

At the conclusion of the 2025 interim, staff for the Legislative Education Study Committee (LESC) produced a [report](#) on school climate and culture highlighting the need for three types of student behavioral health professionals—counselors, social workers, and psychologists—to support overall student well-being. At the conclusion of that report, LESC staff stated our intention to study strategies to attract and retain school-based health professionals, as well as collaborating with the Public Education Department (PED) and school districts and charter schools to better understand the current student health workforce.

In the 2026 interim, LESC staff plan to build on previous research to provide school leaders and lawmakers with the tools to make informed staffing and funding decisions to support the hiring and retention of four types of student health professionals: school counselors, social workers, psychologists, and nurses. This data brief will offer a review of available data related to these roles and outline intended research and analysis to be presented ahead of the 2027 legislative session.

Assessing New Mexico’s Need for Student Health Professionals

State policymakers and education officials frequently note the lack of access to school-based health professionals in New Mexico’s kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12) school system. Despite this persistent need, the state currently lacks the mechanism to quantify shortages and gaps in services.

To better understand New Mexico’s school-based health professional needs, LESC staff used licensure statistics, enrollment figures, and nationally recommended student-to-professional ratios to estimate the number of full-time health professionals required in New Mexico schools.

Methodology

A Regional Analysis. Staffing challenges are typically unevenly distributed in New Mexico and throughout the United States, with rural areas more often struggling to find personnel to fill needed roles. As a result, statewide analyses may not capture the full picture of health professional needs.

Taking a more regionalized approach, LESC staff used the geographic areas defined by the [regional education cooperatives \(RECs\)](#) to divide the state’s student population into regions. Not all school districts and charter schools are member entities of an REC, however, so LESC staff distributed non-member districts and charter schools into the REC corresponding to their geographic location. New Mexico’s 10 RECs are based in the following communities:

- REC-1 – Bloomfield;
- Northwest REC-2 – Chama;
- High Plains REC-3 – Raton;
- Northeast REC-4 – Las Vegas;
- Central REC-5 – Albuquerque;
- REC-6 – Portales;
- REC-7 – Hobbs;
- Pecos Valley REC-8 – Artesia;
- REC-9 – Ruidoso; and
- Southwest REC-10 – Deming.

Key Takeaways

- LESC staff used licensure statistics, enrollment figures, and nationally recommended student-to-professional ratios to estimate the number of full-time health professionals required for New Mexico schools (*Page 1*).
- New Mexico’s student population of 298.2 thousand needs 1,193 school counselors; 1,193 school social workers; 597 school psychologists; and 398 school nurses to meet nationally recommended student-to-staff ratios (*Page 3*).

Student Enrollment. LESC staff used SY26 40-day enrollment counts for school districts and charter schools in New Mexico. According to this data, there are a total of 298.2 thousand students enrolled in New Mexico public schools. After staff distributed school districts and charter schools into their respective RECs, there were 3,316 students missing from the dataset. To address this, staff assumed the remaining student population was representative of the state as a whole and determined REC-5, located in and around Albuquerque, accounted for 39.4 percent of the total statewide student population. LESC staff then used this percentage to estimate that 1,219 out of 3,316 students were also enrolled in REC-5. The remaining 2,097 students were distributed across the other nine RECs based on the percentage each REC's student population represented compared with the overall student population in New Mexico. All REC enrollment figures referenced in this brief reflect these assumptions.

Nationally Recommended Staffing Ratios. The analysis used staffing ratios recommended by national professional organizations and government agencies for school-based health professionals to estimate the number of required full-time employees each region in the state would need to adequately serve their student population. The ratios used to create LESC staff's baseline estimates for New Mexico's student population reflect recommendations for general education students. School health professionals serving student populations with greater health needs will likely require smaller ratios to more appropriately manage caseloads. The ratios used for calculating the estimates included in this brief are as follows:

- **School counselors:** 1 counselor for every 250 students, as recommended by the [American School Counselor Association](#);
- **School social workers:** 1 social worker for every 250 students, as recommended by the [School Social Work Association of America](#);
- **School psychologists:** 1 psychologist for every 500 students, as recommended by the [National Association of School Psychologists](#); and
- **School nurses:** 1 nurse for every 750 students, as recommended by the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Training Tools for Healthy Schools](#).

According to national and state data, New Mexico struggles to meet nationally recommended staffing ratios for these school-based roles. New Mexico's counselor-to-student ratio in the [2023-2024 school year](#) was reported to be 1 to 440, while the state's social worker-to-student ratio was 1 to 945 in [2022](#) and the psychologist-to-student ratio was 1 to 8,863 in [2024](#). Additionally, the [2024-2025 Annual School Health Services report](#) from PED and the New Mexico Department of Health reported 44 percent of surveyed school districts did not have a school nurse.

Findings

Table 1: Health Professional Need by Regional Education Cooperatives provides a regionalized breakdown of minimum full-time student health staffing needs across New Mexico. These projections reflect the **total** staffing need, not additional staffing above existing levels. Reflecting the significant variations in population density in the state, REC student populations range from under 2,000 students in High Plains REC-3 to nearly 119 thousand in Central REC-5. Overall, New Mexico's student population of 298.2 thousand needs 1,193 school counselors; 1,193 school social workers; 597 school psychologists; and 398 school nurses to meet nationally recommended student-to-staff ratios.

Table 1: Health Professional Need by Regional Education Cooperatives

Based on Per-REC Student Enrollment

Regional Education Cooperative	Student Enrollment	Total Counselors Needed (1:250)	Total Social Workers Needed (1:250)	Total Psychologists Needed (1:500)	Total Nurses Needed (1:750)
REC-1	33,431	134	134	67	45
Northwest REC-2	15,210	61	61	31	21
High Plains REC-3	1,684	7	7	4	3
Northeast REC-4	20,578	83	83	42	28
Central REC-5	118,925	476	476	238	159
REC-6	13,010	53	53	27	18
REC-7	15,047	61	61	31	21
8	24,049	97	97	49	33
REC-9	10,450	42	42	21	14
Southwest REC-10	45,825	184	184	92	62
TOTAL	298,209	1,193	1,193	597	398

Source: LESC Analysis of PED Data

Student Health License Holders in New Mexico

As part of research into New Mexico’s school-based student health workforce, LESC staff collaborated with PED to gather licensure information on seven licenses currently issued by the department to individuals seeking to serve as counselors, psychologists, social workers, and nurses in schools. **Table 2: Student Health License Holders in New Mexico** highlights the most up to date SY26 totals for all seven licenses related to these roles.

Table 2: Student Health License Holders in New Mexico

SY26

License Type	Number of License Holders
PreK-12 School Behavioral Health Counselor	49
PreK-12 School Counselor	1,622
PreK-12 School Social Worker	1,081
PreK-12 School Psychologist	377
PreK-12 Level One Nurse	356
PreK-12 Level Two Nurse	637
PreK-12 Level Three Nurse	47

Source: PED

Understanding the total number of professionals holding relevant licenses in New Mexico offers some insight into the size of New Mexico’s prekindergarten through 12th grade (PreK-12) student health workforce, but it does not tell the entire story. As discussed in previous LESC publications, PED licensure data does not reflect a license holder’s current school district or whether they are currently serving in a role relevant to their license. Instead, licensure data reports the district a licensed individual was in at the time their license was issued. As a result, this data could potentially overstate the degree to which New Mexico’s current student health workforce is sufficient to serve a student population of our state’s size. **Table 3: Projected Statewide Gap for Student Health Professionals** indicates how licensure totals compare to the projected statewide need outlined earlier in this brief.

Table 3: Projected Statewide Difference for Student Health Professionals

Based on Student Enrollment and Statewide Licensure Data

License Type	Number of License Holders	Projected Statewide Need	Statewide Difference
School Counselor	1,671	1,193	478
School Social Worker	1,081	1,193	(112)
School Psychologist	377	597	(220)
School Nurse	1,040	398	642

Source: LESC Analysis of PED Data

A Note on Licensure and Employment Data

The license numbers used for the projections in the preceding section reflect the total number of license holders in New Mexico as of SY26. This data does not indicate whether a license holder is currently employed by a school district or charter school, nor does it guarantee they are serving in a role relevant to that specific license. To reach a greater level of clarity on the state’s student health workforce, LESC staff are working with PED to match employment data from the department’s Nova data system with licensure data to establish which licensed professionals are employed by school districts and charter schools in New Mexico. This will also allow for more precise development of cost estimates around providing additional compensation or other incentives to support recruitment and retention.

At the time of this brief’s publication, PED staff have already provided data on school staff employed and assigned at least one day as a nurse in SY26. According to the data provided by the department, there are currently 518 individuals able to be matched by license number who are currently serving as school nurses in either a part- or full-time capacity. Out of a total 1,040 unique school nurse license holders reported by PED, this indicates just under half of licensed school nurses can be verified as working in a relevant role in a school. For the sake of consistency across the analysis, this data was not incorporated into projections of the statewide gap in student health professionals. Future publications plan to consider this matched data for all four roles.

New Mexico has projected statewide personnel deficits for both school social workers and school psychologists. However, licensed personnel totals for both school counselors and school nurses appears to be in surplus of projected need. These findings suggest New Mexico schools are in a strong position to provide both counseling and nursing services to students. But this statewide view does not acknowledge the uneven distribution of professionals in New Mexico. For example, the 29 school districts in the three most populous RECs (Central REC-5, Southwest REC-10, and REC-1) represent over 60 percent of New Mexico’s student population but are only home to 47.3 percent of licensed counselors; 44.9 percent of licensed school social workers; 41.1 percent of licensed psychologists; and 42.1 percent of licensed school nurses. This imbalance indicates student health professionals in these districts are more likely to have caseloads exceeding nationally recommended levels. Given that licensure data does not reflect the actual number of professionals serving in relevant roles, the imbalance may be even greater than this data can show.

Higher Education’s Role in Supporting Student Health Professionals

As New Mexico addresses reported gaps in access to student health professionals, higher education pathways to these professions will be critical in producing a workforce to take on these roles. To better understand the degree to which New Mexico higher education institutions are producing individuals with the relevant credentials to eventually enter the health workforce (school-based or otherwise), LESC staff collaborated with the Higher Education Department (HED) to gather enrollment and degree and certificate completion data from the 2019-2020 academic year to the 2023-2024 academic year. **Table 4: Degree and Certificate Completion for Counseling, Social Work, and School Psychology**, breaks down total number of certificate and degree completers for each pathway between 2019-2020 and 2023-2024. At the time of publication of this brief, LESC staff have not received data on either counseling or school psychology degree and certificate completion, though the data has been requested and HED staff are preparing it. Full data and conclusions will be shared as part of the final report LESC staff will present in November 2026.

Table 4: Degree and Certificate Completion for Counseling, Social Work, and School Psychology

From 2019-2020 to 2023-2024

Degree Type	Counseling	Social Work	School Psychology
Less than 1 Year Certificate		21	
1-2 Year Certificate		32	
Associate's Degree		271	
Bachelor's Degree		967	
Master's Degree		1,780	
Graduate Certificate		299	
TOTAL	Data Pending	3,370	Data Pending

Source: HED

Table 5: Nursing Degree and Certificate Completion

Between the 2019-2020 and 2023-2024 Academic Years

Degree Type	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Less than 1 Year Certificate	333	203	278	288	368
1-2 Year Certificate	108	88	53	58	63
Associate's Degree	589	478	474	511	540
Bachelor's Degree	636	639	674	685	634
Master's Degree	69	66	81	88	70
Post Master's Certificate	9	7	7	7	19
Doctorate	15	20	15	25	19
Doctor of Nursing Practice	5	13	19	9	10
TOTAL	1,764	1,514	1,601	1,671	1,723

Source: HED

Table 5: Nursing Degree and Certificate Completion shows the number of certificate and degree completers over the course of five academic years. According to data from HED, New Mexico higher education institutions have consistently produced between 1,500 and 1,800 nursing certificate or degree recipients over those five years. To become a school nurse, an individual needs at least an associate’s degree and a valid registered nurse license. Focusing only on an associate’s degree or above, the state’s institutions produced between 1,200 and 1,350 nursing degree recipients annually in those five academic years. These findings suggest New Mexico’s school health professional shortage may be a result of inadequate incentive structures (including compensation and licensure requirements) to encourage nursing graduates to pursue school-based roles, rather than a lack of supply.

Looking Ahead

LESC staff’s preliminary analysis suggests further research is required. Currently available data allows LESL staff to estimate the total number of student health professionals needed for our student population, report on license holder numbers statewide, and draw some limited conclusions about distribution of professionals around the state. But the information included does not accurately reflect the number of actively employed individuals working in these roles in New Mexico public schools. Ahead of the final report on this topic anticipated in November 2026, LESL staff plan to collaborate with PED to match licensure data with employment data to better understand the number of license holders who are currently serving in relevant roles. Analysis of matched employment and licensure data will be paired with case studies of specific staffing strategies being implemented by school districts and charter schools in the state to identify successful practices already in place and identify areas of common concern or opportunity throughout New Mexico’s public schools regarding student health professionals.

This greater level of clarity about New Mexico’s school-based student health workforce will allow more precise cost estimates for lawmakers’ consideration. Additionally, the findings could be used to inform policy recommendations around compensation; recruitment and retention strategies; and coordination between K-12 education, higher education, and industry to create robust pathways for individuals interested in pursuing careers as counselors, nurses, social workers, and psychologists in New Mexico’s public school system.