

B i t e - S i z e



Santa Fe Public Schools voted against rebuilding E.J. Martinez Elementary. Funds will be allocated to renovations at the merged E.J. Martinez-Chapparral Elementary and other projects. The district cited declining enrollment, high rebuilding costs, and financial pressure for its decision.



New Mexico is one of seven states to receive a College in High School Alliance (CHSA) grant. The grant funding will focus on three goals: 1) Setting a state-wide vision for dual enrollment; 2) Expanding dual enrollment access; and 3) Creating structured dual enrollment experiences with pathways toward college credentials.



On July 31, 2025, the Public School Capital Outlay Council (PSCOC) approved a new policy that lets school districts update past project awards to match larger building sizes now allowed with the increased gross square footage (GSF) permitted by the new GSF calculator and adequacy standards.



i n f o r m E D

a publication of the Legislative Education Study Committee

Senator William P. Soules, Chair / Representative G. Andrés Romeros, Vice Chair / John Sena, Director / September 2025

From the Chair

Over the last month, nearly 300,000 students went back to school in New Mexico. While the end of summer break means only the memories and souvenirs of family trips remain, and kids will have fewer playdates and late night sleepovers, returning to school also means students and educators reconnect with classmates and colleagues.

For students, school buildings are a safe haven where they are surrounded by adults who care about them, where they're guaranteed healthy food, and where they get access to opportunities that will shape their lives. For educators, many of whom spent the summer improving their craft through professional development and planning, the start of the school year is an exciting time to let their creative and intellectual juices flow, collaborate with fellow teachers, and build upon past successes.

It's hard to deny the challenges that exist for New Mexico's schools. Too many of our students still struggle to read or do math at grade level. And many are coping with the social emotional challenges associated with lives impacted by poverty or substance abuse. Despite those challenges, the return to the classroom is also brimming with opportunity. As a state, New Mexico has invested in initiatives to improve literacy, provide more comprehensive supports for behavioral health, and create an engaging secondary school experience.

The work is not done, however. As we get closer to another legislative session, LESC will continue to find way to invest in students and support all school staff. We know a high quality education system is critical to healthy communities, and we'll continue to work toward that goal for all New Mexicans.

Back to school is an exciting time, all first day jitters and learning new names. At LESC, we're excited to keep building a future that holds continued successes, both for our students and for our state.

William P. Soules

Healthy Universal School Meals Funding

In 2023, New Mexico passed the Healthy Universal School Meals Act (HUSM), providing every public school student with lunch and sometimes breakfast, at no cost. The program not only removes stigma and eases financial burdens for families but also raises expectations for meal quality, requiring scratch cooking, fresh ingredients, and more locally grown food.

Funding for HUSM relies on a blended model including federal reimbursements through the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) and state contributions. Nearly all eligible schools now operate under CEP, maximizing federal funds.

Federal eligibility requirements dictate that free school meals may be offered to students living in households with income not exceeding 130 percent of the federal poverty line, while reduced price meals may be offered to students living in households with income between 130 and 185 percent of the poverty line. According to FY24 family income index data, approximately 63.7 percent (172,070) of New Mexico's students fall into these categories.

A recent Legislative Finance Committee (LFC) evaluation notes the state spent \$17.4 million in

FY25 to provide free meals to students who exceed these income limits. However, it is important to consider that "above average" income is anything above \$72,388. A family of four in Albuquerque living on \$72,338 would generate roughly \$4,708 in monthly income, after tax. U.S. Census Bureau data from 2023 indicates the average New Mexico household spent \$1,244 per month on groceries. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Agriculture reports food prices rose by 23.6 percent between 2020 and 2024, indicating that families that exceed these limits still benefit from a universal meals program.

The LFC evaluation further finds the program is showing early promise but also faces significant implementation challenges. In the first year, meal participation increased by nearly 9 percent across the state, with growth in 68 of 89 school districts. Families are reporting financial relief, and many students have noticed fresher options on their plates. However, schools spend only about 4 percent of their food budget on local products, which is below the national average of 8 percent. Many schools struggle to meet the 50 percent scratch cooking requirement due

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Career-Connected Learning: Costs and Framework

Since 2019, New Mexico has made increasing efforts to offer career-connected learning (CCL) for students. CCL programs include structured career and technical education (CTE), internships, apprenticeships, dual credit coursework, and school innovation initiatives. These initiatives expand college and career readiness, strengthen the workforce in New Mexico, and offer the opportunity to engage students.

However, providing high-quality CCL programs costs more than traditional academic courses. Districts face startup costs as they are required to invest in specialized equipment and facilities. These spaces also need ongoing maintenance and updates to keep pace with industry standards. Additionally, budgeting is required for recurring consumables, such as automotive parts for shop classes, ingredients for culinary programs, or welding supplies

for metalwork. Hiring qualified instructors for CCL presents another financial challenge. Instructors often need both teaching credentials and professional industry experience, a combination that makes recruitment and retention more expensive. According to LESC analysis, these factors raise the annual instructional cost of CCL by \$900-\$1600 per student. Notably, costs vary across career pathways and programs.

Legislators have recognized these disparities and have continued to increase CCL appropriations since FY23 and recent legislation increased the secondary student weight in the state equalization guarantee (SEG), boosting per-student funding by about 7 percent. However, a simple per-student factor may not be sufficient, since costs vary widely across pathways. The allocation also remains broad, allowing districts to apply the funds to a range of priorities

and creating uncertainty about sustained resources for CTE programs. Additionally, the Public Education Department (PED) has historically allocated CCL funds to two major programs. Of these two programs, the NextGen CTE Pilot will be coming to an end in FY27. This provides legislators with the opportunity to build a funding mechanism tailored specifically to CTE.

A categorical formula could ensure equitable CTE funding by combining base allocations with per-student multipliers and adjustments for high-cost fields and rural challenges. This structure would improve transparency, allow multi-year planning, and tie dollars to quality standards, reassuring taxpayers while supporting workforce needs. The conversation now facing lawmakers is not whether CTE is valuable, but how to pay for it in a way that secures its long-term success.

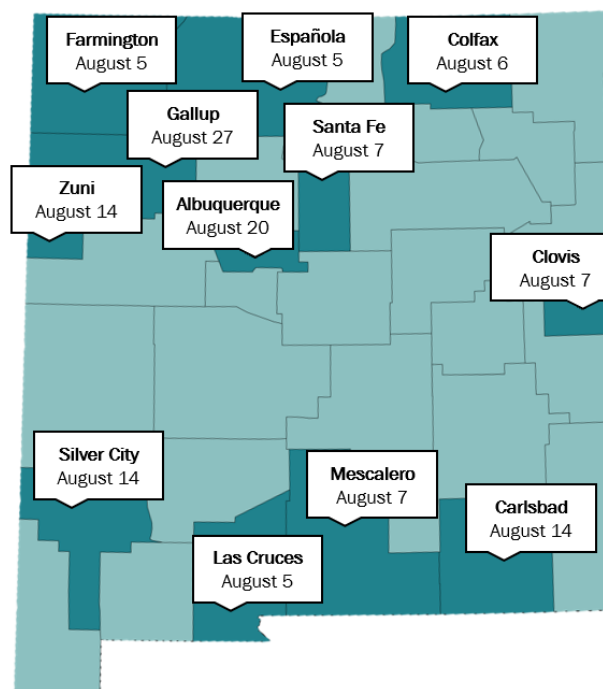
Universal Meals

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to staffing shortages, outdated kitchens, and limited vendor access.

Sustaining HUSM will require continued investment in infrastructure, technical assistance, and monitoring systems to ensure the program fulfills its dual goals of food security and healthier meals statewide. Despite the hurdles, HUSM represents a bold investment in New Mexico's students. By strengthening meal quality, supporting local food systems, and ensuring no child goes hungry, the program is reshaping what it means to serve school meals in our state.

Martinez-Yazzie Action Plan Meetings



The New Mexico Public Education Department (PED) is leading the Martinez-Yazzie Action Plan development and has concluded regional meetings, which began in early August and continued statewide through the month. To support this work, PED contracted with the Los Alamos National Laboratory Foundation (LANLF), which is leading community engagement, and WestEd, which is taking the

lead on writing the action plan, with additional support from LESC staff. Sessions were held in 12 cities across 11 counties, with virtual options available at the end of the month. The purpose of the sessions was to gather broad community input. Through a series of activities, attendees were asked to share perspectives on remedies to address educational inequities identified in the Martinez-Yazzie court ruling. For those unable to attend, PED also developed an online community survey to capture input. PED will be holding a session for LESC lawmakers on Wednesday, September 3, to further discuss the action plan. Community feedback will be analyzed and incorporated into the action plan, which PED will release later this year.

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September 2025

Published monthly in the interim by the
Legislative Education Study Committee
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Santa Fe, NM 87501
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<https://www.nmlegis.gov/Entity/LESC/Default>

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