



# Community Schools and Extended Learning Bureau

## STATE OF THE STATE BRIEF

### Introduction

Research is clear that community schools, designed to provide comprehensive academic, social, and health supports for students and family members, result in improved educational outcomes for students (Oakes et al., 2017). The community school strategy is an approach to schooling based on evidence-based principles, or “pillars,” rather than a “program” that must be implemented uniformly across locales. Community schools are built on four pillars—Integrated Student Supports; Expanded and Enriched Learning Time and Opportunities; Active Family and Community Engagement; and Collaborative Leadership and Practices—in a way that can utilize community assets to flexibly meet the unique needs of the community. When implemented in collaboration with staff, families, students, and community partners, such blended supports at the school site are associated with significant improvements in academic achievement, social well-being, student attendance, and behavior (Partnership for the Future of Learning, n.d.; Johnston et al., 2020).

Community schools are particularly effective in communities of concentrated poverty, in which many families and neighborhoods have limited pathways to be engaged in their children’s education and are in need of additional supports (e.g., nutrition, home visits, medical, dental, and mental health, academic enrichment, community-based learning opportunities), beyond what a traditional school typically provides (Oakes, et al., 2020). However, the community school strategy is not only designed for low-income communities, it is a strategy that can be effective at any school.

There are currently over 5,000 community schools across the United States, of which 80 are operating in New Mexico. Of these schools, 33 are funded by State and Federal funds, per the New Mexico Community Schools Act (2019), which Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham signed into law on April 3, 2019. The New Mexico Community Schools Act supports the coordination of services to students and families by connecting local, State, Tribal, and Federal governments with community-based organizations. These partnerships engage broader voice in school decision-making and allow community schools to more effectively leverage community resources and integrate funding streams to help meet the needs of the whole child.

The New Mexico Community Schools grant program is managed by the New Mexico Public Education Department’s (NM PED’s) Community Schools and Extended Learning Bureau. In

addition to administering the grants, the NM PED provides responsive training, technical assistance, and resources to support current and future community schools in the state.

The purpose of this brief is to provide a snapshot of New Mexico's diverse pre-kindergarten through high school community school grantees. It highlights specific programs and practices that grantees have used in the first year of implementation, despite many challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Each school spotlight highlights one school's recent innovative approach to meeting their school community's specific needs within one of the four researched-based community school pillars identified in the Partnership for the Future of Learning's Community Schools Playbook (n.d.):

1. Integrated Student Supports,
2. Expanded and Enriched Learning Time and Opportunities,
3. Active Family and Community Engagement, and
4. Collaborative Leadership and Practices.

Information included in this brief is based on data collected from interviews with a sample of community school grantee principals and coordinators, data from a New Mexico community schools survey administered in July 2020, and data on New Mexico's community schools compiled by the NM PED.

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## New Mexico's Community Schools

A community school is a research-based, equity-driven *strategy and place that brings students, families, organizations, and communities together to transform education and create well-rounded educational opportunities and supports* (Partnership for the Future of Learning, n.d.). No two New Mexico community schools look alike. Each individual community school strategy reflects its own context of needs, assets, and priorities. However, one common element of a strong community school is a full-time community school coordinator. The community school coordinator is essential in integrating students, families, and community partners into the school decision-making process, focusing on a shared vision of student and school success to mitigate academic and life outcome inequities (Partnership for the Future of Learning, n.d., p. 3).

The New Mexico community schools' theory of action states: If schools and communities partner to provide integrated supports to students to meet the needs of the whole child in a culturally rich and inclusive environment, then students will be actively involved in their learning and in their communities; families and caregivers will be increasingly engaged in their children's education; and communities and businesses will sustain their support for the needs of students. The intended outcome of community schools in New Mexico reflects the outcome of the NM PED's overall mission statement "to ensure that ALL students are healthy, secure in their identity, and holistically prepared for college, career, and life" (New Mexico Public Education Department, n.d.).



## The Four Pillars in Action: Spotlight on New Mexico Community Schools

The four pillars of community schools align with the whole child approach of the community school strategy and are considered supporting practices through which schools work toward achieving successful outcomes for students. The strategies used within each pillar can reinforce each other and account for the school's unique context (Partnership for the Future of Learning, n.d., p. 9).

### PILLAR 1: INTEGRATED STUDENT SUPPORTS

The first pillar of the community school strategy addresses non-academic and out-of-school barriers to learning through key partnerships with social and health service agencies (Partnership for the Future of Learning, n.d., p. 29). Examples of strategies from New Mexico community schools include school-based health care and dental clinics, case management services, and family supports that are culturally and linguistically responsive.

## Spotlight on Robert F. Kennedy Charter School

Robert F. Kennedy Charter School (RFK) leverages community partnerships to provide critical health and nutrition supports to the families it serves. As part of the Albuquerque Public Schools, RFK operates from two campuses, one of which is in the southern part of the city of Albuquerque, and the other of which is in Southwest Mesa. RFK identifies the unique needs of the communities it serves on the two different campuses through an annual needs assessment. RFK takes a whole child approach to reduce barriers to student achievement. This approach has included establishing a school-based health center with funding from the New Mexico Department of Health and through partnerships with organizations such as Centro Sávila and orchestrating a behavioral health collaborative to provide culturally and linguistically relevant care and services to students. Sierra Mapel, RFK's community school coordinator, describes RFK's approach to establishing and strengthening partnerships, stating, "This work is relational, more



► *Volunteers at RFK's Monthly Mobile Food Pantry pack produce into boxes in preparation for a COVID-safe drive through distribution of food. The site distributes between 2,000–5,000 pounds of fresh produce per month, or 20–50 lbs per family!*

than anything. You really have to develop one-on-one professional relationships with different stakeholders in the school in order to understand what is important to them, what they really care about, and how we can work together to bring some of the ideas and things that they care about to fruition." The

school-based health center offers low- or no-cost primary care and behavioral health services to students under the age of 18 from RFK and other nearby schools. Through in-house health programs led by an on-site behavioral health team, Mapel has collaborated with other schools in the area allowing RFK to provide services to students and families enrolled in the school, as well as to families in the nearby community. RFK has provided comprehensive, annual support to between 12 and 15 of the school's neediest families, as well as a wide array of services to families in their community. These layered supports for families have been crucial, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to school-based health services, RFK has also developed a program to provide food for families in the community.

Prior to COVID, RFK received a grant from the New Mexico Foundation and established a partnership with Roadrunner Food Bank to provide a monthly mobile food pantry. Although promoting the mobile food pantry, and recruiting families to participate, presented some initial challenges when it was first launched, Mapel and the family support officer persisted in building stronger connections and communication with families and students. As a result, when the COVID-19 shelter in place orders were first initiated, the program was able to immediately provide 100 boxes of food to RFK's students, families, and the community at large. Additionally, the mobile food pantry aligned its efforts with the local US Census Bureau office to increase participation in the 2020 Census and ensure families were counted.

## PILLAR 2: EXPANDED AND ENRICHED LEARNING TIME AND OPPORTUNITIES

The second pillar of the community school strategy includes before-school, after-school, weekend, summer, and/or year-round programs that support students with additional academic and enrichment programs and activities that align with the school's curricular goals. These different learning opportunities are coordinated by the local community school coordinator in collaboration with teachers and community-based organizations. Such efforts improve academic learning and support the development of social, emotional, and life skills (Partnership for the Future of Learning, n.d., p. 40). In New Mexico community schools, students have access to a variety of expanded learning and enrichment opportunities, such as after-school programs in collaboration with the local non-profit partners, academic tutoring, career and technical education, leadership, music, art, and sustainable agriculture classes. During distance learning, students were provided with remote learning kits to support engagement at home.

## Spotlight on Los Padillas Elementary School

For the Los Padillas Elementary School, expanded and enriched learning time has taken on the air of, well, genius. Los Padillas has extended its school day by one hour and refers to this hour of student-driven activities as Genius Hour. The variety of activities and topics offered during this hour range from robotics to drama, dance, martial arts, crafts, and sports, and—every six weeks—students’ choices are re-identified through family and student surveys. Genius Hour is led and designed by teachers and offers students time at the end of the school day to explore activities and topics of interest to them.

The Genius Hour includes a meal and a 45-minute class session, in which students are placed into one of two groups based on their grade level: students in kindergarten through second grade, and those in the third through fifth grades. Each teacher works with between 8–12 students from various grade levels in their class, allowing for multi-grade interaction between the students and teachers. Each Genius Hour session lasts six weeks, and at its conclusion, students present their work to families and the community at a Genius Hour Showcase. Cesar Hernández, principal at Los Padillas Elementary School noted, “The biggest and best way to raise rigor, is to allow people to perform what they learn.” Although all students continued to participate in Genius Hour during the pandemic, adjustments have been made, such as transitioning to virtual classes and the creation of a website to host a virtual showcase.

The Los Padillas Elementary School principal and transformation coach views Genius Hour as an approach to creating a school community that invites students to spend their after-school time in school and fosters an



► *Girls flexing their STEM muscles during Los Padillas’s Genius Hour.*

atmosphere in which teachers and students naturally forge meaningful relationships.

With one hundred percent of Los Padillas students participating in Genius Hour, there is a discernible impact on the school culture and student outcomes. School administrators have noted that after they implemented Genius Hour, chronic absenteeism declined by 9.67 percent between the 2017–18 and 2018–19 school years, and—once on the verge of shutting down—Los Padillas Elementary now has community members who have become notably more supportive and involved. In addition, parents and community members are provided access to classes at the school, including general educational development (GED) courses.

The stated goal of the Los Padillas Elementary School staff is to grow student agency and cultivate a welcoming and creative space. Staff are rapidly and carefully reconfiguring their school building into a hub for learning and community engagement, apparently well on their way to achieving their desired objective.

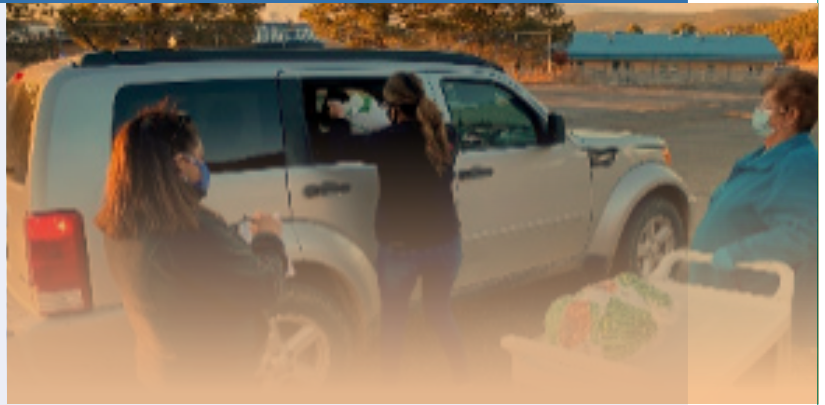
## PILLAR 3: ACTIVE FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The third pillar of the community school strategy embraces the experiences of stakeholder groups from diverse backgrounds in decision-making and encourages collaboration with parents or caregivers to promote a vision for student success (Partnership for the Future of Learning, n.d., p. 49). For example, one New Mexico community school has created a series of parent support workshops, while another is engaging families through a mural project and monthly Zoom forum events to celebrate student accomplishments, talents, and share their ideas.

### Spotlight on Peñasco Elementary School

Peñasco Elementary School, which draws students from across the district, is uniquely located within an area that is comprised of 15 unincorporated villages as well as the Picuris Pueblo, a historic pueblo in Taos County and home to members of the Pueblo people. The unincorporated status of the villages surrounding this rural school creates challenges in ensuring families are connected with resources and social services. By investing time to build relationships that are centered on trust and respect for the established cultures and traditions in the area, Peñasco Elementary School has become a valuable anchor in the community. Staff have leveraged their close relationships with families and community groups to support parents and caregivers to actively engage in their children's education and well-being.

Peñasco Elementary School is a central hub of family and community information for resources and social services. Michael Noll, community school coordinator at Peñasco Elementary School, shared, "Community schools is community-driven and makes sure the [school offerings] are specific to the community." The Peñasco Elementary School community school coordinator plays an integral role in actively engaging and connecting families and the community to the resources and services they need. For the Peñasco



- *Peñasco Elementary School organized a turkey giveaway, in which 225 turkeys were given to district families during the Thanksgiving holiday.*

Elementary School community school coordinator, active engagement has meant leveraging community partnerships to create an infrastructure of support to direct resources to those who need them. Outreach has included 1) creating a newsletter that is emailed and physically posted at the post office and other key places in the community, 2) making phone calls, 3) sending text messages, and 4) doing home visits with school families. It is, however, face-to-face contact that has proven to be most effective in Peñasco Elementary School's work with families. Given the current COVID context, this outreach format is also the most challenging. Because trusting relationships and leadership capacity were developed with families and key organizations in the community such as:

El Centro, Taos Behavioral Health, and the Nurturing Center, the community school coordinator and district staff have been able to provide families with food, school supplies,

financial assistance, internet access, and even running water. Moreover, these efforts have had the effect of building active family and community engagement in the school.

## PILLAR 4: COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP AND PRACTICES

Effective implementation of the fourth and final pillar of the community school strategy can result in a culture of collective trust, professional learning, and shared responsibility for implementing the community school's strategies. Collaborative leadership practices are the foundational glue that reinforce and connect the other pillars, calling on the site-based leadership and the community school coordinator to work together to achieve determined outcomes (Partnership for the Future of Learning, n.d., p. 61). New Mexico community schools have implemented a variety of collaborative leadership strategies: the development of a diverse site-based leadership team or leadership council that ensures actionable voice of student, families, and communities is inherent in the school decision-making process and the organization of monthly community school partner meetings with school board and city council members, businesses, parents, and staff.

## Spotlight on Enos Garcia Elementary School

A leadership model rooted in collaboration and active listening has guided the Enos Garcia Elementary Community School Council (CS Council). Members of the Enos Garcia Elementary school leadership, as well as teachers, work alongside elected officials and non-profit and for-profit business leaders from Taos on the CS Council to develop the community school's strategy. Meeting biweekly since October 2019, the CS Council formed a vision, mission, and purpose for the community school while helping the community school coordinator launch various initiatives. Paula Oxoby-Hayett, Community School Coordinator at Enos Garcia Elementary School, is the liaison between the CS Council's work and the needs of families, students, and the community; she takes the lead on creating cohesion. Oxoby-Hayett, states, "The CS Council allows the community at large to understand the school better. This is a wonderful space where we can talk and understand each other better."



► Beth Tafoya, Educational Assistant (pictured on the right) and Paula Oxoby-Hayett, Community School Coordinator (on the left) are shown seated at school desks that were distributed to families.

By building strong relationships with each member of the council Oxoby-Hayett is able to bridge the needs of families and students with the resources, knowledge, and expertise of council members. Leveraging the connections that members of the council have to community resources has been critical, particularly



during COVID. One of the CS Council's business representatives from a local utility company arranged for the use of their trucks to deliver food to families, while a non-profit member provided tutoring for students.

To actively listen to the needs of students, the CS Council implemented a school-wide needs assessment survey in August 2020, with plans to administer it annually. Based on data that included 333 responses, the CS Council developed and agreed upon three priority areas: increase family access to food, support

students and parents through tutoring, and support families with access to and use of technology. To work on these priority areas, the CS Council developed goals, outcomes, and measures that it will use to monitor progress. For example, the survey results demonstrated that about 70 percent of parents have children who use their kitchen table for distance learning. This prompted school staff to help families create a learning space by offering them school desks to take home.

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## Community Schools and the COVID-19 Pandemic

As grantees were beginning to launch the community school strategy at their sites, they were also facing the challenges of the emerging pandemic. These schools had to quickly pivot from longer-term implementation plans to emergency responses that addressed new and immediate family and student needs, including distance learning formats. In many cases, the early planning efforts by grantees positioned them well to respond to emerging community and student needs. In July 2020, the NM PED surveyed grantees to identify the extent to which they believed their community schools were able to meet stakeholder needs during the COVID-19 pandemic and the additional supports they were able to provide for their communities.

Community school grantees indicated that they were able to meet a variety of student and family needs during school closures and remote learning. In response to open-ended questions about how they were most able to meet the specific needs of their community, the most frequently reported responses included: 1) communicating regularly with students and families (56 percent of respondents), 2) helping students access nutritious meals (60 percent of respondents), and 3) offering technology support for students and families during online instruction (56 percent of respondents).

When asked about their greatest accomplishments during the pandemic, multiple respondents offered that they were proud of their school staff and community partners' ability to work together as a caring, committed team, to a) provide continuous remote learning for students and to b) support families with nutritious meals.

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## Conclusion

As noted in the Learning Policy Institute's recent report, *Improving Education the New Mexico Way* (Oakes et al., 2020), the community school strategy addresses documented inequities in New Mexico schools, including limited opportunities for expanded learning time and social and health services for at-risk students (NM Center on Law and Poverty, 2018). Although New Mexico community school grantees are in the early stages of implementation, the schools are identifying strategies aligned with the four pillars of community schools that respond to identified needs expressed by the community. The early implementation of community schools in New Mexico holds promise for the potential to build and scale these early efforts across the state and for "achieving the goals of the Community Schools Act for Federal, State, local, and Tribal governments to work together with community-based organizations to improve coordination, delivery, effectiveness, and efficiency of services provided to students and families" (Oakes, et al., 2020, p.11).

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