



BEING A GOOD RELATIVE

**A Report on Native Youth
in New Mexico**

2026



One Generation is a Native-led initiative that works to identify and support strategies that provide sustainable solutions for Indigenous communities. The fund focuses on a holistic "One Generation" approach to ensure that by empowering a single generation to master their Native languages and traditional agricultural practices, Indigenous culture and wellness can be sustained for centuries to come.





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Executive Summary

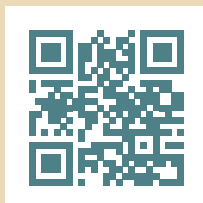
District Profiles: from Numbers to Lived Reality

Each profile includes: Key indicators, Contextual factors, Interpretation

- Bernalillo Public Schools
 - Central Consolidated School District
 - Cuba Independent School District
 - Dulce Independent School District
 - Gallup-McKinley County Schools
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INTRODUCTION

A Word to the Reader

NATIVE YOUTH ACROSS NEW MEXICO POSSESS RICH KNOWLEDGE, STRENGTH, AND BOUNDLESS POTENTIAL. Shaped by their families and communities, they steward the stories, culture, and futures of their people. Our children are whole people; their academic success cannot be separated from their physical health, mental wellness, connection to culture and language, families' economic stability, access to technology, or sense of belonging in schools and communities. By bringing holistic experiences into clearer view, we better understand our shared responsibilities to support Native students and their educational journeys.

In Indigenous communities, education is a lifelong, collective process rooted in relationships, where individuals are both teacher and learner. Learning is not restricted to formal schools; it occurs through daily interaction, storytelling, and hands-on participation. Elders are respected as vital keepers of wisdom, individual identity is inseparable from the collective, and the preservation of culture is a sacred act of love that honors thousands of years of ancestral knowledge. Collectively, we walk together in a circle of shared responsibility, where every opportunity is an invitation to restore balance and we ask ourselves: *How can we do better together?*

Grounded in collaboration with schools, districts, Tribal communities, elders, and families across New Mexico, we center the voices of Native youth and their families. The data and stories you'll find here come from conversations, from community gatherings, and from the lived experiences of students, families, educators, and Tribal members across New Mexico. At its core, this work reflects the responsibility of being good relatives. **Being a good relative** means treating all children as our own and taking responsibility for the collective well-being of our people, the community, land, and future generations. It means showing up with intention, listening deeply, honoring relationships, understanding that we are all connected: that the success or struggle of one is felt by all.

We offer these findings as a call to partnership and shared responsibility. We invite readers to reflect on what it means to be a good relative to Native youth, who continue to navigate complex challenges while carrying deep curiosity, brilliance, and strength. We hope this work will serve as a foundation for dialogue, meaningful collaboration, and informed action. We invite you to join us—as partners, listeners, and good relatives—in supporting Native youth and the families and communities who raise them.



Guiding Commitments

This report is grounded in five commitments that shape how we gathered this information, how we present it, and how we hope it will be used:

1 Tribal Sovereignty and Self-Determination

Tribal Nations in New Mexico are sovereign governments with inherent rights to determine what is best for their citizens. We honor that sovereignty by recognizing that Tribal communities are not subjects of study but partners in knowledge creation and retention. Any data about Native students must ultimately serve Tribal Nations' ability to exercise self-determination including but not limited to education, health, economic development, and cultural preservation. We acknowledge that students, families, community members, elders, and Tribal leaders hold authority over how information about their young people is interpreted and acted upon.

2 Students, Families, and Communities as Experts

The most important knowledge about what Native youth need comes from young people themselves, their families, the elders who carry cultural wisdom, the educators who show up every day, and the community members who have been navigating these challenges for generations. We seek to center those voices. Every data point is connected to lived experience. Every theme emerges from community-identified priorities. We trust that those closest to our youth, including youth themselves, understand their needs best, and that sustainable solutions must be built with them, not for them.

3 Data as a Tool, Not a Verdict

Numbers can illuminate patterns and reveal disparities, but they cannot capture the full story of our people. The statistics in this report are tools for understanding student, family, and community context. When we report that Native students have lower proficiency rates or families experience higher rates of poverty, we are not documenting deficits in our children, their families, or communities. We are documenting the failure of systems to serve them. We are measuring the distance between where we are and where we need to be. Data should provoke questions, inspire action, and guide resource allocation; it should not be used to limit or define the potential of our youth.

4 Partnership Over Compliance

Too often, work with Native communities is framed through the language of compliance, including: Tribal consultations that check boxes, data collection that extracts without giving back, and programs imposed from the outside that don't consider local realities. This report rejects that approach. We believe in genuine partnership rooted in mutual respect, shared decision-making, transparency, and relationship. Partnership means state agencies and school districts don't just report to Tribal Nations—they work alongside them. It also means success is defined collectively, and responsibility is shared across all partners.

5 A Commitment To Act

This report will be ineffective if it simply sits on a shelf or generates a few headlines before being forgotten. What is needed now is action: sustained, resourced, community-driven action. This report is designed to inform decision-making: principals allocating school resources, superintendents and school board members setting district priorities, legislators enacting policy and budgets, Tribal councils planning and investing in their young people's futures, and community organizations developing programs. Every reader should finish this report by asking **"What is mine to do?"**



CONTEXT

Understanding Native Youth in New Mexico

Native Nations, Students, and Schooling Today

ACCORDING TO THE 2020 U.S. CENSUS, approximately 266,318 American Indian and Alaska Native people—alone or in combination with other races—reside in New Mexico, representing about 13% of the state’s population.¹ New Mexico is home to 23 sovereign Tribal Nations including 19 Pueblos, three Apache Tribes, and the Navajo Nation. Two Apache Tribes—the Jicarilla Apache Nation and the Mescalero Apache Tribe—are located within New Mexico. The Fort Sill Apache Tribe, whose primary reservation is in Oklahoma, is also recognized by the state, as their ancestral homeland is in New Mexico. Beyond these Nations, Native peoples in New Mexico reflect a diverse population, representing hundreds of other Tribal Nations from across the U.S., Mexico, and Canada.

Albuquerque has the highest urban Native population in New Mexico with roughly 46,857 Native residents, including individuals who identify as American Indian or Alaska Native (AIAN) alone or in combination with one or more races.² The cities of Gallup and Farmington are home to some of the largest Native populations in the state, based on the overall percentage of each city’s population. Gallup has approximately 12,143 residents who identify as AIAN, more than 56 percent of its total population.³ In Farmington, about 15,534 residents identify as AIAN, making up roughly 33.5 percent of the city’s population.⁴ The past several decades have seen a steady increase in migration to urban environments. This shift reflects both individual choice and the long-term impacts of federal policies that disrupted ties to land, language, and community.⁵

Education systems serving Native students in New Mexico operate across a complex network of federal, state, Tribal, and local jurisdictions. Native students may attend Bureau of Indian Education (BIE)-operated schools, Tribally controlled schools, public school districts, charter schools, private schools, or home school, each governed by different funding formulas, accountability systems, and resource levels. Many Native students move between these systems over the course of their education, transitioning—for example—from a federal early Head Start program to a state pre-k, to a BIE school, and/or to a local public school. Native youth (ages 0-17) make up about 15% of the total child population in New Mexico.⁶ In SY24-25, around 45,000 Native students were enrolled in New Mexico public schools. Approximately 6,786 Native students attend a Bureau of Indian Education-operated school, Tribally controlled school, or are—in some cases—homeschooled.^{7,8}

Roughly 7,500 (21%) Native students (does not include Tribally affiliated students who are from Tribes outside of New Mexico) are identified with a special need or disability,⁹ approximately 16% of Native students were identified as English Learners, and 33% as economically disadvantaged.¹⁰

TRIBAL AFFILIATIONS OF STUDENTS IN NM

| Tribe, Nation, Pueblo | Students Per Tribe |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|
| Pueblo of Acoma | 663 |
| Pueblo of Cochiti | 147 |
| Pueblo of Isleta | 731 |
| Pueblo of Jemez | 495 |
| Jicarilla Apache Nation | 675 |
| Pueblo of Laguna | 972 |
| Mescalero Apache Tribe | 738 |
| Pueblo of Nambe | 179 |
| Navajo Nation | 25,784 |
| Pueblo of Ohkay Owingeh | 285 |
| Pueblo of Picuris | 41 |
| Pueblo of Pojoaque | 103 |
| Pueblo of Sandia | 62 |
| Pueblo of San Ildefonso | 99 |
| Pueblo of San Felipe | 697 |
| Pueblo of Santa Ana | 181 |
| Pueblo of Santa Clara | 138 |
| Pueblo of Santo Domingo | 923 |
| Pueblo of Taos | 268 |
| Pueblo of Tesuque | 63 |
| Pueblo of Zia | 143 |
| Pueblo of Zuni | 2,019 |
| Tribes outside of New Mexico* | 4,728 |
| GRAND TOTAL | 40,134 |

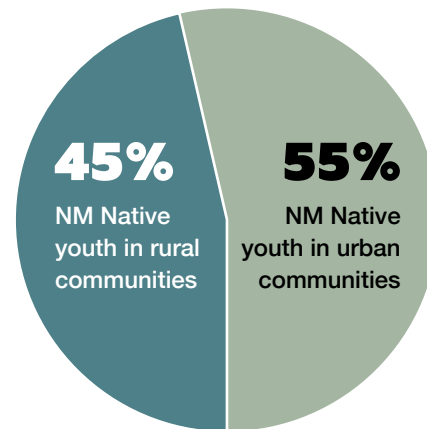
*Across the United States and Canada. Source: Data Source: District and charter counts from NMPED (including Appendices B and F), Indian Education Division, *Tribal Education Status Report: School Year 2024-2025*

WHERE NATIVE STUDENTS ARE EDUCATED

| School Type | Number of Students | Percentage |
|---------------------|--------------------|-------------|
| BIE Operated | 2,518 | 5% |
| Tribally Controlled | 3,738 | 8% |
| Charter | 1,748 | 4% |
| District | 37,663 | 82% |
| Homeschooled | 530 | 1% |
| GRAND TOTAL | 46,197 | 100% |

Data Sources: District and charter counts from NMPED, Indian Education Division, *Tribal Education Status Report: School Year 2024-2025*; BIE count from BIE Report Cards from SY22-23, *Data on Native Students*; and Homeschooled count from NMPED, Options for Parents & Families Division, *Homeschooling: Annual Report - 2025*.

WHERE NATIVE YOUTH RESIDE



Like the broader Native population in the state, these students live across New Mexico, in cities, on Tribal lands, and in rural and border communities. Many Native youth move between these spaces. Some live and attend school in urban areas like Albuquerque during the week but return to Tribal communities on weekends, whether to engage in ceremony or to generally maintain cultural, familial, and community ties. New Mexico has a much higher percentage of its Native population remaining on or near ancestral lands compared to the national average where roughly 70% of Native Americans live in urban areas. Whether urban or rural, Native youth are shaped by multiple places, responsibilities, and relationships at once.

Despite geographic differences, all Native students deserve to be honored and treated with dignity to reach their full potential, and all are part of the same interconnected story, a story shaped by history and contemporary resilience, by systemic barriers and cultural strength, by disconnection and deep belonging.



History and Present-Day Implications

Historical Context: Assimilationist Education Policies in the United States

FOR GENERATIONS, Indigenous peoples across what is now the United States have maintained their own education systems rooted in language, land, kinship, and cultural responsibility. These systems sustained Indigenous knowledge across generations and continue to shape how Native communities understand education today.

In the late 16th century, Spanish colonizers imposed racial hierarchies that privileged whiteness and denigrated Indigeneity through a caste system that placed Spaniards at the top, positioned mixed-race populations in the middle, and relegated Black and Indigenous peoples to the bottom.¹¹

Beginning in the 19th century, the federal government began systematically attempting to erase Indigenous cultures, languages, and lifeways through assimilationist schooling models.¹² Native children were removed from their families, punished for speaking their languages, and deliberately separated from land, culture, and community.¹³ (For more on this history, see beingagoodrelative.org/historical-context.)

The legacy of assimilationist policies—broken or separated families, lost languages, disconnection from culture—correlates with contemporary challenges Native youth face in education systems designed to eliminate their identities. Despite over two centuries of policies designed to dismantle their heritage, Indigenous people have demonstrated profound resilience and intellectual strength, sustaining language and cultural knowledge across generations.

Data Limitations

Data gaps and limitations can constrain a complete understanding of Native youth in New Mexico. Across federal, state, and local systems, American Indian and Alaska Native populations may be underrepresented, suppressed due to small sample sizes, or grouped into generalized “Other” categories. Differences in how agencies define Tribal affiliation, geography, and community further complicate interpretation. Federal agencies, such as the U.S. Census, Indian Health Service, and U.S. Department of Education, may use different criteria for identifying Native students, resulting in incomplete or inconsistent representation across datasets. This fragmentation means that a Navajo student attending school in Gallup might appear in some datasets but not others, counted by one agency but not included by another agency, making it nearly impossible to understand their full educational journey or holistic needs. These limitations reflect broader structural challenges in how data systems were designed, often without Tribal Nations as primary authorities over how their people are represented.

A Brief Overview of Indian Education: History, Funding, and Accountability

The Federal Indian Boarding School Era and Its Intergenerational Impact

THE FEDERAL INDIAN BOARDING SCHOOL ERA REPRESENTS ONE OF THE DARKEST CHAPTERS IN AMERICAN HISTORY, with impacts that reverberate through Native communities today. These institutions were designed to separate Native children from their families, languages, and cultures, and to replace Indigenous systems of knowledge with externally imposed education systems. New Mexico holds the painful distinction of being the third most affected state in the nation, with 46 historic boarding school sites across the state.



The impacts of the boarding school era did not end with those who attended. Many survivors returned home carrying the effects of separation from family, language, and community, often without support for healing or reconnection. This history has shaped subsequent generations, influencing how families feel about schooling, how language was passed down, and increased rates of depression, substance abuse, domestic violence, and educational challenges. Native students today continue to navigate education systems shaped by this history.

Today, Tribal Nations, educators, elders, and families lead efforts to revitalize language, strengthen culturally grounded education, and ensure that future generations can learn in ways that reflect their identities and communities.

Chronic Underfunding and Jurisdictional Complexity

FEDERAL PROGRAMS, SUCH AS THE JOHNSON-O'MALLEY (JOM) ACT, TITLE VI INDIAN EDUCATION FORMULA GRANTS, AND IMPACT AID, PROVIDE CRITICAL SUPPORT for Native students in public schools. However, these funding streams are often insufficient and inconsistently applied. Moreover, delays in federal appropriations can lead to budget challenges for Native-serving school districts that rely on these funds. Impact Aid, for example, is designed to compensate districts for tax-exempt federal lands including reservations, yet frequently falls short of covering annual school operating expenses.



Jurisdictional complexity also shapes how students experience education. A Native student may live on Tribal land, attend a state-funded school, and be eligible for federal education services, while navigating multiple administrative systems that do not always align.

Yazzie/Martinez Consolidated Lawsuit

IN 2014, FAMILIES REPRESENTED BY THE NEW MEXICO CENTER ON LAW AND POVERTY AND THE MEXICAN AMERICAN LEGAL DEFENSE AND EDUCATIONAL FUND (MALDEF) SUED THE NM PUBLIC EDUCATION DEPARTMENT (PED), challenging the state's ability to provide students, particularly economically disadvantaged, Native American, English language learners, and students with disabilities, the programs and services necessary for them to learn, thrive, and succeed.



In 2018, the court ruled that New Mexico was not meeting its constitutional obligation to these students. The ruling cited outcomes, including the lowest graduation rate in the nation, 70% of students unable to read or do math at grade level, and nearly half of college-going students requiring remediation. Since 2019, the state has been responsible for responding to the ruling.

PATTERNS AND INSIGHT



ISTOCK PHOTO

Statewide Patterns and Insights

A YOUNG PERSON IS NEVER JUST A STUDENT. Their success grows from the whole of their life—the strength of family and community ties, daily access to culture and language, the personal interests that shape who they are becoming, and the economic stability of their home.

Examining these areas, alongside traditional education outcomes, and overall health and wellness, allows us to see a more complete picture.

Listening to those Most Proximate

WE HOSTED COMMUNITY LISTENING SESSIONS in Cuba, Gallup, Laguna-Acoma, and Shiprock, where we asked participants to reflect on what they valued most about their communities, what supports young people felt were most helpful or needed, and what schools were already doing well. We invited honest conversation and reflections around what may have felt heavy and where educational systems may have fallen short of meeting community needs. What emerged were deeply situated perspectives shaped by history, place, and daily lived experience.

LISTENING TO COMMUNITY VOICES

“I knew I was smart enough to do Algebra eighth grade year, but they said I couldn’t keep up.”

– NATIVE STUDENT INPUT FROM LISTENING SESSION

LISTENING TO COMMUNITY VOICES

“Our students are ill prepared for the future. We send them to a future they are not ready for.”

– COMMUNITY MEMBER INPUT FROM LISTENING SESSION

Themes from Listening Sessions

While each community has its own context, several patterns surfaced consistently across sites.

◆ STUDENTS RECOGNIZE WHEN EXPECTATIONS DO NOT MATCH THEIR POTENTIAL.

Across districts, students spoke clearly about wanting rigorous classes, honors and advanced coursework, meaningful instruction, and clearer pathways to college and careers. At the same time, many described moments when those opportunities felt out of reach. One student shared, “I knew I was smart enough to do Algebra eighth grade year, but they said I couldn’t keep up.” Families echoed these concerns, questioning whether schools foster student interests and potential. As one community member asked, “What would our kids be capable of if they were nurtured?”

These experiences reflect a broader pattern. Students described earning high grades while still feeling unprepared for what comes next, and families spoke about gaps in reading, math, and overall preparation for college and careers. As one community member reflected, “Our students are ill prepared for the future. We send them to a future they are not ready for.” Families also spoke about students leaving their communities to pursue stronger educational opportunities elsewhere that limited their access to language and cultural continuity efforts.

When Native students are not given consistent access to rigorous, grade-level instruction, the consequences may compound over time. Research shows that students often spend more than 500 hours each year on assignments below their grade level, a gap that can amount to roughly six months of lost learning in every core subject.¹⁴

The Yazzie/Martinez consolidated lawsuit highlighted that most Native students in NM are not performing at grade level in Math or English Language Arts. Meeting this responsibility means ensuring every Native student has access to grade-level, culturally relevant learning, advanced coursework, and certified educators who recognize and nurture their potential.

LISTENING TO COMMUNITY VOICES

“What would our kids be capable of if they were nurtured?”

— COMMUNITY MEMBER
INPUT FROM LISTENING
SESSION

◆ RESOURCE AND STAFFING GAPS SHAPE DAILY ENGAGEMENT AND LEARNING OUTCOMES.

Families and educators repeatedly pointed to outdated materials, limited access to technology, and persistent teacher shortages, often resulting in over reliance on substitutes and worksheet-based instruction. During a community listening session, students described having a long-term substitute in Algebra and spending hours completing word searches instead of receiving direct math instruction. These conditions were not described as temporary disruptions, but as long-standing realities that erode instructional quality, consistency, and student trust and engagement over time.

While it is common to consider the presence of updated instructional materials and technology access to quantify classroom quality, we must also note the importance of student-teacher relationships. Research shows

that positive student-teacher relationships and the presence of at least one trusted adult in school are strongly linked with improved student engagement, attendance, academic performance, emotional wellbeing, lower dropout risk, and reduced risk behaviors.¹⁵ When schools face educator turnover or shortages, the resulting loss of instruction negatively impacts academic momentum and trust.

Qualified and reliable staffing builds the fundamental infrastructure required for students to feel safe, seen, and supported to succeed and thrive.

◆ CULTURE, LANGUAGE, AND BELONGING MATTER.

Across all sites, students and families emphasized the importance of Native language, culture, and access to culturally affirming spaces or resources. Where these supports existed—often through Indian education departments or JOM-funded programming—they were described as meaningful sources of motivation, affirming identity, and increasing belonging. At the same time, participants expressed concern about funding cuts and the fragility of these programs, especially when academic and cultural supports are positioned as supplemental or contingent on budget, rather than holistically integrated and aligned into the entire education system.

Success in school should encourage affirming and exploring identity in the classroom. A student's sense of belonging is a powerful driver of improved educational and life outcomes. Researchers have found that a strong cultural identity is a protective factor, and students who are grounded in their traditional languages and beliefs actually perform better academically than those who are pressured to assimilate.¹⁶ The New Mexico Public Education Department (PED), many NM school districts and charters, as well as community organizations are already working to expand access to culturally and linguistically responsive education and instructional resources or experiences.

◆ **FAMILIES ARE DEEPLY INVESTED IN THEIR CHILDREN'S SUCCESS, BUT SYSTEMS ARE DIFFICULT TO NAVIGATE.**

Many caregivers shared that they want to support their children more actively but often do not receive clear information about academic expectations and opportunities, special education processes, or postsecondary pathways. One parent shared, "My son was gifted. I didn't know what that meant...I learned advocacy by advocating for my son." Some described feeling intimidated, unwelcome, or unsure how to engage with schools or districts. This was especially true in contexts where communication between districts, families, the community and Tribal leadership was inconsistent or strained.

Research shows that a strong home-to-school partnership is a reliable predictor of student success regardless of a family's income or background. When families and schools collaborate as true partners and have strong relationships, students engage meaningfully and see higher attendance, better grades, and a stronger sense of community. This is especially vital: students indicate that when schools create a culturally respectful environment where parents feel welcome rather than intimidated, student experiences and outcomes improve.

◆ **GENERATIONAL EDUCATIONAL INEQUITIES.** In several sessions, participants reflected on how little has changed over decades. Parents and grandparents described experiencing the same academic gaps, lack of accountability, and limited preparation as students, which now affect their children and grandchildren. This sense of repetition shaped both frustration and urgency in the conversations.

When families say they see the same issues today that they did forty years ago, they are describing a lived history of intergenerational trauma. The field of epigenetics suggests that extreme or chronic stress—like the kind experienced during the boarding school era or through systemic discrimination—can leave "chemical marks" on genes, potentially affecting how future generations respond to stress

and learning. This history—and present day treatment—creates a profound lack of trust in systems that have historically been tools of harm rather than help.¹⁷

These listening sessions make clear that the conditions surfaced in data are not abstract. Native students and families may face them every day. These conversations also reinforce something the data alone cannot show: students and families are deeply invested in their schools and communities. There is pride in place, commitment to culture, and a clear desire for education systems that prepare young people and listen to families without asking them to leave parts of themselves behind.

What the Numbers Reveal

We approach data the way we approach all knowledge—as a tool in service of our people. The voices from the listening sessions gave shape and texture to what numbers can only approximate, and we carry that with us as we go to the statewide level. What follows is a snapshot of the broader patterns shaping Native youth experiences across five interconnected domains—economic well-being, family and community context, access to culture and language, education, and health and wellness.

LISTENING TO COMMUNITY VOICES

"My son was gifted. I didn't know what that meant...I learned advocacy by advocating for my son."

— PARENT INPUT FROM LISTENING SESSION



COURTESY AAS

◆ **ECONOMIC WELL-BEING:** Across New Mexico, Native children face significantly higher levels of economic insecurity than their non-Native peers. Statewide, one in three Native children (33%) lives in poverty, compared to just over one in five non-Native children (21%). These gaps show up early and persist across childhood. Among children from birth to age 4, more than one-third of Native children (35%) live below the federal poverty line, compared to 24% of non-Native children, making clear that many students enter school already navigating economic instability.

In many reservation communities, like the Navajo Nation, unemployment can be up to seven times higher than the national average.¹⁸ Heads of households are often faced with a difficult choice: work on reservation lands or seek employment opportunities in urban hubs like Albuquerque, Santa Fe, or even out of state. Consequently, grandparents often become the primary caregivers.¹⁹

- Housing costs further strain Native families' stability. Half (50%) of Native children live in households where housing costs exceed 30% of household income. Many of these same children (44%) face a severe housing cost burden, with more than half of their household income going toward housing. These pressures limit families' long-term financial stability and mobility around navigating ongoing challenges, consistency, and basic needs.
- Food access reflects these same patterns. More than half of Native children (51%) live in households that rely on SNAP benefits, compared to 32% of non-Native children. Though food assistance plays a critical role in supporting families across the state, these rates suggest economic instability for many Native

households and the importance of schools as reliable sources for providing daily nutrition. On the Navajo Nation, for example, which spans 25,000 square miles across New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah, there are only 13 full-service grocery stores, leading to the need for residents to purchase food from gas stations and convenience stores. Healthy food often costs significantly more in remote areas than in urban areas, causing SNAP benefits to not stretch as far and forcing a shift toward lower-quality, processed foods, which may lead to a negative long-term health outcomes.

◆ **FAMILY AND COMMUNITY:** Native children in New Mexico are more likely to grow up in family systems that are relational and include multigenerational households and other blended formats. Statewide, 43% of Native children live in single-parent households, compared to 28% of non-Native children, which may constrain household resources.

At the same time, Native children are more likely to live in multigenerational households. Nearly one in three Native children (27%) lives in a household with three or more generations, compared to 12% of non-Native children. Fifteen percent live with an elder age 65 or older, which is more than double the non-Native rate. These households may reflect the strength of an extended family network and increased intergenerational cultural practices.

◆ **ACCESS TO CULTURE AND LANGUAGE:** More than one in three Native children (38%) lives in a household where at least one person speaks an Indigenous language. For children who identify as AI/AN alone, that figure rises to 47%. It is important to note, however, that this measure reflects exposure, not fluency. Nevertheless, this data demonstrates that Indigenous

Native English Learners

Unlike many EL students who are recent immigrants, American Indian EL students in NM typically come from families who have lived in the state for generations. Their "English Learner" status often stems from using a modified English influenced by Native language patterns or simply not having acquired "Standard Academic English" yet. As a result, these students often face "cultural dissonance" between home and school, especially in rural districts where teachers may lack specific expertise in supporting American Indian language development.

languages remain present in homes and everyday family life, despite generations of suppression. This is an opportunity for schools and education systems to recognize, honor, and build on what students bring with them into the education space.

More than 8,500 students are enrolled in Native language programs across New Mexico, a 17% increase since 2020. At least seven Indigenous languages are taught, with Navajo, Keres, and Zuni representing the largest enrollments. Proficiency among participating students has more than doubled (from 5% to 13%), though most students remain at beginner levels.

- Native students who attended a school with a Bilingual Multicultural Education Program (BMEP) for at least four years outperformed those who didn't attend a school with a BMEP. Specifically:
 - They were reclassified as English proficient at higher rates (19% vs. 12%).²⁰
 - They were more likely to meet grade-level standards in math and English language arts in the 3rd and 4th grades.
 - Most of these students (96%) were in "Heritage Language" programs, with Diné (Navajo) being the most common language taught.

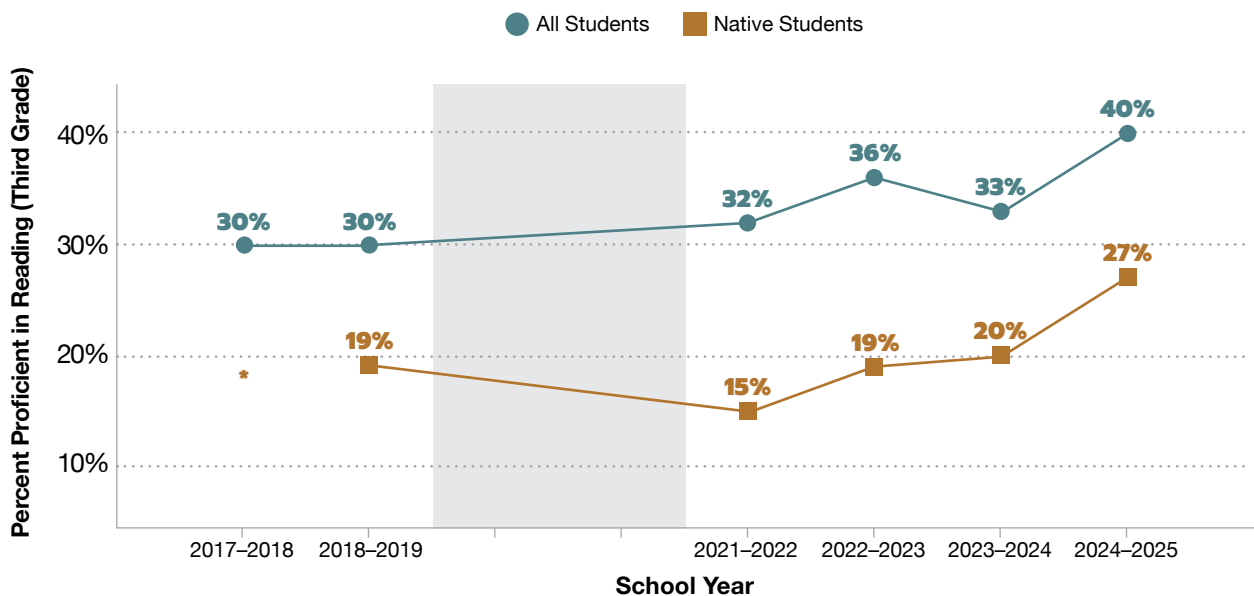
- While the New Mexico Public Education Department set a goal for EL students to attain proficiency within five years, only 18% of American Indian EL students were actually reclassified as English proficient within that timeframe. This means the vast majority of these students enter the upper elementary grades without having reached the state's language proficiency targets.

- The primary hurdles to reclassification were reading and writing. Notably, even students who were successfully reclassified as proficient still struggled significantly with academic writing, often failing to reach "high proficiency" in that specific domain.

◆ **EDUCATION:** In 2018, the Yazzie/Martinez decision declared that New Mexico is failing to meet its constitutional obligation to provide Native students with the programs and services necessary for them to learn and thrive.

In 2025, 27% of Native 3rd graders demonstrated reading proficiency on state assessments. Nearly three in four Native 3rd graders are moving through early elementary school without foundational literacy skills.

THIRD GRADE READING PROFICIENCY: NEW MEXICO STATEWIDE



* 2018 AI/AN data suppressed (≤20%). No 2020 or 2021 data due to COVID-19 testing disruptions

That said, Native students have made gains since the pandemic. Third grade reading scores for Native students have risen, fueled by a seven-point jump in the most recent academic year. At the same time, the data reaffirm how far the system remains from meeting its obligations.

Math proficiency follows a similar pattern. In 2025, 15% of Native students were proficient on state math assessments. While this reflects a five-point gain from 2024, Native youth remain the least likely of any group in the state to attain proficiency in math. Concerningly, more than half of Native students (56%) score at the lowest performance level for elementary school and high school, and only 2.5% reach the highest level.

Statewide Native student graduation rates have shown modest improvement in recent years, with the

most recent graduating class achieving a four-year cohort graduation rate of approximately 78%—an increase from prior years, though still slightly below the state average of 81%.²¹

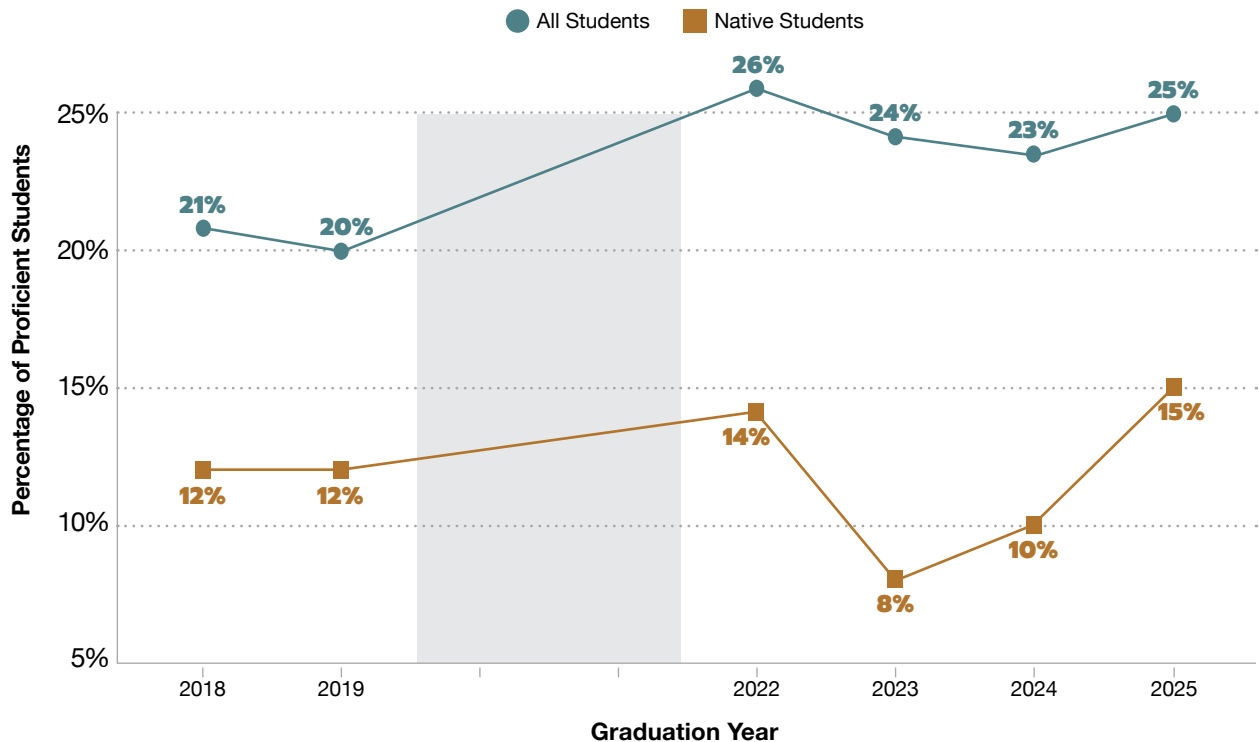
◆ **HEALTH AND WELLNESS:** Statewide data from the New Mexico Youth Risk and Resiliency Survey offer a

window into the health and wellness of New Mexico’s Native high school students. In general, Native students track the broader trends of all high school students in the state. Among all Native students surveyed in 2023, more than one in three (35%) reported feeling so sad or hopeless almost every day for two or more weeks that they stopped doing usual activities, an indicator of depressive symptoms. Seventeen percent seriously considered suicide, and 12% reported a suicide attempt in the past year.

Native students are among the least likely to report being bullied, with 14% of youth saying they have been bullied on school property. New Mexico’s

Nearly three in four Native 3rd graders are moving through early elementary school without foundational literacy skills.

STATE AND DISTRICT MATH PROFICIENCY AMONG NATIVE STUDENTS



Native youth are also the most likely group to agree or strongly agree with the statement “I feel good about who I am as a person,” with 61% of Native youth agreeing.

Encouragingly, substance abuse levels statewide have declined from pre-pandemic levels. Twenty percent of Native youth report marijuana use, and only 10% report alcohol use—the lowest rate of any racial or ethnic group in the state survey. E-cigarette use is higher, at 37% of Native youth.

When it comes to physical health, roughly 80% of Native youth have health insurance—the lowest rate in the state, yet over 70% can utilize Indian Health Services (IHS) facilities as a vital safety net²². Over 86% of Native youth in NM had a preventative dental visit in the last year—slightly higher than the national average. Unfortunately, Native children in NM are still four

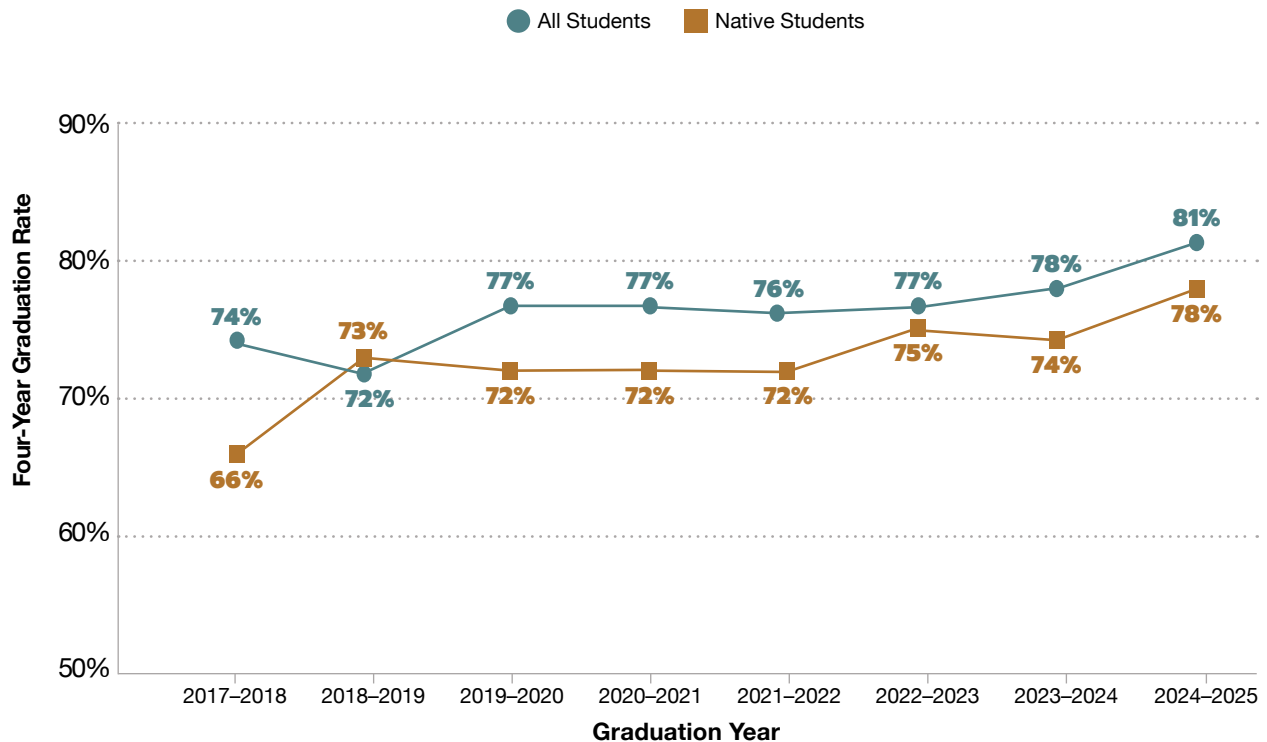
times more likely than their non-Native peers to have untreated tooth decay, exacerbated by a lack of dental providers accepting Medicaid.²³ Native youth in NM are also nine times more likely to be diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes than their non-Native counterparts.²⁴



These statewide patterns reveal that Native students move through complex realities that shape learning before they walk into a classroom and after the school day ends. Native students are also growing up with strong family and community networks. Extended family structures, multigenerational households, and continued access to Indigenous language environments reflect care,

connection, and shared responsibility. These realities shape how Native students understand themselves, where they feel they belong, and how they move through school.

FOUR-YEAR HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES: NEW MEXICO STATEWIDE



Source: NM Public Education Department. Four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate.

RECOMMENDATIONS



COURTESY APS

Moving Forward Together: Recommendations for Districts, Tribes, and the State²⁵

From Intention to Infrastructure

Across our findings and recommendations, a common thread emerges: meaningful progress for Native students requires authentic partnership with Tribal Nations, communities, and families. Partnership requires deliberate infrastructure. Districts can consider designating or realigning staff specifically to cultivate and sustain these relationships, whether through a Tribal Liaison, Native Family Engagement Coordinator, or Indian Education Director with the authority and time to build trust beyond compliance tasks. Districts can also consider formalizing relationships with local Tribal governments and urban Native communities through a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), or similar instrument, that articulates shared values and goals, designates specific responsibilities tied to each of the district's commitments to Native students, and creates a living accountability structure that both parties help create and revisit. This kind of agreement moves the relationship from consultation to genuine co-governance of the educational conditions that shape Native students' daily lives. The strength and authenticity of the relationships districts build with the Native communities creates a foundation to move forward in a collaborative partnership.

Recommendations For District Leaders

1 Build stable, community-rooted educator and staff pipelines early.

Despite decades of Tribal Nations, districts, higher education institutions, and philanthropic entities investing in a range of “grow-your-own” and other educator preparation pathways, many schools face persistent vacancies and high turnover. Districts and Tribal Nations can strengthen these efforts by investing in early educator preparation programs, paid paraprofessional roles, and partnerships with Tribal colleges/universities (TCUs). These pathways can support students and community members who want to work in schools and communities where they live. At the same time, retention can be prioritized through mentorship, professional learning communities, and culturally relevant professional development.

2 Expand access to rigorous, college- and career-ready coursework for Native students.

Too often, Native students face limited access to high-quality instructional materials, advanced coursework, gifted programs, and challenging academic pathways. Districts can actively monitor course offerings, screening practices, and enrollment patterns to ensure Native students are not disproportionately placed in below-grade-level courses, taught by uncertified teachers, or excluded from advanced learning opportunities. To address this, districts can implement universal screening for gifted education programs and expand universal access to Advanced Placement and Honors courses, as well as Career-Connected Learning experiences.

3 Pair academic rigor with culturally relevant and experiential learning.

Academic excellence and cultural relevance are mutually reinforcing. Schools can strengthen engagement and achievement by integrating culturally sustaining curriculum, Indigenous knowledge systems, land-based learning, and community-based experiences into core academic content. District leaders can take concrete steps to support this work by partnering with Tribal Nations and communities to develop and/or support cultural programming into schools, including Mentor-Apprentice models to sustain intergenerational learning.

4 Guide parents and caregivers in navigating school systems and advocacy.

Families want to support and advocate for their children but often lack clear information or guidance. Districts can strengthen trust and student success by partnering with Tribal education departments to offer parent navigation and advocacy supports, including resources such as grandparents raising grandchildren support groups that help caregivers understand their rights and engage more confidently with schools. Schools can also create regular opportunities for engagement through quarterly student-led conferences focused on their holistic wellness and development.

5 Support student attendance.

To better address chronic absenteeism, districts can work with families and Tribal partners to understand the underlying causes of student absences, including cultural, familial, or community responsibilities. This may include reviewing attendance policies, distinguishing cultural and ceremonial exceptions, and developing clear re-engagement pathways that help students remain academically connected when they are absent from school. New Mexico state policy already requires all districts serving Native students to consider Tribal customs and religious practices in their attendance policies and to explore Memorandum of Understanding with Tribal Nations.

6 Address rural isolation, connectivity gaps, and staffing shortages.

Rural and geographically isolated schools face persistent challenges in staffing, course availability, and access to specialized instruction, including family-school models. Expanding ethical, high-quality distance learning, shared virtual teaching models, and regional course-sharing partnerships could help rural students access advanced coursework and specialized educators they might not otherwise have. Investments in broadband connectivity and professional support for remote teaching can mitigate isolation while maintaining strong student–teacher connections. It would be equally beneficial to establish a framework that engages Tribal elders as classroom partners to teach Native languages and other culturally grounded lessons.

7 Strengthen coordination, reciprocity, and accountability across systems serving students and families.

Students' experiences are shaped by education, health, housing, and workforce systems that often operate in silos. Strengthening coordination across agencies—especially in partnership with Tribal governments through proper consultation—can reduce fragmentation, improve service delivery, and ensure students experience consistent expectations and support as they move through school and into adulthood. Districts and partners can treat Native communities as reciprocity zones for educational innovation by piloting blended funding strategies across education, health, and support services, growing culturally grounded integrated service models.

8 Recognize and support intergenerational and extended family structures in school policy and practice.

Many Native students in New Mexico grow up in multigenerational households or extended family systems that reflect cultural caregiving traditions. District policies around communication, enrollment, caregiving responsibilities, and family engagement can explicitly recognize parents, grandparents, and extended family members as legitimate caregivers and partners, which could better support student stability and success.

9 Address housing instability proactively.

Housing insecurity may be one of the most destabilizing forces affecting Native students' attendance, engagement, and academic continuity. Districts can play a proactive role by partnering with Tribal and local housing authorities and community-based organizations to identify vulnerable families earlier and connect them to supports before housing loss occurs. Additionally, many Native families may qualify for specific housing supports—such as HUD Section 184 Indian Home Loan Guarantees or VA home loans for Native veterans—but lack access to clear, trusted information. Finally, some districts, particularly in rural or high-cost areas, may have underutilized land or facilities that could support affordable housing for students and families.

10 Consolidate information about student and family supports into accessible, family-centered systems.

Funding streams, programs, and services that support Native students and families are often fragmented across agencies and can be difficult to navigate. Districts can work with Tribal and state partners to consolidate information—through centralized resource hubs, system navigators, or coordinated referral systems—so families can more easily understand and access available supports. Having a single, trusted place, whether a school-based navigator, community partner, or online portal, to learn about tutoring programs, housing supports, health services, cultural programming, and financial assistance without having to navigate multiple agencies on their own. Reducing complexity increases equity and access by helping families understand eligibility requirements and navigate application processes and screenings for specific benefits and opportunities.

11 Acknowledge historical harm and intentionally rebuild trust with Native communities.

Districts can invest in ongoing professional learning that builds critical consciousness—equipping teachers, leaders, and administrators with transformative knowledge about Indigenous history, educational justice, and the systemic forces that have shaped Native students' experiences in schools. This may go beyond cultural awareness training: it can mean creating structured opportunities for educators to examine their own assumptions, studying the history of colonization and assimilation in education, and developing the tools to become advocates for educational justice in their classrooms and communities.

12 Center Native student, family, and community voices in decision-making.

Districts can strengthen belonging and accountability by establishing Native student advisory councils, strengthening equity councils, and partnering consistently with Indian Education Committees, Indian Parent Committees, and TEDs. Ongoing, structured engagement ensures policies are informed by those most impacted.

13 Build and sustain relationships with Tribal and community partners beyond compliance.

Effective support for Native students requires relationships that extend beyond formal consultation requirements. Districts can invest time in relationship-building with Tribal leadership, chapter houses, community-based organizations, elders, and family support networks. For example, school districts on the Navajo Nation could share data with the Navajo Nation Department of Diné Education to improve collaboration and services for Navajo students in the region. These relationships can be foundational to shared problem-solving, cultural relevance, and long-term improvement.

14 Create outdoor learning opportunities through Land-Based Learning and Healing, and Experiential Education.

Research links time in nature with improved academic engagement, emotional regulation, and well-being — benefits especially meaningful for Native students whose cultural identities are rooted in relationships with the land. Districts can make nature-based and land-based learning available for up to 50% of the school day, treating outdoor environments as core instructional spaces rather than enrichment. Partnering with Tribal Nations, elders, and cultural practitioners ensures this learning is culturally grounded. Districts can sustain this work by investing in aligned professional development and training for educators on land-based pedagogy and trauma-informed outdoor education.

Recommendations for Tribal and Community Leaders

- 1 Assert Tribal authority in education, data governance, and policy design.**

Tribal Nations have continuously asserted their authority over the education of their children, yet this authority is often inconsistently recognized or implemented within state and district systems. Strengthening Tribal roles in education governance requires clear structures and commitments that ensure Tribes are meaningfully engaged in decision-making, including policy development, curriculum, language instruction, accountability measures, and definitions of student success. Tribal Nations can also be supported in developing data governance policies that determine how Native student data collected by state or district systems is stored, accessed, used, interpreted, and shared.

- 2 Establish and strengthen partnerships with Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs), including Tribal colleges and universities, and school districts focused on educator recruitment and retention.**

Use public funding to create and sustain partnerships with IHEs, including TCUs, to prepare pre-service teachers in a holistic manner, and with school districts to establish strategies for effective teacher recruitment and retention. Work with non-profit organizations and regional education cooperatives to support teacher professional development. The educator pipeline programs highlighted in the district recommendations section—including the Native American Teacher Preparation Program (NATPP) at UNM, the Indigenous Teacher Residents Program at CNM, and the Diné Language Teacher Institute (DLTI)—were each built through active partnership between Tribal communities, higher education institutions, and school districts.

- 3 Lead the definition of Native Student Success metrics for college, career, and community.**

Engage Native families and youth to develop relevant defined indicators of success—such as language fluency, cultural continuity, wellness, and community belonging—and require their use in state and district reporting.

- 4 Lead Native language revitalization planning across the lifespan.**

Develop comprehensive language revitalization strategies—that are multi-year and multi-generational—spanning early childhood, K–12, postsecondary, and adult learning, aligned with community-defined goals through an Indigenous language 10-year action plan with aligned resources and specific outcomes.

- 5 Develop Tribal and Urban educator pipelines for language and culture.**

Support and invest in mentorship, apprenticeship, and certification pathways for Native youth and community members to become language teachers, cultural educators, and school leaders.



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6 Partner strategically with districts and nonprofits while retaining Tribal authority.
Engage in MOUs and compacts with school districts and nonprofits who specialize in retention and revitalization of Native Languages that clearly preserve Tribal authority over language, culture, and curriculum while enabling access to public resources. Nonprofit partners can support implementation by providing specialized programming, educator training, or technical assistance—potentially through fee-for-service or contracted services—that allow districts to access expertise while Tribal Nations retain leadership over program design and cultural integrity.

7 Embed healing-centered, land-based, and culturally rooted wellness practices in education systems.

Community and Tribal leaders can help ensure that Indigenous approaches to wellness, restorative practices, and community healing are recognized as essential components of Native youth success in schools. Cultural practitioners and community-based organizations can partner with schools to provide culturally and linguistically responsive prevention and intervention programs that reflect local traditions, values, and healing practices. To ensure that Native students and families have access to mental health and wellness resources that align with their cultural identities and lived experiences, we should create opportunities for traditional healing, counseling, and community-based wellness programs to exist alongside school-based supports, and create land and nature based learning communities.

8 Monitor, enforce, and publicly respond to state compliance.

Tribal leaders and Indigenous education advocates have consistently worked to hold state and local education agencies accountable for commitments to Native students, including requirements for Tribal consultation and collaboration with urban Indian organizations. Continuing to monitor whether these commitments are being met—and using formal resolutions, testimony, legislation, and legal mechanisms when they are not—remains an important strategy for advancing Native student success. Strengthening these efforts through clearer tracking of consultation processes, public reporting on outcomes, and coordinated responses across Tribal Nations can help ensure that commitments move beyond compliance toward measurable action and results. Uphold public transparency.

9 Establish a partnership with a local Native Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI).

Local Native Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) bring specialized expertise and existing relationships within Native communities. Partnering with a Native CDFI can help families access tailored guidance, financial literacy, and lend support related to the complex home buying process in Indian Country, including the challenges of purchasing on trust land, improving credit, and understanding financing options.

10 Establish a working relationship and utilize the expertise within Tribal Education Technical Assistance Centers.

Two Tribal Education Technical Assistance Centers (TETACs) were recently established through state legislation to support Indian education and Native student success across New Mexico. These centers work in partnership with Tribal governments, state and local education agencies, schools, and early childhood programs to strengthen education systems from early childhood through postsecondary workforce development. TETACs provide technical assistance to build capacity for program development, capital outlay projects, and effective use of education funding.

Recommendations for State Policy

The recommendations for districts and Tribal Nations in the preceding sections can only be possible if the state co-creates the conditions—funding, policy, accountability, and infrastructure—that make them sustainable. Too often, state policy asks districts and Tribes to do more without providing the resources, flexibility, or authority needed to act. The recommendations that follow are organized around the state’s unique responsibility: to fund what works, remove barriers to innovation, hold systems accountable, and ensure that Tribal sovereignty is honored not just in principle but in practice.

1 Create a dedicated, recurring state funding stream for Native language education in 2027.

Move beyond short-term grants by establishing stable state funding to support Tribal and district-led Native language programs across early childhood, K–12, and out-of-school settings. This stable funding stream can be the foundation that makes Tribal language revitalization planning and district-level language program expansion possible.

2 Build the infrastructure for Native language immersion, charter authorization, and Tribally controlled school success.

The state has a responsibility to create the structural conditions—funding, authorization, and accountability—that allow Native language education to thrive across multiple school types. This requires action on multiple fronts:

- **Language immersion and bilingual programs:** Provide start-up funding, ongoing technical assistance, and long-term sustainability support for language immersion and bilingual programs in partnership with Tribal Nations, particularly in rural and Tribal-serving districts. Establish per-pupil funding for community-based immersion schools to ensure these programs are not dependent on short-term grants or philanthropic support.
- **Native language charter authorization:** Create a dedicated Indigenous Education Authorizer—a state-level entity with the expertise and mandate to support the development, oversight, and long-term success of Native language charter schools. Current authorization structures were not designed with Indigenous language schools in mind, and a specialized authorizer could ensure these schools are evaluated on terms that honor their mission.
- **Technology and digital infrastructure for language preservation:** Support Tribal-led digital archives, curriculum platforms, and teacher resources to expand access while maintaining community control over intellectual property.
- **Tribally controlled school accountability:** Partner with Tribal Education Departments (TEDs) to develop locally defined, culturally grounded indicators of success for Tribally controlled schools—moving beyond standardized measures that do not reflect Tribal educational priorities. Establish an opt-in community of practice where TEDs, districts, and charter schools can share promising practices, build capacity, and collectively define what student success looks like in their communities.
- **Alignment with federal revitalization efforts:** State funding and infrastructure could align with federal efforts already underway. New Mexico can ensure its policies actively support implementation of the federal 10-Year Native Language Revitalization Plan and existing Tribal language laws—by creating an opt-in community of practice for educators, districts, charters, and BIE-funded schools to assess, share, and grow language program strategies together.

3 Modernize educator licensure, compensation, and training for Native language teachers.

Current licensure and compensation structures were not designed with Native language educators in mind—and this creates disparities. Elders and first-language speakers, who carry irreplaceable linguistic and cultural knowledge, are often excluded from classrooms by credentialing requirements that have no bearing on their ability to teach. At the same time, Native language teachers who do enter classrooms frequently lack access to specialized training in immersion methodologies—a gap that traditional educator preparation programs do not address. The state can act on the following three fronts:

Licensure: Expand alternative certification pathways that honor Tribal approval, language fluency, and community expertise—including pathways for elders and first-language speakers at all licensure levels, for example through The New Mexico Native American Language and Culture (520 NALC) certificate. Flexible licensure is essential to making grow-your-own and Tribal educator pipeline programs viable at the district and community level.

Compensation: Establish compensation structures that recognize Native language teaching as the specialized, irreplaceable expertise it is—not as a supplemental or paraprofessional role. Language teachers can be compensated at parity with or above other certified educators, given the scarcity of their knowledge and the urgency of language revitalization.

Training: Invest in specialized professional development and pre-service training for Native language educators, with particular emphasis on immersion methodologies. Currently, virtually no formal training exists for educators teaching in Indigenous language immersion contexts. The state can fund partnerships with Tribal colleges, universities, and programs like the Diné Language Teacher Institute (DLTI) to develop and sustain this training infrastructure—ensuring that Native language teachers have the pedagogical tools to match their linguistic expertise.

4 Create a State-Tribal Native Language Advisory Task Force.

Convene a time-bound state-Tribal task force composed of educators, youth, elders, and language practitioners to develop actionable policy recommendations for strengthening Native language education in New Mexico. The task force can work in coordination with the Indian Education Advisory Council (IEAC), TEDs and practitioners to identify funding needs, accountability measures, and feasible implementation pathways for language immersion and revitalization efforts. Within a defined timeline, the task force can produce a set of policy and funding recommendations to guide state, district, and Tribal partners.

5 Establish Tribal data sovereignty agreements.

Formalize government-to-government agreements that ensure Tribal Nations govern how Native student data is collected, stored, interpreted, used, and shared. As New Mexico explores how Tribal affiliation data is collected and shared in education systems, clear data agreements with Tribes are necessary. These agreements can improve community trust, improve data collection and accuracy, uphold Tribal data sovereignty—the inherent right of Tribal Nations to govern the collection, ownership, and use of data about their citizens and communities.

6 Align state data systems with Tribal language priorities.

Co-develop data collection approaches with Tribes that track participation and access without reducing language learning to standardized assessments or deficit framing. Tribes are best positioned to determine how to assess their languages, but may need additional capacity and resources to do so. Data collection can also extend beyond Tribes geographically located in New Mexico to include all Indigenous languages represented by children enrolled in language courses across the state.

7 Develop a publicly accessible Native education data dashboard.

Develop a publicly accessible data dashboard that shares key indicators on Native student experiences, resources, and outcomes across New Mexico. The platform can be developed in partnership with Tribal Nations and uphold Tribal data sovereignty, ensuring Tribes steward their citizens' data. Appropriate data suppression and privacy protections can be used where necessary to protect student privacy while still ensuring meaningful public access and transparency. The dashboard can help Tribes, educators, and policymakers track progress toward the state's commitments under Yazzie/Martinez, and should be paired with community workshops that help students, parents, educators, and policymakers understand the data, build data literacy, and use information to strengthen schools and communities.

8 Codify enforceable accountability and transparent budgeting for state agencies serving Native youth.

Accountability without transparency may not be complete. Invite NMPED, the Early Childhood Education and Care Department, the Higher Education Department, and other state agencies to adopt clear performance benchmarks, timelines, and corrective actions for Native student outcomes, with public reporting and independent oversight. Mandate transparent, line-item budgets for all Native education strategies—including language revitalization, culturally relevant curricula, and student supports—to ensure commitments are fiscally real and sustainable. State leaders can also create and implement a corrective action plan when more than \$1 million is returned annually to the Indian Education Act Fund, treating unspent resources as a signal requiring an immediate response.

9 Invest in healing-centered, land-based and culturally grounded mental health supports.

Fund Tribally-led, culturally grounded wellness models within schools and communities, recognizing intergenerational trauma as an educational equity issue. Create partnerships with community-based programs that support culturally relevant experiential learning and prevention programs, and ensure that Indigenous approaches to healing and wellness are treated as essential infrastructure rather than supplemental programming.

10 Provide ongoing capacity support for tribes.

Invest in Tribal policy, research, and administrative capacity to design, implement, and evaluate solutions aligned with the needs of their students, communities, and programs. Establish technical assistance teams within state agencies to support Tribes in advancing their Tribal Education plans. Without investment in Tribal administrative and policy capacity, the most well-designed state and district programs may outpace Tribes' ability to shape, implement, and evaluate them.

11 Establish local employment options for Native youth to serve in their own communities.

Native youth consistently express a desire for purposeful, paid work connected to land, culture, and community—not just abstract “career readiness.” The state can establish a permanent, state-funded youth employment corps, co-designed with Tribal governments. This program can prioritize Indigenous traditional knowledge and language revitalization while scaling the conservation and climate resilience efforts already created by groups like the Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps (ALCC). Integrating these efforts with the NM Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) Climate Corps pilot can ensure long-term sustainability and tribal sovereignty.

12 Prioritize Native youth in workforce development through federal WIOA funds.

Strengthen the public workforce system by utilizing federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) funding to help Native job seekers—including youth ages 14–24 and those who face significant barriers to employment—access education, training, and support services to secure high-quality jobs. Create a formal partnership between the Department of Workforce Solutions and local Workforce Development Boards to prioritize Native young adults, and collaborate with Tribes to align workforce development funding and programs with community-defined needs and emerging economic opportunities in Indian Country.

CONCLUSION

What Is Ours to Do?

This report began by asking what it means to **be a good relative** to Native youth in New Mexico. After listening to communities and reviewing the data, we return to that question with deeper understanding.

Being a good relative means recognizing that we are all connected: when one struggles, we all feel it, and when one thrives, we all grow together. It means showing up with intention, listening deeply, and taking responsibility for collective well-being. It means asking ourselves: **What are our assets and strengths?**

How can we do better together?

Native students in New Mexico carry extraordinary strengths: cultural connection, family networks, resilience, and strong identity. They also navigate extraordinary challenges: economic instability that started long before they were born, housing insecurity that shapes where they sleep at night, historical trauma that lives in their families' memories, and education systems designed in another era.

Some of this work requires resources we don't currently have. Stable state funding for Native language programs. Competitive salaries that recruit and retain educators in rural communities and on tribal lands. Infrastructure investments in housing, broadband, and transportation. Individual districts and Tribal Nations cannot solve these challenges alone. They require state leadership, legislative action, and sustained public investment.

Some of this work requires better coordination across systems that don't always talk to each other. When a student's family is navigating housing insecurity, food access, healthcare needs, and school expectations simultaneously, those systems need to work together rather than in isolation. Building these connections takes time, trust, and intentional relationship-building. There are state policies in place that have a strong foundation. We now need to focus on the implementation and execution of the intended ideas and we need to ensure we have the infrastructure and resources to do the work.

Some of this work requires rethinking assumptions about schools. If students bring Indigenous language, extended family networks, and cultural knowledge with them, schools can build from those strengths. If students need different pathways to teaching careers, licensure systems can create those pathways. If communities define success differently than standardized tests measure it, accountability systems can include those community-led definitions. To meet that moment, we can move beyond outdated models and commit to thoughtful planning and deep-seated changes that support students through the critical transition from K-12 to adulthood.

And some of this work is already happening. Native language enrollment is growing. Culturally sustaining programs are expanding. Districts are partnering with Tribal Nations in new and innovative ways. Communities are designing their own solutions.

**What is mine to do? Who do I need to partner with to make that contribution matter?
What do I need to learn or unlearn to be a better relative to our young people?**

We are all connected. The success and growth of Native youth belongs to all of us, as shared responsibility and collective possibility. The invitation stands. Let's do it together.

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**BEING A GOOD
RELATIVE**