

New Mexico Community School Profile

Peñasco Independent School District



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Summary

Peñasco Independent School District is a rural community school district serving approximately 280 students. Peñasco’s approach to community schooling focuses on culturally relevant, community-connected learning (including project-based learning and career and technical education), family and community engagement, and support for students’ health and wellness. Since implementing this strategy in 2021, the district has seen improvements in family and community engagement, chronic absenteeism, school climate, and the graduation rate.

Introduction

[Our students] are not just engaged, they’re connected. They know about the food that their grandma was making, they know about hornos [outdoor earth ovens], and they know about where the water that feeds our whole community is coming from. They know about their [Tiwa] language that we don’t want to lose ... that has been around for hundreds of years.

As this educator describes, students in Peñasco Independent School District in New Mexico are engaging in culturally relevant, community-connected learning opportunities as part of their community schools experience (see [What Is a Community School?](#)). At Peñasco High School, students have access to a brand-new culinary arts classroom with gleaming stainless-steel countertops and appliances. Outside, a classic horno is used to make bread, cookies, and chicos (slow-roasted sweet corn kernels), a culinary tradition founded in Ancestral Puebloan culture. Nearby, students in the woodshop are building furniture pieces, including chairs and side tables, with elements of Spanish colonial design. The teacher—a graduate of Peñasco High and longtime college instructor—is a well-known local furniture maker and folk artist with pieces on display throughout New Mexico and beyond.

These career and technical education courses, grounded in cultural traditions and led by local experts, are just one element of Peñasco Independent School District’s approach to community schooling in a rural area. With an emphasis on project-based learning, family and community engagement, and physical and mental wellness, the district is making strides to support the whole student and family. Since the district implemented the community schools strategy in 2021–22, family and community member attendance at

school events has dramatically increased, chronic absenteeism decreased (from 45% in 2021–22 to 32% in 2022–23), and the high school graduation rate increased and exceeded 90% in 2022–23, compared to 76% statewide.

An educator describes a growing “sense of possibility that ... these are not just things that happen in Los Alamos or Santa Fe, or maybe Taos or Albuquerque. We can have the best parts of education here in Peñasco as well.”

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](#) shows 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](#).

New Mexico has taken important steps to support the implementation and scaling of community schools in Peñasco and statewide. Since 2019, \$36.9 million in community schools funding has been allocated to the New Mexico 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 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, together with community partners, have developed to support student thriving and family well-being.

Peñasco Independent School District

Peñasco is a census-designated place in Taos County, NM, with approximately 700 residents. It is located along the scenic High Road to Taos in northern New Mexico, nestled in a valley of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. The Picuris Pueblo is located close by, with a bison herd grazing on tribal lands. Peñasco Independent School District (Peñasco) is a rural district serving about 280 students in its elementary school and middle/high school (see [Table 1](#)). The district operates on a 4-day school week and has experienced a steady enrollment decline in recent years, one of the challenges the community schools initiative is designed to address.

Since 2021, the district has received several community school grants from New Mexico Public Education Department (PED). Peñasco Elementary School received a \$150,000 community schools implementation grant in both the 2021–22 and 2022–23 school years, followed by a \$75,000 renewal grant in the 2023–24 school year. Peñasco High School received a \$50,000 community schools planning grant in the 2021–22 school year, followed by implementation awards of \$150,000 each in the 2022–23 and 2023–24 school years. For the 2024–25 school year, Peñasco High School received a \$55,000 implementation award, while Peñasco Elementary will participate in the [PED Accredited Pilot Program](#) for community schools that previously received renewal grants.

During this time, the Peñasco community also developed a [compelling purpose statement](#), graduate profile, and [strategic plan](#) informed by the voices of students, families, educators, and community members to guide community school implementation. These documents envision Peñasco students as engaged, connected, proud, and empowered with integrity and a love for lifelong learning.

Table 1. District Demographics (2022–23)

Demographic	Peñasco Independent Schools
Number of students	284
% Hispanic	86%
% Native American	9%
% White	<5%
% Eligible for free or reduced-price meals	≥ 95%
% English learners	6%
% Students with disabilities	15%

Source: New Mexico Public Education Department. (2024). [STARS](#).

Peñasco's Whole Student and Family Approach to Community Schooling

Peñasco has leveraged its unique strengths and resources as a rural district to design a whole student and family approach to community schooling. This includes engaging students through culturally relevant, community-connected learning opportunities; reviving the school as a hub for families and community members; and supporting student wellness. This approach aligns with PED priorities for the community schools grant program (see [What Is a Community School?](#)) as well as the district's strategic plan.

Engaging Students Through Culturally Relevant, Community-Connected Learning

To fully engage students, Peñasco offers culturally relevant, community-connected learning opportunities and project-based learning in all classrooms starting in the 2023–24 school year; robust after-school programming; and a renewed focus on bilingual instruction.

A centerpiece of Peñasco's commitment to culturally relevant, community-connected learning is its career and technical education program. Described in the district strategic plan as “program (and mind) expansion through career trades,” the program is a point of pride in Peñasco. The effort to revitalize these courses coincided with students' requests for more hands-on, real-world learning experiences. The district drew on COVID-19 relief funding to update the career program building, expanding the culinary classroom from a small and crowded space with unreliable wiring to a brand-new, professional-grade facility. In addition to the culinary class and woodshop, students can also take courses in small engines and 3D printing. A media production class is coming in the 2024–25 school year. What really makes the career track shine is the care and expertise of the instructors. By preparing students for college and career, educators help them to explore the world beyond Peñasco with the hope that the students eventually return to give back to their community as their instructors have done.

Project-based learning to support deeper learning is another priority area for Peñasco. This initiative began when a community school coordinator secured a Library of Congress grant (totaling approximately \$130,000 over 2 years) for teaching primary sources. This led to partnerships with the [Manitos Community Memory Project](#) (a digital archive recording the history of northern New Mexico Indo-Hispano natives) and the New Mexico Highlands University Center for the Education and Study of Diverse Populations, which offers a [Drawing From the Well](#) oral history curriculum. These partnerships culminated in a professional development experience for Peñasco teachers focused on project-based learning.

The districtwide rollout of [project-based learning](#) has been slow and steady, since it is a new approach that many Peñasco teachers are adding to their instructional repertoire. In the 2023–24 school year, all teachers offered at least one project per semester in each class. A watershed project took students to the top of the nearby mountain to study the source of Peñasco's water. Students analyzed water purity and the history of local water rights—including the [historic tension](#) between the Picuris Pueblo and Mora Valley communities on the other side of the mountain, who have been accused by the Pueblo

of illegal irrigation practices. This project culminated in a student-made video titled [The Fight for Water](#). The district's overall goal is to continue moving steadily from isolated projects to cross-curricular, comprehensive learning experiences that tie into the local community and culture.

After-school programming has been another area of innovation for community-connected learning. An educator explains, "You can kind of test-run different activities to see if there's interest. ... Then the activity could be integrated into the school day." For example, 3D printing and podcasting started as successful elementary after-school activities that led to the introduction of secondary school courses, including journalism, where students [now produce](#) a video broadcast (Tea Time) and a newsletter (The Peñasco Post).

The community school coordinator has played a key role in developing activities and finding instructors from the community. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a 3D printing program offered online flopped. However, since students were excited by the topic, the coordinator offered in-person instruction despite a lack of formal training. Eventually, the district partnered with an instructor from University of New Mexico-Taos to continue the course. The success of this course illustrates the importance of in-person, interest-driven after-school programming in rural settings. As an educator notes, "We're so spread out—there's no neighborhoods, no parks, no going over to your friend's house because everybody lives so far away. This is a chance to be with your friends." Unfortunately, state after-school funding has become less flexible, with a requirement to use certain funds for tutoring, even in rural areas where staffing is a challenge. This might jeopardize Peñasco's approach to after-school programming in future years.

A renewed focus on bilingual education is also an important element of the culturally relevant, community-connected learning in Peñasco. A district leader recalls that in the past, bilingual education was a strength: "A lot of students ... were fluent in Spanish and English or Tiwa [and English]." The board of education aimed to bring back this tradition of strong bilingual programming. Preserving Tiwa instruction is particularly valuable, since there are 10 or fewer fluent speakers left in the community, making it difficult to provide continuous and in-depth instruction. The nearby Picuris Pueblo approves qualified Tiwa instructors. Interested students typically take the Tiwa course through 8th grade and learn vocabulary words and information about the language and culture of the Picuris Pueblo, of which approximately 10% of students are members. A student shares:

I feel happy that I could learn Tiwa because it makes me feel closer to my ancestors, my culture, and our ways. ... I hope that the future generations will keep our culture and traditions alive to honor the past and to protect the future generations after them.

Next steps for this instructional work include more directly tying Spanish and Tiwa instruction into project-based learning lessons and connecting these lessons with community elders. Another goal is to formalize the district's commitment to community-connected learning by changing graduation requirements to include a 4-year service-learning requirement, an internship or work-based learning requirement, and a portfolio and capstone project to conclude 4 years of high school.

Reviving the School as a Community Hub

Growing up in a rural area, you tend to be more community oriented as well, just naturally family oriented. [In the past] we didn't have the title "community school," but we had educators who were very proactive and engaged in organizing community events.

As this educator observes, Peñasco's approach to community schooling has deep roots. In Peñasco's rural setting, members of the school community—and the town as a whole—know each other well. The community schools strategy has helped to revive the school system as a central hub of community engagement. A district leader explains, "The ask of my work was not only the internal components and culture of the district, the systems, but how do we connect back to the community and vice versa."

District leaders leveraged the close community ties to implement a comprehensive and deeply collaborative strategic planning process. Initially the district partnered with the [Center for Transforming Education](#) on staff trainings to develop a shared purpose and vision. These trainings included all employees, from classroom teachers to food services, transportation, maintenance, and classroom assistants. The resulting [compelling purpose](#) statement led to the development of the graduate profile and [strategic plan](#). A committee of staff and community members—facilitated by the superintendent and the family and community engagement coordinator at the time—led this effort, including conducting interviews and hosting multiple meetings to get the input of students, families, and local community members. A participant explains, "[These materials] are not top heavy. ... [They] didn't come from just administrators saying, 'This is the way it is.' ... Everyone had a voice." The commitment to collaborative decision-making in [this process](#) shows how districts can develop structures and opportunities for shared leadership through activities like vision-setting and strategic planning, as well as formal site-based leadership teams.

The resulting strategic plan emphasizes "community-integrated education through parent engagement and community activities." The coordinators play an important role in advancing this priority area by supporting events and communicating with families. Attendance at events like literacy nights and project-based learning showcases has skyrocketed. During the 2023–24 school year, a winter light parade with about 20 floats, sponsored by local businesses, attracted nearly 500 people. After the parade, people gathered in the school gym, where they enjoyed 300 Frito pies prepared by students. The community school coordinators also engage families through creative communication approaches because many areas around Peñasco lack cell phone coverage, less than half of students come from homes with internet service, and there is no local newspaper. The coordinators employ a combination of texting, leaving physical copies of newsletters in the post office and stores, and, in some cases, conducting home visits, in addition to standard email and phone calls.

In Peñasco, developing community partnerships looks different than it would in an urban setting with many potential partner organizations nearby. The community school coordinators have found ways to partner with individuals who can share their expertise and have identified organizational partners and written grants to bring in additional resources (see [Community School Partners in Peñasco](#)). These resources help to strengthen the school system's status as a central hub for events, activities, and community.

Community School Partners in Peñasco

In a rural community like Peñasco, community school partnerships are a blend of drawing on local resources in creative ways and finding partners from other areas that are willing to join. An educator describes how “you need to go out and beat the bushes” to find partners. Community school partners include:

- **Individual Community Members.** Current and former residents of Peñasco share their expertise through career and technical education instruction (e.g., the culinary arts class taught by a renowned local chef; the woodshop class taught by a local folk artist); after-school instruction (e.g., a retired Air Force member who teaches a drone class; a local botanist who teaches gardening and plant identification); and enrichment activities (e.g., flamenco instruction offered by a Peñasco graduate who now owns a dance studio in Taos).
- **The Picuris Pueblo.** The nearby pueblo is an important partner, hiring student interns over the summer and providing cultural enrichment (e.g., inviting students to participate in feast days).
- **University Partners.** New Mexico Highlands University Center for the Education and Study of Diverse Populations and the University of New Mexico–Taos have partnered on project-based learning training and provided specialized instructors (e.g., the 3D printing after-school class).
- **Nonprofit Support.** Nonprofit partners include El Centro Family Health and Taos Behavioral Health for school-based health and wellness support, along with Future Focused Education, which is supporting deeper learning work.

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

Supporting Student Wellness

Peñasco seeks to “cultivate a positive learning environment, with wellness at the heart,” according to the strategic plan. This includes support for students’ physical, mental, and social-emotional wellness. The rate of [adverse childhood experiences \(ACEs\)](#) in the Peñasco community is three times higher than the state average—and New Mexico has one of the [highest rates](#) of ACEs in the country. The wellness work occurring in Peñasco as part of community schools implementation and the district’s overall priorities is therefore urgent.

In-school health services support students’ physical and mental health. Services include a school-based health center co-located on campus and operated by El Centro Family Health, a nonprofit partner. The center is open 2 days each week and provides vaccinations, physicals for athletic requirements, and counseling. An educator notes, “For some of our kids, it’s the only health care they ever receive.” There are plans to bring dental services to the center in the future.

Taos Behavioral Health, another important in-school partner, provides push-in classroom support for students with severe emotional distress. Approximately 15% of students receive this support, which is billed to Medicaid. Taos Behavioral Health also operates a Nurturing Center at Peñasco Elementary. The center provides support for all students, such as classroom and group social-emotional learning

activities, and family navigation services, such as connection to counseling and other community resources. The center also provides school supplies, personal hygiene materials, and extra clothing when needed.

At the secondary level, Peñasco High now has a Wellness Room that opened during the 2023–24 school year to support students' social-emotional wellness. The Wellness Room is staffed by a longtime Peñasco resident who is the former Spanish teacher, the current cross-country track coach, and a retired Marine and firefighter. A colleague notes, “He has established a lot of trust with students and parents. That’s key, especially in a rural community.” The Wellness Room is a peaceful space with strands of twinkling lights and thriving green plants. Two large panther statues (the school mascot) guard an armchair. Students can self-refer to this space for conflict mediation or if they simply feel hungry, tired, or overwhelmed. This room also provides an alternative to out-of-school suspension. Students with disciplinary issues come to this room to receive support, do classwork, and prepare to return to class.

The Wellness Room reflects a districtwide commitment to restorative practices. Community input played a major role in this shift. An educator explains, “It’s one of the things that would come up again and again on needs assessments ... the acknowledgment that some of our ways of handling discipline and behavior issues weren’t working.” Initially there was some concern among teachers that students would use this space to avoid class. Over time and with the development of a formal referral process, teachers have bought into the value of a restorative approach. The school principal notes how proud he is that the high school had fewer than five suspensions during the 2023–24 school year.

Student voice has also been essential in creating a more positive learning environment that supports wellness on multiple fronts. One of the community school coordinators taught a leadership class at Peñasco High during the 2023–24 school year, open to all students. The students surveyed their peers and teachers about their school experiences and developed recommendations that they presented to school and district staff pertaining to issues such as attendance, late work, and referral policies. The educators were receptive to the proposals, with a district leader noting, “[This student input] was so impactful that we’ve asked ... that these meetings happen more often throughout the year. This way we get a better feel for how students are feeling ... and what kind of supports they need from us.”

Key Accomplishments

The Peñasco school community is making progress on both community school implementation and more traditional outcome measures (see [Progress in Peñasco Independent School District](#)). Educators are proud of their progress, while also noting areas for continued improvement.

Progress in Peñasco Independent School District

- **Family attendance at school events increased.** While only a handful of families attended events at the high school in 2022–23 (the first year of community schools implementation at the high school), the following year there were 70 to 80 families at a February literacy night and 90 to 100 families at a project-based learning showcase in the spring.
- **Community engagement with and support for the district increased.** Close to 500 family and community members attended a light parade in winter 2023–24. Also, the community came together to pass a bond measure on the second try, enabling the district to secure state facilities funding with a local match.
- **Chronic absenteeism decreased at a faster rate and is lower than the state average.** From 2021–22 to 2022–23, chronic absenteeism went from 45.18% to 31.63%, a 13.55 percentage point decrease (compared to a statewide reduction from 40.73% to 39.22% during the same period, a 1.51 percentage point decrease).
- **The 4-year graduation rate has improved in recent years and exceeds the state average.** In 2022–23, the district’s 4-year adjusted cohort graduation rate exceeded 90%, compared to 76% statewide. This reflects a 12 percentage point increase over 3 years.
- **The state has recognized Peñasco High for academic excellence.** In the 2022–23 school year, the state awarded Peñasco High School a “Designation of Excellence” and “Spotlight School” status with a score of 93.3 (out of 100) in school distinction.
- **Formative assessment measures show Peñasco Elementary students exceeding state averages.** In 2022–23, local formative assessment scores from Istation’s Indicators of Progress showed Peñasco K–2 students exceeding state averages (59.2% near or above grade level in reading, compared to 44% statewide; 68.3% near or above grade level in math, compared to 50.5% statewide).
- **Peñasco High has moved away from exclusionary disciplinary practices.** During the 2023–24 school year, fewer than five high school students received out-of-school suspensions.
- **Peñasco Elementary students report an improved school climate.** On an elementary school climate survey, the number of students who reported liking school—as well as the number of friends students reported having—increased by approximately 20 percentage points from 2022–23 to 2023–24.

Sources: Interviews with school and district officials by Learning Policy Institute. (2024); [NM Vistas report for Peñasco Independent Schools](#). See also: Peñasco Independent School District. (2023). [Why families should choose Peñasco ISD](#).

Conclusion

Through its community schools strategy and overall strategic plan, Peñasco has taken exciting strides in creating transformative learning opportunities, engaging the community, and expanding student wellness supports. Of course, as with any complex undertaking, implementation challenges remain. Funding sustainability is a real concern, especially for a small, rural district with limited access to external partners. The state community schools funding has decreased for the 2024–25 academic year and the district will have less flexibility in how it uses state after-school funding. District leaders are adept at blending and braiding funding and are working hard to build a sustainable approach to whole child community schooling. A district leader remarks, “To see where we started at the very beginning and where we’re at now is kind of amazing.”

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