

**IMPROVING SCHOOL CLIMATE AND SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING STRATEGIES
FOR BETTER STUDENT OUTCOMES¹
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Research on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) -- including food and housing insecurity, lack of health care, physical and emotional abuse, neglect, and exposure to violence -- shows that greater exposure to these negative experiences in childhood increases the risk of diminished life outcomes.² New Mexico has among the highest rates in the nation of children and youth who have experienced an adverse childhood experience (ACE), and the number of young people in the state who have reported 3-8 ACEs is nearly double that of the national average.³ Research has shown that for children and youth living on tribal lands, the rates of experiencing at least one adverse experience are even higher.⁴

New Mexico schools also report significant rates of chronic absenteeism among all student subgroups, ranging from 9% of Native American students to 13.3% of Black students. Research on chronic absenteeism, defined as missing 10 or more days a year through excused and unexcused absences, suspensions, and time moving between schools, finds that students who are chronically absent are at higher risk for disengagement and dropping out.

Research also shows that the overuse of suspensions and expulsions, particularly for students of color, has contributed significantly to dropout rates and the perpetuation of the “school-to-prison pipeline.”⁵ Further, students of color and those with disabilities are suspended at a rate that is disproportionate to that of their White and nondisabled peers for comparable behaviors.⁶ The most recent Civil Rights Data Collection shows that this is particularly true for English Learners (ELs) and special education students in New Mexico.

All children learn when they feel safe and supported, and their learning is impaired when they are fearful, traumatized, or overcome with emotion. Thus, each and every child, regardless of background, needs both supportive environments and well-developed abilities to manage stress and cope with the inevitable conflicts and frustrations of school and life beyond school. Therefore, it is important that schools provide a positive and culturally responsive learning environment that provides physical and psychological security and support that maximizes students’ ability to learn social and emotional skills as well as academic content.

As summarized in a recent LPI report,⁷ a review of 78 studies published since 2000 found that a positive school climate is related to improved academic achievement and can reduce the negative effects of poverty on academic achievement. Another review of 327 school climate studies found that support for student psychological needs and academic accomplishment is reflected in higher grades, test scores, and increased motivation to learn and is associated with strong interpersonal relationships, communication, cohesiveness, and belongingness between students and teachers.

Policy Goal: Ensure all of New Mexico’s students have access to a positive learning environment and programming that helps develop their social, emotional, cognitive, and cultural competencies.

Interventions that address the negative impact of adverse conditions on student achievement and focus on student engagement and connection to school can increase students’ opportunity for educational success, including positive learning environments built on relational trust, social and emotional learning opportunities, culturally responsive instruction, and replacing punitive disciplinary policies with restorative and educative practices. To enable the education system to incorporate and scale this Whole Child approach, we recommend the following:

Recommendation 1. Develop PK-12 standards and guidance around the development of students’ social and emotional competencies.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) as “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.” Well-implemented programs designed to foster SEL are associated with positive outcomes, ranging from better test scores and higher graduation rates to improved social behavior.

New Mexico is one of five states that currently have PreK-Kindergarten competencies/standards aligned with CASEL’s SEL competencies.⁸ New Mexico has an opportunity to elevate the importance of developing students’ social and emotional competencies alongside their academic skills by building out the PreK-K learning guidelines to the 12th grade and providing educators with tools and guidance to support implementation of SEL programming and integration of SEL into academic curriculum. The Legislature could direct the PED to develop social and emotional development competencies and provide guidance to schools and districts on adopting social and emotional programming, integrating SEL into academic instruction, and using SEL in professional development.

Recommendation 2. Ensure that educator preparation and professional development programs enable educators to develop students’ social, emotional, and cognitive competencies in ways that are culturally and linguistically responsive.

Statewide SEL competencies can help guide the integration of social and emotional learning into teacher and administrator licensure requirements in coordination with the Professional Licensure Department and state IHEs. These can also guide professional development offerings. Research shows that effective educators understand not only how to teach content and language skills effectively, they also know how to help children develop self-awareness, interpersonal skills, empathy, executive function, growth mindset, and the ability to make sound decisions – interweaving cognitive skills with social and emotional skills that enable greater learning. Educators also need to understand how to create a physically and

psychologically safe classroom and school environment in which all students know they belong and are cared for, eliminating bullying and social identity threats and drawing on students' personal and cultural experiences to provide a foundation for community and knowledge building. Finally, educators need to understand the effects of trauma on children and develop skills for identifying and addressing needs related to adverse childhood experiences.⁹

The legislature can consider authorizing a task force to evaluate how the licensure and program approval systems for educator preparation can be revised to best represent the current knowledge base from the sciences of learning and development. It can also fund professional development that supports educators' broader learning in these areas.

Recommendation 3. Reduce punitive disciplinary practices and replace them with restorative and educative practices.

Syntheses of research suggest that restorative practices result in fewer and less racially disparate suspensions and expulsions, fewer disciplinary referrals, improved school climate, higher quality teacher-student relationships, and improved academic achievement across elementary and secondary classrooms.¹⁰

The Legislature could consider funding PED to offer guidance on productive disciplinary practices and provide strategic statewide professional development on restorative and educative practice for educators. This PD should be targeted based on areas of greatest need and could include training in restorative justice, integrating social and emotional development into academic instruction, and trauma-informed practice. Additionally, the Legislature should consider integrating PD on restorative and educative practice into existing legislation and grant programs, including the community schools pilot program, as well as in teacher licensure requirements.

Recommendation 4. The Legislature should fund and the PED create a high-quality data system to improve learning settings and student outcomes, including an annual school climate survey, as well as measures of student absenteeism and disciplinary exclusions. Such a system must include adequate support for educator training and professional development in how to use data to create positive learning environments for all students.

In line with research that shows students at risk of dropping out of school are more likely to be chronically absent, have a record of behavioral issues, and fail one or more core courses, the PED has instituted an Early Dropout Warning System to identify students at risk of dropping out as early as the 3rd grade. The legislature's critical decision to shift from measuring truancy (unexcused absences) to chronic absenteeism (both excused and unexcused absence) will also necessitate a data system equipped to accommodate this change and produce timely data for educators, as well as additional training in how to accurately collect and report this new data to ensure methodological and operational soundness.¹¹

Notably, New Mexico’s ESSA plan states “the state plans to explore other instruments that might have broader application to learning climate, academic achievement, engagement, and self-efficacy for use in school ratings across all grade spans.” The PED is expected to identify a climate survey and begin piloting during the 2019-2020 school year. There will be a need for analytic capacity both within the PED and at the local level to use these data in productive ways. Training will be needed for schools and districts to collect and report the data produced from the climate survey or how to analyze and use the data to create actionable plans for sustained improvement.

Under ESSA, New Mexico must collect student disciplinary data. These data can provide educators a more nuanced understanding of which students are more likely to receive disciplinary action and where targeted supports, including restorative justice and social-emotional programs, can be instituted to reduce the number of students affected by exclusionary disciplinary practices that remove students from the learning environment and negatively impact their connectedness to school and academic outcomes. The collection and reporting of exclusionary discipline data should also be prioritized as part of a high-quality data system.

The data produced by the Early Warning System, climate survey, discipline data, and other sources of student learning data can provide essential information to educators, but only if it is accurate and timely. To ensure that both the early warning system and school climate survey data are used effectively, the Legislature should consider investing in a high-quality, accessible, and efficient data system to centrally collect and report these data to schools and districts. The Legislature should also appropriate funds for the PED to conduct analyses of the data and to provide educator training in collecting and using these data to better support their students and develop improved learning environments. Funding that accompanied the shift from measuring truancy to chronic absenteeism could be appropriated towards this. These funds could be used toward adopting an evidence-based model for adult learning, such as the ECHO Model created at the University of New Mexico.¹²

¹ The Learning Policy Institute (LPI) conducts and communicates independent, high-quality research to improve education policy and practice. Nonprofit and nonpartisan, LPI connects policymakers and stakeholders at the local, state, and federal levels with evidence, ideas, and actions needed to strengthen the education system and support empowering and equitable learning for each and every child. LPI’s research in New Mexico is supported by core operating support provided by the Sandler Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the Ford Foundation, and by a grant from the Thornburg Foundation..

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). Adverse Childhood Experiences.

<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/acestudy/index.html>

³ Child Trends³, using data from the National Survey of Children’s Health, examined state variations in prevalence of ACEs in children and youth:

- Highest rates in the nation reported in New Mexico and Arizona
- In New Mexico, 48% had 0 ACEs (National average is 55%)
- In New Mexico, 18% had 3-8 ACEs (National average is 10%)

⁴ Koss et al. (2003) examined reported ACEs in 1660 tribal members from 7 tribes:

- 86% reported at least 1 ACE (Orig. ACE Sample = 63.9%)
- 33% reported 4 or more ACEs (Orig. ACE Sample = 12.5%)

⁵ Kim, C., Losen, D., & Hewitt, D. (2010). *The School-to-Prison Pipeline: Structuring Legal Reform*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

⁶ U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. (2016). 2013–2014 civil rights data collection. A first look: Key data highlights on equity and opportunity gaps in our nation’s public schools. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/2013-14-first-look.pdf>

⁷ Darling-Hammond, L. & Cook-Harvey, C. M. (2018). *Educating the whole child: Improving school climate to support student success*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

<https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/educating-whole-child-report>

⁸ Dusenbury, L., Dermody, C., & Weissberg, R. (2018). State scorecard scan September 2018. <https://casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/csi-scorecard-sept2018.pdf>

⁹ Darling-Hammond, L., Oakes, J. et al (2019). *Learning to teach for deeper learning*. Harvard Education Press.

¹⁰ Fronius, Persson, Guckenburger, Hurley, & Petrosino, 2016; Gregory, Clawson, Davis, & Gerewitz, 2016

¹¹ New Mexico Public Education Department. (2017). New Mexico rising: New Mexico’s state plan for the Every Student Succeeds Act. <https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/FINAL-APPROVED-NM-State-ESSA-Plan.pdf>

¹² New Mexico School of Medicine. (n.d.) Project ECHO: How It Works. <https://echo.unm.edu/>.