

# Returning to school: Adult students pursue diplomas

LAS CRUCES – Alicia Demchok is a sophomore at New America School-Las Cruces. She is 41 years old. Originally from Honduras, Demchok dropped out of school at age 13.

“I went through eighth grade, and then my father was killed,” she said. “My mom had to move to the United States, and I had to take care of my two little brothers. When I was 19, I came to the United States and started working, taking care of kids.”

She worked as a caregiver for children and the elderly for nearly 20 years, while raising two daughters of her own. They both attended public schools — beginning in bilingual classes, and in fourth grade switching to English-only teaching. Both are now in college.



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Alicia Demchok, a student at the New America School, that is finishing High School as an adult, Thursday, March 2, 2017. (Photo: Josh Bachman/Sun-News)

Demchok saw a billboard for New America School three years ago, touting the school’s English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. She enrolled, mostly to learn English.

“Two years later, I started regular high school classes,” she said. “I decided I wanted to get my high school diploma. I figured it’s never too late. I’m still young, and I can do it.”

When she graduates, she wants to continue her education.

“Right now, I work as a caregiver for the elderly and I like it,” Demchok said. “I take them to doctor’s appointments, but I’d like to be able to do more —

like check blood pressure or give them medication.”

## **Adult education**

Right now, there is no age restriction on who can attend New Mexico high schools. The New Mexico Public School Code guarantees a free public school education to any school-age person who is a resident of the state and has not received a high school diploma or its equivalent.

A 2014 Legislative Finance Committee report found that, in 2013, a total of 1,125 adults age 23 and over were enrolled in New Mexico public schools, ranging in age from 23 to 90. Thirty percent were between the ages of 31 and 40.

The only upper-age restriction for students is for special education, and stems from the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which restricts special ed funding when a student reaches age 22.

Of those adults 23 and older attending public schools in New Mexico in 2013, 90 percent were enrolled in charter schools, which are typically more expensive to operate than traditional public schools. The state average that year was \$7,044 per student, while New America School-Las Cruces spent \$8,083 per student.

In addition to being more expensive, many adults who re-enroll in a charter school never receive their diploma. In 2014, only about 15 percent of students in charter schools that enroll adults received a high school diploma.

Schools that serve adults also tend to enroll students for far fewer than 180 days, a full school year. In 2014, students at New America School-Las Cruces were enrolled an average of 73 days, according to the LFC report.

For these reasons, state legislators frequently discuss changing the definition of “school-aged person,” and instituting a statewide age limit for high school students. Worried that legislation would be introduced this year, New

America School social studies teacher and student council sponsor Victoria Fisk took a group of students to Santa Fe to meet with legislators.

“Every year the State Educational Committee looks at where budget cuts need to be made, and every year there are concerns that adult funding will be one of those cuts,” Fisk said. “The stakes are high for our adult students who dropped out for various reasons when they were younger and are now back at school working hard to earn a high school diploma.”



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**Victoria Fisk, a teacher at the New America School, who took students to speak to the New Mexico State Legislature about funding for older students returning to high school. Thursday March 2, 2017. (Photo: Josh Bachman/Sun-News)**

Fisk said there are many reasons a student may choose to pursue a diploma rather than a GED. Some jobs will not promote workers to management positions if they only have a GED. GED-holders also find it more difficult to

get into the military, are generally required to score higher on the Armed Forces Qualification Test, and they may be turned down altogether. Furthermore, Fisk estimates 50 to 60 percent of her students have attempted to get a GED and failed.

Students earning their GED also do not qualify for the New Mexico Legislative Lottery Scholarship, which is a significant deciding factor for low income students wishing to further their education.

About six NAS students made the trip and met with about a dozen state legislators. After sharing their stories, Fisk said the students were promised by several legislators that it would not be addressed during this year's session.

“If they stop funding adult education, they're taking away my opportunity to get the diploma that I want — that I need — so badly,” said Marie Freeman, 37, who was one of the students that made the trip.

### **Marie's story**

Freeman is also a tenth-grader at New America School. She was supposed to graduate from Las Cruces High School in 1998, but said she was thrown out of her house at age 16. Without going into details, she described her home life as “a very bad situation.”

“I didn't want to quit school, but I had to get a job to pay rent,” she said. “I worked at Grandy's in the morning and Burger King in the evening, just to pay my rent — and that's when minimum wage was \$4.25. I think my rent was \$350 at the time, but that was still a lot.”

She didn't have a car, and walked to work every day. Three times she tried to get her GED, but never passed.

“I was only at a ninth- or tenth-grade level, and I didn't remember a lot of the stuff,” Freeman said. “I passed ever subject but math, but could never pass it, so I just stopped taking it.”

She has been working home healthcare jobs for the past several years, but said she always felt like something was missing in her life. A family member saw a billboard on Highway 70 for New America School last year, and in August she called.

“I was hesitant, because I thought they were just going to give me the GED again,” she said. “I called, and they explained that it was a high school, and I could get my diploma. I said, ‘Well, what’s the age cutoff? Because I’m 37.’ They said there wasn’t one. So I enrolled, and it has been a blessing.”

Freeman is also a Melanoma survivor. As a result, she wants to study tomography after she graduates.



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**New America School, Students Angelique Armendariz, Lluvia Salazar, Marie Freeman, Desiree Quintana and Alicia Demchok, talk about their experiences returning to high school as adults, Thursday March 2, 2017 at the New America School. (Photo: Josh**

## ***Bachman/Sun-News***)

“When I was going through my cancer treatments, I had to go in for CT scans and PET scans all the time,” she said. “The ladies that were there were always so nice — so gentle and comforting. It takes a special person to do that, and I want to be that person for someone else who is going through a scary time. I want to hold their hand.”

### **Students share stories**

Every adult student at New America School has a story about why they dropped out of high school, and what brought them back.



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Desiree Quintana, one of a group of older high school students at New America School, that took a trip to Santa Fe to talk with state legislators to encourage them to continue funding older students who return and finish High School, Thursday March 2, 2017. (Photo: Josh Bachman/Sun-News)

Desiree Quintana, 33, chose to be home-schooled as a junior in high school. But, because of difficulties in her personal life, she had to move to Las Vegas, Nevada, where she earned a living as a babysitter. She was one credit short of graduating.

“It was a math credit, and I just couldn’t pass it,” she said.

At 25, she had a son, and for eight years, she was a stay-at-home mom. At 28, she had a daughter.

“Last year, my son was struggling in school,” she said. “I decided then to go back to school — to be an example for my son and daughter. There was a void. I had very low self-esteem, no confidence, and felt like I couldn’t get what I need without a high school diploma.”

Now, Quintana said returning to high school has given her more confidence. She has also made friends, which she didn’t have before. She is two credits away from

graduating. Then, she wants to become a teacher.



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Angelique Armendariz, one of the students finishing high school at the New America School, who traveled to the State Legislator to help keep funding for older students seeking to finish high school. *(Photo: Josh Bachman/Sun-News)*

Angelique Armendariz, 20, fell behind while attending Oñate High School. She enrolled at New America School to catch up on her credits in hopes of returning to Oñate and graduating with her class. Then her parents went through a difficult divorce, and she dropped out to help care for her three younger siblings and her mother.

“She was able to go back to school and become a teacher,” Armendariz said. “After that, I said, ‘OK, now it’s my turn to get an education.’”

After high school, Armendariz hopes to go to college and become a social worker.

Lluvia Salazar, 26, dropped out of high school the second semester of her senior year, after her grandmother died.



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Lluvia Salazar, a student at the New America School, who is finishing her High School diploma

“Me and her were really close, and I just fell into a deep depression,” Salazar said. “I didn’t want to get out of bed. I didn’t want to eat. So I just didn’t go back. I was like a month away from graduating.”

For eight years, she worked a variety of agricultural jobs — mostly seasonal work, she said. Then she heard an ad for New America School on the radio. She enrolled, and will graduate at the end of this semester. After graduating, she plans to enroll in the vocational nurse program at Vista College.

“If I can do it, I’m pretty sure anyone can do it,” she

at the school, Thursday  
March 2, 2017 (Photo:  
Josh Bachman/Sun-  
News)

said of returning to high school. “I have three kids—a  
four-year-old, a three-year-old and a one-year-old.”

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