

Building College and Career Confidence

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Student Voices, Real-World Choices: How Local Partnerships Are Supporting Career Readiness

Local and Statewide Efforts to Keep Students Engaged and on Track

In 2024, the Success Partnership's [Kinder-Career Coalition](#) hosted a series of [Conversation Cafés](#) in local high schools, where students shared their hopes, frustrations, and ideas for a better school experience. Their feedback, calling for more life skills, career guidance, and real-world learning, shaped the Supported Success Internship Program (SSIP) [\(1\)](#), a pilot initiative aligned with the Success Partnership's [strategic plan](#) to promote equity, re-engage students after COVID-related disruptions, and expand career-connected learning for historically underserved youth.

Discovering Student Needs: The 2024 Conversation Cafés

The 2024 Conversation Cafés created space for young people to share their experiences, challenges, and ideas for improving their education. Across schools, students consistently asked for more practical preparation for life after graduation, such as life skills classes, career-specific guidance, and expanded electives that reflect their interests and future goals.



"More useful classes/career-based classes. We need classes to learn about ways of life and what to do as an adult."
-Conversation Café participant



"I think my school could teach us more things that will be useful after high school. It would help students be more successful as adults."
-Conversation Café participant

Students also emphasized the importance of mental health support, inclusive teaching practices, and stronger relationships with school staff. Many described challenges accessing resources like tutoring, Advanced Placement (AP) courses, and college prep, and expressed a desire for more personalized guidance and mentorship. While some students felt supported, others noted gaps in communication, trust, and fairness—especially for those with learning differences or limited access to enrichment opportunities.

Although students cited various barriers to success, one theme emerged: they want more opportunities to connect classroom learning to real-world experiences. Internships and work-based learning (WBL) were seen as valuable tools for building confidence, gaining career clarity, and staying motivated in school—yet access to these opportunities remains limited across the state.

The Coalition's Response: Launching SSIP

To address students' needs shared during the Conversation Cafés, the Success Partnership's Kinder-Career Coalition launched the Supported Success Internship Program (SSIP). The pilot offered high school juniors and seniors paid, hands-on experience in fields like healthcare, education, engineering, and the trades. SSIP was developed in response to student feedback and as part of the Coalition's [strategic plan](#) to promote equity and expand career-connected learning for historically underserved youth. In its first year, ten students interned with local organizations, each earning a \$1,200 stipend [\(2\)](#). The program had an 80% completion rate, and students reported meaningful growth in confidence, communication, and career clarity.

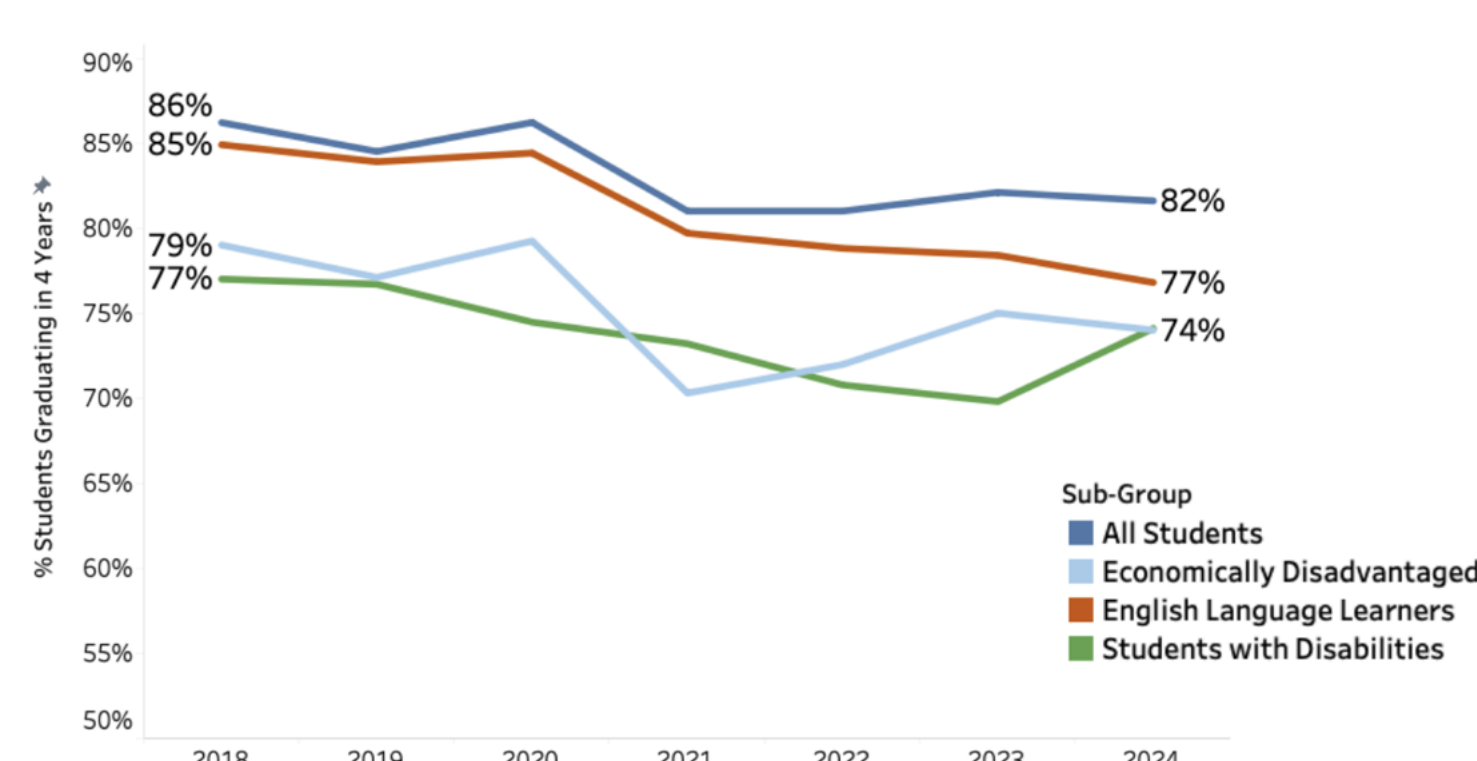
SSIP also benefited from technical support provided by [Future Focused Education](#), whose statewide WBL work helped inform the design and implementation of the pilot. Together, these efforts reflect a growing commitment to ensuring students have access to real-world learning experiences that support academic and personal success.

Why Work-Based Learning Matters: What makes SSIP different?

SSIP is designed to reach students who are often excluded from traditional internship opportunities because of barriers such as economic hardship, language access, and learning differences. This includes students from families experiencing financial stress, students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), and English Language Learners (ELLs). By offering paid, structured WBL experiences, SSIP helps students avoid having to choose between staying in school and working long hours to support their families. It also provides the support and flexibility that make career-connected learning accessible to a broader range of students.

This approach is critical in light of ongoing disparities in graduation outcomes. While overall graduation rates in Doña Ana County have improved in recent years, not all students benefit equally. In 2024, 90% of Hatch Valley students, 88% of Gadsden Independent School District (GISD) students, and 82% of Las Cruces Public Schools (LCPS) students earned diplomas [\(3\)](#). However, data from the Center for Community Analysis [Graduation Dashboard](#) reveals persistent gaps. A trend analysis shows that although overall graduation rates have increased modestly in recent years, students with disabilities, ELLs, and economically disadvantaged students continue to graduate at lower rates than their peers.

4 year high school graduation rates by sub-group, Las Cruces Public Schools, 2018-2024



Source: New Mexico Public Education Department, Webfiles 2018-2024.

[Click here to explore our NM High School Graduation dashboard](#)

Paid WBL opportunities like SSIP help address these inequities by offering structure, skill-building, and community connections. These experiences foster social capital and give students a sense of purpose beyond the classroom. They also lay the foundation for long-term school, work, and life success.



"I feel more confident in myself to get out there and experience more opportunities."
-SSIP intern

Local and Statewide Momentum

Statewide, [Future Focused Education](#) and the [New Mexico Public Education Department](#) (NMPED) support schools through the [Innovation Zone Initiative](#). Participating schools are expanding access to WBL and career-connected experiences, with hundreds of students now engaged in internships and community-based projects. These efforts reflect a shared commitment to ensuring students across New Mexico have access to meaningful, real-world learning opportunities.

Closely aligned with these efforts, SSIP was awarded Youth Civic Infrastructure funding through the Future Focused Education Youth Civic Infrastructure Fund, administered by the New Mexico Community Trust. This support will enable the program to expand to two additional high schools in Doña Ana County.

Looking Ahead

Student feedback shapes how schools and communities respond to educational and career readiness needs. As programs like SSIP evolve, they offer a practical model for increasing access to real-world learning—especially for students who face barriers to traditional pathways. Collaboration across local and state partners will be key to building systems that support all students.

If you are a business, nonprofit, or community leader interested in becoming an internship site or supporting SSIP work, please get in touch with Marisa DeWolf, Kinder-Career Coalition Coordinator at marisa@ngagenm.org or (575) 521-1957.

Sources:

- [\(1\) The Las Cruces Bulletin Success Snapshot: Opening Doors for Students Through the Supported Success Internship Program](#)
- [\(2\) SSIP Data Quick View SY 24-25. Developed by Future Focused Education](#)
- [\(3\) CCA Dashboard: High School Graduation Rates in Doña Ana County](#)



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