

# Community schools in New Mexico provided invaluable services amid pandemic, advocates say

LAS CRUCES – When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Manuela Casada Gomez and her husband each lost their jobs.

There was no money to spare with her three teenage children, ages 12, 14 and 17.

Through Arrey Community Elementary School support, Casada Gomez received much-needed backpacks, school supplies, clothes and food to support her and her family.

"Because we couldn't work, we didn't have anything to pay for bills or rent," Casada Gomez said in Spanish. "Sometimes, suddenly, the family needs clothes, but the little money that we had would go to rent and bills."

**'Very disappointing':** [Las Cruces Public Schools condemns graffiti ahead of Las Cruces-Mayfield game](#)



She said that the community school tried to connect her with financial aid services to no avail. Now, they are employed and making it through.

"We are doing better," Casada Gomez said earlier in September.

Through the pandemic, the assistance that the 80 community schools in New Mexico provide became more valuable than ever.

With basic resources such as food, clothing and housing to more complex resources including internet access and adult classes, community schools have made efforts to provide students and families with support in the short term and long term.

Once those basic needs are met, the community can thrive, community school advocates say.

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## Relationships and networks

The pandemic hit at a time when many community schools were just opening up, including Arrey.

"When the pandemic happened, especially when schools literally shut down, there was a question about, 'Okay, well, what are the implications for community schools?'" said David Greenberg executive director of the National Education Association of New Mexico's Center for Community Schools.. "A lot of what makes it meaningful to the school is being a hub. What happens when we're virtual?"

"I think what we learned is that community schools (are) not just about the physical space of buildings, it's really about a network of relationships."

**More:** [Community schools aim to cover 'every basic need.' Here's how they do it in New Mexico](#)

MacArthur Community Elementary in Las Cruces is trying to foster those relationships now. Because the school became a community school just before the pandemic shut down school buildings in New Mexico in March 2020, it had to establish itself during online learning.

"We've always had the mentality of being a community school, my teachers just always go above and beyond for kids," said Principal Yuri Leyva-Castillo. "When people walk into McArthur, a lot of times they'll tell me, 'I love how it feels, it just feels like a family.'"

Leyva-Castillo herself has gone above and beyond to provide resources to her students during the pandemic.

**COVID-19 vaccines for kids:** [Pfizer-BioNTech say low dose of its COVID-19 vaccine is safe and effective for kids 5-11](#)

Although free breakfasts and lunches were provided at all LCPS schools last year, several parents couldn't drive to pick up the food. Leyva-Castillo would deliver meals to students she knew wouldn't get the food otherwise.

In particular, she said she often delivered meals to families that lived in a motel. At one point, eight families lived in one motel at the same time.

"When I delivered, they were just so excited to see me," Leyva-Castillo said. "They just wanted hugs more than anything else. Parents would come out, and I would have time to ask them, 'Did you get the email? Did you get the Remind message?' That was my way of staying connected with those



families that probably didn't engage as much."

MacArthur also delivered paper packets to families that had trouble using the internet, a service not every school in the district offered.

Leyva-Castillo said that only 30 out of the 400 families at MacArthur were not engaging during the pandemic.





MacArthur Elementary community schools coordinator Tatiana del Toro-Frank said that although the classes and programs have been limited due to COVID-19 restrictions, there has been a lot of interest in the community school from residents.

"The need and want to be a part of a school and socialize with other mothers or talk to one another, I think was really great," del Toro-Frank said. "I wish we could have done this this whole time (during the pandemic). But you can really see your parents engaging."

In the Cuba Independent School District in northwest New Mexico, that parent engagement had a much slower start.

Since the elementary, middle and high community schools were established in 2020, Dominguez had to go to families to see what their needs were.

However, after establishing trust in some of the families, more and more began to reach out directly to ask for support.

"It's not a one-size-fits-all for the students and families," Dominguez said. "Some people need help with food and clothes, some people need help with housing, some people need help electricity. We really tailor the approach to an individual to an individual level."

### **Classrooms and education:** [Flooding again disrupts Gadsden Independent School District's busing in the La Union area](#)



*Miranda Cyr, a Report for America corps member, can be reached at [mcyr@lcsun-news.com](mailto:mcyr@lcsun-news.com) or [@mirandabcyr](https://twitter.com/mirandabcyr) on Twitter. Show your support for the Report for America program at <https://bit.ly/LCSNRFA>.*