

# Doña Ana County graduation rates see sharp increase

LAS CRUCES - New Mexico made modest gains in the state's high school graduation rate in 2016, but Las Cruces Public Schools and the Gadsden Independent School District saw rates skyrocket at many high schools.

LCPS officials credit the district's improved graduation rates to better credit-recovery options, more educational options for students and better bookkeeping.

The LCPS graduation rate has improved from 43.8 percent in 2008 to 80 percent in 2016. Every school except for Mayfield High School saw graduation rates improve from 2015 to 2016.

Last week, Gov. Susana Martinez announced the statewide class of 2016 set an all-time high graduation rate at 71 percent — an eight-point increase since 2011. But it is still below the 2015 national rate of 83 percent.

Districtwide, the LCPS graduation rate improved from 74.5 percent in 2015 to 80 percent in 2016. Many high schools enjoyed significant year-to-year improvements.

- Arrowhead Park Early College High School had the highest graduation rate, at 97 percent. Most APECHS students also graduate with an associate degree or certificate from Doña Ana Community College. In 2015, the school had a four-year graduation rate of 92 percent.
- Oñate High School had the highest graduation rate of the comprehensive high schools at 86 percent — a 10-point improvement from 2015.
- Centennial High School saw the greatest improvement of the four

comprehensive high schools, improving from 69.7 percent in 2015 to 83 percent in 2016.

- Las Cruces High School improved by about 5 percent, from 74.8 percent in 2015 to 79 percent in 2016.
- Mayfield High School saw the district's only decline in graduation rates, falling about 5 percentage points — from 77.6 percent in 2015 to 72 percent last year.
- Rio Grande Preparatory Institute, which specializes in credit recovery for students struggling at larger district schools, had the district's lowest four-year graduation rate but also saw the greatest improvement — from 42.6 percent in 2015 to 59 percent in 2016.

RGPI Principal Kathie Davis credits the school's improvement with its unique class schedules and internship opportunities for students.

“I really think our improvement is due to the flexible schedule we offer, allowing students to focus on two core classes at a time,” Davis said. “And the electives revolve totally around the students' interests. We are the transition from school to the workforce or to higher education. Because our students are out in the workforce doing internships, they're gaining real-life work experience, which also keeps them engaged and moving toward graduation.”

RGPI also plays a role in helping the district's larger high schools improve their graduation rates. Because of the way the rates are calculated by the New Mexico Public Education Department, schools get partial credit for students graduating on time, even if the student transfers to another school, district or state — provided the school can provide the state with that information. As a result, the four larger high schools get partial credit for the students RGPI is able to graduate on time.

Daniel Misque, 17, is one of those students. The senior at RGPI started

attending school there this year.

“I started at Mayfield, but I would miss school a lot, and I skipped my after-lunch classes pretty often to go to work,” Daniel said. “At RGPI, I’m able to focus on one class at a time. It’s way more flexible with my work schedule. And there’s not as many students in my classes, so teachers can spend more one-on-one time with students.”

Now Daniel is back on track. He has made up all of his credits, and plans to graduate in May. He hopes to enroll at DACC and pursue a welding degree. Daniel credits RGPI for helping him finish high school.

“This is a really good school,” he said. “Ms. Davis is always helpful, and works hard to keep all of the students on track.”

RGPI also offers summer school for students of all of the district’s comprehensive high schools.

Albert Vega, the district’s chief technology and research officer, said some of the improvements the district has seen can be attributed to better record-keeping.

“What we’ve done is looked at how students are dis-enrolled,” Vega said. “When students leave, we’re making sure that we’re capturing where they’re going. We’re looking at records requests to make sure we capture those transfers.”

This way, if a student transfers out of the district, the schools can still get partial credit if the student goes on to graduate on time.

“We’re also doing a much better job of identifying those students who are at risk of not graduating on time, and letting their principals and guidance counselors know much earlier, so they can intervene and help them get back

on track,” Vega said. “A lot of it has to do with us catching it ahead of time. Now we have enough data to get ahead of it, and focus on kids before it’s too late.”

Oñate High School Principal Jim Schapekahn, whose school had the highest graduation rate of the four large schools, said a variety of little things at the school made a big difference.

“We really focused on a few little things last year,” Schapekahn said. “We paid very close attention to attendance, and teachers did a very good job at calling parents about attendance concerns, when students missed a few days. We also focused on ‘Knight School,’ which allowed some of those kids who were falling behind the chance to stay after school and make up credits, so they don’t have to wait for summer school.”

Erlinda Martinez, the district’s associate superintendent for instruction, said that providing credit-recovery alternatives that work for students can help get a struggling student back on track quickly.

“Each school is responsible to providing credit-recovery options,” Martinez said. “And they’ve really taken the initiative and come up with some great solutions.”

She also credits the district’s variety of educational options with keeping students engaged and moving toward graduation.

“The instruction is more focused, and we’re providing more opportunity for kids than we ever have before — from the Virtual Learning Academy to Early College High School and Rio Grande Prep,” she said. “For teachers, we’re also providing targeted professional development, which is important in addressing the needs of individual teachers and, in turn, helping them reach struggling students.”

Of Las Cruces charter schools, only Alma d'Arte Charter High School fared better than the statewide average, with a four-year graduation rate of 73 percent, up from 64.8 percent in 2015. Las Montañas Charter School dropped from 37.7 percent in 2015 to 28 percent in 2016, while New America School – Las Cruces remained relatively flat, from 33.8 percent in 2015 to 34 percent in 2016.

The Gadsden Independent School District also saw year-to-year improvements in graduation rates, improving from 80.7 percent in 2015 to 86 percent last year. Gadsden High School had the district's highest graduation rate at 88 percent. Santa Teresa High School had an 87 percent four-year graduation rate, and Chaparral High School graduated 86 percent of its students in four years.

Hatch Valley High School also saw rates improve, from 67.5 percent in 2015 to 74 percent in 2016.

For a list of New Mexico graduation rates dating to 2008, visit [ped.state.nm.us/ped/Graduation\\_data.html](http://ped.state.nm.us/ped/Graduation_data.html).

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## ***2016 graduations***



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**PHOTOS: Arrowhead Park Early College High School commencement**



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13 Photos

PHOTOS: Centennial High School commencement



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PHOTOS: Mayfield High School graduation



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PHOTOS: Oñate High School commencement