

Process, Products and Results of the  
Carlsbad Graduation Summit

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## The Carlsbad Graduation Summit Executive Summary

In keeping with Governor Richardson's *Graduate New Mexico* initiative, this report profiles one school district's efforts to raise graduation rates and nurture a college-going culture. Included in the report is a summary of the process, products and results from the Carlsbad Graduation Summit held on May 8, 2010. The report highlights the efforts of the Carlsbad Municipal Schools' work to put actionable information in the hands of youth, parents, grandparents, educators and civic and business leaders.

Carlsbad Graduation Data: High school graduation rates in Carlsbad, as across the state and nation, are cause for concern. The number of Carlsbad students graduating on time from 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade is much lower than desired. Despite incremental progress, 25 percent of the 2009 4-Year Cohort failed to graduate from high school. Nearly half of Carlsbad's college-going students are underprepared; 48 percent of Carlsbad's students need to take remediation coursework. A graduation gap of as much as 15 percentage points divides Carlsbad's Hispanic students from their Caucasian peers. While 82 percent of Caucasians graduate on time, only 67 percent of Carlsbad's Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students make it to the graduation stage.

Carlsbad High School Graduation Gap 4-Year Cohort Graduation Rate, 2009	
Caucasian	82%
Hispanic	67%

Challenge: The Carlsbad Municipal School District is challenged by the urgency of the graduation data. We recognize that we have a long way to go to close the graduation gap and meet our goal of at least 90 percent graduating by 2014. The graduation rates are not as high as our community would like them to be and the pace of improvement needs to be much faster. We know that much more needs to be done to raise the proficiency levels in elementary literacy and middle school numeracy, to increase regular attendance in grades K-12, and to promote enrollment in rigorous coursework in high school.

Theory of Action: Alarmed by the sobering statistics, Dr. Sheri Williams, Superintendent of Schools, convened a Summit Organizers' Team in the fall of 2009 to plan a course of action that would engage the community in the graduation challenge. The Summit Organizers came together knowing that talking about "drop outs" or "push outs" would be an uncomfortable topic for many people. The organizers believed; however, that a diverse group of community members needed to be given a place at the table in order to make necessary change.

In a community the size of Carlsbad where there are thirteen K-12 public schools, one local charter school and a preschool with nearly 6000 children and youth, it was deemed important to capture the needs and voices of all stakeholders in the community if we were to do something about increasing the graduation rates in Carlsbad.

The Summit Organizers worked throughout the school year to organize the community's first conversation around the graduation challenge. The plans culminated on May 8, 2010, when 150 diverse stakeholders in the Carlsbad community sat down together at the Carlsbad Graduation Summit to discuss the critical issues facing the community's educational and economic future.

Ideas for action emerged from the ten small-group conversations that were facilitated by volunteer moderators and recorders who were trained by Public Agenda, a not-for-profit and non-partisan agency. Some of the participants remained for an afternoon session that was designed to prioritize the ideas that held the most promise for action by partners in the home, school and community. Action groups were formed to follow-up on the ideas that would best work to raise expectations about the importance of the high school diploma and prepare more students for success in college and career.

[Next Steps](#): The Carlsbad Municipal School District is capitalizing on the momentum from the Summit by providing regular reports of celebrations and challenges to the Summit participants and to the elected officials and the local media. In the end, we hope our work will result in the development of new local leaders who are willing to step forward to assist in the design and implementation of community actions that will best respond to the graduation challenge. Finally, we offer the enclosed information about the process, products and results of the Carlsbad Graduation Summit. The materials are freely shared in the event that other school districts might wish to replicate the community conversation model in their local communities.

## **Report Overview: The Process and Conversation**

This summary report is a compilation of the discussions and recommendations generated during the Carlsbad Graduation Summit on May 8, 2010. The report identifies the outcomes of the citizen deliberation that will be used as a starting point for further dialogue and problem solving. Part one presents a summary of the themes that surfaced during the dialogue groups and part two presents the priorities for follow up as generated by the action groups. Carlsbad's Graduation Summit was a point of departure for efforts that aim to bring citizen voices and energies to bear on the graduation challenge. Following the conversation, a good number of people came forward with energy and motivation to act on the ideas generated during the small group discussions.

### **Report Overview**

#### **The Process: Rationale for holding the Community Conversation on the Graduation Challenge**

After a year-long campaign to raise educator and parent awareness of the graduation challenge in the Carlsbad public schools, the Superintendent of Schools and members of the Summit Organizers' Team took the message out to the larger community. Carlsbad conducted its first-ever Graduation Summit on May 8, 2010. The Summit came together after months of planning for the purpose of engaging parents, community and youth in the graduation challenge.

Public Agenda, a not-for-profit and non-partisan agency, offered their services to assist the school district in the community engagement process. Public Agenda began its relationship with the school district early in the 2009-10 school year when it was first recognized that New Mexico was on the short-list of states identified by the Kellogg Foundation as being at risk for drop outs. Shortly after that designation, Dr. Will Friedman, CEO of Public Agenda, contacted the Carlsbad Municipal Schools with an offer to structure a community engagement process in Carlsbad on the graduation challenge. At the same time New Mexico was sponsoring statewide graduation initiatives, giving additional impetus for Carlsbad to sponsor its own Graduation Summit.

Carlsbad educators, community members, and high school students attended the Lieutenant Governor's Statewide Graduation Summit on September 10 in Las Cruces, NM. A Summit Organizers' Team was formed in winter 2009.

#### **The Conversation:**

At the Carlsbad Graduation Summit on May 8, participants joined in a productive, action-oriented conversation about what the community can do together to transform the culture of low expectations in Carlsbad and to raise the aspirations of students, parents and community leaders about the importance of graduating from high school prepared for college and career. Participants were urged to think boldly

about what was needed to significantly increase the graduation rate in Carlsbad and prepare more of Carlsbad's youth for the demands of the community's workforce and civic life. Their attendance demonstrated community-wide commitment to be a part of the solutions that will positively impact Carlsbad's current and future youth. The event gave the local community a chance to share concerns and create local solutions to the dropout crisis – solutions that would work best in the Carlsbad community.

Held at the Pecos River Valley Conference Center in Carlsbad, the 150 participants at the Summit included parents, grandparents, teachers, youth, youth service providers, corporate volunteers, elected officials and community leaders. Twelve elected public policy makers attended the Summit representing state legislators, county and city officials, magistrates, and local school board members. They pledged to take what they heard back to their official bodies in order to inform public policy and ensure that decision-making is well informed by Carlsbad's values, ideas and aspirations.

Sponsors contributed substantial funds to host the community conversation and action agenda. The work was sponsored by the Carlsbad Municipal School District with generous support from local partners including the Carlsbad Chamber of Commerce, Carlsbad Medical Center, Carlsbad National Bank, Carlsbad Elks Lodge, Intrepid Potash and Mosaic Potash.

The primary goal of the Carlsbad Graduation Summit was to create a productive dialogue among a diverse group of community members that would open up lines of communication between families, schools and the greater community; share ideas and perspectives about how to improve the graduation rate and help more students cross the graduation stage prepared for college and career; and brainstorm and prioritize the ways in which the school district and the community could work together to respond to the graduation challenge. An additional goal of the process was to ensure that local youth had a voice on actions that would impact their current and future educational opportunities.

Volunteer moderators and recorders who were trained by Public Agenda facilitated ten small-group conversations. Participants discussed three distinct approaches to addressing the graduation challenge. The approaches were based on ideas generated from nine focus groups held earlier in the school year. One focus group was composed entirely of parents and grandparents, another with at-risk students and dropouts, and another with Hispanic community members. The focus groups were instrumental in identifying the discussion starters for the community conversation. Participants were asked to decide which approach was closest to their own thinking and why. The results varied by person and whether the person was a parent, an educator, a non-educator, or a youth. With the participants thinking and talking together, each group worked specifically to identify areas of common ground, clarify concerns or disagreements, identify outstanding questions, create priorities for action, and report their findings back to the group as a whole.

### Summary of the Three Approaches:

1. Do more to keep kids out of trouble and on a healthy path through after school activities and programs that help students who are dealing with social problems to get back on track.
2. Raise expectations by parents, teachers, guidance counselors and other influential adults, and reinforce the message that all students can and should graduate.
3. Improve the ways we educate young people in school and after-school, to engage them more deeply and successfully in their education.

Around thirty planners remained in the afternoon to prioritize the ideas that held the most promise for action by partners in the home, school and community. Action groups were formed to follow-up on the ideas that would best work to raise expectations about the importance of the high school diploma and prepare more students for success in college and career. Participants left with action steps that would help address the graduation challenge in Carlsbad.

### Why the Community Conversations Matters:

Too often, important decisions about the challenges facing our community are made behind closed doors and without the valuable input and involvement of citizens. This is partly because there are generally few good opportunities for citizens to engage in the kind of productive dialogue that contributes to solutions and organizes action. Community conversations are inclusive events that go beyond the 'usual suspects' to bring diverse stakeholders together and help the community-at-large address a pressing issue.

Rather than lectures by experts or gripe sessions by angry constituents, well-designed community conversations create a frank, productive problem-solving process in which diverse ideas are put on the table, diverse participants sit at the table, and people work together to find common ground and shared solutions. Such conversations are best thought of as a step toward better communication, collaboration and problem solving on important challenges facing the community.

### Event Date, Location, and Number/Type of Participants:

Around 150 participants attended the Carlsbad Graduation Summit at the Pecos River Village Conference Center in Carlsbad on May 8, 2010. Participants generally reflected the diversity of the community with 64% Caucasian and 36% Latino/Hispanic. Females outnumbered males with 75% Female and 25% Male. 60% of the participants were 45 years of age or older; 34% were 18-44 and 6% were under 18. The participants were generally more highly educated than the community at large, with 80% having completed college or advanced degrees; 8% were high school graduates/GED and 6% had not finished high school. Participants represented diverse stakeholders including 9% students; 17% teachers or university instructors; 26% community members; 29% parents and 19% other.

**Post-Summit Survey:** A post-survey was conducted by Public Agenda and revealed that 47.1% of the participants would like more discussions in other parts of the community and 79.4% would like to see more community action by local citizens and groups; 88.6% of the participants agreed that the Summit was somewhat to very useful; 89% wanted to be informed of follow-up activities and 71% wanted to stay involved. Participants generally felt empowered by the purposeful dialogue and wanted to stay involved.

### **Part One: Summary of the Themes that Surfaced during the morning Dialogue Groups**

The collated discussion notes from the morning Summit were analyzed for major themes that arose across discussion groups. Post-forum participant surveys also informed this summary report. Themes emerged from each of the following areas: common ground, concerns/disagreements, any outstanding questions, and priorities for action.

**Key Areas of Common Ground and Areas of Disagreement:** The national drop out issue has been labeled as a "silent epidemic" because people are generally not willing to speak out; however, there was no silence in the room during the Carlsbad community conversation. Participants broke into ten spirited discussion groups to identify potential causes of students dropping out and ways to address those causes. The local reporter from the *Carlsbad Current Argus* captured the discussion:

- Some said there should be more school days in the year and students should work summer jobs to develop a better work ethic and responsibility. Others said students are working too many late hours at jobs on school nights and are too tired to focus on school the next day. "They're just overwhelmed," one teacher said. "They have to work to pay for their cars and insurance."
- Another said it was the parents who were working too much, rendering them unable to help their children with school. One said he spoke with a girl who dropped out of school because her single mother needed help raising the siblings.
- A student said she did well in school because her friends were good students and helped her with her schoolwork. "I just fell into the right group," she said.
- A student said she learns better with hands-on activities. "I just can't sit there and take notes about William Shakespeare and Julius Caesar," she said.
- Some suggested using technology and games to keep students focused on curriculum, saying kids are texting and they're playing games on the phone.
- Others focused more on public policy. Family resources were a concern for several educators. "I struggle with that every day," a teacher said. "The kids don't have a pencil or a piece of paper to write on."
- Others cited a lack of communication between parents and teachers. One parent said her child did not turn in homework for six weeks and she did not know about it until she got a report card with a failing grade.

- An elected official urged his group to be more vocal with legislators. "We're not doing what we said we would do for our kids. To do these things, we've got to have the funds."
- Several groups highlighted early identification of potential drop out students and immediate intervention as a solution to the drop out problem.

## **Part Two: Priorities for Action from the afternoon Planning Group**

Around 30 of the 150 participants came back for the afternoon action planning on May 8<sup>th</sup> to synthesize the ideas from the morning conversation and recommend follow-up actions. The group generated actions that might be most effectively pursued by participants and that could be addressed right away by participants, organizers and, as possible, local officials. Overlapping ideas were identified in order to control for any duplication of effort that might arise between and among the recommended actions. The motivating force was to help identify and fill gaps in services and promote collaboration within the community.

Three priorities emerged. The priorities ranged from developing new program initiatives to expanding existing programs that would better serve Carlsbad's P/K-16 students, from preschool through college. These priorities for action brought attention to new initiatives as well as efforts currently underway in the Carlsbad community to help attain the goal of a 90% graduation rate.

### **Priority One: Keep Students Safe, Supported and Healthy**

- Develop an alternative program to intervene with at-risk upper elementary and middle school students through intensive academic and behavioral supports.
- Create a safe and controlled place for student counseling, mentoring and tutoring.
- Provide more meaningful involvement of parents and students in setting school policy.
- Provide in-service training to facilitate communications and expectation between and among teachers, students and parents.
- Teach students interpersonal skills, such as conflict resolution and goal setting.
- Follow-up with parents appearing at Truancy Court to educate parents on how to support their children.
- Provide for early identification of potential dropouts.
- Close the achievement gaps in literacy and numeracy.
- Provide more support for underserved and behaviorally challenged students.
- Increase expectations and consequences for student discipline.
- Provide consistency in expectations from kindergarten through the 12th grade

**Priority Two: Create incentives for ambitious reforms that would raise the bar and reward excellence.**

- Expand existing opportunities for internships in STEM-related fields along with new career interests, whereby students would intern in the community and earn industry-recognized certificates or licenses during their public school years.
- Increase the involvement of local industry and researchers in the schools.
- Create new career tracks. Emphasize careers in technology and business development.
- Engage students in planning and aligning their education with their future goals.
- Provide more flexible scheduling, including night, summer and online classes to better accommodate students' schedules.
- Make education relevant to students through updated technology and curriculum.
- Provide consistent and positive feedback for students and parents.
- Create more effective pathways and practices that prepare and support quality teachers in the classroom.
- Provide a curriculum that integrates languages other than English and that is culturally relevant.

**Priority Three: Create innovative community solutions to remove barriers that impede student progress.**

- Create community-wide awareness and actions to address the two most significant causes of school failure: chronic absence from school and summer learning loss.
- Keep community centers open for summer enrichment and exploration of career-readiness skills.
- Develop more community-sponsored after school programs, especially for children who are too young for Boys and Girls Club.
- Create incentives to encourage student involvement in service-learning and student leadership opportunities.

Certificates of Commitment were presented to six community leaders and one high school student for their exemplary work to address the graduation challenge. The certificates honored individuals for their “commitment to take an active role in making a difference in the lives of Carlsbad’s children and youth.” Their actions will inspire others to follow their example to positively affect the dropout crisis in Carlsbad. Certificates were presented to:

\*Mike Wiemers, sponsor of high school internships, designed to grow and develop the next generation of engineers

\*Kevin Zink, sponsor of high school internships under development in the culinary arts field, designed to grow the next generation of chefs

\*Deena Antiporda, sponsor of after-school enrichment in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) for elementary-aged students

\*Russell Hardy, sponsor of a seamless system of supports for students in Pre-K through 16

\*Mayor Dale Janway, sponsor of the Mayor's new Student Advisory Committee, designed to provide secondary students with leadership opportunities in civic life

\*County Commissioner Roxanne Lara, sponsor of Girls Achieving Leadership Success, designed to grow the next generation of females in elected office

\*Krista Marrs, Carlsbad High School Student member of Summit Organizers' Team and co-producer of the "Carlsbad Graduation Summit Video"

**Follow-up Plans:** Following the Carlsbad Summit, local partners stepped forward to assist in the coordination of the various Summit priorities as identified by the Carlsbad community. Partners who have already stepped forward include the Carlsbad Mayor, Carlsbad United Way, Carlsbad Mental Health Center, Carlsbad Rotary and the Carlsbad Chamber of Commerce. With the possible assistance of Carlsbad United Way and the Carlsbad Boys and Girls Club, the Summit Organizers are hopeful that subgroups will form and meet regularly over the months ahead. Through the community efforts, Carlsbad will continue its commitment to collaboration and efforts to tackle the dropout crisis in a family-driven and community-centered way.

[Application for "100 Best:"](#) One of the unanticipated results of the community conversation was the impetus for the school district and city to apply for a spot on the nation's list of 100 best communities for young people. The *100 Best Communities for Young People* recognizes and celebrates community-wide efforts to improve the well being of youth and end the nation's dropout crisis. More than 350 communities registered for this year's competition. The 2010 *100 Best Communities for Young People* will be announced on September 21 at a national event in Washington, D.C.

[Next Steps:](#) The Summit Results will be used to inform key stakeholders about the community's values, concerns and priorities, and to educate, encourage and enable more individuals and groups across the community to work together to make progress on increasing the graduation rate. In addition to helping the community tackle this particular issue, we hope that the community conversation will also provide a model and method for addressing other issues in the community.

[Disseminating the Report:](#) The first audiences for the summary report were the participants themselves, using a "Basecamp" software tool as developed by Public Agenda. This tool allowed participants to continue the conversation online. Summit Organizers and the moderators and recorders received expressions of appreciation for their work in the community conversation. Plans for next steps were provided to all participants with contact information for those wishing to sign up for further involvement. Participants will continue to develop and implement concrete action plans in the days and months ahead based on the ideas for action that emerged from the community conversation. The summary report was also disseminated to local officials and other community leaders asking them to comment on or respond to the ideas and issues raised.

### Video: “The Carlsbad Graduation Summit”

“The Carlsbad Graduation Summit Video,” produced by Carlsbad High School students Krista Marrs and Chip Dugger, was debuted at the Summit on May 8. The video featured the authentic voices of high school students, dropouts and GED students who told their stories of challenge and hope. Students were asked why they believed a high school diploma was important and what barriers were keeping them from staying in school and crossing the graduation stage. Students shared their personal stories about how they struggled academically and fell behind in their classes and what happened to help them come back and reengage in school.

### Blueprint: “Carlsbad Graduation Challenge”

A document entitled, “The Carlsbad Graduation Challenge” was unveiled at the Summit. The blueprint for change provided participants with a short report on the school district’s position concerning the graduation challenge. Designed and authored by Carlsbad Superintendent, Dr. Sheri Williams, the blueprint proposed six challenges to be taken up by parents, students and community leaders. The report mirrors President Obama’s blueprint for reform in education. The blueprint brought important research into the conversation around the need for a new generation of assessments that are aligned with college- and career-ready standards, more effective pathways and practices that prepare quality teachers in the classroom, more support for historically underserved students, incentives for ambitious reforms that would raise the bar and reward excellence, innovative solutions to remove barriers that impede student progress at key transitions during the school years, and investments to keep student safe and supported.

Early praise was given to the blueprint from the New Mexico Public Education Department. In a communication to the school district on April 26, Danielle Montoya said, “Carlsbad is on top of reform. Districts across the state are strengthening the link between teacher training and student growth and Carlsbad is leading the change.” Carlsbad was pleased to receive such a positive acknowledgment. The school district had been working to develop a reform message throughout the school year calling for multiple measures of student growth, better assessments, and professional development for teacher and administrator improvement.

### Choicework Conversation Guide

Public Agenda, the nonprofit, nonpartisan organization, produced a “Choicework Conversation Guide” to frame the Summit’s conversation and action agenda. The guide could be used in other communities to thoughtfully engage students, parents, educators and community leaders in public life, to strengthen communities, and to empower active citizenship. During the course of the 2009-10 school year, Public Agenda conducted eight focus groups to hear what Carlsbad parents, students and dropouts had to say about the issue. On May 8, the organization returned to facilitate the community conversations.

**Promotional Materials**

The Summit Organizers developed multiple promotional materials to raise awareness of and promote attendance at the Carlsbad Graduation Summit.

- A recruitment pamphlet was created to reach selected audiences for the pre-Summit Focus Groups. One focus group was composed entirely of parents and grandparents, another for at-risk students and dropouts, and another for Hispanic community members. The three-fold pamphlet was titled, "Invitation to Join a Focus Group on the Carlsbad Graduation Challenge." The focus groups were instrumental in identifying the discussion starters for the community conversation.
- Requests for Funds were solicited, resulting in meeting the fundraising goal.
- Summit Organizers gave PowerPoint presentations at city council and community meetings to raise awareness of the graduation challenge.
- A multi-media campaign included weekly letters to the newspaper editor, radio appearances, cable TV, and public service announcements with a message that stated, *"If we don't believe that virtually all students can and should graduate from high school ready for college and career, neither will our students. Your voice is needed to help respond to the graduation challenge."*
- Free "tickets" to the event included breakfast, lunch and childcare. Tickets were available using an online registration portal provided by Public Agenda, on <http://carlsbadgs.eventbrite.com/>
- Postcard invitations were mailed and hand delivered.