



New Mexico Community School Profile

Los Padillas Elementary School

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Summary

Los Padillas Elementary School is part of a network of community schools supported by Albuquerque Public Schools and the ABC (Albuquerque/Bernalillo County) Community School Partnership. Since 2018—when Los Padillas adopted the community school strategy in response to its MRI (More Rigorous Intervention) designation due to low test scores—the school has undergone a remarkable transformation driven by a shared vision and engaged community. By centering culturally relevant, sustaining, and community-connected learning opportunities—including dual language instruction, outdoor education, and student elected enrichment activities—Los Padillas has seen improvements in school climate, chronic absenteeism, attendance, academic performance, teacher retention, and enrollment.

Introduction

[Genius Hour] is a low, low stress environment because they're just doing something they want to do for fun. And yeah, we sneak in academics, vocabulary, critical thinking, and research. But they don't know that, right? And so, they're just relaxed and having a great time ... sewing and chatting ... like they're sitting in a Starbucks. They get that time ... to explore what they want, with people who are interested in the same things they're interested in.

Children and families smile and hold hands as they stroll through the open courtyard of Los Padillas Elementary School in southern Albuquerque—and travel around the world. Over the final 6 weeks of the school year, each class has prepared for this day during “Genius Hour,” Los Padillas’s extended-day enrichment offering, learning about a country and producing projects and presentations for their fellow students and the wider school community. In a 5th-grade classroom, during a dry run for the event, students were eager to share all they’d discovered about France’s history, its economy, and its many culinary delicacies. They rehearsed pronouncing “escargots” (snails in a garlic butter sauce) and imagined what it would be like to eat snails (most said “gross,” but a few thought they might want to try it).

The community-filled event was a testament to Los Padillas’s emphasis on loosening the boundary between the school community and the broader area. Students of all ages displayed this confidence and openness to sharing their ideas with whomever engaged them. In a 2nd-grade class, students read

aloud facts they had gathered about Australian animals and weren't shy about sharing which animal was their favorite: the koala. In one kindergarten classroom, a young boy wearing his best gray suit and tie impressed a packed room with his all-Spanish presentation on Ecuadorian food and culture.

The story of Los Padillas is one of community school transformation. [Los Padillas](#), a PreK–5 elementary school, has evolved from a school threatened with closure to a community school with a positive climate and steadily improving outcomes. In 2017, following the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act, the New Mexico Public Education Department (PED) designated Los Padillas as an MRI (More Rigorous Intervention) campus, indicating that the school's average proficiency rates were below 25% for English language arts (ELA), and below 10% for math, for at least 5 consecutive years. Districts with MRI schools are required to choose from four options for school improvement, one of which is evidence-based school redesign. The community schools strategy anchored Los Padillas's required redesign plan.

Los Padillas's transformation into a community school enabled its departure from MRI status and is driving promising academic gains, particularly for students who began at Los Padillas once the community schools strategy was fully up and running. This year's 4th-graders improved tremendously upon their 3rd-grade ELA scores and made small gains in math. Third-graders, who took their end-of-year assessment for the first time in the 2023–24 school year, are displaying strong results relative to other 3rd-graders across the district and in Albuquerque Public Schools (APS) community schools. Since 2021–22, kindergarteners have increased their performance year-over-year in ELA and math. At the same time, 5th-graders—who began kindergarten during the first full year of community schools implementation and had their 1st- and 2nd- grade years interrupted by the pandemic—have struggled on end-of-year assessments. Leading indicators of success for the school as a whole—including school climate survey data and attendance—have also shown significant improvement. Los Padillas reduced by half its peak chronic absenteeism rate of 65.5% in 2021–22. For the 2023–24 school year, the rate was 31.3%—lower than the rate for other community schools in the district (for more details, see [Progress at Los Padillas Elementary School](#)).

New Mexico has taken important steps to support the implementation and scaling of community schools like Los Padillas, both in Albuquerque and statewide. Since 2019, \$36.9 million in community schools funding has been allocated to PED for grant funding, grant management, and technical assistance. The funds have allowed the strategy to spread across the state. For the 2024–25 school year, [90 schools](#) either received funding for implementation grants or were designated to participate in the Accredited Pilot Program.

The Learning Policy Institute team has worked with New Mexico education partners, including the Southwest Institute for Transformational (SWIFT) Community Schools and the Albuquerque/Bernalillo County (ABC) Community School Partnership, to conduct research supporting high-quality implementation of New Mexico's community school grants. This profile is part of a series documenting community schools implementation in three districts across the state—Albuquerque, Peñasco, and Roswell. These profiles draw on interviews, site visit observations, and a review of relevant documents to highlight the structures and processes school and district staff have developed to support student thriving and family well-being.

What Is a Community School?

The New Mexico Public Education Department (PED) defines a community school as “a whole child, [comprehensive strategy](#) to transform schools into places where [educators, local community members, families, and students work together](#) to strengthen conditions for student learning and healthy development. As partners, they organize in- and out-of-school resources, supports, and opportunities so that young people thrive.”

While programs and services at each community school vary according to local context, PED has identified [six key site-level practices](#) that are grounded in [research](#) and the expertise of community school practitioners participating in the national [Community Schools Forward task force](#). These are (1) expanded, culturally enriched learning opportunities; (2) rigorous, community-connected classroom instruction; (3) a culture of belonging, safety, and care; (4) integrated systems of support; (5) powerful student and family engagement; and (6) collaborative leadership, shared power and voice.

These whole child practices are best implemented when there is a shared vision and purpose, trusting relationships are formed between members of the school community, and decision-making is both data-informed and inclusive. Research from the [Learning Policy Institute](#) and [RAND](#) show that well-implemented community schools can improve students’ attendance, behavior, engagement, and academic outcomes, including test scores and graduation rates.

Source: New Mexico Public Education Department. [Community schools](#).

Albuquerque Public Schools and ABC Community Schools

Located in central New Mexico, [Albuquerque Public Schools](#) is an urban school district and is the largest of the state’s 89 school districts. It serves just over 68,000 students in 143 schools across 1,200 square miles. APS is deeply committed to the community schools strategy, with several central office staff echoing the sentiment of a district administrator who noted that “community school work is pivotal in the academic outcomes of kids and communities.” Just over 40% of the district’s students attend community schools (see [Table 1](#)), all of which are supported by a unique multi-institutional partnership.

The [Albuquerque/Bernalillo County \(ABC\) Community School Partnership](#) was formed in 2007 to “promote the holistic well-being and success of students, families, and community members by developing community schools, aligning resources, transforming systems, and facilitating community self-determination.” The partnership operates as a joint-powers agreement between APS, the city of Albuquerque, Bernalillo County, the United Way of Central New Mexico, the Albuquerque Hispano Chamber of Commerce, the University of New Mexico, the New Mexico Department of Workforce Solutions, and the Albuquerque Teachers Federation. In the 2023–24 school year, ABC supported 80 community schools, offering professional development and training for community school coordinators. To build collaborative leadership practices and deepen implementation of the community schools strategy, ABC partners with APS to conduct joint professional development sessions with community school principals and their coordinators.

When PED designated Los Padillas as an MRI campus in 2017, the district responded by developing—in consultation with the local teachers union, ABC Community Schools, and the school community—a transformation framework for school improvement they named Transformational Opportunity (TOPs) Schools. The community schools strategy, which was a foundational component of the TOPs model, provided an evidence-based, whole-school redesign intervention that allowed for intentional community engagement in planning and implementation, and local flexibility to build from the goals, needs, and assets in each community. TOPs schools also have extended days and years, include extra salary and protected time for teacher professional development and collaboration, and offer Genius Hour—enrichment time built into the extended day (see [Culturally Relevant, Sustaining, and Community-Connected Learning](#)). Los Padillas’s community schools implementation has been made possible by a combination of federal funding for school improvement (a Title I set-aside) and Every Student Succeeds Act dollars, APS and ABC supports for redesign, and state funds that include the community schools implementation grants. For the 2024–25 school year, Los Padillas will participate in [PED’s Accredited Pilot Program](#) for community schools that previously received renewal grants.

Table 1. District Demographics and School Demographics (2023–24)

Demographic	Los Padillas Elementary School	Albuquerque/Bernalillo County (ABC) Community Schools	Albuquerque Public Schools
Number of students	203	28,346	68,137
% Asian	–	1.3%	2.4%
% Black	–	2.9%	2.6%
% Hispanic	92.6%	79.2%	66.5%
% Native American	1.5%	5.6%	5.3%
% Two or more races	–	2.6%	3.8%
% White	5.9%	8.4%	19.3%
% Eligible for free or reduced-price meals	≥ 95%	≥ 95%	81.3%
% English learners	40.9%	30.2%	19.2%
% Students with disabilities	17.7%	26.0%	23.8%

Sources: New Mexico Public Education Department. (2024). [STARS](#); Albuquerque Public Schools. (2024). [APS dashboard: Enrollment and demographic information](#).

A Cohesive Strategy for Community School Transformation

Los Padillas sits at the southernmost border of Albuquerque Public Schools. The neighboring area is surrounded by farmland and has a rural feel, despite being located in the biggest city in New Mexico. The deep roots in this multigenerational community engender pride in the local institutions and spur active involvement. In the years leading to Los Padillas's academic low point, the school leadership did not see the broader community as an asset. One administrator shared, "The school was closed off. There was no community engagement at all ... no community connection whatsoever, no dual language program." In a push to reverse this, the district and school adopted the community schools strategy and reengaged the community, centering their ideas and dreams for Los Padillas, including an open school with volunteer and engagement opportunities, extracurricular enrichment, bilingual curriculum, and nature-based education. The intentional community engagement created the Los Padillas of today: a vibrant, welcoming, dual language community school.

Bringing the Community In: Building a Shared Vision With the Community

The state was looking at taking the school away from the district. Our philosophy was, no, we're not gonna let that happen. We want you, the community, to tell us what we need to do to be better. What can we do? And we did that ... with the foundation of community schools.

Strengthening family and community engagement and developing a shared vision have been foundational elements of Los Padillas's transformation. As the school teetered on the brink of closure, district staff stepped in with a clear message: APS will not let the school close and the community around it crumble. True to the community schools principle of collaborative leadership, district staff held three community meetings in late 2017 and early 2018 to gather the input needed to design an evidence-based plan that represented the strengths, needs, and goals of the community. Families and community members filled the room and were asked three basic questions: (1) What do you see or not see happening in your school? (2) What would you like to see happening in your school right now? and (3) What are the barriers in the way of success?

Los Padillas families coalesced around several key priorities. They "wanted the community in the school and the school in the community," according to one district administrator. As a predominantly Hispanic school with a large percentage of English learners, dual language learning opportunities were crucial. Grandparents wanted to speak Spanish with their grandchildren, and for their grandchildren to feel their culture and language were valued. Los Padillas is also unique in that it is home to a 5-acre experiential education facility: the Los Padillas Wildlife Sanctuary. In 2017, the sanctuary was in disrepair and out of use. The community emphasized the importance of reviving the sanctuary and using it as an outdoor learning space. Finally, families wanted the school to figure out how to provide a range of extracurricular opportunities that were inaccessible in the immediate area. Los Padillas's [theory of action](#) emerged from these sessions and shaped the school's mission:

Our mission at Los Padillas Elementary is to develop creative, bilingual, lifelong learners who think critically, work collaboratively, and are contributing members of the community now and in the future.

Through the community school transformation process, Los Padillas became a welcoming site with robust family and community engagement. Over 2 days during the last week of the 2023–24 school year, more than 80 caregivers and community members were on campus. Some were core members of the active Parent Teacher Club (PTC), who were organizing and decorating for the upcoming 5th-grade promotion ceremony. Others volunteered for the bimonthly drive-up food bank, open to the entire surrounding community. More than 70 caregivers and community members showed up for the Genius Hour showcase. Throughout, parents, teachers, administrators, the coordinator, and students switched between Spanish and English with fluidity. Every person on campus not only seemed to feel a sense of belonging but also extended a warm welcome to new visitors on campus.

Engagement at Los Padillas extends beyond volunteering and attending school events. Through the Community School Council (a site-based leadership team composed of parents, students, the coordinator, teachers, and the school leader), parents are actively involved in root cause analysis, setting goals, enacting interventions, and assessing those interventions. As an example, the Community School Council and PTC designed a revamped Career Day for the students, an event they tied to meeting academic goals in their 90-day plan. The importance of a renewed Career Day was highlighted in a fall 2023, all-day visioning meeting open to the entire Los Padillas community. One area marked for improvement was helping “students dream big by exposing them to more careers.” They held several planning meetings to crystalize how to organize this event.

Determined to make this event meaningful and successful, the Council and the PTC accelerated into high gear, recruiting volunteers from across the city to come to campus, share stories, and answer questions about their careers. Students attended both a morning and an afternoon gallery-like session during which they were exposed to a range of occupations and able to ask questions to whomever piqued their interest. The coordinator, with much enthusiasm, described the event:

We invited partners to bring vehicles, bring tools from their work to show the students. The local fire department and police [showed up]. We even had our city bus to come out, and the kids got to explore it. Our school nurse, she had a station where she was showing them all her instruments. ... We had tons of people. We had geologists, we had biologists, we had nuclear engineers, we had lawyers, entrepreneurs!

Ensuring student and community well-being is equally important to engagement. Los Padillas offers many wraparound services typical of community schools, including a food pantry, a clothing room with backpacks and supplies, and parent workshops (see [Community School Partners at Los Padillas](#)). As is the case elsewhere across the country, student mental health needs are substantial at Los Padillas. To meet these needs, the school provides weekly classes on social and emotional learning, a part-time therapist (the fruits of more than 2 years of advocacy by the school administration), and a school counselor who connects families with services—but these aren’t enough. Their partnership with the New Mexico Department of Health, which provides support with data analysis and strategic planning, helped identify a big gap in the community: easily accessible health and mental health care. Los Padillas families sometimes have to wait nearly a year to see a provider, which contributes to decreased attendance and is detrimental to the health of the school community. In the 2024–25 school year, the principal and coordinator are committed to securing funding for a school-based health center and bringing more mental health resources to the school.

Community School Partners at Los Padillas

Los Padillas is located far away from many of the partners and resources in the center of Albuquerque. However, the school has cultivated a number of partnerships, some ongoing and some as-needed, to extend the opportunities and services elevated in root cause analyses and needs and assets assessments. In 2023–24, the school leveraged the equivalent of \$122,560 in volunteer hours, donations, and contributions, as calculated by the coordinator using ABC Community School’s transformation guide for tracking implementation and outcomes. Community school partners include:

- **Individual Community Members.** Abuelas (grandmas), parents, and community members are constantly on campus volunteering and donating materials and resources. The Parent Teacher Club raises funds and plans schoolwide events.
- **Los Padillas Community Center.** This [Bernalillo County Parks and Recreation site](#) offers after-school programs, hosts events, provides transportation for students to visit a local senior center, and offers free gym access to Los Padillas parents.
- **University Partners.** University of New Mexico was brought in to offer legal services to grandparent caregivers (a sizeable portion of Los Padillas families) who did not have legal guardianship. They helped grandparents understand their rights and how to access services and benefits for the students.
- **Nonprofit Support.** In 2023–24 Road Runner Foodbank delivered food twice per month, Hacia provided workshops for 5th-grade families on middle school options, Kids Cook NM offered weekly cooking classes on campus for students, Locker 505 donated clothing and shoes, and Mercado Music Ministries conducted monthly music workshops during Genius Hour. English as a second language and GED classes were offered to parents.

Sources: Interviews, observations, and document review by Learning Policy Institute. (2024).

Culturally Relevant, Sustaining, and Community-Connected Learning

As part of its community school transformation, Los Padillas committed to offering students instruction, curriculum, and enrichment activities that connect to their lives, their culture, and their interests. Part of this commitment is evidenced in their staffing: In addition to keeping the transformational coach placed on each MRI campus to facilitate overall improvement and organize Genius Hour, the school has hired a bilingual coach and a naturalist teacher. Los Padillas is a 50/50 dual language school in every grade, meaning all students learn in both Spanish and English every day. Honoring the value of bi- and multi-lingualism, Los Padillas was one of the first schools in APS to offer an Elementary Bilingual Seal. This means 5th-grade students can complete and present (in both English and Spanish) a bilingual portfolio to a panel of community members. Performance tasks like this are central to learning at Los Padillas. As a former administrator shared, “Students step up and learn when there are stakes, when they know they need to present, share, or teach what they’ve learned.”

The Genius Hour, described in the opening vignette of this brief, is a key strategy for expanding students’ access to diverse enrichment opportunities. Devised as part of the school redesign and directly tied to community priorities, Genius Hour uses the extended day as an opportunity to promote student choice,

voice, academic enrichment, and relationship-building. Students select an extracurricular activity to focus on daily for 6 weeks. The options vary widely—from coding, robotics, and circuits to knitting, soccer, martial arts, and mariachi. Importantly, all teachers are involved. The idea, one educator shared, “is to keep our classes small so that we can have more one-on-one time with the students and they can have a more individualized approach.” It also allows teachers to incorporate reading, writing, speaking, and math into Genius Hour seamlessly.

Genius Hour is also a time to bond with teachers and students from other grades who share similar interests. One former educator attributed a major reduction in bullying, fights, and disciplinary action to Genius Hour, noting the cross-grade relationships and increased sense of belonging as the drivers. Because of Genius Hour, every member of the school staff knows every child’s name. Finally, Genius Hour is also an avenue for family engagement. At the end of every 6 weeks, parents and caregivers are invited to the Genius Hour Showcase to observe everything the students have learned, built, or produced. These events are well attended and offer a chance for families to have positive, informal interactions with teachers, establishing rapport for future communications.

The nature sanctuary provides an important venue for culturally relevant, community-connected learning. Fourth-graders embarked on a project-based unit to learn how to take care of the pond, which was overgrown with cattails. Students conducted research by going to different ponds in town and learning from experts how to clean water, clear cattails responsibly, and maintain the pond ecosystem. The sanctuary is also used as a place for storytelling. Students sit in a learning space constructed with tree stumps for seats, while Tribal leaders from around the state tell stories and invite students to learn about Native culture and history. Recognizing the value of sanctuary, APS works with Los Padillas to help maintain the grounds and arranges a visit for every 3rd-grade class from across the city. Los Padillas remains committed to outdoor and nature education as it becomes a STEM magnet school, embracing increased rigor and inquiry learning with a focus on environmental science.

Key Accomplishments

Los Padillas has undergone an impressive transformation. Fully embracing the community schools strategy enabled it to go from an MRI school to a school with outcomes that continue to steadily improve (see [Progress at Los Padillas Elementary School](#)), according to traditional and other important measures of success.

Progress at Los Padillas Elementary School

Outcomes

- **Chronic absenteeism is decreasing.** Chronic absenteeism decreased by more than half, from 65.5% in 2021–22 to 31.3% in 2023–24, a rate that is just above the district (30.8%) and below APS community schools (38.9%).
- **Daily attendance rates are above the district average.** Los Padillas had a 91.3% overall average daily attendance rate in 2023–24, compared to 90.6% districtwide and 88.9% for APS community schools.

- **Students' academic performance is improving and, in some cases, outpacing district averages:**
 - In 2023–24, 34% of the 4th-graders met or exceeded the English language arts (ELA) standard. In the previous year, as 3rd-graders, only 13% met or exceeded ELA proficiency, suggesting notable progress for this group of students. This 4th-grade group also performed better than their peers in APS community schools, with 26.6% of those 4th-graders meeting or exceeding the ELA standard. Math achievement remains low for the Los Padillas 4th-grade cohort, who began school at the start of the pandemic, but it improved slightly from 2022–23 (2.6% proficient when in 3rd grade) to 2023–24 (5.7% proficient when in 4th grade).
 - The 3rd-graders at Los Padillas are showing promise in both math and reading. In 2023–24, 29% of Los Padillas 3rd-grade students were proficient or advanced in ELA, which is a higher percentage than the 3rd-graders in APS community schools (17.1%). Similarly, in math, 29.2% of Los Padillas 3rd-graders were proficient or advanced, outperforming their peers in other APS community schools (11.1%) and the district overall (23.1%).
 - Even Los Padillas's youngest students, the kindergartners, are making impressive gains. In their local formative assessment (Istation's Indicators of Progress), the percent of students on grade level in ELA increased from 71.4% in 2021–22 to 82.6% in 2023–24, and the percent of students on grade level in math increased from 37.9% to 65.3% over the same period.
- **The school has shifted away from exclusionary discipline practices.** During the 2023–24 school year, no students received in- or out-of-school suspension.
- **Students and families feel connected and welcomed at Los Padillas.** On the 2023–24 [APS Skills, Habits, and Mindsets Student Survey](#), Los Padillas students' results for perceived perseverance, self-efficacy, and social awareness were above the district average. Importantly, 66% of students reported a sense of belonging, well above students in the rest of the district (44%).
- **Teachers are choosing to stay.** Over the past 5 years, Los Padillas has retained nearly all its teachers.
- **Enrollment has stabilized and is beginning to increase.** Although there has been some fluctuation year to year, Los Padillas has increased its enrollment by at least 70 students since 2017. More students are electing to transfer in because the school's reputation is positive, and families are willing to take extra steps to attend.

Sources: Interviews with school and district officials by Learning Policy Institute. (2024); Albuquerque Public Schools (2024). [APS Dashboard](#); Learning Policy Institute review of district and school documentation. (2024).

Conclusion

In just 6 years, Los Padillas has experienced a dramatic transformation, from a school marked for closure to a shining example of the community schools strategy. Staff leveraged collaborative leadership and powerful family and community engagement to tailor and integrate the other key practices of community schools (rigorous, culturally and linguistically sustaining, community-connected instruction; expanded and enriched learning opportunities; and integrated systems of support). By embracing the community and bringing

them into the design process, the school has been able to offer unique opportunities for students and families; reestablish trust; and cultivate a strong, welcoming school climate and culture. To continue and maintain these successes, school leaders are also thinking about financial sustainability. The community school coordinator position is now largely funded through the operational budget, allocating Title 1 funds for salary. While this move signals a strong commitment to the strategy, it also means school leaders are making a trade-off, sacrificing something else Title 1 funds could be used for. A source of funding that is supplemental and ongoing would allow the school to offer even more to its families and students.

Los Padillas Elementary is embarking on a new phase of its community school journey. Using the data gathered in its stakeholders meeting last fall, Los Padillas has articulated a set of new goals to expand opportunities for equitable and empowering learning for its students, soon to be formalized in a graduate profile. These include adopting a new curriculum, adding rigor to the dual language program, deepening the school's collaboration with families, and bringing in more partners for Genius Hour. The school has also refined its vision to emphasize the development of student leaders who "are inclusive; understand how their actions affect others in the community; connect their learning to local, national, and global issues; and who advocate for positive change in their community." Los Padillas has demonstrated the ability to engage in joint problem-solving and leverage community assets, which are essential steps for achieving better academic outcomes and reducing barriers to student well-being. The future looks bright for Los Padillas.

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