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Prepared By: Annie Armatage, Senior Policy Analyst II, LESC; Tim Bedeaux, Senior Policy Analyst II, LESC; Sunny Liu, Principal Analyst, LFC; and Anna Rose, MPP Fellow, LFC

Witness: Dr. Arsenio Romero, Secretary, Public Education Department

Supporting Teachers to Improve Student Outcomes

Research has shown teachers are the most important school-related factor influencing student outcomes, such as performance on reading and math assessments, likelihood of on-time high school graduation, and even college attendance, college completion, future earnings, and other distal outcomes. Significantly, the court in the *Martinez-Yazzie* consolidated education lawsuit found effective teachers were key to improving proficiency and concluded the quality of teaching for at-risk students was inadequate in New Mexico.

The need for highly effective teachers in New Mexico is particularly great, with only 38 percent of students proficient in reading and 24 percent of students proficient in math. A high proportion of students are at risk, with one in four children living in poverty and higher than national averages of students identified as English language learners or students with disabilities. Statewide academic achievement for these students continues to lag those of their peers.

Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic heightened these challenges, with teachers in New Mexico and across the nation reporting a marked impact on students' social, emotional, and behavioral development, resulting in increased disruptions of instructional time and demands on teachers and support staff.

Key Takeaways

Without addressing workload or instructional practice, teacher salary increases are unlikely to result in effective and sustained staffing changes or improved student outcomes.

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The most credible study of class size reduction found significant, small effects of student academic growth.

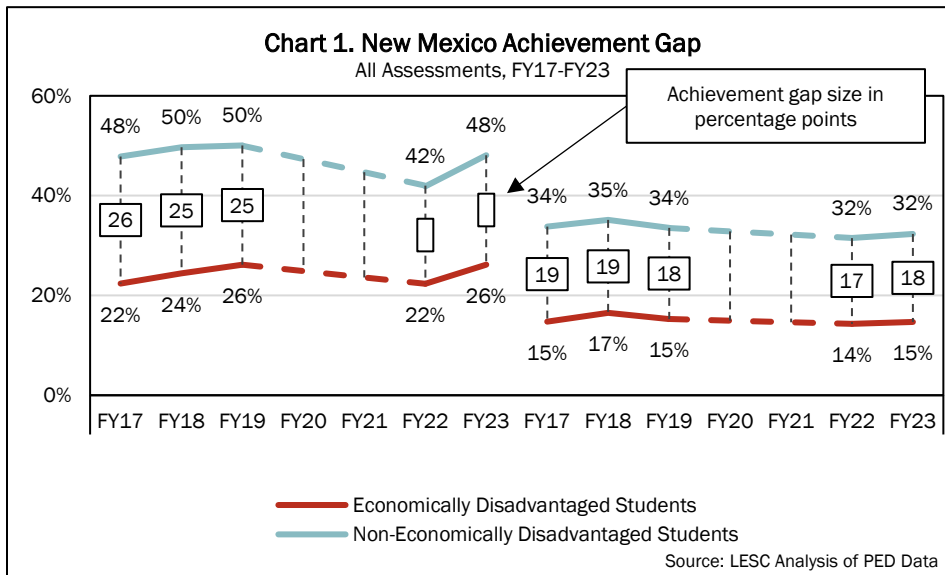
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Statewide class size averages appear to be below statutory maximums and national averages.

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The state should focus on additional teacher supports that strengthen instructional practices within the classroom or staff classrooms more strategically.

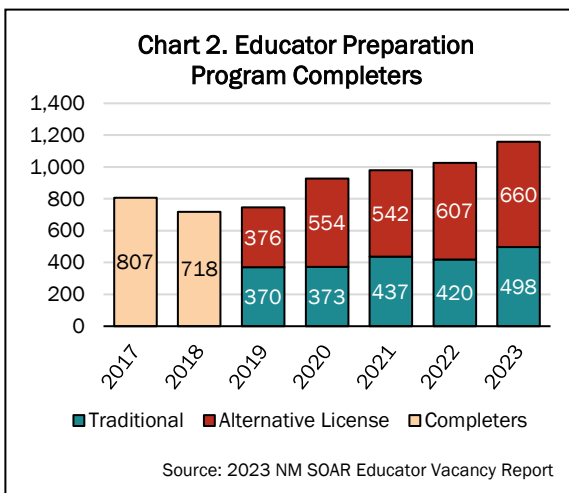
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At the same time, New Mexico faces several barriers to ensuring each classroom is staffed with a highly effective teacher. Despite significant investments in teacher recruitment and retention, teacher vacancies and turnover persist. Since the *Martinez-Yazzie* ruling in 2019, the Legislature has increased recurring funding for public schools to \$4.4 billion, an increase of \$1.6 billion, or 58 percent. Over 60 percent of the total increase, or \$984 million, is attributable to educator compensation, including higher minimum salaries, across-the-board raises, insurance, and expanded coverage benefits. Beyond pay increases, the state has reduced barriers to entry by funding teacher residencies, Educator Fellows, student teaching stipends, teacher preparation affordability scholarships, and teacher loan repayment awards.

The Impact of Teacher Attrition

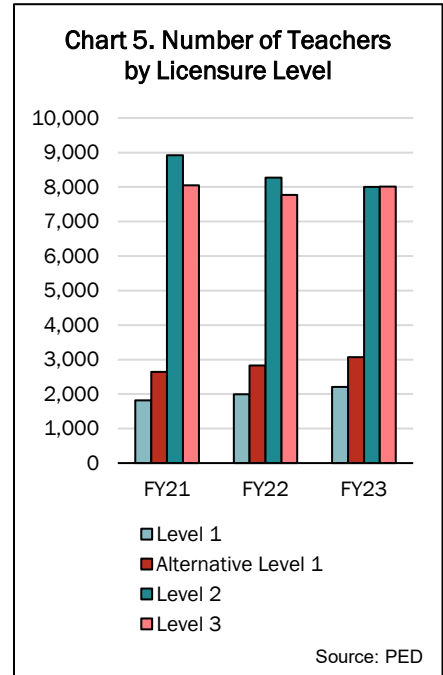
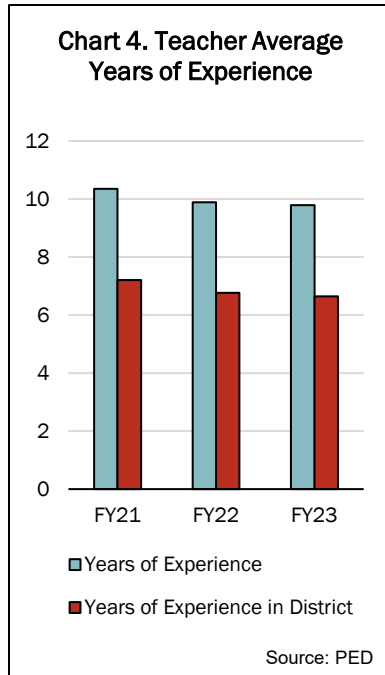
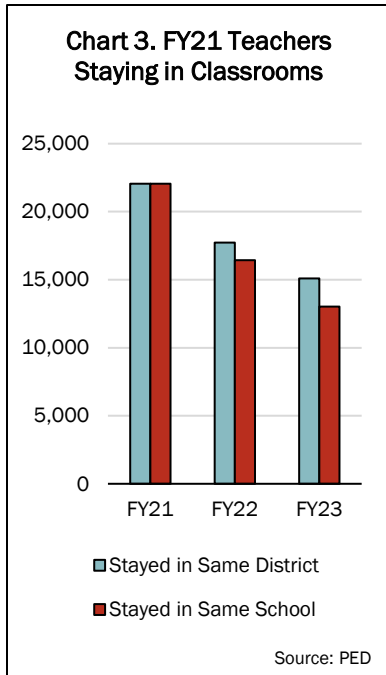
According to the [Southwest Outreach Academic Research Center](#), New Mexico public schools had an estimated 751 teacher vacancies in September 2023. Total licensed school personnel vacancies amounted to an estimated 1,471 positions, including educational assistants, counselors, speech language pathologists, and behavior support providers.



New Mexico educator preparation programs graduated 1,158 new teachers in 2022-2023 school year (SY2023), a 13 percent increase from the prior year. However, the proportion of graduates completing alternative licensure programs has grown to nearly 60 percent. Alternatively licensed teachers typically begin teaching immediately, with little to no classroom experience. Some [research](#) suggests these teachers may have higher rates of attrition than traditionally licensed teachers who complete substantial coursework and clinical hours prior to becoming a teacher of record. Each year, about 1,500 level 1 teachers leave their classrooms in New Mexico—a clear deficit compared to the number of candidates graduating from educator preparation programs.

A 2017 Learning Policy Institute [report](#) found teacher turnover rates in New Mexico were among the highest in the country—23 percent—second only to Arizona. Since FY21, fewer and fewer teachers in New Mexico have remained in the same district or school, and from FY21 to FY23, the state has seen a drop in teacher years of experience and a decrease in the number of teachers with level 2 licenses.

According to a 2023 McKinsey and Company [report](#), teachers who consider leaving the classroom typically cite compensation, unreasonable expectations, and an inability to protect their well-being as their top motivators. In New Mexico, while the Legislature has recently made substantial investments in teacher compensation and preparation, less attention has been given to teacher supports within schools. National research suggests compensation increases alone, without addressing workload or instructional practice, are unlikely to result in effective and sustainable staffing changes or improved student outcomes.



Class Sizes, Teacher Retention, and Student Achievement

The ruling in the *Martinez-Yazzie* consolidated lawsuit found the state did not provide at-risk students with programs proven to provide the supports they needed to succeed. The court cited several such effective programs, including quality full-day prekindergarten, summer school, extended learning time programs, after school programs, research-based reading programs, and reducing class sizes. In 2024, the Legislature passed House Memorial 20, tasking LESC staff with studying class sizes, including potential effects on student outcomes, staffing, and funding.

National Research on Class Sizes

Numerous attempts to reduce class sizes over the past decade, most recently [House Bill 215](#) and [House Bill 227](#) in the 2024 legislative session, would have reduced class size maximums, the latter phased in over a period of five years. Neither bill was heard. Class size reductions are frequently proposed by educators themselves as a policy mechanism for improving student outcomes and reducing teacher attrition. The Learning Policy Institute published a 2017 [report](#) that included analysis of 2013 nationally representative survey data on teacher turnover. The survey found the reasons teachers most frequently cited for leaving their school or profession (excluding retirement or personal family reasons) were dissatisfaction with testing and accountability pressures, lack of administrative support, lack of opportunities for advancement, dissatisfaction with working conditions, importantly including large class sizes, and salary.

Smaller class sizes appear to be most beneficial for at-risk students and for students in classes with less experienced or effective teachers.

Little research exists on the effects of class size reductions on teacher retention. However, a few small [studies](#) suggest a correlation between smaller class sizes and improved teacher retention. Teachers themselves clearly express dissatisfaction with larger class sizes. In the 2023 Merrimack College Teacher [Survey](#), the top three steps teachers said districts could take to support their well-being were increasing compensation, reducing class sizes, and providing more support for student discipline-related issues. Some [research](#) suggests smaller class sizes may improve student engagement and behavior, allowing teachers to

focus more on providing instruction. Following the Covid-19 pandemic, teachers in New Mexico and across the nation [reported](#) a marked impact on students' social, emotional and behavioral development, resulting in increased disruptions of instructional time and demands on teachers.

More research exists on the impact of class size reductions on student outcomes, though few of these studies are robust, longitudinal studies that adequately control for student, class, and student-level variables. The most influential and credible study of class size reductions is the 1989 [Tennessee Student Teacher Achievement Ratio \(STAR\) project](#). Researchers randomly assigned over 7,000 kindergarten-through-third-grade students in 79 schools to small classes (13 to 17 students), regular classes (22 to 25 students), or regular classes with an educational assistant (22 to 25 students). Teachers were also randomly assigned. On average, the students who had been assigned to small classes were found to have grown by an additional three months of schooling (0.22 standard deviations) compared to their peers in larger classes. This effect was driven by growth among kindergarteners. Additionally, effects were largest for black students, economically disadvantaged students, and boys. The estimated economic returns of class-size reductions in Tennessee outweighed their costs, with an internal positive rate of return of about 6 percent. A 2010 [analysis](#) of the STAR project data found students who were assigned to small classes were about 2 percentage points more likely to be enrolled in college at the age of 20; however, no income advantage was found at age 27.

Meta-analyses of class size reduction studies, generally report mixed results, showing statistically significant small effects, no effects, or even in a some cases, negative effects.

[Meta-analyses](#) of class size reduction [studies](#), generally report mixed results, showing statistically significant small effects, no effects, or even in a some cases, negative effects. The STAR project is generally considered to have found the largest effect amongst studies. Overall, literature suggests class size reductions have the strongest impact on student academic growth in early childhood, with the effect size decreasing each subsequent year. In addition, smaller class sizes appear to be most beneficial for at-risk students and for students in classes with less experienced or effective teachers. Some [research](#) indicates well-trained educational assistants utilized effectively by teachers can help improve student outcomes.

John Hattie's [Visible Learning meta-analysis](#) organizes 138 educational influences according to their effect size on student achievement. The average effect size of all influences studied was 0.4 standard deviations. Hattie estimates the typical effect size of class size reduction is 0.10 to 0.20 standard deviations—below the estimated average effect. Hattie also notes reducing class sizes may have larger effects on teacher and student work-related conditions, which then may or may not produce effects on student learning. It should be noted that smaller class sizes may better allow teachers to implement influences with some of the largest effects, such as response to intervention (1.29 standard deviations).

PEW-MacArthur's Results First [Initiative](#) allows states to input state-level data to a sophisticated analytical model that projects the costs and benefits of programs. In 2019, Legislative Finance Committee (LFC) staff reported the model estimates the effect size of reducing the average class size by one student in

Table 1. Cost-Benefit Analysis of Class Size Reductions in relation to Other Educational Interventions

Intervention	Benefit-to-Cost Ratio	Chance Benefits Will Exceed Cost	Effect Size on Test Scores
Literacy consultant teachers	\$32	99%	0.428
Tutoring by certified teachers	\$15	97%	0.209
Teacher professional development on data-guided instruction	\$132	98%	0.117
Content-focused coaching for teachers	\$190	94%	0.107
More experienced teachers	\$13	99%	0.058
Reducing average class size by one student in kindergarten	\$11	99%	0.052
Reducing average class size by one student in grade 1	\$7	93%	0.027
Reducing average class size by one student in grade 2	\$4	78%	0.014
Reducing average class size by one student in grade 3	\$3	69%	0.010
Reducing average class size by one student in one grade, 4-6	\$2	62%	0.007
Reducing average class size by one student in one grade, 7-8	\$2	59%	0.004
Reducing average class size by one student in one grade, 9-12	\$2	53%	0.004

Source: 2019 LFC Results First Educational Interventions

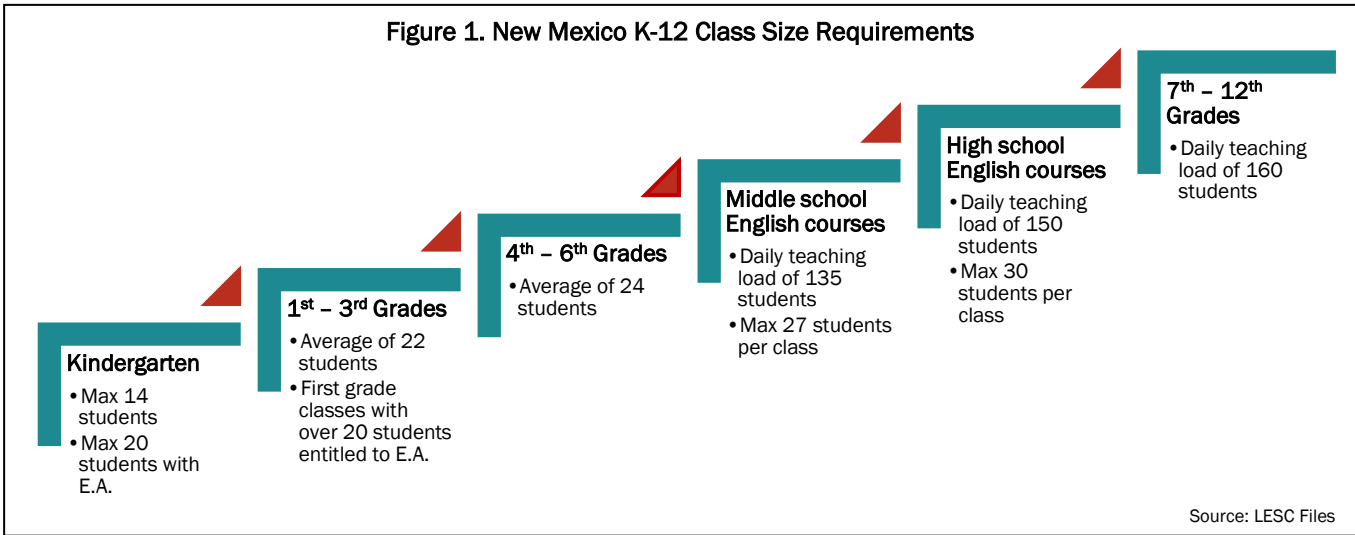
kindergarten at 0.052 with a benefit-to-cost ratio of \$11 in New Mexico. The model does not provide estimates for reducing class sizes by more than one student, but existing literature suggests it would be higher, as well as variant depending on the beginning and ending size of the class. The model does indicate the effect on student learning, and the return on investment reduces each subsequent year through high school. Other interventions are likely to produce far greater effects with a larger benefit-to-cost ratio, including employment of literacy consultants, tutoring, certain professional development for teachers, and employment of more experienced teachers.

In summary, studies of class size reductions yield mixed results with typical effect sizes on student learning ranging from 0.10 to 0.20 standard deviations. Class size reductions have the strongest impact on students in kindergarten and first grade, with the effect size decreasing each subsequent year. In addition, smaller class sizes appear to be most beneficial for at-risk students and for students in classes with less experienced or ineffective teachers. Other educational interventions are likely to produce larger effects at a higher benefit-to-cost ratio.

Class Sizes in New Mexico

New Mexico set class size requirements for K-12 students in the early 1990s and few changes have been made since that time (Section 22-10A-20 NMSA 1978). While kindergarten classes have an absolute maximum number of students (14 students or 20 students with an educational assistant), class size requirements for subsequent grades are primarily based on the average size of all classes within a particular range of grades. For example, the average class load for fourth through sixth grade teachers may not exceed 24 students when averaged among grades four, five, and six. Under this requirement, the size of classes within any single school could vary substantially.

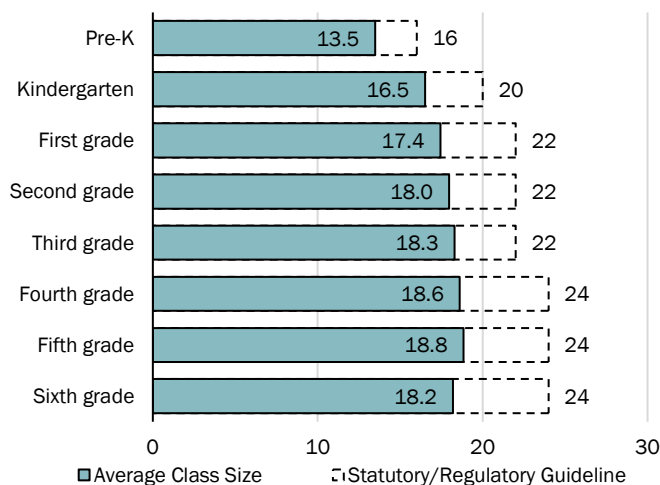
Figure 1. New Mexico K-12 Class Size Requirements



Research indicates smaller class sizes are most beneficial for the youngest students, but state statute and administrative rule allow for larger class sizes in prekindergarten, kindergarten, and first grade with the presence of an educational assistant. Prekindergarten classes for three-year-old children may not exceed 16 students with a 1:8 adult-to-child ratio. Prekindergarten classes for four-year-old children may not exceed 20 students with a 1:10 adult-to-child ratio. These ratios may be met by a teacher plus an educational assistant (Early Childhood Education and Care Department PreK Standards).

Staff analyzed statewide PED course roster data for prekindergarten through 12th grade during the 2022-2023 school year (SY2023). School districts and charter schools are required to report the size and composition of classes to PED by the 40th day of the school year ([Section 22-10A-20 NMSA 1978](#)). However, class size data is reported by individual schools and districts in an inconsistent manner, making analysis of class sizes challenging. Staff made certain assumptions to omit classes assumed to be data entry errors. The class size data reported in this analysis should be interpreted with caution, due to highly variable data quality.

Chart 6. Average Elementary School Class Sizes, SY2023



Note. Due to inconsistent data reporting practices statewide, average class size data should be interpreted with caution.

Source: PED STARS class roster dataset

Based on analysis of available data, statewide class size averages appear to be well below statutory and regulatory guidelines. In prekindergarten, the average class size is 13.5 students, below the 16-student maximum for three-year-old students. In kindergarten, the average class size is 16.5 students, below the statutory maximum of 20 students. It is likely that many prekindergarten and kindergarten classrooms also have educational assistants, further reducing the student-to-adult ratio in early grades.

In first through sixth grades, statewide class averages are near the “small” class sizes found to produce student learning effects by the STAR study (13 to 17 students). However, as statute allows schools to remain below class

size maximums by averaging class sizes among several grades, some classes may still be notably above the average. Legislators could consider removing this averaging allowance. However, removing this flexibility could prevent strategic local decisions, such as providing a more experienced teacher with a stipend for teaching a larger class, while giving a new teacher a smaller class load.

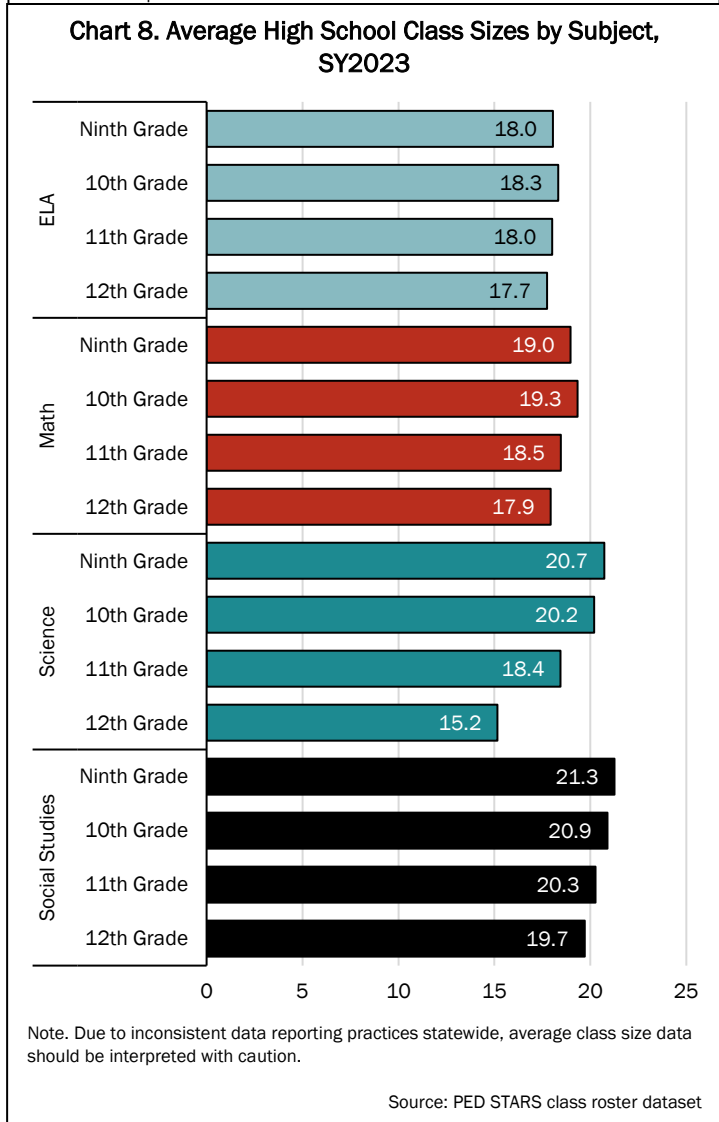
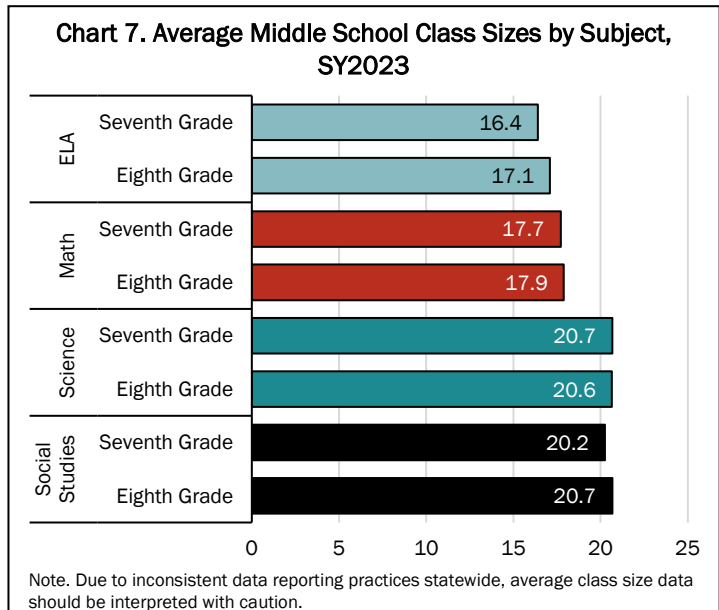
Statewide averages for middle and high school classes in core subjects also provide little concern that classes are too large statewide. In fact, in secondary grades, average class sizes range from 15 to 21 students per class—well below the most stringent state maximums for these grades (27-30 students per ELA class). Elective classes were excluded from analysis due to wide variation in reporting.

Elementary, middle, and high school class size averages across New Mexico are consistent with national averages [reported](#) by the National Center for Education Statistics, which reports a national average of 19.1 students per teacher in elementary schools, 22 students per teacher in middle school, and 21 students per teacher in secondary schools. In New Mexico, these average figures are approximately 18.2, 18.8, and 19.2, respectively.

Due to concerns about data quality, staff did not conduct extensive analyses at any level more granular than the statewide level. **Appendix A** reports the average class sizes in school districts by grade level and subject area based on available data, but given inconsistencies on district-by-district reporting techniques, staff did not analyze these class sizes in-depth.

As shown on Appendix A, four school districts and nine state-chartered charter schools were identified as having large class sizes in certain grades and subjects. While the class sizes on Appendix A indicate the presence of larger-than-average classes in certain schools and districts, the table does not necessarily indicate a district is out of compliance with statutory requirements.

While the data suggest that, on average, class sizes are small, some individual classrooms across New Mexico may still be above the statutory maximum. In addition, a lack of special education teachers statewide may increase teachers' in-classroom workloads. For example, inclusion classrooms typically require two adults to meet the needs of students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). When general education teachers have students with IEPs in their classrooms and special education teachers are



limited, class size can become an issue even if their classroom adheres to (or is far below) statutory class size maximums.

When school districts are unable to meet statutory class size requirements, officials must apply for class size waivers on an annual basis, which cannot not be granted for more than two consecutive years. Waivers maybe granted only when districts demonstrate:

1. No portable classrooms are available.
2. No other available sources of funding exist to meet the need for additional classrooms.
3. The district has plans to build capacity within one year.
4. Parents of children affected by the waiver are notified in writing of the district's decision.

For districts that receive a waiver for an elementary school, the average class load for teachers cannot not exceed 20 students in the first grade and shall not exceed 25 students when averaged among grades two, three, four, five, and six (Section 22-10A-20 NMSA 1978). According to PED, four districts and charter schools were granted class size waivers in SY2024, including Artesia, Taos, Gallup, and La Academia de Dolores Huerta Charter School. In SY2023, districts granted a waiver included Artesia, Clovis, Las Cruces, and Gallup.

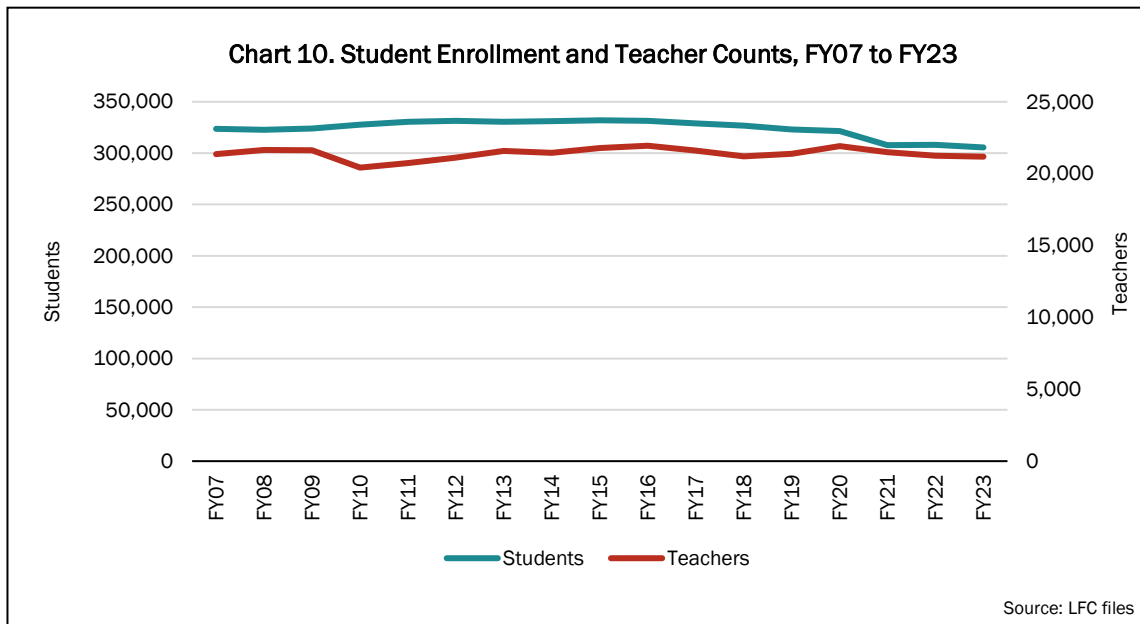
Estimated Costs of Reducing Class Sizes in New Mexico

General reductions in class sizes typically require either a reduction in student enrollment or larger numbers of instructional personnel. In some districts, reducing class sizes may also require an additional classroom through the repurposing of existing facility space or use of a portable classroom, often placed outside of the main building.

A statewide reduction of class size maximums by five students would require an additional 513 teachers, costing approximately \$39.4 million assuming an average level 2 salary of \$60 thousand with a 28 percent benefits ratio. Based on available school classroom data, the state would still need to add 288 additional classrooms due to insufficient space in certain schools (including existing portable classrooms). At an estimated \$250 thousand per classroom, the cost of infrastructure would be over \$72 million. Including Albuquerque and Gallup classroom data would increase this estimate further.

Declining student enrollment may inadvertently reduce class sizes over time absent any action by the state. Since FY16, student enrollment has consistently declined by about 1 percentage point each year. Projections from the National Center for Education Statistics show New Mexico's public school enrollment dropping more than 5 percent between 2020 and 2030 due to declining birth rates and net migrations out of state.

While the number of teachers at a district level generally matches the change in student enrollment, recent counts of teachers statewide have remained relatively flat while student counts have generally declined. Effectively, the statewide average class size has decreased in the last decade as a result of declining enrollment. Assuming districts maintain existing staffing levels, class sizes should continue to shrink over time.



Additional Teacher Supports

While reducing class sizes will improve working conditions for teachers and can improve outcomes such as retention rates and student achievement, this policy lever alone will not accelerate improvements in the quality of instruction. With class sizes already close to research-backed levels and projected reductions in class sizes due to natural declining enrollment, the state should focus on additional teacher supports that strengthen instructional practices within the classroom or staff classrooms more strategically. Foundationally, New Mexico has begun forming strategic pipelines of high-quality candidates into schools while simultaneously boosting recruitment with higher compensation and benefits to educators in the classroom. If the state can clearly establish strong supports within schools, New Mexico will not only address findings in the *Martinez-Yazzie* lawsuit but also lead the nation in building a world-class education system.

Teacher Residency Programs

In response to national enrollment declines at teacher preparation programs, increasing numbers of alternatively or emergency certified teacher candidates, and long-standing concerns about the preparedness of teacher graduates, colleges of education are increasingly turning to teacher residency and apprenticeship programs (modeled after medical residencies) to recruit and prepare high quality educators.

Teacher residency programs provide a full year of clinical preparation under an expert mentor teacher—as opposed to the traditional 16 weeks of student teaching in traditional programs—provide financial support for residents in exchange for multi-year teaching commitments after their residency, tightly integrate coursework with clinical experiences, place cohorts of residents in schools that model good practices with diverse learners, and feature strong partnerships between preparation programs and placement schools. The co-teaching model employed within residencies effectively reduces class sizes, with two educators working within the same classroom for the full year splitting the class load without the use of an additional classroom.

One 2012 study conducted in Boston found within 4 years to 5 years, residency-trained teachers were outperforming traditionally trained colleagues in measures of student achievement and teacher retention,

despite initially performing poorly during the first year of teaching. A 2015 study by the National Center for Education Evaluation also indicated residency programs may lead to improved teacher retention with 82 percent of teacher residents, compared to 72 percent of non-residents, still working in their initial districts by the third and fourth years of teaching. A 2023 report from the National Center for Teacher Residencies (NCTR) found 88 percent of program graduates reported their residency prepared them to be effective classroom teachers and 92 percent of principals reported teacher residency graduates were more effective than typical first year teachers. A 2024 Learning Policy Institute report found teacher residents in California were more likely to be people of color.

In FY20, immediately following the *Martinez-Yazzie* ruling, the Legislature appropriated \$1 million to PED to pilot teacher residency programs at colleges of education. In FY21, the state enacted the Teacher Residency Act to ensure residency programs followed national best practices. New Mexico has since appropriated about \$33 million for residency programs and most recently invested \$60 million over the next three years to test whether residency programs outperform other teacher preparation models.

In FY22, NCTR partnered with the Albuquerque Teacher Residency Partnership (ATRP) to publish an initial survey of teacher residents' experiences in Albuquerque Public Schools. The survey found ATRP programming was aligned to best practices. Graduates were more diverse than the national teacher workforce, were rated as more prepared to teach, and were more likely to teach in high-needs schools and subject areas. About two-thirds of teacher residents in New Mexico currently identify as a person of color and nearly half are in residencies supporting high-need areas such as special education and bilingual education. In FY24, the U.S. Department of Education awarded New Mexico a \$7.8 million education innovation and research grant for teacher residency programs over a 5-year period, allowing PED to award about \$1.6 million for residency programs alongside state awards. PED intends to use a portion of the grant funding to study the effects of reducing the adult to student ratio in classes with a resident.

According to PED, the state currently has 280 teacher residents across eight institutions for FY24 at a total cost of \$13 million and plans to maintain these slots for FY25. The state has a unique opportunity to study how teacher residents compare to the 446 traditional student teachers who will be paid a \$12 thousand stipend after program completion. Over the 2024 interim, LESC staff plan to study how the interaction between these different teacher clinical practices and alternative and traditional licensure preparation impact student outcomes. Costs of expanding teacher residency programs are largely driven by the \$35 thousand stipend for each resident and \$2,000 for mentor teachers. On average, each resident costs about \$44.6 thousand after accounting for administrative overhead and other required expenditures.

New Mexico Teacher Residencies

New Mexico's teacher residency program provides teacher candidates who are enrolled in coursework at a partner college or university with a \$35 thousand stipend while they are placed with a local school district in a yearlong "clinical immersion" working under the mentorship of an experienced and certified classroom teacher who also receives a \$2,000 stipend. Partner institutions receive a \$50 thousand stipend for a program coordinator and participating school leaders also receive a \$2,000 stipend. Residents are required to commit to three years of teaching at schools within the sponsoring district and receive mentoring and support for one year following completion of the program.

While a promising model to grow and prepare new educators, teacher residencies are also the costliest preparation option, covering only about a tenth of the annual open positions each year. As such, the state should continuously evaluate the efficacy of the program and scale residencies strategically over time to meet demand across the state if the programs are shown to be successful. The state may also want to consider registering residencies as apprenticeships to leverage federal teacher apprenticeship funding through the U.S. Department of Labor or identify local funding streams to expand residency slots.

Mentorship for New Teachers

In New Mexico, high poverty schools are more likely to have teachers with less experience, provisional or

emergency credentials, or courses where they are teaching outside of their subject area. According to PED, in FY23, about 25 percent of teachers had less than 5 years of experience, 14.6 percent of teachers were on provisional certifications, and 5.1 percent of teachers were teaching outside of their subject area.

Research shows beginning teachers report one of the main factors behind their decision to leave the profession is a lack of adequate support. According to The National Conference of State Legislatures international study of world-class educational systems, *No Time to Lose*, top-performing countries place new teachers with officially designated, well-trained master teachers, and often new teachers begin teaching with a reduced workload. Additionally, research has found first-year teachers assigned a mentor were more likely to return the following year, indicating mentoring can be a valuable strategy for teacher retention. A 2019 LFC Results First report noted teacher induction and mentoring programs can be effective and have modest effects on test scores. Models that focused teacher learning on the use of data to guide instruction or targeted needs were more likely to result in better outcomes. Coaching from experienced teachers or consultant teachers was also strong, particularly with content-focused coaching.

Research shows beginning teachers report one of the main factors driving their decision to leave the profession is a lack of adequate support.

Current state law requires all beginning teachers to participate in a teacher mentorship program during at least the first three years of teaching. School districts and charter schools must submit descriptions of teacher mentorship programs to be approved by PED annually. The department must regularly review and evaluate teacher mentorship programs; however, PED has not disclosed any information about the performance of these programs.

In FY03, the state enacted the teacher mentorship program requirement for level 1 teachers, requiring structured training for mentors and ongoing evaluation of each beginning teacher's performance during the first three years of teaching. The Legislature appropriated \$998 thousand to PED for this purpose in FY03, which grew to \$2 million in FY09. In FY10, PED's beginning teacher mentorship funding decreased to \$1.4 million and was discontinued in FY11.

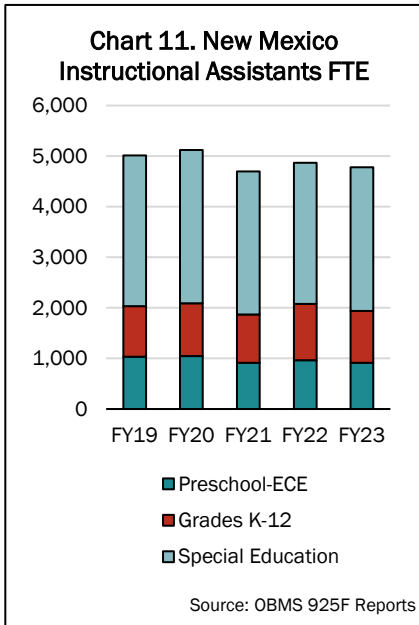
The Legislature appropriated \$22.5 million to public schools for teacher mentorships through the state equalization guarantee (SEG) distribution in recent years, allocating \$1.5 million in FY15, \$11 million in FY21, and \$10 million in FY23. In FY16, the Legislature appropriated \$1 million to PED for Teachers Pursuing Excellence (TPE), a department initiative for teacher mentorship. The appropriation grew to \$2.5 million in FY20 as PED announced TPE would be used for an Achieve Excellence initiative, a one-year program aimed at supporting early career and alternatively licensed teachers. Currently, PED receives \$4 million for teacher professional development but no longer supports first year teachers.

PED's Office of Special Education recently began partnering with Regional Education Cooperative 9 to provide a statewide mentorship program targeted to new teachers in special education, inclusion classrooms, and classrooms or schools serving Native American students. The program supports teachers within their first three years and requires mentor teachers to have at least 15 contact hours with their mentees.

While the framework behind New Mexico's beginning teacher mentorship law is relatively robust, the state does not monitor program outcomes nor evaluate effectiveness. PED is required to collect information about beginning teacher mentorship programs as part of the educational plan submission from districts and charters each year and is prohibited in the General Appropriation Act from making awards to entities that fail to submit an approved program.

Additional Educational Assistants

The effective use of educational assistants (EA) is a key factor in promoting inclusive practices for students with disabilities, reducing teacher stress and workload, and supporting positive learning experiences for students. EAs often perform a range of non-instructional roles, and some may deliver instructional services, mostly individualized or small group instruction to students with disabilities and managing student behaviors. When utilized ineffectively, however, EAs can become a high-cost position with a low or detrimental impact on student learning. Alongside lower pay, EAs often receive minimal induction into their role, lack clear role descriptions, receive limited feedback, are rarely given the opportunity to contribute to program planning, and have inadequate training—many factors beyond their control but nonetheless barriers that affect their ability to support student learning.



Teachers are often not trained on how to work with or utilize EAs effectively, and studies suggest beginning teachers and EAs often have differing views about their roles within a classroom. While EAs primarily view their role as providing academic support to students with disabilities, teachers perceive EAs as responsible for delivering instruction and managing student behavior. Some studies show when EAs receive training and supervision in the delivery of research-based practices, they can have a positive impact on literacy development and social and behavioral performance for students with disabilities or at-risk students at the elementary level. However, inappropriate EA practices, such as focusing solely on task completion and dependence on EA support can negatively impact academic performance and limit inclusivity in classrooms.

In FY23, New Mexico schools reported employing 4,782 EAs from operational funds in preschool, early childhood, elementary, secondary, and special education classrooms. This count is down 341 EAs from FY20, or 6.7 percent; however, average salaries for EAs grew over that period from \$17.3 thousand to \$20.7 thousand.

PED has three license levels for EAs, who (at a minimum for Level 1) must be at least 18 years of age, hold a high school diploma, and be certified by school administration to have satisfactorily completed an orientation pertinent to their assignment. In addition to these requirements, Level 2 EAs must be certified by the district superintendent or charter administrator to have met PED’s EA competencies. Level 3 EAs must either hold an associate degree with specific course requirements, complete 48 hours of specific higher education coursework, or pass a local district test approved by PED. Beginning in FY24, EA minimum salaries must be at least \$25 thousand, up from \$12 thousand. Unlike teacher minimum salary levels, schools do not differentiate EA salaries based on licensure level.

Amendments to state law in FY21 require schools to grant EAs professional leave to attend a teacher preparation program in New Mexico. During the Covid-19 pandemic, PED used \$37 million in federal emergency aid to create the [Educator Fellows](#) program, intended to create a new teacher pipeline for elementary schools, while improving adult to student ratios in classrooms. Individuals with a high school diploma, pursuing a degree in education with the goal of becoming a teacher or education service provider, are eligible to apply. Current school employees, including EAs, are eligible to apply to the program. However, they are not permitted to fill an existing EA position; their presence must be additive, increasing the adult to student ratio. Fellows receive a full salary and benefits, a \$4 thousand stipend to support their studies, and funding for licensure and background fees. In contrast to EAs, fellows receive intensive training prior to entering the classroom, as well as coaching and support throughout their time in the program.

Innovative Staffing Models

Innovative staffing models typically aim to:

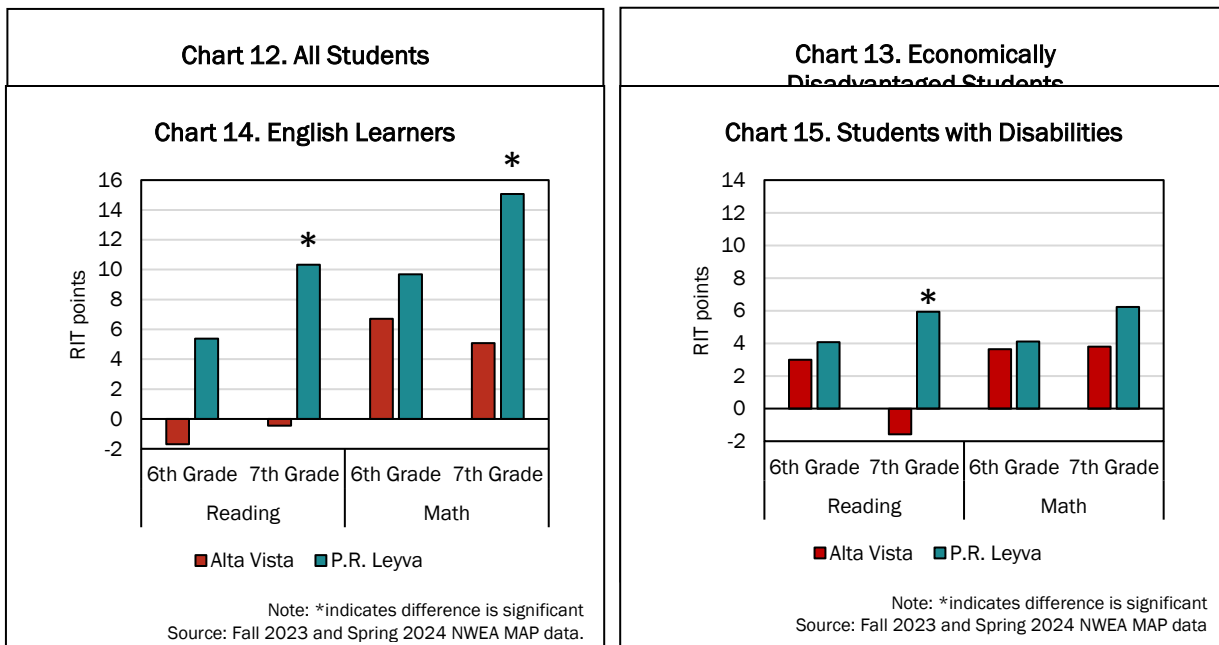
- Increase staff to student ratios, allowing teachers to more effectively deliver differentiated instruction to meet the needs of all students;
- Provide teachers high-quality, job-embedded professional development;
- Extend the reach of highly effective teachers;
- Increase opportunities for teacher collaboration and connection;
- And provide professional advancement opportunities.

Opportunity Culture. In SY2024, Carlsbad Municipal Schools began piloting [Opportunity Culture](#), an initiative of Public Impact, a North Carolina-based LLC, which offers an innovative staffing model to extend the reach of excellent teachers to promote student growth. In the model, highly effective teachers are selected to take on the role of multi-classroom leader (MCL) and lead a small teaching team in their school. MCLs co-plan, co-teach, model excellent instruction, coach, and provide small-group instruction. MCLs are accountable for the results of all students on the team and earn a sizable stipend for this work on top of their regular teaching salary. Schools also redesign schedules to provide additional school-day time for teacher planning, coaching, and collaboration. The MCL position provides teachers an opportunity for professional advancement that utilizes their expertise, compensates them accordingly, and does not require them to enter school administration.

In Carlsbad, middle school students who attended an Opportunity Culture school had statistically significant higher growth in math and reading than their district peers.

In Carlsbad, P.R. Leyva Middle School participated in Opportunity Culture during SY2024, while Alta Vista Middle School is slated to implement Opportunity Culture in SY2025. A comparison of student academic growth at the two schools demonstrates initial promising results. On average, students who attended P.R. Leyva, had statistically significantly higher growth in reading and math, as measured by the NWEA Measures of Academic Progress assessment, from fall of 2023 to spring of 2024, than their peers at Alta Vista Middle School. The average growth in math of students at P.R. Leyva exceeded expected growth based on national norms, while the average math growth of students at Alta Vista did not notably exceed growth expectations. The average reading growth of P.R. Leyva students modestly exceeded growth expectations, while the average reading growth at Alta Vista fell substantially below growth expectations.

Average Student Achievement Growth by Student Group, Fall 2023 to Spring 2024



Students at P.R. Leyva who were economically disadvantaged, English learners, or had disabilities, demonstrated greater growth than their peers at Alta Vista. In some cases, these differences were statistically significant.

These initial results should be interpreted with caution because the analysis includes small subgroup sample sizes and cannot control for classroom level differences. Additionally, although the demographics of students at both schools are relatively similar, the proportion of at-risk students at P.R. Leyva is somewhat lower than that of Alta Vista. Finally, the analysis does not demonstrate whether students at P.R. Leyva grew at similar rates prior to implementation of Opportunity Culture.

Public Impact's own [research](#) touts students in schools with Opportunity Culture average an extra half-year of learning annually; educators surveyed indicate high levels of satisfaction with the program; and program investments can be offset by reducing the costs of teacher turnover.

National research supports these preliminary findings. A 2018 American Institutes for Research [evaluation](#) of Opportunity Culture implementation in three school districts in North Carolina and New York found students in classes whose teachers were coached by an MCL had statistically significant higher performance in math than their peers, controlling for student, class, and school-level factors, with medium effect sizes ranging from 0.11 to 0.17 standard deviations. In reading, these students also had statistically significantly higher performance, however, the effect size was small, ranging from 0.03 to 0.07 standard deviations. In the case of reading, controlling for certain school-level factors eliminated statistical significance, suggesting that some of the reading increases could be due to school-level factors that may or may not be related to Opportunity Culture implementation.

A Texas Tech University [evaluation](#) of Ector County Independent School District's SY2021 implementation of Opportunity Culture reported a medium effect size of 0.2 standard deviations for reading growth; and a small effect size of 0.07 standard deviations for math growth, both statistically significant. For reading, English learner students demonstrated a larger effect size than all students at 0.32 standard deviations—an [estimated](#) 1.3 years' worth of additional learning compared to other English learner students.

In Tennessee, four school districts recently [reported](#) initial outcomes from several years of implementation of Opportunity Culture. The districts report notable increases in the number of schools whose students exceed academic growth expectations; teachers in participating schools outperform other teachers in the district in terms of student growth; and vacancies and teacher attrition have fallen.

Districts around the country, including Carlsbad Municipal Schools leadership, emphasize the importance of careful design and rollout of Opportunity Culture to ensure implementation with fidelity. Legislators could consider funding a three-year pilot of Opportunity Culture through the GRO fund. Allowing districts to self-select into the program is preferable, as dedicated and motivated school leadership is critical for program success. Opportunity Culture provides districts with a menu of supports, including program design, training, evaluation, and more. Supports for a three-year rollout of Opportunity Culture for roughly half of the districts in New Mexico, would cost an estimated \$16 million to \$35.8 million. Carlsbad Municipal Schools contracted with Opportunity Culture at the highest level of support. Providing MCLs an annual stipend of \$12 thousand would cost an estimated \$48 million over the three-year pilot.

Table 2. Estimated costs of three-year Opportunity Culture pilot for 48 districts

(In millions)

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Estimated Total
Number of Districts Served	16	32	48	48
Number of MCLs	667	1,333	2,000	2,000
MCL \$12 thousand Annual Stipends	\$8	\$13.30	\$24	\$48
Self-driven Opportunity Culture Supports (Option A)	\$3.60	\$5.20	\$7.20	\$16
Intensive Opportunity Culture Supports (Option B)	\$6.40	\$11.60	\$17.80	\$35.8
ESTIMATED TOTAL (OPTION A)	\$11.6	\$18.5	\$31.2	\$64
ESTIMATED TOTAL (OPTION B)	\$14.4	\$24.9	\$41.8	\$83.8

Source: LESC files

Professional Work Time

Research indicates the most effective professional development for teachers is job-embedded, rather than one-off learning sessions. The Learning Policy Institute describes effective professional development as content focused, incorporating active learning, supporting teacher collaboration, using models of effective practices, providing coaching and expert support, offering feedback and reflection, and is of sustained duration. This type of professional learning requires substantial time investments.

Beginning in FY24, districts can count professional work time as part of the instructional time requirement for school calendars. While the professional work time appears to come at the expense of classroom time with students, the design is intended to encourage job-embedded professional development, rather than the one-off sessions typically used statewide. Additionally, the definition of professional work time includes time spent on home visiting and parent-teacher conferences (previous uses of instructional time), educator training, and collaboration between school employees. Coupled with funding formula components through K-12 Plus, the framework incentivizes schools to provide both extended learning opportunities for students and collaboration time with teachers.

As schools experiment with variations in calendar uses of professional work time, the state should monitor changes to these configurations, such as daily, embedded professional work hours at TOPS Model schools in Albuquerque, the elimination of half-days at Rio Rancho, or the content-focused nature of training teachers in the science of reading, to identify which uses of professional work time support or detract from teacher practices and how this affects student outcomes.

Policymakers and administrators should consider redesigning school schedules to increase opportunities for professional learning communities, peer coaching, observations across classrooms, and collaborative planning. Teacher preparation periods are often consumed by lesson planning, grading student work, communicating with parents, completing paperwork, covering other classes, and more, sometimes leaving little time for professional development. Several recent national surveys reported teachers citing increased collaboration and planning time during the school day as one of the primary ways a district could support them and keep them in the teaching profession.

John Hattie’s Visible Learning meta-analysis estimates the effect of teacher professional development on student learning at 0.62 standard deviations. Effects are greatest when instruction includes observation of actual classroom methods; microteaching, video/audio feedback, and practice. According to the Pew-MacArthur Results First model, for every dollar spent training teachers how to use student assessment data to inform instruction, a \$132 return can be expected.

While the costs of buying additional time is the one of the largest barriers to implementation—estimated

Table 3. Cost Benefit Analysis of Teacher Professional Development in relation to Other Educational Interventions

Intervention	Benefit-to-Cost Ratio	Chance Benefits Will Exceed Cost	Effect Size on Test Scores
Teacher professional development on data-guided instruction	\$132	98%	0.117
Teacher professional development on content area	\$38	79%	0.071
Teacher induction and mentoring	\$6	60%	0.046
Online, targeted teacher professional development	\$9	61%	0.020
Not-targeted teacher professional development	\$0	38%	0.000

Source: 2019 LFC Results First Educational Interventions

at about \$3.6 million per hour—the larger challenge in New Mexico has been building local support on the addition of more time and how that time is used. To most effectively leverage the use of professional work time, educators not only need additional time, but also an assessment system that provides timely and actionable data, appropriate coaching on explicit skills, space to reflect on results with peers, and opportunities to share excellent teaching practices. Like other professions, the lack of structures to facilitate an informed continuous improvement process will result in untargeted time that becomes more of a compliance exercise than meaningful learning.

Policy Considerations

To achieve better student outcomes, New Mexico must improve the quality of instruction. Within schools, teachers unequivocally have the greatest impact on student achievement. The state is well on its way toward developing a strong educator workforce, with regionally competitive teacher salaries, robust clinical experiences, financial incentives for recruitment, overall shrinking class sizes, opportunities for professional work time, and innovative staffing models to reinforce masterful teaching.

However, tempting it may be to hope for silver bullet approaches, relying too heavily on a single strategy may create unintended consequences or lackluster results. Simply reducing class sizes may improve working conditions but also substantially increase the number of services and amount of infrastructure required to support more teachers and classrooms. Relying solely on residency programs to prepare teachers ignores the impact that school cultures play on collective efficacy. Increasing salaries alone will not change the existing practices of current teachers. And merely adding hours for professional work does not guarantee time will be used productively.

Building a world-class teaching profession and workforce will require an outcome-focused, holistic approach that employs multiple, connected strategies. The state also cannot allow the continuance of structures that rely on underprepared teachers to teach, push high-performing teachers to leave the classroom, and create classroom silos rather than collaborative schools. And ensuring educators are on board, as implementers of policies, will be key to successful implementation.

The Legislature should consider:

- Funding innovative staffing pilots that provide exemptions from class loads over three years through the Government Results and Opportunity (GRO) fund program.
- Funding grow-your-own programs or evidence-based EA training programs through the GRO fund program.
- Funding standards-based assessments that include interim, short-cycle assessments.
- Establishing and connecting performance measures related to teacher retention, diversity, placement in hard-to-fill positions, and student outcomes to PED's GRO appropriations.
- Amending the School Personnel Act to develop pathways or roles for the best teachers to stay within the classroom rather than moving into administration or leaving the profession.

PED should consider:

- Standardizing collection of class load data through unified business rules or upgrading the agency's statewide information system; and ensuring transparency by publishing annual class loads in districts.
- Providing guidance on effective class sizes for beginning teachers.
- Publishing teacher mentorship programs on NMVISTAS and ensuring all beginning teachers are participating in approved programs.
- Providing technical assistance for establishing and implementing effective teacher mentorship programs.
- Applying for federal apprenticeship program funding for teacher residencies.
- Reporting and evaluating performance of teacher residencies, paid student teaching, Educator Fellows, grow-your-own, and traditional preparation programs.

PSFA should consider:

- Updating adequacy standards to consider innovative staffing models.
- Identifying and coordinating the transfer of portable classrooms to districts with larger class sizes or fewer vacant classrooms.

Districts and schools should consider:

- Adjusting schedules or adding time to increase opportunities for collaboration and data sharing amongst teachers and EAs.
- Leveraging K-12 Plus program funding to add instructional days that increase class time and professional work time.

- Embedding professional work time throughout the school day in regular increments rather than at the beginning and middle of the school year.
- Reducing class sizes for beginning teachers.
- Adopting a residency or apprenticeship model for staffing classrooms.
- Expanding opportunities for observations and classroom walkthroughs, particularly of high performers, beyond the principal to other teachers.
- Ensuring professional development is targeted, using student assessment data, and research-based.
- Leveraging increased SEG, at-risk, and fund balance revenue sources to increase the number of personnel providing student support, including social workers and counselors.
- Leveraging cash balances to support professional work opportunities and training.