

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What We Know, What We Must Do

Being a good relative means creating and sustaining systems that help children and families thrive. This commitment must show up every day as Native children in New Mexico enter school carrying unique histories, responsibilities, and ways of knowing that shape how they experience and relate to education and school. Educational outcomes for Native youth are influenced not only by individual effort, but by social and historical factors. These circumstances are inseparable from past and present policies, systems, and beliefs that sought to erase Indigenous identity and continue to shape students' experiences in schools today.

To better understand these interconnected realities, we examined indicators across five domains: **Access to Cultural & Linguistic Resources, Economic Well-Being, Education, Family & Community, and Health & Wellness.** Together, these indicators—alongside insights shared by students, families, educators, and Tribal communities—help us understand the conditions shaping Native students' experiences and where and how something different is possible.



Student and Community Voice

We collected insights shared by students, families, educators, and community members through listening sessions across four communities, Shiprock, NM; Gallup, NM; Cuba, NM; and Laguna and Acoma, NM. Each session helps illustrate how patterns show up in daily school life. Across these conversations, several themes emerged:

✦ **Students want access to opportunity, and recognize when it is limited.** Students consistently expressed interest in advanced coursework, technology, and clear college and career pathways. Many also described feeling underestimated academically, being discouraged from pursuing rigorous classes, or having limited course options.

✦ **Schools are asked to meet needs that extend beyond academics.** Educators and community members described schools serving as hubs for food access, technology, stability, and emotional support, especially in communities facing economic strain. These services highlight the critical role schools, especially in rural communities, play in academic preparation and in supporting students' overall well-being.

✦ **Safety, belonging, and cultural connection shape learning environments.** Students and families described how experiences of racism, stereotyping, and low expectations affected how they engaged with school. At the same time, language programs, cultural classes, and strong relationships with educators and peers were consistently named as sources of connection and belonging. Participants emphasized that, in addition to functioning as spaces for formal academic learning, schools play a critical role in how students develop a sense of identity and learn to relate to others from different backgrounds and perspectives.

✦ **Families invest deeply in their children's success but confront barriers navigating systems.** Parents and grandparents expressed strong commitment to their children's education, while also facing challenges accessing information, understanding school policies, and advocating for services. Families emphasized the importance of stronger communication and outreach from schools, ensuring access to parent learning opportunities, college and career guidance, and culturally relevant programming.

Key Findings at a Glance

Across these indicators, several patterns emerge statewide:

Indigenous languages, culture, and intergenerational relationships shape Native children's everyday life. More than one-third (38%) of Native children in New Mexico live in households where an Indigenous language is spoken. Language, beyond a means of communication, carries worldview, identity, history, and connection to land and community. These patterns point to opportunities for schools and education systems to honor, build upon, and sustain linguistic and cultural knowledge.

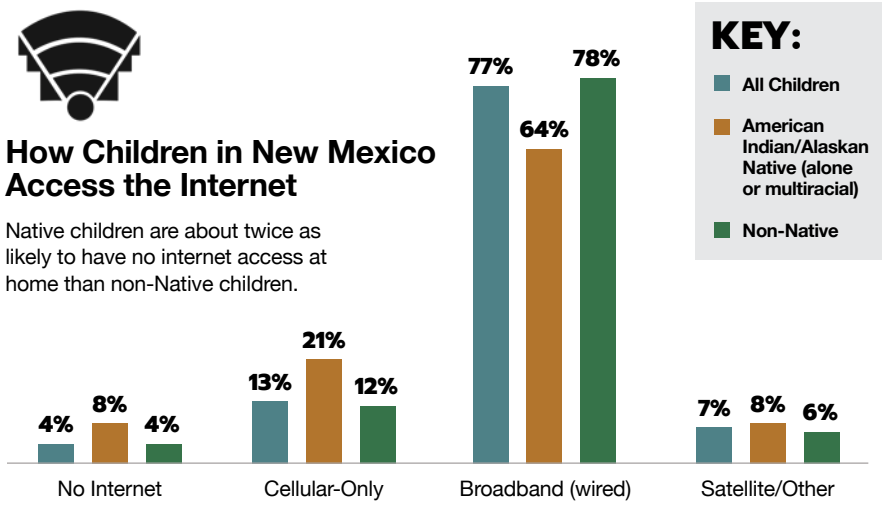
More students are learning Native languages in the classroom. Statewide enrollment in Native language programs has grown from 7,270 students in SY20-21 to more than 8,500 students in SY24-25—a 17% increase over four years. Navajo language courses serve the largest share of students, while enrollment in Keres, Zuni, Jicarilla Apache, and Pueblo languages—such as Tewa, Tiwa, and Towa - have also improved. At the same time, student proficiency levels are increasing—from 5% in SY18-19 to 13% in SY24-25. While most students are still developing fluency, these trends reflect ongoing investments and advocacy by Tribal communities, educators, and schools to strengthen language access and revitalization.

Native youth report the strongest sense of personal identity in the state, alongside persistent health and wellness challenges. 66% of Native high school students reported feeling confident in achieving their goals, and 61% feel good about who they are as a person—higher than the statewide average of 59%. At the same time, more than one in three (35%) Native students report persistent sadness or hopelessness, and one in ten (12%) report attempting suicide in the past year, compared to 8% of students statewide. Native youth report lower alcohol use than their peers (10% compared to 16% statewide), though tobacco use remains higher, with 29% reporting use of any tobacco product compared to 22% statewide.



How Children in New Mexico Access the Internet

Native children are about twice as likely to have no internet access at home than non-Native children.

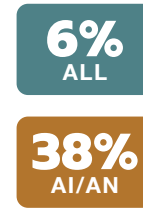


KEY:

- All Children
- American Indian/Alaskan Native (alone or multiracial)
- Non-Native

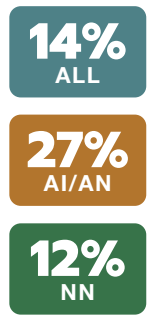
Indigenous Language Spoken in Household

Indigenous language use continues to be a common part of home life for Native children.

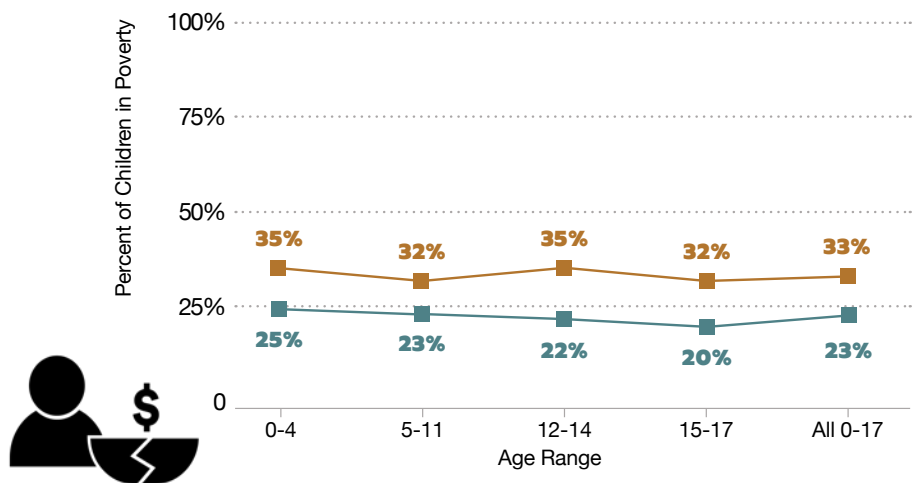


Children Living in Multigenerational Households

More than 1 in 4 Native children live in multigenerational households



Child Poverty Rates by Age (Ages 0-17)



✦ Native children in New Mexico experience substantially higher poverty rates than their non-Native peers.

Statewide, one in three (33%) Native children, ages 0-17, lives at or below 100% of the federal poverty line (FPL), compared to roughly one in five (21%) non-Native children. For reference, in 2026 the FPL is \$15,960 for one individual and \$33,000 for a family of four in the mainland United States. These disparities emerge early and remain consistent across age groups, affecting more than one in three (35%) Native children ages 0-4 and remain elevated across childhood and adolescence. Living at or below this threshold shapes families' access to stable housing, food, transportation, healthcare, and other resources that holistically support children's well-being.

✦ Native youth are more likely to experience food insecurity.

Approximately half (51%) of Native children in New Mexico live in households that participate in the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), compared to roughly one-third (32%) of non-Native children.

While food assistance plays a critical role in helping New Mexican families meet basic needs, higher participation rates also reflect broader economic instability. These conditions underscore the important role schools play as a reliable source of daily nutrition for many children.

✦ Housing costs are a heavy burden on Native families, limiting financial flexibility and stability. About 1 in 2 Native children in New Mexico (50%) live in households that are housing-cost burdened, meaning expenses like rent, mortgage, and utilities exceed 30% of household income. Many of these same children (44%) live in households facing severe housing-cost burden, with more than half of household income going toward housing. When housing takes up this much of a family's income, there is a little left for everything else, including food, transportation, and other basic necessities.

✦ Native children in New Mexico are more likely to live in single-parent and/or multigenerational households. Across the state, around 2 in 5 (43%) Native children live in single-parent

households, compared to 1 in 4 (28%) non-Native children. At the same time, Native children are almost twice as likely (29%) to live in multigenerational households or with at least one elder than their non-Native peers (15%). These household arrangements reflect both strengths, such as support networks, exposure to language, traditional teachings, and stories, and constraints, including increased financial strain, parental stress, and the complexities of multigenerational and blended families.

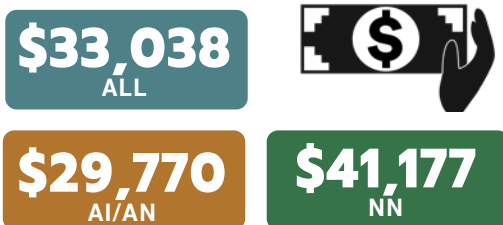
✦ Most Native students are not yet receiving the early literacy instruction they need. Statewide, 1 in 5 (19%) Native third graders were reading proficiently in 2019, a rate that declined to 15% in 2022 following the COVID-19 pandemic, before rebounding to 1 in 4 (27%) in 2025. While assessments shifted over this time period, the overall trend is clear: nearly three in four (73%) Native third graders are not learning foundational literacy skills. Because early literacy is closely linked to long-term academic success, these gaps can shape students' educational experiences well beyond third grade.

Children Living in Households Experiencing Housing Cost Burden



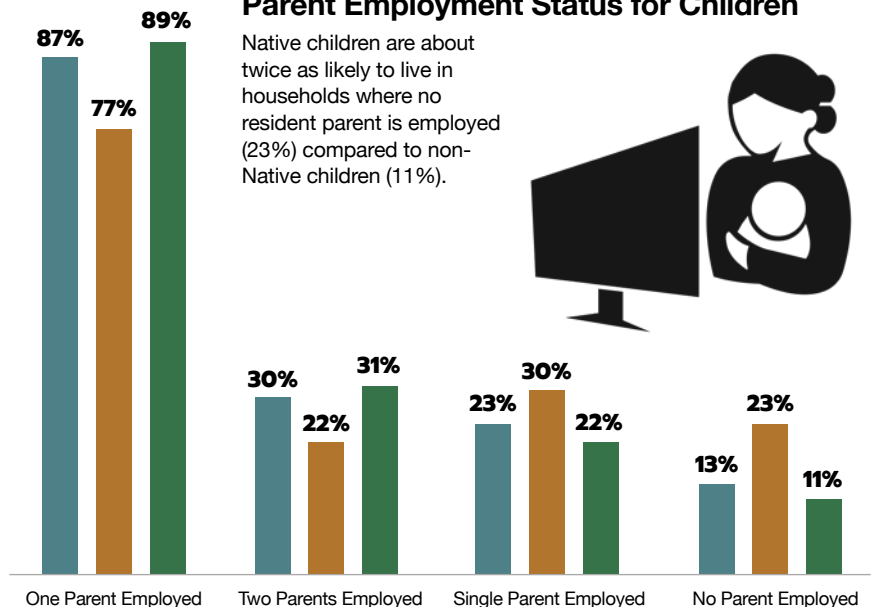
More than 2 in 5 Native children live in households spending ≥50% of income on housing.

Per Capita Income



Parent Employment Status for Children

Native children are about twice as likely to live in households where no resident parent is employed (23%) compared to non-Native children (11%).



Data Sources: Indicators are based on the 2018-2022 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year Public Use Microdata Sample, accessed via the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS). Unless otherwise noted, margins of error and confidence intervals for ACS estimates reflect a 90% confidence level, consistent with U.S. Census reporting conventions. Education indicators reflect New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED) administrative data (2018-2025). Health indicators are sourced from the 2023 New Mexico Youth Risk and Resiliency Survey (YRRS).

Recommendations

Our recommendations are grounded in research and data analysis, listening sessions with Native students, families, and educators, and a review of promising practices and evidence from other states and geographies. They reflect the collective input of community members, Tribal leaders, practitioners, and policymakers working to advance Native student success in New Mexico. This is a summary; the complete recommendations appear at the end of the report.

For District Leaders

- Build educator pipelines through grow-your-own programs, Tribal college partnerships, and mentorship; expand equitable access to gifted, AP, Honors, and Career-Connected Learning through universal screening.
- Integrate Indigenous knowledge, land-based learning, and Mentor-Apprentice models into core academics; offer parent navigation supports and student-led wellness conferences that recognize extended family as caregivers.
- Address chronic absenteeism by understanding root causes and recognizing cultural and ceremonial obligations; expand distance learning and course-sharing to address rural staffing gaps.
- Strengthen cross-agency coordination with Tribal governments using blended funding and integrated service models; consolidate student and family supports into centralized hubs or navigator systems.
- Partner with housing authorities to connect at-risk families to housing resources; provide clear information on HUD Section 184, VA home loans, and other available supports.
- Acknowledge the legacy of boarding schools; provide ongoing culturally responsive professional learning and establish Native student and community advisory structures with Tribal Education Departments.

For Tribal and Community Leaders

- Assert Tribal authority over education governance, curriculum, language instruction, accountability, and Native student data; develop Tribally defined success metrics covering language, cultural continuity, wellness, and community belonging.
- Develop multi-generational language revitalization plans with 10-year goals; invest in certification and apprenticeship pathways for Native youth to become language teachers and cultural educators.

- Establish MOUs with districts and nonprofits that serve Native American youth; embed Indigenous wellness practices in schools; monitor state compliance and use formal mechanisms when commitments go unmet.
- Partner with Native CDFIs and Tribal Education Technical Assistance Centers (TETACs) to build community capacity for homeownership, program development, and effective use of education funding.

For State Policy

- Create dedicated, recurring funding for Native language education, immersion and dual-language programs, and an Indigenous Education Authorizer for Native language charter schools and community based Immersion Schools.
- Co-develop opt-in data collection with Tribes covering all Indigenous languages; support Tribal-led digital archives and curriculum platforms; convene a State-Tribal Native Language Advisory Task Force.
- Require NMPED and state agencies to adopt performance benchmarks and corrective actions for Native student outcomes; mandate transparent budgets and expand alternative licensure pathways honoring Tribal approval and language fluency and Indigenous knowledge through certification of community knowledge holders.
- Formalize Tribal Data Sovereignty agreements with all 23 Tribes and Pueblos; develop a public Native education data dashboard with community data literacy workshops.
- Fund culturally grounded wellness and mental health models in schools; Establish local employment options for Native youth to serve in their own communities, co-designed with Tribal governments.
- Invest in Tribal planning and administrative capacity; partner with workforce boards to prioritize Native youth ages 14-24 for job training and career services using federal WIOA funds.