims to enable school leaders to make bold, calculated decisions to improve the conditions for effective teaching and learning and thus increase student engagement and learning.⁴

Four cohorts of principals, who together lead 124 schools with more than 28,000 students, have participated in PPE so far. Between 2015 and 2017, students in these schools have seen their scores on the PARCC assessment rise by 7.2 percent in English language arts and 4 percent in math—double and triple the average improvements statewide.⁵ Notably, the schools whose principals have participated in PPE are serving students that many say are the most challenging: 83 percent of students are economically disadvantaged, compared with 71 percent statewide; 23 percent are Native American, compared with 11 percent statewide; and 16 percent are English language learners versus 12 percent statewide. These leaders are proving every day what is possible in New Mexico schools.

Box 1. PPE Theory of Action

- If we strengthen the competencies of leaders to transform districts and schools, then they will have the capacity to take bold and purposeful action.
- If leaders take bold, purposeful action, then they will establish the conditions for effective teaching and learning.
- If the conditions for effective teaching and learning are established, then teachers will be able to improve instructional practice.
- If teachers improve instructional practice, then student learning will increase.

Educators

New Mexico has been equipping, empowering, and championing its teachers with tools they need to support their students. In its review of state ESSA plans, the National Council on Teaching Quality highlighted the state as an exemplar because it set a clear, ambitious timeline for eliminating its educator equity gaps by August 2020.⁶

New Mexico has recognized the need to invest in its teachers and the enormous challenges in recruiting and retaining the most talented ones. Key to New Mexico's teacher engagement and empowerment strategy is its Teachers Pursuing Excellence (TPE) program, a two-year program in which minimally effective and ineffective teachers receive mentorship from highly effective peers. These teachers are identified through the state's robust educator evaluation system. Data from this system reveal that spending just one year with an exemplary teacher translates into 25.1 months of learning for students. The first cohort of TPE teachers saw their students' math proficiency overall increase by 10.6 percent and English proficiency by 10.3 percent.

TPE has just launched its third cohort. Gil Sanchez Elementary School in Belen Consolidated Schools, a district outside of Albuquerque, moved from a C to an A just one year after its teachers began participating in TPE. As the superintendent of this district said, there are "no magic ingredients, just hard work."⁷

Data and Evidence

New Mexico has also committed to gathering and reporting accurate data, which it uses to drive decision making. Robust data allow the New Mexico Public Education Department to set up systems and structures that are customized to schools' contexts and to help them plan and make informed resource allocations.

Results for America recently cited New Mexico for making good use of ESSA's opportunities for leveraging evidence and evaluation in its efforts to improve its schools; it found that the state employed 9 of its 13 recommended best practices.⁸ One example is the state's partnership with Khan Academy to accelerate learning. In a single year, New Mexico moved from just 1 percent of its students using the online Khan Academy to more than 30 percent. New Mexico's education department expects that more than 50 percent of its students, a majority of whom attend rural schools, will be taking advantage of this free resource within the next year.

New Mexico is also using data on school performance to allocate resources to the state's highest-need schools through ESSA's Direct Student Services (DSS) provision, one of only a handful of states to do so.⁹ DSS allows districts to apply for additional funding to provide customized supports—extended learning time, high-quality online courses, or tutoring, for instance—to students who need them the most.

The state's DSS initiatives build on several years of effort to expand access to Advanced Placement (AP) courses for New Mexico students and schools who historically have not had the opportunity to take rigorous classes and to reimburse them for AP test fees. The nearly 20,000 students who took AP courses in 2017 represented nearly a doubling of AP course-taking students since 2010 and an 11 percent increase since 2015. Those students took about 17,000 AP tests in 2017, an increase of 62.6 percent since 2010 and 23.5 percent since 2015 (table 1).

Even more encouraging than these totals are the steady annual gains in the numbers of Hispanic, low-income, and Native American students enrolling in AP courses and taking the exams. For example, the number of Hispanic students taking AP exams more than doubled in two years, from 2,700 in 2015 to 6,000 in

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Table 1. AP Course and Test Taking in New Mexico, 2010–17

	2010	2015	2017	2010–17 Growth (percent)
Students taking AP exams	6,799	8,625	10,541	55.0
AP exams taken	10,499	13,829	17,073	62.6
AP exams passed	4,373	5,186	6,028	37.9
AP courses taken	20,496	28,343	32,140	56.8
Students taking AP courses	9,970	17,529	19,526	95.9

Source: College Board, *Integrated Report, 2017*; STARS, *AP Students with Course Counts*.

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2017. New Mexico’s students are also passing more AP exams than ever before and as a result are earning college credit that could save New Mexico families as much as \$3.5 million in tuition.¹⁰

The National Lens

Federal, state, and local authorities have worked hard over two decades to develop and implement turnaround strategies. Yet these approaches lacked vertical cohesion and rarely allowed for the flexibility necessary to develop interventions and improvement plans that met individual schools’ needs. Whereas many states were previously doling out resources to struggling schools and districts, the funds were disconnected from robust, contextualized plans for improvement and failed to leverage standards, assessments, and clear accountability for students, educators, and schools.

Recently, some education advocates and analysts have urged a move away from these foundational elements and toward models grounded in something other than rigorous expectations and measurements. But New Mexico’s leaders have stayed the course, agreeing with NCTQ’s Kate Walsh that “achieving

a complex, ambitious goal—like providing all children in this nation with a strong education—requires laser focus, determination, abundant resources, an ability to measure progress, exceptional expertise, and a strong research basis.” Or as Louisiana’s state superintendent, John White, notes in a recent op-ed, “Walking away from the principles underlying that progress would be a foolish disservice to our children, our communities, and our economy.”¹¹

Money alone will not improve student outcomes. This ultimate goal depends on educators and leaders developing a shared understanding of the commitments necessary to turn a school around and a flexible state framework that takes context and community needs into account.

ESSA substantially adjusts the federal approach to supporting school turnaround. States now can set aside 7 percent of their Title I dollars for school improvement and face few federal restrictions in how they allocate those funds, so long as they can demonstrate their interventions meet federal evidence standards.¹²

Augmented by the provisions in ESSA, New Mexico is raising the bar on what is expected of districts in school improvement. It is making the application for school improvement funds

competitive and ensuring that the improvement plans that get funding are high quality and likely to produce sustained progress. Louisiana, Nevada, and Tennessee are also taking this approach to encourage strong planning and facilitate partnerships.

Implications for State Boards of Education

New Mexico remains committed to school improvement. While New Mexico does not have a state board of education, state boards elsewhere can certainly draw implications from its experience. State boards can play a number of roles in fostering strong school improvement strategies and in partnering with their state education agencies and state chiefs to produce better outcomes for students in persistently struggling schools:

- providing clear information to parents and stakeholders about the performance of schools;
- focusing on the capacity of teachers and leaders in supporting sustained school improvement;
- promoting the use of data and evidence-based practices, now that there are models across several states that have generated results;
- changing the false narratives that bedevil school improvement strategies—that they are either “silver bullets” or that “nothing works”; and
- encouraging their states to consider multiple paths to school improvement, with careful consideration of levers such as high-quality school choice, competitive use of funds, and more rigorous interventions for schools that are persistently low performing.

New Mexico’s approach illustrates the much greater latitude states have now than they did before ESSA. But it is up to states to leverage this opportunity and explore the strategies—in partnership with schools and districts—that can dramatically change outcomes for students in schools that need it the most. Failure is not an option. Children and their families are counting on education leaders to be relentless in their pursuit of equity and opportunity for all. ■

¹“Check State Plans,” website, Collaborative for Student Success, 2017, <https://checkstateplans.org/states/new-mexico/>.

²New Mexico Public Education Department, “New Mexico Rising: New Mexico’s State Plan for the Every Student Succeeds Act,” http://ped.state.nm.us/ped/ESSA_docs/NMStatePlan.pdf.

³New Mexico Public Education Department, “Principals Pursuing Excellence,” <http://ped.state.nm.us/ped/PrioSchoolsDocs/CPMP/PPE%201%20paper%203.2016.pdf>.

⁴Chiefs for Change, “ESSA Title II-A: Preparing, Training, and Recruiting High-Quality Teachers, Principals, and Other School Leaders” (Washington, DC, September 2016), <http://chiefsforchange.org/policy-paper/3108/>.

⁵“Teach Reach New Mexico,” website, <http://teachreachnm.us/2017/07/>.

⁶National Council on Teacher Quality, “ESSA Educator Equity Best Practices Guide,” https://www.nctq.org/dmsView/NCTQ_ESSA_Educator_Equity_Best_Practices_Guide-Round_1.

⁷Kim Burgess, “‘The Right Way’: Jarales Elementary School Rises from C to A,” *Albuquerque Journal* (August 30, 2017).

⁸Results for America, “ESSA Leverage Points: 64 Promising Practices from States for Using Evidence to Improve Student Outcomes,” 2017, http://results4america.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/ESSA-Leverage-Points-_July-24.pdf.

⁹Chiefs for Change, “Expanding Equity: Leveraging the Every Student Succeeds Act to Provide Direct Student Services,” policy paper (Washington, DC, April 19, 2016).

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹John White, “Critics Say Nothing in Education Is Working. That’s Wrong,” *Washington Post* (February 8, 2018).

¹²ESSA lays out four tiers of evidence, which Bob Slavin describes in his article in this issue. Chiefs for Change offers recommendations and emerging best practices for administering the set-aside in “The Hidden Equation in School Improvement: Lessons Learned about Governance-Based Strategies,” policy paper (Washington, DC, January 31, 2018).

Hanna Skandera was New Mexico’s secretary of education from 2011 to 2017 and is a member of Chiefs for Change.