

POSITIONING FOR THE POSSIBLE

INVESTING IN EDUCATION REFORM IN NEW MEXICO



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POSITIONING FOR THE POSSIBLE: INVESTING IN EDUCATION REFORM IN NEW MEXICO

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A Discussion Paper for the Philanthropic Sector

At the beginning of 2010, the New Mexico Association of Grantmakers (NMAG) asked Chris Sturgis of MetisNet to explore ways in which philanthropic investments could be structured to lead to improved student achievement and to produce a more effective public education system. This paper includes a summary of the investigation and recommendations for moving forward. The author interviewed education leaders from diverse perspectives; however, there is no doubt that additional interviews would provide new and different insights. Thus, this paper is designed to provoke discussion among funders and educational leadership to discover ways to maximize the benefits of philanthropic investments in New Mexico. The paper does not reflect an official position of NMAG, but rather the initial insights of the author, who is fully committed to finding better ways for everyone involved to work together. So, please feel free to share your comments directly with Ron White of NMAG at rwhite@nmag.org or with Chris Sturgis at chris@metisnet.net.

I. Introduction

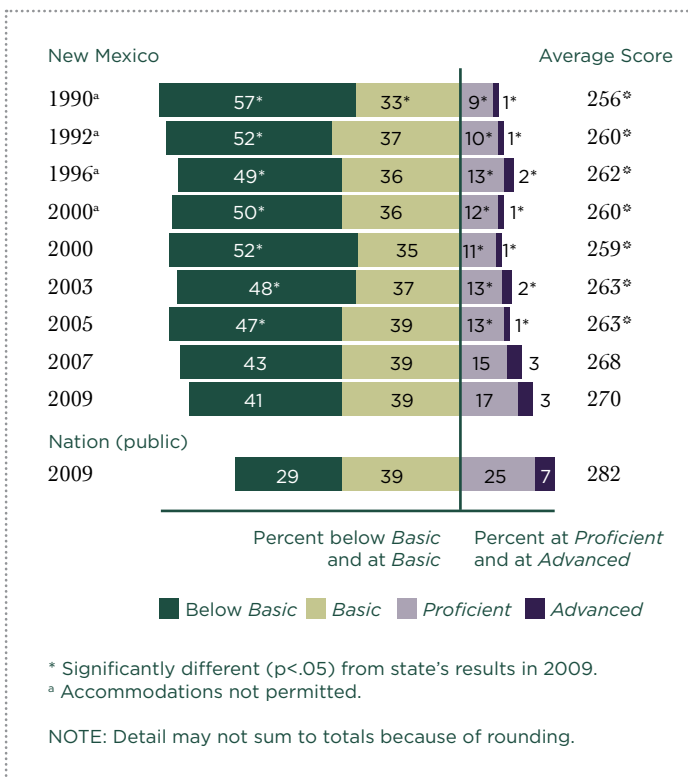
Philanthropy can be a powerful tool for improving our communities and the lives of our children. Yet, anyone who has tried to “invest” in social change knows that it can be more difficult to bring about real results than first anticipated. First, our vision is often greater than our checkbook. Second, beyond charitable giving, it can often be difficult to evaluate different investment options. Third, if the desire is to actually improve public systems, it usually requires considerable knowledge and a willingness to dig through the weeds of policy, regulation, and bureaucracy.

Improving New Mexico’s education system is critical for the success of so many other parts of our lives: economic development, public health, and environmental challenges. The system is also tremendously challenging to improve, given its highly interdependent components and competing stakeholder interests. In education, theories of change abound (public will, standards, system alignment, accountability, innovation, market-driven, equity, governance, and financing), as do the targets of change (state policy,

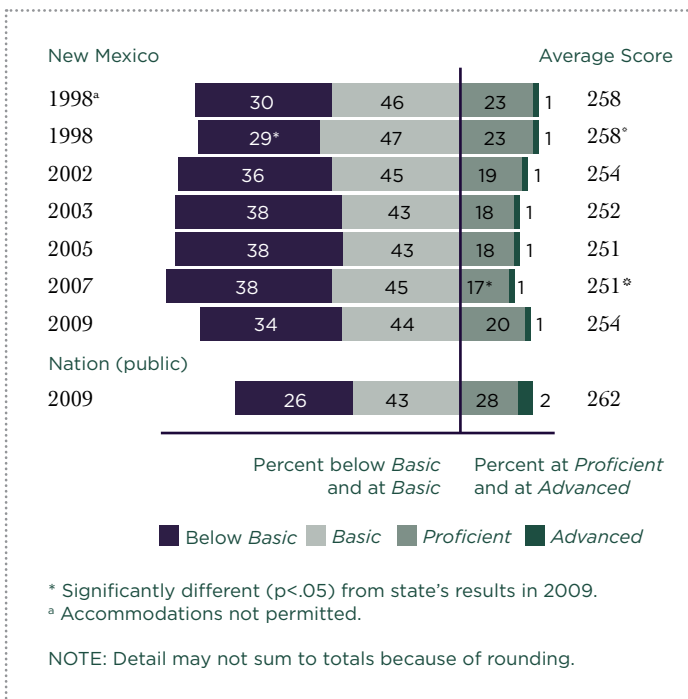
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Chart 1
Achievement Level Percentages and Average Score Results

Mathematics, Grade 8



Reading, Grade 8



higher education, teacher training, districts, schools, teachers, unions, families, students, and community leaders). The legacy and values of a foundation, including its geographic focus and program areas, also shape what is seen as a viable theory of change.

Many funders focus on the isolated sections of public education — early learning or after-school classes — and avoid becoming mired in the muddiness of systemic change. It is usually easier to fund a nonprofit that is running a program to help children learn to read than it is to make an investment that will make sure that the school is effectively helping all children discover the love of reading. However, worrying that investments are not showing a long-term impact may make it frustrating to keep funding a program year after year when the system churns onward with little or no improvement.

The deployment of an investment framework can make it easier for philanthropic donors in New Mexico to work together, investing in more powerful (and more expensive) systemic reforms. A philanthropic investment framework includes a common language and an agreed upon set of constructs that allow donors to expedite their learning, establish meaningful networks, and coordinate funding. Although it might include a unified theory of change or a set of strategic goals, it can also literally just frame the conversation to identify potential levers or windows of opportunity for investments.

Based on this initial investigation, the recommended investment framework for the next three to five years is three-fold:

- ◆ Embrace a common set of design principles to guide grantmaking
- ◆ Strengthen the capacity for change across the state to improve education
- ◆ Invest in programs, advocacy initiatives, and organizations that are integral to long-term strategic initiatives

Philanthropy can play a powerful role in changing the current state of affairs. It is anticipated that

the federal government will continue to use competitive grants to lead education reform efforts around the country. Furthermore, national foundations generally look for investment opportunities that have the highest likelihood of succeeding. Given that New Mexico is a “majority-minority” state—and the only officially bilingual state in the country—national organizations are deeply interested in its success in improving educational outcomes. If donors in New Mexico work together to build the capacity for change in the state—sharing a common investment framework and demonstrating collaborative leadership on behalf of our children—the likelihood of winning competitive grants and engaging national foundations will increase. Most importantly, philanthropy can play a catalytic role in creating a vibrant reform environment in which possibilities flourish, for our state and for our children.

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II. New Mexico’s Education System Today

“Rural and poor, with great cultural diversity and a high proportion of scientists and engineers”—this is the typical, and relatively accurate, description of New Mexico today. Those characteristics will be considered throughout these findings and recommendations, as they do shape the context in which we are working. Education may be a national problem, but it requires local solutions.

While New Mexico is improving its education system, there is concern that it is at a rate slower than other states. It is difficult to assess overall growth, as there are a multitude of educational indicators to be considered. Yet, the following set of charts gives a sense of the dynamics of the state educational performance as it relates to the rest of the country. (Remember: Many countries are doing much better than the United States.) All the data used in the following section is based on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP).ⁱ

Chart 1ⁱⁱ highlights New Mexico’s progress in eighth grade mathematics, as well as the static patterns in eighth grade reading levels.

The following charts are from the Education Trust’s profile of education in New Mexico.ⁱⁱⁱ Charts 2 and 3 compare student achievement on the New Mexico Standards Based Assessment (SBA) as compared to NAEP.^{iv} Given that each state currently has its own standards, assessments, and cut-off points to determine proficiency, the NAEP test is the only way to know how well the education system is performing, compared to other states. These charts raise the question of whether New Mexico’s accountability policies are truly reflecting high expectations for the students.

Chart 2

Are students proficient in reading?
Grade 4 Overall Reading/English
Language Arts Performance
New Mexico Standards Based
Assessment and NAEP

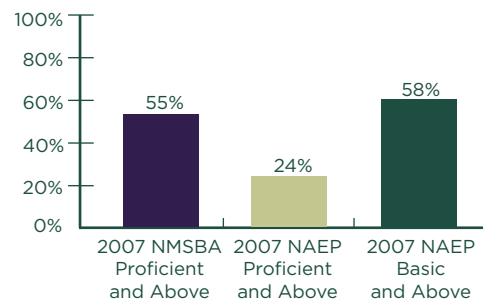
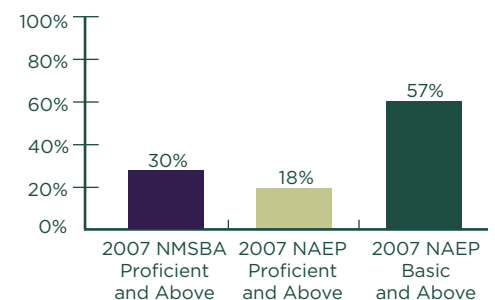


Chart 3

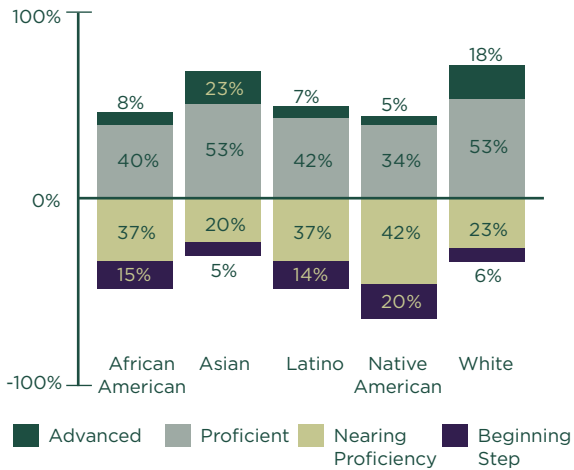
Are students proficient in mathematics?
Grade 6-8 Overall Mathematics Performance
New Mexico Standards Based
Assessment and NAEP



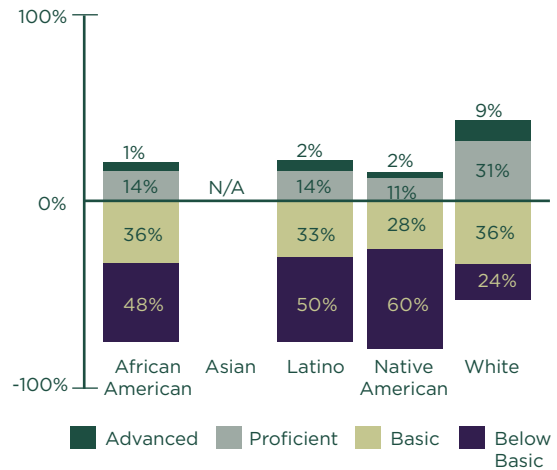
Finally, similar to the rest of the country, New Mexico has disturbing inequities between socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic groups. The following charts expose the deep variation in achievement across population groups. Chart 4 shows the percentage of students that are proficient or above, marked by the horizontal line across the middle, based on New Mexico's SBA as compared to NAEP. For example, New Mexico's state accountability system indicates that 14 percent of Latinos are at the beginning level (or below basic) of reading at fourth grade, whereas NAEP indicates that a full 50 percent of Latino fourth grade students are still far from proficient.

Chart 4

2007 New Mexico Standards Based Assessment
Grade 4 Reading



2007 NAEP - New Mexico
Grade 4 Reading

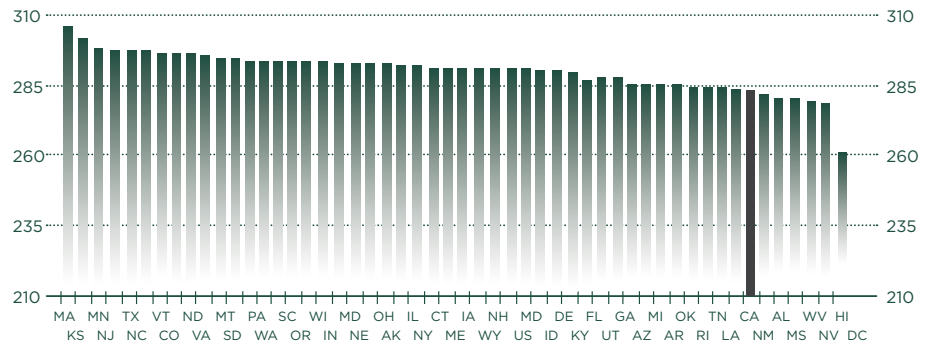


Many may try to use the extensive poverty in New Mexico as an explanation for the state's low educational achievement. Yet, the following chart from Education Trust highlights the mathematics performance of higher-income students, thus eliminating the explanation of poverty in performance differentials.

Chart 5

How does the mathematics performance of higher-income students compare across states?

2007 Grade 8 Mathematics Average Scale Score



The overall low performance and inequities in student achievement are particularly disturbing given the anticipated demographic changes. Essentially, New Mexico’s economic strength will depend greatly on increasing the performance of the education system overall, as well as reducing the inequities across cultural groups. Again, Education Trust provides a quick picture.

A Shifting Population

Changes in state population, ages 5–24, 2006–2020

	<i>Population 2006</i>	<i>Projected Population 2020</i>	<i>Projected Change 2006 - 2020</i>
African American	11,121	11,475	3%
Asian	7,580	9,039	19%
Latino	293,772	372,636	27%
Native American	73,520	93,531	27%
White	232,150	220,123	-5%
TOTAL	618,143	706,804	14%

As in most states, the education system is characterized by multiple education reform initiatives—some introduced in response to federal policy, such as Race to the Top; some led by the state, such as the Hispanic Education Act and Project 2012, a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) initiative; some kicked off by the district; some with principal leadership; and some through partnerships with the philanthropic community, such as Los Alamos National Laboratory Foundation’s (LANL) effort to improve the teaching of math. In addition, there are independent initiatives, such as Teach for America, Innovate Educate’s STEM network, and a growing charter school sector. New Mexico relies heavily on reforms organized by issues as described above. The missing piece is a full strategic vision that establishes the much needed performance-oriented environment found in the states leading the nation in education improvement.

III. Discussion on Key Findings

A. Raising Expectations for the Students, for the Community

There is a continual national discussion about the degree that income, specifically poverty, impacts student achievement and the degree that our education system itself explains the achievement gaps. There are certainly mountains of studies that explore the numerous ways that poor nutrition and a lack of health care can affect student attendance and attention. Yet, there is equally significant evidence that other states are doing better than New Mexico in educating their children. Furthermore, there is proof that points to schools across the country that are incredibly effective in helping low-income children achieve at very high standards. The truth probably



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lies somewhere in the middle—that a combination of effective schools with a coordinated delivery of support services to alleviate symptoms of poverty and a reform-oriented public policy environment will produce much better outcomes than we are currently experiencing in New Mexico.

Low expectations are a common theme in interviews, although no studies were found that provide a sense of the scope or depth. Too often the issue of poverty is raised as an excuse for why our students are not achieving at higher levels. In addition, the concern that parents in rural communities do not want their children to go to college, as they are afraid that they will not return to their community, was raised repeatedly by high-level educators and policymakers. These arguments relieve the education system of responsibility, suggesting that the problem rests with the communities and families.

Yet, there are educators, many working through reform initiatives, who share an entirely different assessment of the dynamics. They consistently said that in their experience all parents, regardless of where they live, want the very best for their children, including a good education. In the discussions, they agreed there was uneasiness among some parents about their children going to college, but it was caused by their unfamiliarity with the transition to college—New Mexico has a low percentage of adults with college degrees. With strong college readiness and transitional supports to help understand college selection, navigate college applications, and apply for financial aid, much of this discomfort disappears. A recent Univision-AP poll demonstrates the rising expectations of parents for their children—94 percent of Latinos say they expect their own children to go to college.^v

There is also a concern about the lack of urgency around education at the local level. One community organizer said that despite education being the highest priority in the community, the sense of hopelessness was so strong they had focused on other issues. This suggests that it is not a lack of urgency but a sense of helplessness that is undermining efforts to generate public will.

The assumption that poverty is the cause of low achievement, rather than school design or responsiveness of educators, may also undermine the sense of efficacy of adults to improve the system by reinforcing the idea that there is nothing to be done in the face of poverty. The belief system that poverty is the dominant underlying cause of low achievement in New Mexico may be leading to apathy and a sense of helplessness. It assumes that we cannot improve our schools until we eliminate poverty or fully address its symptoms. This can begin to create a vicious, self-fulfilling cycle in the face of flawed implementation of reform approaches. Inconsistent implementation produces lower than anticipated results. Instead of im-



The missing piece is a full strategic vision that establishes the much needed performance-oriented environment found in the states leading the nation in education improvement.

proved student achievement, the result is decreased efficacy, greater wariness of reforms, and a deepening of the belief that the problem lies with the children rather than the public sector. Thus in going forward, it is imperative that investments and initiatives confront these low expectations in the schools and communities.

B. Strengthening State Leadership

During initial interviews, there was constant criticism of state government and its leadership on education. Yet, in exploring further, it appears that state legislators, the Legislative Education Study Committee (LESC), the Legislative Finance Committee (LFC), and management at the Public Education Department (PED) deserve some credit for working hard to develop an effective policy environment to support education improvement. Now, working hard doesn't always equate with working together or effectively, but in fact, the policy environment has dramatically improved over the past five years. State leadership has sought out national network^{vi} to expedite learning and get access to technical assistance. The collaboration of state departments coordinated by the Children's Cabinet has made great progress in expanding early childhood programs. The LESL and LFC have increased the capacity of the legislature to assess alternative policy options with the result of successfully upgrading high school graduation requirements and making headway in establishing a high-quality state information system.

Yet, the criticism that state-level leadership must become more aggressive in its education reforms deserves attention.

- ◆ Two structural issues are weakening New Mexico's efforts.
 - ✦ There is no authorized body with the capacity to develop an overall strategic vision that can guide the state in its efforts. The Public Education Commission (PEC) is constitutionally authorized to create a statewide plan, yet there is no confidence that they can fulfill that obligation. The fact that they are selected by elections with less than 5 percent turnout undermines their public accountability. Furthermore, in their current role as charter authorizers, they have failed to demonstrate the ability to approach that one function strategically.
 - ✦ The state lacks a clear way to measure academic success and progress in implementing reforms. This was a fundamental problem in the Race to the Top applications, as there was no framework grounded in New Mexico's conditions to provide coherence to the federal policy reforms. In addition, without a performance-oriented strategy or metrics to drive results,

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the individual reform issues lack accountability and the LFC and LESC can continue to work independently of each other. Finally, with the current economic situation, there is a risk that without an overall strategy, policy is being written purely through a budgetary lens.

- ◆ Although the prevailing mindset is to turn to the state for leadership, New Mexico's strong focus on "local control" is creating a policy gridlock. The legislature churns out policies and programs for PED to implement, yet PED is designed to focus on compliance rather than supporting districts to build capacity for increased educational achievement. Furthermore, PED does not manage schools, districts do. Thus, much of the source for reform rests in the lap of elected school boards. In much of the education policy discussions across the country, there is a focus on balancing accountability with autonomy. Thus, if school boards are expected to operate with this level of autonomy, they need to demonstrate greater accountability for the state funding they receive.
- ◆ Many of the people interviewed shared a sense that the status quo was being held in place by a combination of the lack of demand for improvement by community members and the advocacy of the "Education Partners" (the NM Coalition of School Administrators, NM School Superintendent Association, NM School Board Association, National Education Association, and the American Federation of Teachers was referred to as the "Big Five" in one interview). The perception is that they have undue influence with the state legislature, the LFC and LESC staff members, and among leadership at the PED. Organizations representing other interests including communities, businesses, and reform initiatives are not organized well enough to counterbalance their voice in education policy discussions.
- ◆ Two concerns about the Public Education Department were consistently raised.
 - ◀ The lack of transparency and candidness from PED leadership undermines all reform efforts. In the age of Google, claiming that New Mexico has an accountability system that drives toward high standards or using out of date methods to determine graduation rates simply establishes PED as an untrustworthy organization. A quick online search will produce national reports that describe the status of New Mexico on a range of issues, including how children in New Mexico are doing on the NAEP as compared to other states. Given local control, this

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environment undermines any efforts in PED providing support or technical assistance to districts.

- ◀ Similar to most states, the PED has very little capacity beyond their compliance functions. With the rapid development of policy by the legislature and the governor, it is not clear whether capacity constraints are being considered in policy development and implementation. Thus, it is often unclear how state policy gets translated into action. For example, New Mexico's Project 2012 is a comprehensive set of recommendations on how to implement STEM statewide that fails to provide an implementation plan with costs, responsibilities, and indicators measuring progress.
- ◆ Although New Mexico has put into place most of the pieces of an effective statewide information system, there are still substantial weaknesses. While other states are beginning to fine-tune how they use data, the lack of a longitudinal database in New Mexico is restraining the ability to create a performance-based policy environment. Although state leadership has repeatedly said that adequate data is available for decision making, those interviewed consistently commented that it is difficult to access the data that is needed to drive school improvement or to help districts make critical strategic decisions about programming. In addition, New Mexico's data system is not designed to respond to the cultural diversity of the state, illustrated by failing to create alignment with the Bureau of Indian Education or providing adequate schoolwide data so that tribal leaders can better advocate for and support their communities.

C. Investing in District Leadership and Capacity

There was unanimous agreement in conversations with people in New Mexico that school boards were not fulfilling their roles and were often a major cause of low performance in schools. Furthermore, there was substantial concern that superintendents were not able to provide the level of leadership needed to drive toward improvement. The constant changing of superintendents creates a challenge for consistent implementation of reforms. One person suggested that superintendents were not using the data that was available to them to drive performance. These are sweeping generalizations, and certainly there are examples of effective governance and management within the state; however, the frequency of this concern does raise the need to better understand the dynamics involved and to explore ways to address the concern.

Again, there may be an issue of role misalignment. If school boards are attempting to micromanage, spending too much time on issues that are not central to achievement, or failing to set the expectations and policies that

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shape higher achievement, they indeed may be creating barriers to change. A quick review of PED's and the NM Association of School Boards' websites indicates that the training available to school board members is limited to fulfilling the minimum level of their role rather than helping them to understand the full leadership spectrum. For example, school boards need to know how to integrate their oversight of Educational Plan for Student Success, which is required from school districts each school year, with the budget process so that budget decisions are made in the context of the reform plans.

D. Nurturing Strong Social Trust and Cohesion

As we know, the cultural diversity of New Mexico is one of its strengths. Yet, in reviewing documents from PED, it is clear that education leaders are not taking it into full consideration in the reform strategies nor are they using its strength. For example, the revised Project 2012 report on STEM fails to mention cultural competency or designing STEM to respond to community interests within any of its seven elements. This suggests that more has to be done to make sure this is a top priority in designing reforms and grants.

Although a multicultural state, the two largest cultural groups in New Mexico shape much of the conversation, especially in terms of closing achievement gaps. Native Americans and Hispanics frame problems and the solutions around the inequity and issues facing their specific communities. Each has a specific legislative act: the Indian Education Act of 2003 and the Hispanic Education Act of 2010. Although organizing around ethnic identity is very useful for engaging communities and framing problems, there are two considerations in designing responses to educational inequities.

- 1) There are subsets of interests within each of these cultural groups.
 - ◀ Within the Native American community, there are twenty-two tribal governments. In addition, urban Native Americans may encounter educational challenges that are different from those living in tribal communities.
 - ◀ The Hispanic community includes new immigrants, as well as those who have long histories in New Mexico.

- 2) Each group takes the position that the education issues facing their communities are unique and need to be addressed with unique solutions. Although a school that has a very high proportion of one ethnic group can organize reforms around those specific interests, there are significant challenges for ethnic-based solutions in schools with heterogeneous populations.



In the current situation, the "Education Partners" representing special interests of the education sector overwhelm the fragmented community voice.

Native American education has an additional set of governance structures, laws, and resources, as well as cultural values shaping choices and opportunities. Thus, education reform initiatives require greater collaboration with tribal leadership so that the values of self-determination are fully embraced, along with navigating multiple governance structures. However, even given the special circumstances related to Native American education, the position that the educational issues for Native American and Hispanic children are unique to each group are constraining the ability to create a stronger, unified voice demanding improvements. In the current situation, the Education Partners representing special interests of the education sector overwhelm the fragmented community voice.

Thus, it is worth examining the educational challenges for Native American and Hispanic children for common features. There are certainly consistent patterns across the country indicating that children of color or low income are taught by lesser-quality teachers and have limited access to higher-level coursework. Yet, there may be other issues around which solutions can be shaped. Three potential areas of common issues arose in interviews.

- ◆ *Language and Literacy.* Many Native American and Hispanic children are raised speaking a language other than English. Schools are not effectively helping them to develop academic literacy skills, thereby leaving them disadvantaged in higher-level courses. However, speaking two languages is an asset for college access and in the labor market. Thus, New Mexico could build on its cultural diversity by establishing dual language skills as an expectation: one being English and the other of their choice, such as Spanish, Tewa, or Chinese. Essentially, New Mexico could one day boast of having the highest Spanish Advanced Placement rates in the country or online advanced honors courses in Native languages.
- ◆ *Mobility and Interrupted Education.* Our nation's education system still operates on an agricultural model and a linear factory model where students are supposed to hop on in kindergarten and hop off at the end of their senior year. However, that does not always resonate with the reality of our children's lives in Hispanic, Native American, and low-income communities.

First, low-income families have higher rates of changing schools—partially in response to unstable housing, partially in search of work, and partially as a way to find a better education for their children—so schools need to be prepared for high mobility.

Second, many high school students need to work or take care of family members for indeterminable periods of time. Some may even need

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Thus, there may be a common interest among the ethnic groups in New Mexico to demand that schools create the cultural competency needed to be able to respond to students from different cultures.

to leave the country to care for family members elsewhere. In Native American communities, students may have ceremonial responsibilities that interrupt their education. Schools perceive this as dropping out when in fact those students perceive it as simply an interruption in their education. Also, some students who do not have a sense of where their education is taking them can benefit from taking a year off to work, learning what the labor market is going to require of them, and then returning to school with greater motivation. Our ever-rolling factory model of schooling fails to respond effectively to these groups of students.

Student mobility and attendance issues are often perceived to be a sign of irresponsibility on the part of students and/or parents. Yet, in many cases, it is actually a sign of young people trying to be responsible within a system that is severely constrained in its ability to customize its services. Seeking creative solutions for increasing flexibility, including competency-based pathways, online learning, and independent study, could benefit students across New Mexico's multicultural communities.

- ◆ *Navigating Culture and Institutions.* Students need to learn how to navigate new environments to make the transition between schools, to higher education, or to the workplace. Many students make these adjustments easily when their home and community culture is similar to these environments or when they have someone helping them. The ability to modify one's behavior between home environments and other environments is often referred to as "code switching." For students from diverse backgrounds or from very disadvantaged backgrounds, navigating school can be difficult. Different values, social skills, and use of language may be shaping the environment. Thus, there may be a common interest among the ethnic groups in New Mexico to demand that schools create the cultural competency needed to be able to respond to students from different cultures, as well as to support students in navigating different organizational terrains.

Organizing communities around identity, while aiming at shared goals, will strengthen the demand for change statewide. Cohesive education reforms that are designed to benefit every group of underserved group of children will also simplify implementation at the district and school levels.

E. Embracing a Performance-Based Culture

The cities and states driving the greatest improvements in education reform have cultivated a performance-driven culture with a laser focus on student achievement and other academic indicators. Regardless of the

reform strategy employed, these communities invest in effective data systems, design metrics to drive implementation, and are vigilant in using data to help make decisions. In general, New Mexico has yet to demonstrate this level of analysis and attention to detail. There was repeated concern voiced regarding the “implementation gap” —when reforms are implemented without adequate fidelity to the models. Policies and programs are often kicked off without clear strategies for engaging the districts and schools or without clear indicators of success. Thus, there is a flurry of activity but few signs of improvement.

Given the number of current initiatives that are already in place, it would be beneficial to evaluate their level of success and make the necessary corrective actions to attain better results. Evaluation can be expensive, and it does not always make sense to invest in random assignments. However, ensuring that programs and implementation of initiatives are driven by results is a step in the right direction.

Communities need to know when a reform is working, how to adapt it for their unique characteristics, and when to stop trying something that isn’t working. Equally important, the state can play a critical role in monitoring where reforms are being effectively implemented, highlighting those schools where there are gains in academic achievement. Thus, the state can play an adaptive leadership role, inspiring communities to rise to the challenge of improving their schools and bringing effective reforms to scale across the state.

F. Designing for Philanthropic Capacity

The New Mexico Association of Grantmakers conducted a survey of its members to get a sense of their experience and interest in education. The results suggest that generally the funders in New Mexico are in the early stages of investing in the education system. Most of the funders replying had experience in early childhood development or out-of-school time; however, the focus was scattered of those few who were involved in K–12. The shared interest going forward was to participate in briefings about education in New Mexico so that they could make better informed decisions.

The fact that New Mexico has fewer foundations, approximately 50 percent per capita, than other states is important to consider. In addition, few of the foundations in New Mexico have adequate budget size to effectively partner with districts. Those that do, such as J. F Maddox Foundation and LANL Foundation, have demonstrated a great deal of sophistication in designing efforts that get deep into the classroom. These two characteristics, as well as the limitations of geographic constraints for giving, are likely to make coordinated grantmaking strategies more difficult — but not impossible.

The more coordinated the local donors are and the stronger the strategic plans are to improve education, the better New Mexico leaders will be able to converse on equal footing with national foundations.

Design Principles for Philanthropic Investments

Design principles can ensure that the unique qualities of New Mexico are taken into consideration while shaping investments among local and national foundations. Imagine the potential if all grantmaking, local and national alike, was designed around the following principles:

- ✦ Cultivate cultural competency and social cohesion
- ✦ Raise expectations and efficacy
- ✦ Strengthen relationships to support a performance-driven culture
- ✦ Design for affordability
- ✦ Commit to adequate resources for full implementation
- ✦ Co-design for excellence

Thus, in order to develop the resources to address a number of the critical areas—such as district-level capacity—that are holding improvement back, New Mexico will need to work closely with national funders. This is always difficult because national foundations often have pre-existing strategies that may not take into consideration the unique characteristics of New Mexico. The more coordinated the local donors are and the stronger the strategic plans are to improve education, the better New Mexico leaders will be able to converse on equal footing with national foundations.

IV. Recommendations

The following recommendations are designed to offer a range of different approaches for donors investing in New Mexico to improve education. Any one or all of them can be used to design investment frameworks to support philanthropic collaboration, depending on the interests of the donors.

Recommendation 1: Embrace Common Design Principles for Philanthropic Investments

Design principles can serve three valuable purposes in New Mexico. First, they can ensure that the unique qualities of New Mexico and the challenges be addressed during grantmaking. Second, if the donors in New Mexico begin to use design principles in their grantmaking, it is more likely that national foundations will also begin to use the design principles in their work. Finally, if donors use these or similar principles, grantees—both in the public sector and nonprofit—will also begin to use them as it will increase their competitiveness for being funded.

◆ Cultivate cultural competency and social cohesion

Design with the flexibility to respond to different cultures. Seek out empowerment techniques or high engagement among existing organizations with networks, especially when working with Native American communities, to ensure opportunities for self-determination. Incorporate time for relationship building across cultures and perspectives. This is also important for countering the anger and helplessness flamed by the continual nonresponsive education system to communities throughout New Mexico's history. This may add additional costs to grants, but it is vitally important to the success of the work and to the long-term strength of New Mexico.

- ◆ Raise expectations and efficacy

Investments to improve education need to challenge the belief system that poverty is the primary cause of low achievement. Of course, it makes sense to have an inclusive model that takes into consideration ways to address the symptoms of poverty, but it is crucial that investments are designed to demonstrate that schools can improve their services.

Three techniques for designing to build efficacy and raise expectations are highlighted here. First, ensure that the project is *asset-based*, building on the strengths and previous efforts. Avoid assuming that everything needs to be started from scratch. Second, design research to help *identify growth and progress*. We often try to assess projects simply on end results, which may not capture the fact that a project is developing well but has not yet met its full potential. Third, whenever possible use *beat the odds* techniques in comparing classrooms, schools, or districts. Comparisons using data snapshots are useful to a point but fail to give us any context. Those schools that are beating the odds, given their student population, are proof points that we can do better. We need to understand which schools are serving Native Americans or English language learners the best. Which high schools are keeping the students with the lowest academic skills on track through ninth grade? Identifying proof points within the state and demonstrating that we can do better will begin to cultivate the continuous improvement culture that is so desperately needed.

- ◆ Nurture performance-driven culture by strengthening relationships

Data-driven efforts often move us through ideological stances and past the status quo. However, given the general level of wariness in New Mexico, data can also be perceived as something that is disempowering or even harmful. Data is not always perceived as helpful for multiple reasons: it previously has been used to punish or redirect resources away from communities, the state's current data system is not fully designed to meet the needs of communities, and PED's unreliability in being candid and transparent undermines data-rich reports.

Thus, as a guiding principle, investments should balance data-driven processes with a measurable commitment to engagement so that participants have the opportunity to help design and use data for their own purposes. Furthermore, relational strategies will require planning for the time and opportunities for building relationships, leadership development, and strengthening networks. Again, this has costs that are not normally included in philanthropic projects. Yet, we know that wariness of new ideas and hidden agendas is embedded in New Mexico's history. It will simply take

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Walking the Talk: Creating a Philanthropic Performance-Based Culture

Donors know how difficult it is to measure the benefits generated from their investments. It becomes even more challenging once the goal is systemic change. The results-based grantmaking framework developed by The Fiscal Policy Studies Institute can be helpful in clarifying anticipated outcomes that propel systemic reform. The framework offers three categories to clarify intention and outcomes of investments.

Impact

Changes in the condition of well-being for children, adults, families, or communities

Influence

Changes in policies, regulations, systems, practices, or public opinion

Leverage

Changes in investments by other public or private funders

The elements of results-based grantmaking provide a common language that strengthens collaboration while reducing the transactional costs. By enabling funder collaboration, systemic change becomes more palatable. Funders can draw from one another's knowledge, coordinate investments in the same organization so that a project is more likely to succeed by being fully funded, or do related grantmaking that begins to create knowledge, networks, and multiple proof points.^{xiii}

time for people to establish the trust needed for collaborative approaches and the adaptive behaviors needed to bring about systemic change that will challenge the status quo.

Over time, the investment in building relationships across cultures and perspectives will pay off as it can be converted into informed public support. There is substantial social capital in New Mexico, but it is held tightly within subcultures. The challenge is to design our efforts to build social capital across groups. Regardless of our differences, we all share a deep longing for a better future for our children.

◆ Design for affordability

Given today's economic pressures and state fiscal environment, it is critical that we design for affordability from the get-go. At one point in time, philanthropy had leisure to design high-quality programming, run demonstration projects, and then advocate that they be integrated into public policy. Random assignment evaluations were designed to determine effectiveness, which sometimes identified the returns on investments. Yet, comparative cost-effectiveness was rarely considered simply because of the cost of the random assignment evaluations. Keeping an eye on affordability will be important as we go forward.

◆ Commit to adequate resources for full implementation

As discussed above in the findings, paying attention to the quality of implementation is very important for New Mexico. Addressing the "implementation gap" may include a provision for adequate resources as well as leadership development. The skills of managing change and carefully thinking through an implementation plan are invaluable for bringing about changes in the education system. In addition, grantees must be encouraged to ensure that their implementation plans include ways to measure their progress and results.

◆ Co-design for excellence

Two heads are better than one. This simple phrase has grown into a set of collaborative practices that draw on multiple sources of knowledge and perspectives. Co-design as a practice will help to improve investments and build a strong philanthropic network in New Mexico. It is also a great way to increase the intellectual capital of the donor community. Equally important, if the donors in New Mexico can establish co-design as a practice within the state, it will increase the possibility of getting the national funders to also adopt it. Of course, co-design can expand how donors work with potential grantees as well.

With systemic change efforts, it is important to shape long-term commitments to collaboration, stretching the horizons to five years or more. For trustees, an important policy is to create mechanisms by which program officers can establish long-term collaborations that won't be undermined by shifting interests.

Recommendation 2: Strengthen Demand and Capacity for Change

There are three sets of investments that can create a catalytic infrastructure for education reform. This investment framework is a long-term strategy that could easily take five to ten years to show substantial results. Yet, it will progressively create the enabling environment for improvement and innovation to take hold in New Mexico schools and districts. The goal of this investment is to have an informed citizenry that can seek improvements in which all candidates—school board, municipal, county, and state—would be asked to declare their platform and position for improving education. It is a strategy designed to confront the political gridlock to change the status quo.

◆ **Community Engagement: Generating Demand and Capacity from the Ground Up**

Although it often appears that statewide advocacy is the most cost-effective way to build public will and a demand for change, it is critical that New Mexico invest more in leadership development and community engagement from the ground up. State advocacy can be helpful in providing a counterbalance to the Education Partners, but it is almost useless in helping address issues at the local level. Assuming that school districts, especially school boards, are a weak link in the efforts to improve our schools, it is very important that demand is built within communities to elect effective school board members and to monitor their effectiveness.^{viii} Community members need to have the knowledge and skills to effectively engage local leadership in overcoming barriers and conflict. Over time, community organizations working at the local level can coalesce, forming a powerful voice at the state level—perhaps powerful enough to reshape policies for greater clarity and alignment toward accountability and autonomy between the state and the district.

New Mexico has a number of strong community organizing groups, but few are focusing directly on education. Thus, investments to current organizing groups to build educational capacity are valuable investments. Many local organizations will define themselves by ethnicity and culture, so it will be important to identify and strengthen those that are forming alliances while still staying true to their constituencies' interests. If investments are directed to emerging multi-issue community organizations,

Assuming that school districts, especially school boards, are a weak link in the efforts to improve our schools, it is very important that demand is built within communities to elect effective school board members and to monitor their effectiveness.

donors should anticipate their taking education issues after they have demonstrated their effectiveness on other, less-complicated issues.

Given that there are a substantial number of cities and towns without community organizing groups, the community engagement investments will need to expand to include other issue organizing that values education as related to their work, nonprofit service organizations, and faith-based institutions. Finally, across the country, municipal leadership often plays a key role in generating the demand for school boards and superintendents to work aggressively for improvement. It may be possible to work with the National League of Cities^{ix} to build up this capacity across New Mexico.



An education intermediary could play a role in strengthening the four types of capital needed for innovation: financial, design, social, and intellectual.

With a disproportionate number of the low-performing schools in districts that serve Native American communities, there is an urgent need to invest in community engagement related to the School Improvement Grants. Given the unique dynamics of working with Native American communities, co-designing a community engagement strategy with local leadership could be instrumental in increasing the likelihood that school improvement efforts are successful.

◆ Education Intermediary: Strengthening Innovation Capital

During interviews, when asked which organization people would turn to in New Mexico to learn about education, there was usually a long silence and then, with a shrug of the shoulders, “PED?” There is substantial independent organizational capacity around early childhood development and out-of-school time but little around the K–12 system.

When confronted with public sectors that are stuck in the status quo, many cities across the country have created intermediaries to fill a number of leadership, advocacy, innovative, and civic roles. As the public sector begins to move forward, the intermediaries then take on stronger supportive roles, although never fully cutting off their roots.

New Mexico simply cannot afford multiple city-level education intermediaries. Given the size of the population, it makes more sense to create a statewide education intermediary. It is possible to house this capacity in another organization, and it would certainly be the most cost-effective method. However, if national foundations could be identified as partners, it would be possible to create an organization that can be fully rooted in the design principles described above. Starting from scratch with a deep commitment to cultivate cultural competency, gather and share knowledge on education improvement, and support leadership development across the state could be catalytic.

In essence, such an education intermediary could play a role in strengthening the four types of capital needed for innovation: financial, design, social, and intellectual.^x It would not directly manage funding, but instead would focus on linking New Mexico's efforts with cutting-edge efforts across the country. With an influx of knowledge from leading states, New Mexico would be better positioned to take advantage of new funding opportunities. Finally, if constructed with its roots in the community, this education intermediary could provide an alternative voice to the Education Partners at critical times. Assuming that the Education Partners begin to provide more innovative leadership, the intermediary could easily be repositioned in a strategic alliance.

◆ Leadership Development: Nurturing Performance-Driven Leaders

Leadership development should be taken into consideration during all grantmaking. It is essential to cultivate emerging leaders who can take on roles as community-level advocates, principals, superintendents, school board members, and state-level leadership to move New Mexico beyond its status quo education system to one that is driven toward excellence. Across the country, education policymakers know that strengthening human capital is critical to all other reforms. For example, the best way to transform the “Big Five” education associations from being barriers to change into being drivers of change is to have their members demand it.

Building upon current efforts with more intentional leadership development efforts could be very valuable in New Mexico. The attributes of emerging leaders might include the belief that schools can improve; the opinion that cultural diversity is an asset; a passion for knowledge and skill building; and a commitment to working with others toward common goals. The actual leadership development process and goals will need to be organized around individual needs and promising reform strategies. Examples of the types of skills and knowledge that might be nurtured include:

- ◀ Familiarity with research, leaders, and organizations on a range of educational topics
- ◀ Leadership skills including communication, negotiation, and strategy development
- ◀ Management skills including business planning, financial management, and effective use of data
- ◀ Knowledge of techniques for empowerment, cultural competency, and relational organizing
- ◀ Understanding of networking and building relationships with diverse leaders across the state and country

The most important task is to seek out initiatives with clear goals and a strategy for reaching them.

Nurturing leadership (often referred to as human capital) is an essential step for ensuring effective implementation of reforms, effectively engaging diverse communities, and using new metrics to drive change.

Recommendation 5: Medium-Term Options for Educational Investments



High-quality online learning can be instrumental in helping struggling students in low-performing schools succeed.

Although the investigation did not attempt to assess the numerous initiatives or education issues — such as finance, teacher quality, and so on — that are drawing attention in the state, a number of areas were identified where active donors could be of value. The most important task is to seek out initiatives with clear goals and a strategy for reaching them. Donors can then be confident that investments in single programs are also adding value to the shared goals. These might be organizational initiatives such as Teach for America’s strategy to expand into the Santa Fe/Espanola region. Or they might be statewide initiatives as are described below. These investments would most likely need some level of engagement with the district or state leadership, but this could be done without a full partnership.

◆ Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)

Although New Mexico is ranked eighth in the country for high-tech jobs and second for the number of scientists and engineers per capita, we are forty-eighth in college attainment. STEM is a national priority, and New Mexico is well poised to be a leader. The state has developed a set of recommendations in Project 2012 that was recently revised, now including a wide range of exciting programs designed to help students and schools shape STEM programs. The business community is organizing to advocate and participate through the recently created Innovate Educate.

However, there are weaknesses. Project 2012 has not produced a strategy or implementation plan for converting the recommendations into action. There are no clear, measurable goals to drive change. Except in a few cases, STEM has not been thought through with a cultural competency perspective; thus, communities may perceive it as business or state government telling them what to do. Finally, STEM is often positioned as a workforce development strategy in which students are expected to select career pathways. New Mexico’s history and the concern for equity require that it be positioned for all children. Given that STEM requires some college, the tension around college and career readiness can be avoided. Yet, it can be strengthened if STEM is also designed to give value to young people’s current lives, not just a future that they might not be able to imagine yet.

◆ Online Education

High-quality online learning can be instrumental in helping struggling students in low-performing schools succeed. For example, online learning can help the challenges of high student mobility and interrupted education that were discussed earlier. It can also help more students become college ready by increasing access to higher-level courses.

New Mexico has recently invested in online learning.^{xi} IDEAL-NM can be instrumental in ensuring that rural and low-performing schools offer advanced courses if a funding model is developed that would allow for expansion. In addition, online efforts have greater benefits when they are supported by competency-based policies that allow students to progress upon mastery rather than being constrained by seat-time. Donors could be very helpful in ensuring that IDEAL-NM reaches the highest quality and addresses gaps in educational opportunities across the state.

◆ High School Reform and Graduation Crisis

In 2007, the state passed legislation for high school redesign. Additionally, there is a growing awareness of the graduation crisis across the state with a highly attended Dropout Summit in 2009. “Graduating America: Meeting the Challenge of Low Graduation-Rate High Schools,” published by Jobs for the Future and the Everyone Graduates Center,^{xii} has identified New Mexico as a crisis state in which high schools with low graduation rates are spread across the state. Governor Richardson responded to the crisis with a rapid response, band-aid approach of providing credit recovery. Thus, there is a combination of a policy platform, community awareness, and resources that are being directed at the problem. Yet, online credit recovery is inadequate if we are going to stem the tide of students leaving school without a diploma or without being ready for college. Donors can be instrumental in supporting principals and districts to use data to shape strategic efforts to improve college and career readiness while also improving the graduation rate.

◆ School Turnaround

The U.S. Department of Education is directing massive resources to address the national problem of intransigent, low-performing schools. New Mexico has received a School Improvement Grant and will be working to address this problem. There are a number of ways in which donors can be helpful in this area: invest in community engagement so that community members understand the process, identify implementation issues early, and ensure that cultural competency is being included in the design of the

Higher expectations are leading to questions like “How can we give our children the very best education, one that delights and inspires them?” rather than the bureaucratic approach of “How can we improve proficiency?”

reform. There are also a number of technical assistance providers across the country that offer reform models, coaches, or discrete practices such as adolescent literacy. Donors can help schools think through their choices so that they do not waste time starting from scratch or randomly choosing a provider.

Recommendation 4: Strengthen the Network and Knowledge of Funders

NMAG has an opportunity to play a catalytic role by strengthening the education affinity group. First, using these design principles as a starting point, NMAG could embrace a set of principles and encourage national funders to use them as well. This can begin with briefings on education issues in New Mexico, inserting national perspectives to strengthen knowledge of the field nationally. Given the limited number of donors, NMAG could include emerging leaders in the briefings, which would help to strengthen relationships across the field. Finally, NMAG might consider helping donors to build capacity in working with districts. With at least two foundations—LANL and Maddox—taking on strong leadership in this area, it would be an asset that could over time be leveraged to address the weaknesses at the district level.

Given the limited number of funders, it will be important for NMAG to build relationships with national funders. One first step is to become a member of Grantmakers for Education. In addition, inviting national funders to help inform philanthropic investment frameworks to support state and district strategies might serve to draw on their knowledge, as well as their financial resources over time.

Ensuring that the voice of the traditional education sector is counterbalanced by an informed citizenry is critical to overcoming New Mexico's chronic education challenges and making way for a vibrant culture of performance.

V. Concluding Remarks

It is clear that New Mexico is on the tipping point of unleashing its creativity and leadership toward improving education. Higher expectations are leading to questions like “How can we give our children the very best education, one that delights and inspires them?” rather than the bureaucratic approach of “How can we improve proficiency?” Yet, the collaboration required to improve education depends on strengthening the reform infrastructure, bringing together knowledge from effective strategies across the state and country, emerging leaders, and community activists.

There are numerous challenges still to be confronted, including establishing equitable funding formulas, implementing the Common Core of Standards, developing effective human resource strategies that support teachers and principals, and integrating new assessments into policy and practice as they are developed. Investing in a data-driven culture of improvement will

be infinitely important toward effectively implementing current reforms, as well as designing new strategies and policies. Ensuring that the voice of the traditional education sector is counterbalanced by an informed citizenry is critical to overcoming New Mexico's chronic education challenges and making way for a vibrant culture of performance.

There will always be another idea for education reform, another initiative kicked off by a national foundation or the federal government. What is important is that philanthropic donors in New Mexico think critically about what will work for the state, engage others to think about the implications for different communities and cultures, stay focused on measurable results, and invest in high-quality implementation. Most importantly, we must stay focused on learning. It's clear that to help our children learn, we must be active in the learning communities ourselves and ready to challenge our assumptions and beliefs. If we believe in our children and ourselves, anything is possible.

- i. National Assessment of Educational Progress (www.nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard)
- ii. National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, NAEP State Profiles, (www.nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/)
- iii. The Education Trust, EdWatch 2008, in "Education Watch State Report, New Mexico," April 2009 (www.edtrust.org/dc/resources/edwatch-state-reports)
- iv. National Assessment of Educational Progress, www.nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard.
- v. See the Univision Poll (www.univision.com/content/content.jhtml?cid=2490266)
- vi. These networks include programs like Achieve's American Diploma Project (www.achieve.org), National Center on Education and the Economy's Tough Choices or Tough Times initiative (www.ncee.org), and the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) consortium of states dedicated to the design and implementation of high standards and equitable educational opportunities for English language learners (www.wida.us).
- vii. See Harvard Family Research Project, "Grantmaking to School Districts: Lessons for Foundations" (www.hfrp.org).
- viii. See A+ Schools Board Watch program for one of the ways that communities can help improve their school boards (www.aplussschools.org). For more information on community leadership in improving education, visit the Annenberg Institute (www.annenberginstitute.org)
- ix. See National League of Cities, Institute for Youth, Education and Families for ways that municipal and county leadership can play a dynamic role in improving education (www.nlc.org/IYEF/education/K-12_school/networks.aspx).
- x. The four types of innovation capital are discussed by Andrew Hargadon, Center for Entrepreneurship, University of California, Davis.
- xi. See Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning (kpk12.com) for more information.
- xii. You can find "Graduating America: Meeting the Challenge of Low Graduation-Rate High Schools" (www.jff.org)
- xiii. See www.resultsaccountability.com/.../Results%20Based%20Grantmaking.pdf for more information on results-based grantmaking.





ABOUT NMAG

Founded in 1991, New Mexico Association of Grantmakers is dedicated to increasing the effectiveness and impact of organized philanthropy throughout our region.

New Mexico Association of Grantmakers (NMAG) is a regional membership association that provides programs, research and educational resources, and networking opportunities for grantmakers throughout New Mexico. Our members include representatives from a cross-section of private foundations, public charities, governmental grantmakers, corporate philanthropists and individuals giving across the state. For more information visit www.nmag.org.

ABOUT METISNET

MetisNet works with foundations, government, and individuals to identify the most effective ways to shape investments that build communities, benefit children and families, and strengthen our future. Our mission stems from the very roots of our name—metis—a Greek word for local knowledge and wisdom. Drawing on multiple perspectives, MetisNet works with clients to develop vibrant, asset-based investment strategies. For more information, visit www.metisnet.net.

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