

Community schools aim to cover 'every basic need.' Here's how they do it in New Mexico

LAS CRUCES – If you've seen one community school, you've seen one community school.

This no-one-size-fits-all mantra is intentional, said David Greenberg, executive director of the National Education Association of New Mexico's Center for Community Schools.

Since each community's needs are different, so is each community school.

Though each of the 80 community schools in New Mexico offer different services, their missions are the same.

Greenberg will say that mission is to "strategically leverage partnerships to be with local businesses and faith-based organizations or nonprofit organizations or different health providers to to meet the vision of the needs that the communities establish."

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



What he means is that if a community needs it, you'll find it at a community school, with services available to anyone beyond just when school is in session.

In one town, a community school helped facilitate the installation of solar panels in homes that wouldn't otherwise have access to electricity or running water; in another town, the community school became a food pantry; and in still another town a mom found a job through connections at the community school.

And if a community school doesn't have what you need, a staff member can find a service to help. Once those basic needs are met, the community can thrive, community school advocates say.

Could New Mexico schools go remote again: [Not likely, as leaders](#)

[prioritize in-person learning.](#)

"Some people need help with food and clothes, some people need help with housing, some people need help with electricity. We really tailor the approach to an individual level," said Victoria Dominguez, the community schools coordinator for Cuba Independent Schools, one of the most at-risk school districts in the state.

Advocates say community school strategies help the state fulfill it's directives in the *Yazzie/Martinez* lawsuit from 2018 that revealed at-risk children in New Mexico aren't getting the same level of education as their peers.

More: [Community schools in New Mexico provided invaluable services amid pandemic, advocates say](#)

"The first step in really reinventing education is shifting who's at the table and in the room making decisions, and doing the deep listening that we need to do to understand (where) the people are at this point in time," Greenberg said.

What do community schools do?

Lucia Carrillo and her three young children — ages 8, 5 and 2 — live in Arrey, a small town south of Truth or Consequences. Carrillo also cares for her 15-year-old niece, all while working toward for her degree in Early Childhood Education at Doña Ana Community College and New Mexico State University.

Carrillo said she has watched the small town come together since Arrey Elementary School became a community school in 2019.

"More people are coming out to get the help and seek the help," she said.

Arrey Community Elementary has fewer than 100 students enrolled, according to community school coordinator Yolanda Tafoya. However, Tafoya said she provides services to over 180 families in the area.

Tafoya said she's learned more about the community in the year she's been the Arrey Elementary community schools coordinator than in the past 12 years working for Truth or Consequences Municipal Schools

"Those home visits, going in and actually seeing where the students are living, and what their needs are, have just opened my eyes tremendously," Tafoya said. "To know these are their struggles, (these are) some of the barriers that they may have. The reason we're here is all about students, helping them succeed. The only way that they can be successful in school, is make sure they have every basic need covered."

For residents of rural communities — such as Arrey and Cuba — those needs can be myriad and wide-ranging, from food to clothes to health care to internet and utility services.

When Tafoya realized that internet access was a huge problem for Arrey families, the community school provided computers, hotspots and other internet services. She said the school is also working on establishing a computer lab inside the school for anyone in the community.

This will help students like Carrillo access online classes, Tafoya said.

Tafoya has also worked for years to establish a food pantry in town, which she has now done thanks in part to the community school label.

"Instead of it being an entity or an individual or church, we were able to establish under the school district," she said.

Tafoya now receives weekly truckloads of food from Roadrunner Food Bank as well as donations from the local grocery stores in Arrey and nearby Hatch. She now travels the dirt roads in rural town to deliver food to 160 families — 600 individuals — weekly.

In the northwestern corner of the state, Cuba Independent Schools also provides food to residents through its community school. The school building now has racks of clothes that families have access to.

"The thing about Cuba is we're kind of in the middle of nowhere," said Dominguez, the community school coordinator. "We don't have a lot of resources, so rather than dwelling on the fact that we don't have a lot of resources, we just created created our own."

Dominguez said one of the families that utilizes the community school services lives about a 45-minute drive from the center of town. Often the family's grandma will come to pick up food or clothes for the 23 people living in that one house and breaks down crying due to gratitude.

Building that trust with the community is key to providing resources, Dominguez said.

"(We're) letting people know that we're in this together, we're gonna get through this together, we're here to support you," she said.

Dominguez said that there are many families that don't have electricity or running water in the area. She said some have generators, but they are loud and expensive to sustain.

The week of Aug. 30, Cuba community schools helped facilitate the installation of solar panels in the homes of seven families, a program paid for by the the New Mexico Senate and the Indigenous Education Department.

"You just let us know what you need from us, and if we don't have resources, we're gonna find resources for you," she said.

Community schools in cities

Community schools are not just in small towns. They are also in cities wherein the schools can rely more on partnering with already existing organizations in the area.

In Las Cruces Public Schools, the five community schools put a focus on outreach through after school programs.

MacArthur Community Elementary offers child care services, tutoring, professional development courses for staff, technology classes for adults and after school programs for students that they voted on themselves. MacArthur has also provided food, haircuts, school supplies and COVID-19 vaccines to community members.

LCPS community school families also receive free annual dental cleanings.

Similarly, at Sierra Community Middle School in Roswell Independent Schools, community members receive free dental cleanings from local offices and free vision exams and glasses at Walmart's vision clinic.

Sierra also has a brand new school-based health center that is open for general exams and behavioral health services.

"We are just now really kicking off community schools at Sierra," said Sierra Middle community schools coordinator Kristen Salyards. "I tell our leadership team that here at the school, when we do this — not if we do this, but when we do this — we will change lives. This has the potential and the possibility to change the lives of our students and their siblings and their parents."

More: [High school student accused in Chaparero shooting pleads not guilty](#)

Story continues below.

Where does this funding come from?

Of the 80 community schools statewide, 33 are still receiving state and federal funding, according to [the New Mexico Public Education Department's most recent report on community schools](#).

All 33 are funded through the New Mexico Community Schools Act, which Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham signed in April 2019.

Community schools are often placed in areas of high poverty where their services are most needed. Of the 33 state-funded community schools, 16 are elementary schools, six are middle schools and six are high schools. The other five are charter schools serving K-8, K-12, K-2 and 6-12.

Through the Community Schools Act, \$2 million was set aside for community school initiatives in New Mexico. Schools that are accepted for the grant receive \$150,000 each year for a period of three years to get them started.

The thinking is after that three-year period, the community school would have sufficient roots and can rely on community partners and sponsors to continue its services.

In May, the PED issued 50 grants totaling \$6.6 million to schools across New Mexico to plan for or to implement the community school strategy in the 2021-22 school year.

For the 2021-22 year, 21 new community schools were established and awarded planning grants ranging between \$32,000 to \$50,000.

According to LCPS district community school coordinator Amanda Barela, there is a sixth community school on the way in the district that will either be Mesilla Park Elementary or University Hills Elementary. She said both will become community schools eventually, but the district are working to decide who will get the funding through a \$600,000 grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

Other funding sources can come from partners like Kellogg or from other state and federal grants.

What can we expect in the future?

On Monday, Gov. Lujan Grisham issued a proclamation naming the week of Sept. 20-24 Community School Coordinators Appreciation Week to celebrate the work community schools do for students and families.

The potential for longevity of community schools is something New Mexico excels in, according to Jose Muñoz, director of the Coalition for Community Schools, which is a national group that advocates for and supports the development of community schools. There are over 5,000 community schools in the U.S., with the majority being in New York and California.

However, Muñoz said that New Mexico stands out because of the joint powers agreements that have been established between cities and districts in order to support community schools. Albuquerque Public Schools was the first to sign a joint powers agreement in 2007: the ABC Community Schools Partnership. The district now has 34 community schools.

In 2018, the City of Las Cruces and Las Cruces Public Schools signed a joint powers agreement modeled after the agreement in Albuquerque.

"A superintendent changes, a mayor changes, a county manager changes or

something like that, but when you take the time and effort it takes to get a joint powers agreement, it doesn't change because it's recognized by the state and you are now an official entity," Muñoz said. "We're built for the long run if we can get some more joint partnership agreements that include tribal nations (and) how they work with their surrounding counties and cities."

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

It can be expected that more community schools will be established in New Mexico in the coming years.

In July, President Joe Biden proposed an increase of funding for community schools from \$30 million to \$443 million.

Muñoz said his organization has a goal for 25 percent of all public schools in the United States to be community schools by 2025. He said that would create a tipping point in education.

"Once we get to that 25%, it'll withstand any position, or any politician," Muñoz said.

Miranda Cyr, a Report for America corps member, can be reached at 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>.