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Beyond Graduation: Measuring the Quality of High School Experiences

Reframing What Success Looks Like

For decades, graduation rates have been the primary measure of high school success. New Mexico has made notable progress, reaching the highest graduation rates the state has seen in over a decade, an achievement worth celebrating for both educators and students (1). Yet a diploma alone does not guarantee college or career readiness. As graduation rates continue to rise, it is important to understand if students are leaving high school with the knowledge, skills, and experiences needed to thrive in college, career, and beyond. It requires looking beyond completion rates and examining the quality of learning experiences students receive, particularly those that connect classroom learning to real-world opportunities.

What is Readiness?

College and career readiness encompasses more than earning a diploma or enrolling in college. It reflects a student's ability to successfully navigate postsecondary education, trade programs, or the workforce by applying academic knowledge, technical skills, and professional competencies. Experiences like WBL, CTE, and DC help address these needs by building confidence through academic and career readiness and by expanding access to the opportunities needed to succeed.

Work-Based Learning (WBL)
Educational experience that provides students with exposure to career pathways.

Career Technical Education (CTE)
Educational programming that builds technical skills and career knowledge.

Dual Credit (DC)
Program that allows students to experience college-level coursework and earn college credit while still in high school.

Source: New Mexico Department of Education (NMPED).

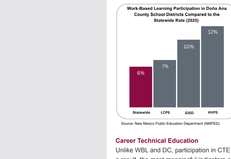
Considering readiness is especially important given that, while more New Mexico high school graduates are pursuing higher education, only 48% complete a bachelor's degree within six years (2). Many students cite academic preparation, mental and emotional health, and financial challenges as barriers to persistence. Providing students with opportunities to explore careers, earn college credit, and develop workplace skills before graduation can help ease the transition after high school and help students feel prepared for what comes next.

Measuring Readiness

As covered in our previous newsletter, between 2015 and 2025, New Mexico's statewide high school graduation rate increased from 69% to 81%, with strong gains across our school districts (3). Gadsden Independent School District (GISD) rose from 81% to 91%, Hatch Valley Public Schools (HVPS) increased from 67% to 88%, and Las Cruces Public Schools (LCPS) improved from 75% to 80%. The New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED) attributes these gains, in part, to increased student engagement through participation in WBL, CTE, and DC (4).

While graduation rates are an important measure of progress, they do not tell the full story of student readiness. To better understand how students are preparing for college and careers, we recently launched the Career Readiness Dashboard. The dashboard tracks participation and completion in WBL, CTE, and DC programs across New Mexico and provides district-level data that help identify areas of success and opportunity. It also includes an **Equity page** that allows users to compare participation across student groups and identify differences in access to college- and career-readiness experiences. Below are a few highlights from the data.

View the Career Readiness Dashboard



Work-Based Learning

WBL participation remains relatively low statewide but has steadily increased in recent years. In 2025, approximately 6% of students statewide participated in WBL programs. Local districts exceeded that rate, with participation reaching 7% in LCPS; 10% in GISD, and 12% in HVPS. All three districts have shown improvement over time, suggesting growing access to real-world learning opportunities that connect students to potential career pathways.

Career Technical Education

Unlike WBL and DC, participation in CTE courses can satisfy graduation requirements. As a result, the most meaningful indicators are not participation alone, but rather the number of students who become concentrators and completers. Here, important district differences emerge. GISD and HVPS report strong CTE pathway participation, with GISD leading in completion. In 2025, 19% of GISD students completed a CTE program, compared with 11% in HVPS, 6% in LCPS, and 5% or less statewide.

Dual Credit

Participation in DC varies more across districts. In 2025, HVPS's participation rate (15%) was comparable to the state average (17%), while LCPS fell somewhat below (13%). GISD's participation rate (8%) remains considerably lower than both statewide and local participation, highlighting an opportunity to better understand and address barriers that may limit student access to college-level coursework while in high school.

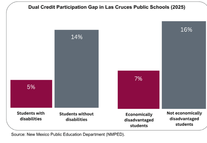
Exploring Readiness Through an Equity Lens

While participation in college and career readiness programs continues to grow, access remains uneven across student groups. Students identified in the Yazzie-Martinez decision, which requires the state to provide uniform and sufficient education for all students, including economically disadvantaged (ED) students, students with disabilities, and English learners (EL), continue to face barriers to educational opportunity and would benefit from additional support to access high-quality learning experiences (5,6).

The Equity page of our Career Readiness Dashboard provides a closer look at participation and completion patterns across student groups, helping identify where differences persist and where additional support may be beneficial. One example appears in WBL participation. In GISD and LCPS, EL students participated in WBL at lower rates than their peers. Similar differences were also observed among students with disabilities.

Although participation in CTE courses is high across student groups, completion tells a different story. In 2025, 13% of EL students in GISD completed CTE programs, compared to 23% of non-EL students, despite nearly identical participation rates (88% and 89%, respectively). Students with disabilities demonstrated a similar pattern, completing CTE programs at lower rates than their peers even though participation rates were comparable.

Some of the largest disparities appear in DC participation. In 2025, only 5% of students with disabilities in LCPS participated in DC, compared to 14% of students without disabilities. Economically disadvantaged students experienced similar gaps, with just 7% participating in DC compared to 16% of their non-ED peers.



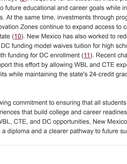
View the Career Readiness Dashboard

Turning Data into Action

The Career Readiness Dashboard and related analyses have provided valuable insights that are helping guide local action. By identifying gaps in access to career readiness opportunities, the data informed the Success Partnership's Kinder Career Coalition as it developed the Supported Success Internship Program (SSIP), an initiative designed to expand paid WBL opportunities for historically underserved students.

During the 2025–26 school year, 20 students completed paid internships with 12 local employers across a variety of career fields (7). Among participants, 12 students self-reported having an IEP or 504 plan, and the majority of students identified as Hispanic. Participants reported high levels of satisfaction with the program, highlighting improvements in communication, time management, and workplace skills, along with increased confidence in their future educational and career goals. Mentors observed noticeable growth in student confidence and abilities, reporting that students seemed more independent afterwards.

These outcomes demonstrate that when students are given access to meaningful career-connected learning experiences, they gain the confidence, skills, and motivation needed to envision and pursue their future goals.



Moving Forward

New Mexico has taken important steps to integrate college and career readiness experiences into the education system. Ensuring equitable access requires continued investment and policies that prioritize student needs. Across the country, states are increasingly using participation and outcome data to identify opportunity gaps and guide improvements for underserved student groups (8).

In New Mexico, districts are aligning Next Step Plans with graduate profiles to create more personalized, career-connected pathways (9). Required for all students, these plans help students connect their coursework to future educational and career goals while increasing awareness of available opportunities. At the same time, investments through programs such as Perkins, NextGen, and Innovation Zones continue to expand access to career readiness experiences across the state (10). New Mexico has also worked to reduce barriers to participation. The state's DC funding model waives tuition for high school students while providing colleges with funding for DC enrollment (11). Recent changes to graduation requirements further support this effort by allowing WBL and CTE experiences to count toward core academic credits while maintaining the state's 24-credit graduation requirement (12).

Together, these efforts reflect a growing commitment to ensuring that all students have access to meaningful learning experiences that build college and career readiness. By strengthening equitable access to WBL, CTE, and DC opportunities, New Mexico is helping students graduate with both a diploma and a clearer pathway to future success.

Take our survey

Please take a few minutes to complete our survey. Your feedback will help us better understand how CCA's data and evaluation work supports your organization and advances our shared mission of promoting educational and workforce equity in New Mexico.

Data and Community Impact Survey

Sources:

(1)(4) From Access to Achievement-Advancing College and Career Readiness Across New Mexico
(2) New Mexico high schools are graduating more students. Are they ready for college?
(3)(5) CCA Dashboard: High School Graduation Rates in New Mexico
(6) NMPED Martinez-Yazzie Action Plan
(7) Ngage NM Supported Success Internship Program Data Brief SY 2025-26
(8) Equity Goal & Public Reporting
(9) Next Step Plan
(10) High Quality Career and Technical Education
(11) Funding for Equity: Designing State Dual Enrollment Funding Models to Close Equity Gaps
(12) A Bold Legislative Shift to Redefine Graduation

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