

# Policy Spotlight: Successful School Practices



January 20, 2025

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## Summary

### School practices matter for student outcomes, and the state can better promote effective practices.

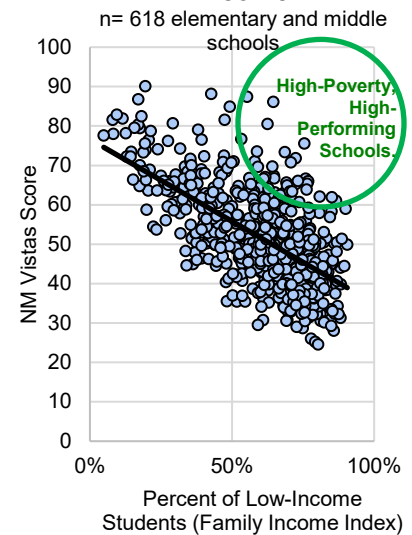
New Mexico appropriated \$4.2 billion to public education operations in FY25, an increase of 65 percent (or \$1.7 billion) since FY18. While many studies have demonstrated overall funding levels have an influence on student outcomes, how that money is spent is even more important. Currently, student outcomes in New Mexico are “dismal,” as highlighted in the *Martinez-Yazzie* lawsuit. In school year 2023-24, 39 percent of students statewide scored proficient in reading and 23 percent in math, with even lower proficiencies for students considered ‘at-risk.’ New Mexico 4th grade proficiencies on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the only assessment that is comparable pre-and-post the Covid-19 pandemic, dropped by 9 percentage points in math and 3 percentage points in reading between 2019 and 2022.

While social variables including poverty and English learner status are correlated with poor academic outcomes for many New Mexico students, demographics need not be destiny. Schools also influence student performance and examples from within the state show there are schools where students from all backgrounds not only meet but exceed proficiency standards.

New Mexico has a federally-required school accountability system, NM Vistas, that ranks schools based on performance and provides additional oversight to schools designated as having the lowest performance. That oversight is primarily directed towards encouraging schools to adopt evidence-based practices for improving student academic outcomes, including having robust systems for teacher development, using student assessment data to guide instruction, and thoughtfully engaging families in student learning. As LFC staff observed during site visits and in reviewing Public Education Department (PED) assessments of low-performing schools, many schools in New Mexico struggle to adopt and sustain those practices. Unclear expectations around practice implementation and insufficient development of leadership capacity are among the barriers.

While the accountability system is primarily focused on schools that are critically underperforming, this report also looks at the practices of high-performing schools, and ways the accountability system can encourage schools to adopt effective practices before problems arise. A more proactive system would set clear statewide expectations for foundational practices, provide support to schools and districts in implementing them, and build capacity—especially leadership capacity—where it is lacking.

**Chart 1. Relationship Between 2023-24 NM Vistas Score and Family Income**



Source: LFC analysis of PED data.

**School, district, and state leadership can address disparities in student achievement by setting clear expectations and ensuring accountability for school practices.**

## Key Findings

- High- and low-performing schools serving ‘at-risk’ students differ in their practices.
- Implementing evidence-based practices requires effective, consistent district and school leadership.
- New Mexico’s current accountability system is not aligned to produce better student outcomes.

## Key Recommendations

The Legislature should consider:

- Appropriating funding to pair principals with performance coaches in a randomized study that would help measure the impact of job-embedded principal professional development on principal retention, teacher turnover, and student outcomes.

The New Mexico Public Education Department should:

- Develop a rubric that quantitatively tracks schools’ implementation of best practices and use the rubric in the department’s assessment and monitoring visits for schools starting in the FY26 accountability cycle;
- Monitor and measure the impact of its school improvement efforts, including both its school improvement assessments and leadership training programs;
- Partner with district leadership to adapt the School Support and Readiness Assessment (SSRA) protocol into a uniform triennial evaluation process for all schools and provide districts with clear timelines, tools (e.g., reporting templates, observation protocols), and professional development to implement the evaluation system consistently starting in FY27;
- Collect and analyze data about teacher and principal performance to identify opportunities for additional support and professional development; and
- Modify its NM Vistas calculations so that schools 1) exit Comprehensive Support and Improvement, More Rigorous Intervention, and Additional Targeted Support and Improvement designation on the same three-year cycle that they are designated, 2) cannot exit designation if their overall proficiency has declined, 3) cannot exit designation without demonstrating improvement in school practices, and 4) receive points in the proficiency index for students at Level 2 or ‘nearing proficiency’ only when they move those students from Level 1 to Level 2.

New Mexico public school districts should:

- Set clear expectations for principals regarding district-wide, evidence-based core practices;

- Ensure all schools within the district have established systems for monitoring student learning, tracking student progress over time and using that information to guide instruction;
- Provide time within district-wide calendars for teachers to participate in structured collaboration focused on data analysis, standards-aligned lesson planning, and strategies for improved instruction; and
- Provide district-wide tools, like a scope and sequence or pacing guide, that help incorporate the state's grade-level standards into day-to-day instruction.

Principals and other school leaders should:

- Develop or strengthen school-based systems for providing teachers with frequent, specific, actionable feedback about how to improve their instruction;
- Develop or strengthen school-based systems for connecting state grade-level standards to lesson plans and available curriculum materials;
- Develop or strengthen school-based systems for regularly monitoring student learning, tracking student progress over time and using that information to guide instruction; and
- Develop or strengthen school-based systems for regularly communicating with families about students' learning progress.

## Background

### Student outcomes are influenced by both social variables and school practices.

Public education aims to provide every student with the opportunity to achieve academic success and develop the skills needed to thrive in society. Since the 1960s, it has been widely understood that social factors like family income, parental education and English language proficiency correlate with educational achievement. For instance, children from low-income families often enter school less prepared, creating an achievement gap that can persist throughout their educational careers. However, social variables alone do not fully account for differences in student outcomes. Research has consistently shown that some schools are able to ‘beat the odds,’ facilitating high levels of achievement among students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Those studies demonstrate that while social factors may create initial barriers, school practices can help close achievement gaps and foster success for all students.

**The majority of New Mexico public school students are ‘at-risk’.** The 2018 *Martinez-Yazzie* court decision found New Mexico’s public education system was not meeting its obligation to provide ‘at-risk’ students with a sufficient education, as guaranteed by the state’s constitution. In the *Martinez-Yazzie* case, the court defined students as ‘at-risk’ if they are economically disadvantaged, English learners, Native American or students with disabilities. A majority of New Mexico students fall into one or more of those categories.

**‘At-risk’ students tend to have worse academic outcomes, but a deep body of research demonstrates that demographics are not destiny.** Proficiency rates vary widely both between and within schools, but New Mexico schools with high concentrations of ‘at-risk’ students generally have lower proficiency rates. A 2017 LFC program evaluation of longitudinal student outcomes found that, on average, New Mexico public schools produce a year of academic growth in each grade, but low-income students’ growth rates are lower than their peers. Given that many low-income students start their education below grade-level, slower growth means those students never catch up. However, a large body of research focused on ‘beating the odds’ schools shows disparities in student achievement are not inevitable.

**Effective schools share certain characteristics, which are embodied in school-level practices.** While no single practice or policy alone explains the difference between high- and low-performing schools, research highlights a set of shared characteristics of high-performing schools—such as high standards and expectations, high levels of collaboration and communication and frequent monitoring of student progress. A 2014 LFC report summarized those as the eight characteristics of effective schools. To embody those characteristics, successful schools

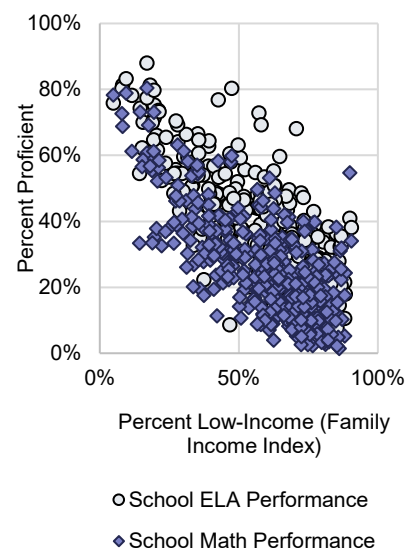
**Table 1. Percent of New Mexico Students in At-Risk Categories, FY23 and FY24 data**

At-Risk Total		71%
Income Level	Low-Income (131-185% FPL)	16%
	Very Low Income (76-130% FPL)	18%
	Extremely Low-Income (0-75% FPL)	21%
	Subtotal	55%
Students with a Disability		19%
Native American Students		10%
Current English Learners		19%

Notes: Category percentages will not add up to the total because of overlap between demographic categories. FPL = federal poverty level.

Source: LFC staff analysis of PED data.

**Chart 2. Relationship between School Academic Proficiency and Percent of Students with Low Family Income, 2022-23**



Source: LFC analysis of PED data.

foster specific practices. For instance, frequent monitoring of student achievement might be reflected in practices like regular formative assessments or teacher-team meetings to review student data. Similarly, high levels of collaboration could be supported by practices like structured professional learning communities or shared leadership. What sets high-performing schools apart is their ability to intentionally design and sustain practices that create the necessary conditions for improving student outcomes.

**Figure 1. The Eight Characteristics of Effective Schools**



Source: 2014 LFC Evaluation of High- and Low-Performing Elementary Schools.

## **New Mexico has a school accountability system rooted in the idea that changing school-level practices changes student outcomes.**

For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, schools were judged as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ based largely on inputs—things like funding levels, teacher qualifications or reputation—rather than measurements of student learning. However, starting in the 1980s, national education policy shifted to focus on student outcomes—concrete indicators of what students know and can do—with standardized tests emerging as a uniform way to measure and compare student performance across schools. The passage of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2001 cemented the focus on outcomes by requiring states to establish accountability systems that differentiated between schools based on progress towards specified student proficiency targets. The law was rooted in research showing some schools, even in challenging contexts, could consistently ‘beat the odds’ and achieve better outcomes for all students. In 2015, Congress replaced NCLB with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which retained the requirement for differentiating between schools but allowed more state-level flexibility in the weighting of variables beyond student progress. New Mexico’s current ESSA-aligned system for differentiating between schools, New Mexico Vistas (‘NM Vistas’), reflects that flexibility by assigning additional weight to measures like attendance and graduation rates in its school quality index. Schools scoring below a certain threshold on the NM Vistas index receive increased state oversight, with a focus on improving school-level practices.

***Federal law requires each state to assess school performance and provide support for implementing evidence-based practices to the lowest-performing schools.***



**New Mexico transitioned from A-F grades to NM Vistas 1-100 scores in 2019.** In addition to the federally required school differentiation based on student progress under NCLB, New Mexico developed and implemented its own supplementary school differentiation system in 2011. The A-F school grading system incorporated more variables than the NCLB ratings, including college and career readiness indicators and points for family engagement. When NCLB transitioned to ESSA in 2015, New Mexico adopted the A-F system as its federally-aligned method of school differentiation. However, critics argued that assigning schools a letter grade oversimplified their performance and unfairly stigmatized struggling schools. Following the recommendations of a 2017 Legislative Education Study Committee workgroup, the Legislature repealed the A-F system in 2019 and replaced it with NM Vistas, a 1-100 (low to high) index score that incorporates student proficiency and growth, as measured by standardized tests, as well as variables like attendance and graduation rates (Appendix A).

**Figure 2. Designations in PED's  
New Mexico Vistas School Accountability System**

Designation	Criteria	Median FY23 ELA Percent Proficient	Median FY23 Math Percent Proficient
Spotlight	Top 25% of all schools, by index score	55%	42%
Traditional	Above the threshold for support	33%	20%
Additional Targeted Support and Improvement	One or more subgroups performing worse than the bottom 5% of all Title I schools	31%	17%
Targeted Support and Improvement	One or more consistently unperforming subgroups	19%	13%
Comprehensive Support and Improvement	Bottom 5% of all Title I schools; Graduation rate lower than 67%; Failed to exit ATSI status	20%	9%
Most Rigorous Intervention	Failed to exit CSI status	14%	7%

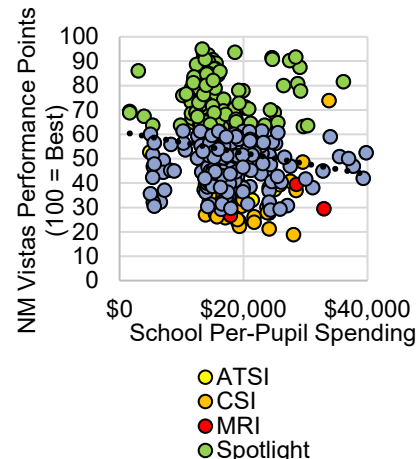
Source: LFC review of PED information.

**The current accountability system, NM Vistas, identifies both high- and low-performing schools.** Under New Mexico's current plan for compliance with ESSA, schools receive designations based on their 1-100 NM Vistas score and/or graduation rate. The six possible designations are: Spotlight, Traditional, Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI), Additional Targeted Support and Improvement (ATSI), Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI), or More Rigorous Intervention (MRI). Schools with an NM Vistas score in the top 25 percent of all schools are designated as 'Spotlight' schools. Regardless of their overall NM Vistas score, schools with low-performing subgroups are classified as Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI) or Additional Targeted Support and Improvement (ATSI). CSI schools include those that remain in ATSI status for six years, those that graduate less than two-thirds of their students and

those that score in the lowest 5 percent of all schools eligible for funding under Title I of ESSA. As a result of encompassing all three categories (graduation rates, low-performing subgroups, and overall low performance), some schools with high NM Vistas scores are nevertheless classified as CSI. MRI schools are those that fail to exit CSI status within three years. All schools that do not fall within one of those categories are considered Traditional. As of November 2024, of the 837 schools that received a designation, 214 are Spotlight, 546 are Traditional, eight are ATSI/TSI, 43 are CSI and 26 are MRI. CSI and MRI schools together account for eight percent of all schools.

**Funding alone is insufficient for better outcomes.** LFC staff analyzed the relationship between schools’ per-pupil spending data and NM Vistas scores for 2022-23 (the first and only year for which such spending data is available from NM Vistas). Low-performing schools (CSI or MRI designations in this report) tended to spend more on a per-pupil basis than higher-performing schools. On average, low-performing MRI schools spent 37 percent (or \$6,401) more per pupil and CSI schools spent 23 percent (or \$3,929) more per-pupil than high-performing Spotlight schools. This pattern is likely attributable to lower-performing schools receiving targeted state funding (such as at-risk dollars) and federal funding (such as ESSA Title I funding) to support low-income students and struggling schools. The negative correlation suggests that funding, while important, may not be sufficient on its own to drive better student outcomes.

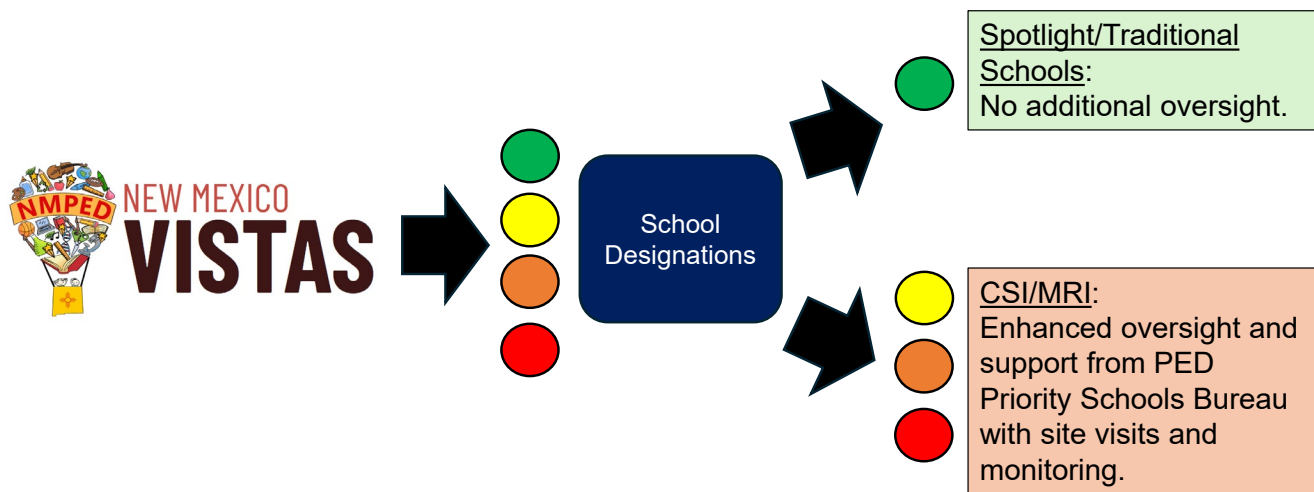
**Chart 3. Relationship Between Schools’ Per-Pupil Spending and 2023-2024 NM Vistas Scores**  
(n = 435 elementary schools)



\*Note: Because CSI includes schools with low graduation rates or persistently low-performing subgroups as well as low overall performance, some CSI schools

Source: LFC analysis of PED data.

**Figure 3. PED Accountability System**



Source: LFC.

**PED suggests opportunities for improvement in school-level practices at schools it identifies as the lowest-performing.** After a multi-year pause, in the 2023-24 school year, PED’s Priority Schools Bureau (PSB) resumed its practice of conducting in-depth assessments of the state’s lowest-performing schools. According to PSB, the goal in evaluating CSI and MRI schools is to “co-identify and address the root




causes of the school’s performance challenges while identifying and celebrating strengths and promising practices already in place.” The 50-page protocol for the newly-developed School Support and Readiness Assessment (SSRA) focuses on evaluating the presence or absence of evidence-based practices in five domains: (1) Equity & Culture, (2) Leadership, (3) Instructional Infrastructure, (4) Talent Management, and (5) Support & Accountability. Teams of two to four education specialists (former teachers, principals, and superintendents), including both PSB staff and contractors, conduct the SSRAs. The initial stage of the assessment includes reviewing the school’s state-mandated Data, Accountability, Sustainability, and High Achievement (DASH) plan and performance data. That is followed by emailed surveys of leadership, teachers, parents, and students designed to identify opportunities for growth and gaps in perception around school practices. Finally, PSB conducts a full-day site visit that includes interviews with school leadership, staff, and parents as well as classroom observations. Between FY24 and FY25, PSB conducted SSRAs of 112 of the 145 schools identified as CSI or MRI based on data from the 2022-23 school year, citing staff constraints as limiting their ability to reach all schools. Following the initial assessment, PSB also conducts regular monitoring visits.

***PED dedicates roughly \$11.3 million toward coaching, monitoring, and professional development services for schools.*** PSB consists of 6 FTE costing roughly \$443 thousand in compensation. PSB staff conduct assessments of schools in improvement designation in collaboration with outside contractors. PSB used \$10.9 million of state and federal funding in FY25 to contract with two regional educational cooperatives for professional services related to initiatives and professional coaching for teachers, principals, and district leaders.

**This report reviews the practices of high- and low-performing schools, and the capacity of the state’s accountability system to promote promising practices at all schools.**

In NM Vistas, a school’s index score is strongly correlated with its demographic makeup—schools with fewer at-risk students tend to score higher. However, there are schools that defy the trend, scoring high on NM Vistas despite serving low-income populations or significant numbers of English learners. These schools that ‘beat the odds’ provide a valuable lens for understanding what drives success in challenging contexts. Building on a long research literature studying ‘beating the odds’ schools, this report examines the practices of the state’s highest- and lowest-performing schools to pinpoint high-impact opportunities for improvement.

**Figure 4. PED’s School Assessment (SSRA) Protocol**

-  Review DASH plan and assessment data
-  Emailed survey of leadership, teachers, parents and students
-  Full-day site visit including interviews with school leadership, staff and parents as well as classroom observations

Source: LFC.

**Table 2. Selected PED Priority Schools Bureau (PSB) Spending, FY25**

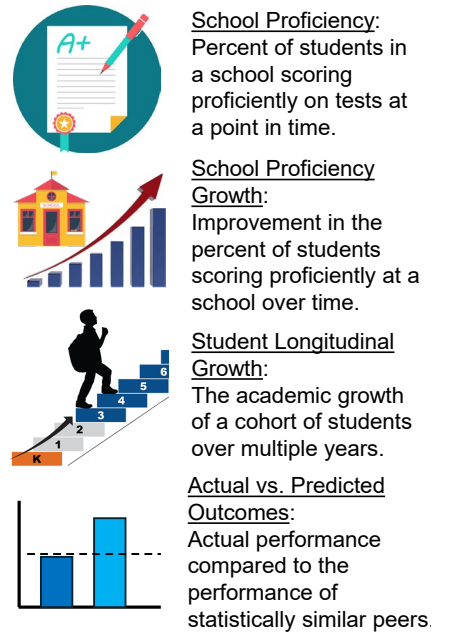
PSB Personnel (6 FTE)	<b>\$443,159</b>
Contract with Regional Educational Cooperative 2	<b>\$5,869,657</b>
Contract with Regional Educational Cooperative 9	<b>\$4,999,814</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$11,312,630</b>

Source: LFC review of contracts and SHARE data.

**Researchers can use various methodologies to identify schools that ‘beat the odds’; this report relies on the state’s current methodology for identifying ‘Spotlight’ schools.** There are two main categories of variables that have to be defined in any beating-the-odds analysis: the odds, and what it means to beat them. When it comes to the odds, there are many factors known to be predictive of an achievement gap for students, including family income, language learner status, mobility, and attendance. Similarly, there are many ways to measure what it means to beat those odds, including student test scores, graduation rates, annual academic growth, and college enrollment. As noted earlier, New Mexico has employed multiple methodologies in the past to differentiate between schools, each with its own underlying calculations. For the purposes of this report, LFC staff did not seek to evaluate the underlying methodology of NM Vistas and its calculations of performance but simply sought to identify demographically similar schools classified by NM Vistas as either high- or low-performing.

**While most ‘Spotlight’ schools serve fewer at-risk students, some defy the trend.** On average, the state’s highest-performing or ‘Spotlight’ schools have fewer students who are low-income, Native American, English learners, or who have a disability. However, exceptions exist. In school year 2022-23, approximately 30 percent of Spotlight schools had above-average proportions of low-income students or students with disabilities, 6 percent had more English learners, and 5 percent had higher numbers of Native American students. Those schools could be considered ‘beating the odds’ schools.

**Figure 5. Various Approaches to Identifying High Performing “Beating the Odds” Schools**



Source: LFC.

**Table 3. Average Demographics by 2022-2023 NM Vistas Designation**

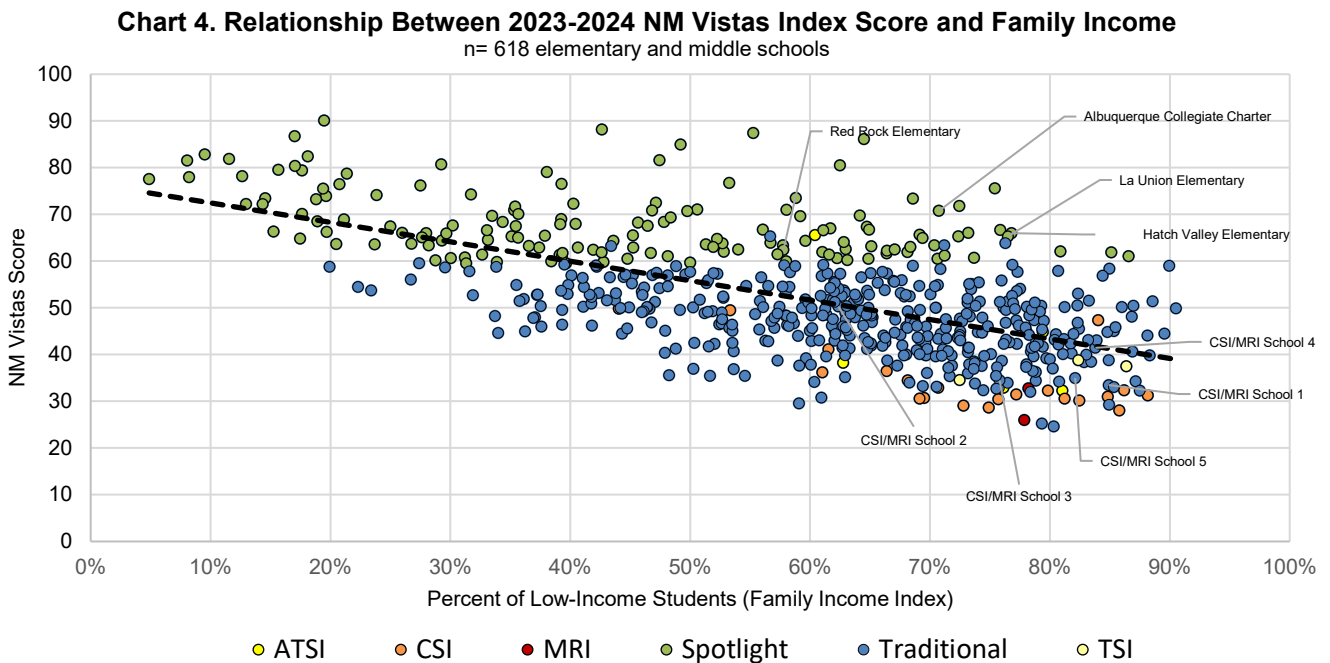
School Designation	Percent Hispanic Students	Percent Native American Students	Percent of Students with Disabilities	Percent Gifted Students	Percent EL Students	Percent Low-Income Students
Spotlight Average	50%	5%	14%	7%	8%	35%
CSI Average	58%	26%	18%	2%	26%	70%
MRI Average	76%	11%	19%	1%	27%	69%
<b>Statewide Average</b>	<b>62%</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>55%</b>

Source: LFC analysis of PED data.

\*Note: Low-income data is from the FY24 Family Income Index (FII).

**For this report, LFC and PED collaboratively applied the Priority Schools Bureau’s protocol for assessing low-performing schools to demographically similar Spotlight schools.** While the research literature suggests certain characteristics define high-performing schools, PED has not historically conducted systematic evaluations of high-performing schools to assess the presence or absence of underlying practices that help schools embody those characteristics. However, as noted above, PSB has developed a comprehensive protocol for assessing the presence or absence of certain evidence-based practices at low-performing (CSI and MRI) schools. For this report, the same teams of PSB specialists applied the same protocol to a selection of demographically similar Spotlight schools (accompanied by LFC staff) with the goal of understanding whether the expected differences in practice were evident. LFC staff visited nine schools in total; five CSI or MRI and four Spotlight schools (Chart 4). LFC staff also reviewed all available School Support and Readiness Assessment (SSRA) summary reports from school years 2023-24 and 2024-25. The reports are narrative and describe what the PSB team and school leadership identified as a school’s promising practices and areas for growth, based on the data collected using the school assessment protocol. The reports do not include all areas for growth but focus on the areas identified by PSB specialists as the most critical for improving student outcomes in the near term.

**School Support and Readiness Assessment (SSRA) reports are narrative and describe what the PSB team and school leadership identified as a school’s promising practices and areas for growth, based on data collected using the school assessment protocol.**



\*Note: LFC and PSB staff visited schools identified as CSI/MRI based on 2022-23 NM Vistas designations. The schools exited CSI/MRI designation in November 2024 based on 2023-24 data, which is why they appear in this chart as Traditional.

Source: LFC analysis of PED data.

**Figure 6. Excerpt from a School Support and Readiness Assessment (SSRA) Summary Report**

**Opportunities for Growth:**

Although there has been a positive shift in culture, this shift is impacted by attendance and engagement lapses. There are opportunities to leverage and solidify the positive shift by prioritizing initiatives to improve student attendance and engagement in the classroom.

Student participation in various activities can limit some student groups from accessing academic support and subsequent celebrations. While the administration continues to refine the cultural aspects of the school’s mission, they may find avenues to enhance equity practices that promote student engagement at all levels.

**Potential Next Steps:**

Along with the foundational pillars, the leadership team will work toward creating a system to improve attendance through monitoring, providing incentives, and solidifying the current procedures for communicating expectations to students and families. When clear avenues of communication are in place, particularly regarding attendance expectations and school events, families are empowered to provide access to their children.

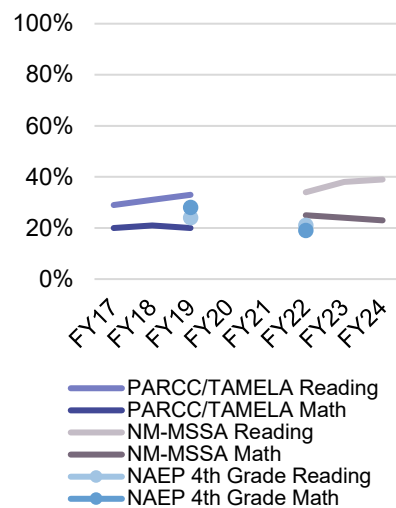
The staff is committed to intentionally formalizing all attendance improvement processes by

Source: PED School Improvement website.

## High- and low-performing schools serving ‘at risk’ students differ in their practices

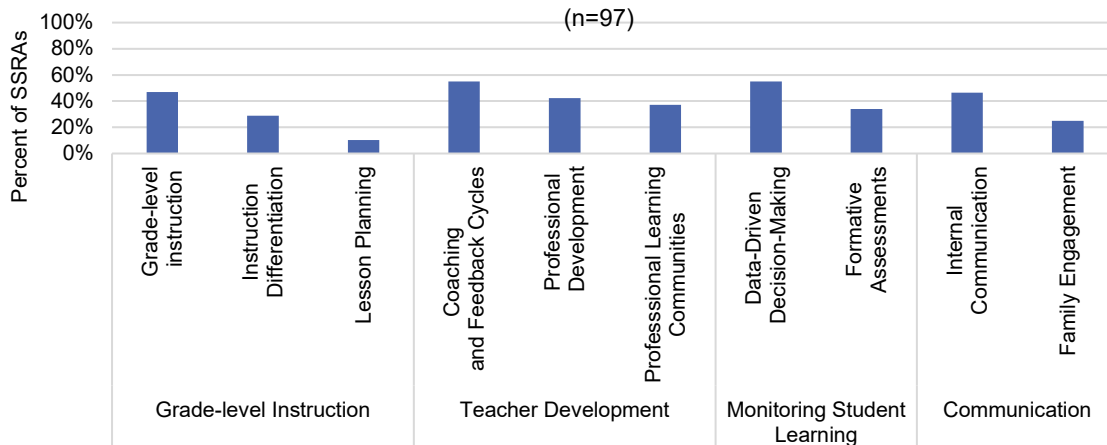
While the presence of evidence-based practices linked to better student achievement is not necessarily predictive of a school’s performance, it is reasonable to expect those practices to be more common in high-performing schools and less so in low-performing ones. That pattern is evident in a review of the Priority Schools Bureau’s School Support and Readiness Assessment (SSRA) summary reports, which show that many low-performing schools either lack systems for core practices like formative assessment and teacher learning communities, or struggle to implement them effectively. By contrast, those practices are more consistently evident in assessments of Spotlight schools. The following chapter will cover the presence or absence of evidence-based practices in the following key areas: grade-level instruction, teacher development, monitoring student learning, and communication. Research shows teachers have the largest school-level influence on student outcomes, so unsurprisingly, many of the practices center on their work. However, without principals articulating schoolwide expectations and developing systems to facilitate implementation of evidence-based practices, schools are unlikely to produce sustained changes in student achievement. Additionally, both teachers and principals operate within the larger contexts of districts and the state, and many practices require systemic support for implementation. Overall, the findings suggest the presence or absence of systematized practices contributes to performance differences between high- and low-performing schools.

**Chart 5. Percent of New Mexico Students Proficient in Reading and Math, FY17-FY24**



Source: LFC analysis of PED data.

**Chart 6. Percentage of CSI and MRI SSRAs Identifying Deficiencies in a School-Level Practice (n=97)**



\*Note: A practice was noted as deficient if PSB included either the absence of a practice or problems with its implementation in the "opportunities for growth" or "potential next steps" sections of the SSRA report

Source: LFC analysis of PED SSRA summary reports.

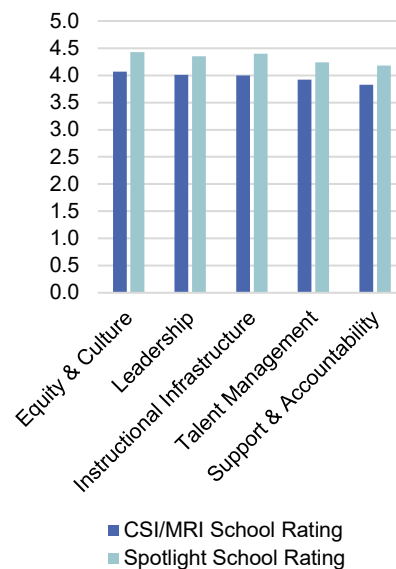
**Spotlight schools consistently received higher ratings of school practices from leadership, staff, and parents.** As part of its SSRA protocol, the Priority Schools Bureau (PSB) sends surveys to stakeholders at every CSI/MRI school before site visits. The surveys are distributed to school leadership, staff, parents and, at high schools, students. Their purpose is to identify potential areas for improvement in practices and to reveal gaps in perceptions of performance among different stakeholder groups. For this report, PSB invited all schools identified as ‘Spotlight’ based on 2022-2023 data to participate in the same survey, with 81 out of 209 responding. Overall, the Spotlight schools received better ratings from all raters in response to questions focused on each of PSB’s five domains—culture & equity, leadership, instructional infrastructure, talent management, and support and accountability.

### High-performing schools have robust systems for planning and delivering grade-level instruction.

Providing grade-level instruction should be a core priority for every school so students complete their education with the appropriate knowledge and skills. However, many schools struggle to deliver on that priority; PSB noted grade-level instruction as a critical area for growth in 47 percent of SSRAs of low-performing schools. State standards, while essential for defining what students need to know and do, are often broad and difficult to translate into actionable classroom instruction, which can leave teachers unsure of how to implement them effectively. While the state provides an instructional scope designed to help teachers unpack the standards, without clear expectations from school and district leaders, teachers may prioritize instructional time for remediation rather than grade-level academics. That challenge is particularly acute when students start out behind, incentivizing teachers to focus on below-grade-level content instead of grade-level rigor. High-performing schools address those challenges by supporting standards-aligned instructional planning, providing high-quality instructional materials, and ensuring teachers have the training and support to target grade-level instruction to students at different skill levels.

**High-performing schools are more likely to provide teachers with tools to align their instruction to state standards.** State standards outline dozens of skills and content areas that teachers are expected to address within a single school year. Teachers must interpret those standards, align them with curriculum materials, and adapt them to meet diverse student needs. Schools and districts can support teachers by providing tools that help them create a logical progression of ideas and skills during instructional planning. The survey conducted by the Priority Schools Bureau across all CSI/MRI schools and 81 Spotlight schools found a statistically significant difference between high- and low-performing schools in the availability of a standards-aligned ‘scope and sequence,’ or curriculum planning tool that outlines the content to be taught and the order in which it should be covered to meet learning standards (Chart 8). Without

**Chart 7. Perception of School Practices Across PSB Domains**  
n=2286 CSI/MRI Raters; 385 Spotlight Raters



Source: PSB 360 Survey.

**State standards, while essential for defining what students need to know and do, are often broad and difficult for teachers to translate into actionable classroom instruction.**

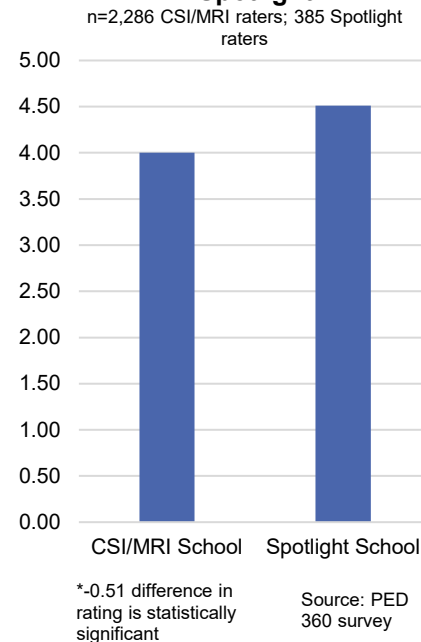


that kind of guidance, teachers may inadvertently overlook certain standards, and instruction may be inconsistent across classrooms within the school and district, a particular problem for districts with high student mobility. At several CSI/MRI schools, leaders noted many teachers struggled to unpack standards and connect them meaningfully to the curriculum and PSB experts noted a lack of grade-level rigor in their classroom observations. In contrast, at La Union Elementary, a Spotlight school in the Gadsden school district, teachers use district-provided ‘proficiency scales’ to clarify learning targets. The scales, which are available on the district’s website, go a step beyond a scope and sequence, not only outlining key concepts and skills by grade level and subject, but also what different levels of proficiency in those concepts and skills look like.

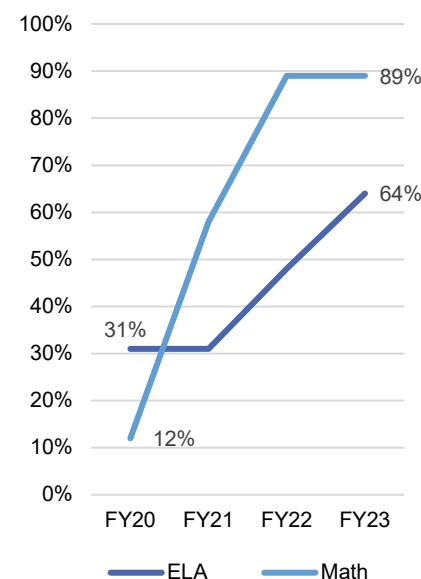
**When teachers have access to high-quality instructional material (HQIM) and know how to use it for standards-aligned instruction, students are able to develop the right skills for their grade level.** In recent years, there has been a nationwide push to increase the availability of HQIM in classrooms, reflecting research showing that certain curricula have a positive effect on student achievement. In FY25, the Legislature appropriated \$55 million to districts for instructional materials, or roughly \$86 per student, up from roughly \$36 per student in FY19. That amounts to a doubling of instructional materials funding, even when accounting for inflation. Although districts and schools are not required to use HQIM, PED maintains a database of recommended instructional materials, which have been vetted according to a qualitative rubric by New Mexico teachers. A majority of districts have adopted curriculum from it across all grade levels. However, the presence of HQIM does not necessarily translate to improved student outcomes; teachers must use the materials, and use them correctly.

In a 2021 EdReports national survey, only a quarter of teachers reported using standards-aligned English Language Arts materials at least once a week, compared to 43 percent reporting using unrated materials, including supplemental materials sourced online. In order to promote more robust adoption of HQIM, research suggests teachers need professional learning opportunities associated with it, something PED acknowledges in the materials it publishes. However, PED does not monitor whether districts contract for professional development related to HQIM nor does it evaluate the quality of those programs. That is in contrast to a state like Delaware, which both vets programs and provides grants to districts to support professional learning related to HQIM. During site visits to several CSI/MRI schools, LFC staff observed HQIM was often not being used or used systematically. Teachers and school leaders expressed confusion during the visits about how to integrate HQIM into standards-aligned instruction. One principal noted that while their school was "flooded with materials," teachers lacked the training and tools needed to use HQIM effectively.

**Chart 8. Rating of the Availability of 'Scope and Sequence' CSI/MRI v Spotlight**



**Chart 9. Elementary School Students with Access to High Quality Instructional Materials**



Source: PED summary of districts' self-reported purchasing data.

**Teachers need to tailor instruction to meet the needs of different students; 29 percent of SSRAs of low-performing schools identify this as a critical area for improvement.** In any classroom, students are often at very different points in their learning, with some performing well above grade level and others performing significantly below. This variability poses a substantial challenge for teachers attempting to help all students meet grade-level targets. Without clear expectations from school and district leadership, teachers may instinctively prioritize struggling students, in the process leaving advanced learners unchallenged and others disengaged. Twenty-nine percent of SSRAs of low-performing schools identify differentiating instruction as a critical challenge. However, strategies like small-group instruction, when implemented correctly, can help address a diversity of classroom needs. Several recent studies suggest flexible grouping of students has a positive impact on achievement in both math, reading and science. Despite its potential, during classroom observations at CSI/MRI schools, PSB experts noted small-group instruction was absent or improperly implemented. Most observed classrooms relied heavily on whole-group instruction, and where small-group teaching was attempted, PSB experts noted it lacked purpose and structure. By contrast, at La Union Elementary, teachers reported using flexible small-group instruction tailored to students’ evolving strengths and weaknesses. Similarly, at Albuquerque Collegiate, a Spotlight school, the school’s team-teaching model in K-3 classrooms is designed to facilitate small-group instruction.

**Strategies like small-group instruction, when implemented correctly, can help address a diversity of classroom needs.**

**Table 4. Comparison of Differentiated Instruction in Spotlight and CSI/MRI School Support and Readiness Assessments**

Spotlight School	CSI/MRI School
<p>"The support and accountability framework includes a 10-day action plan that structures small groups and activities tailored to data and students’ differentiated needs."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Hatch Valley Elementary School SSRA, p.3</li> </ul>	<p>"Most of the instruction on the day of the site visit included a high ratio of teacher talk in a whole group setting. Increasing student voice (from all students), offering more hands-on learning tasks, and using small groups and differentiation would likely increase student engagement and sense of efficacy."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- CSI/MRI SSRA</li> </ul>

Source: LFC review of PED PSB assessment documents.

**Innovative staffing structures, like team teaching, can help with differentiated instruction.** The one-teacher, one-classroom model has been standard for decades, but studies suggest varying that model can be beneficial for both students and teachers. One alternative model is team teaching, where two or more teachers collaborate to plan and deliver instruction. At Albuquerque Collegiate team teaching is used in the lower elementary grades to support differentiated instruction and provide in-class coaching for teachers. Teachers at the school reported that the team-teaching system allows them to deliver more rigorous differentiated instruction for students at all levels without interrupting the flow of the

**Case Study: Innovative Staffing in Carlsbad**

In FY24, Carlsbad Municipal Schools began piloting a program called Opportunity Culture, with the goal of expanding the influence of excellent teachers. The program, which was created by Public Impact, a North Carolina-based LLC, reimagines the traditional one-teacher-one-classroom model by selecting highly effective teachers to lead small teams in their schools. Multi-Classroom Leaders (MCLs) co-plan, co-teach, coach, and model effective instruction for their teams. Participating schools also restructure schedules to provide more time during the school day for planning, coaching, and collaboration. Carlsbad implemented the program at P.R. Leyva Middle School, where preliminary results show high student growth rates, with 37 percent of 7th graders and 47.5 percent of 6th graders achieving 1.5 years or more of growth in reading, and 44 percent of 7th graders and 46 percent of 6th graders doing the same in math. Comparatively, P.R. Leyva students displayed significantly higher academic growth in reading and math than their peers at Alta Vista Middle School, which has not yet implemented Opportunity Culture. A June 2024 LFC-LESC brief estimated supporting a three-year rollout of Opportunity Culture for roughly half of the districts in New Mexico would cost between \$16 million and \$35.8 million.

Source: June 2024 LFC-LESC Hearing Brief, TeachPlus NM Growing Outcomes Through Innovation Report

classroom. Another Spotlight school, La Union, does not have formal team-teaching structures, but teachers have experimented with collaborative approaches. For example, in the 2023-24 school year, the second-grade teachers periodically swapped classes, which they reported required more rigorous planning but led to faster student growth on interim assessments. They attributed that to students receiving instruction about similar concepts in slightly different ways from each teacher. The success of team teaching depends heavily on its implementation, but it is a promising practice districts and the state should continue to study.

**Collaboration among teachers, both within and across grade levels, helps minimize gaps in students’ foundational knowledge.** When districts and schools provide time in teacher contracts and school calendars for professional learning communities (PLCs) and common planning time, teachers have the opportunity to share strategies, review lesson plans, align lessons across grade levels, and analyze student data. However, those efforts need to be well-organized and focused on improving student outcomes to be effective. Thirty-seven percent of SSRAs of low-performing schools identify creating or better implementing PLCs as a critical area for improvement. During site visits to CSI/MRI schools, many teachers shared with PSB and LFC staff that PLCs—if they existed—were often treated as informal staff meetings, and grade-level planning lacked structure and direction. In contrast, the Spotlight schools reported having dedicated block planning timing for grade-level and cross-grade teams as well as highly structured grade-level PLCs to analyze and reflect on classroom data. The Gadsden Independent School District has created district-wide PLC time through early-release Wednesdays, giving teachers at all schools in the district at least 90 minutes weekly for analyzing student data and unit planning. Some schools in the district, including La Union, also provide additional time for teacher collaboration and planning with their calendars.

**Figure 7. Effective Collaboration**

**Gadsden Independent School District expects teachers to answer four questions in all PLCs:**

1. What are our students supposed to know?
2. How will we know our students are learning?
3. What will we do with our students who are not learning?
4. What will we do with students who have already learned?

Source: LFC staff site visits and interview.

## High-performing schools have robust systems for teacher development and accountability.

Research consistently shows teachers are the single most significant school-based factor influencing student achievement, and effective teachers can dramatically accelerate student growth. However, like most professionals, teachers need opportunities to grow and refine their skills. PSB experts noted teacher development as a critical area for growth in 65 percent of SSRAs of low-performing schools. In a robust teacher development system, teachers have a clear understanding of what is expected of them, receive honest feedback on their strengths and areas for growth, and are supported with actionable guidance. That is realized through principals and instructional coaches who help teachers refine and tailor their instruction to the needs of their students and targeted professional development opportunities.

**Observing teachers in their classrooms and providing feedback and coaching is an evidence-based practice for improving instruction, which in turn improves student outcomes; 55 percent of SSRA reports identify feedback and coaching as a critical area of growth for low-performing schools.** While not all feedback is equally valuable, research suggests that when teachers receive specific, actionable feedback in a low-stakes evaluation system, it can enhance their instructional practice. Districts should establish expectations around feedback and ensure schools have established systems for instructional leaders (principals, coaches and other teachers) to provide it. PSB identified a lack of systematization around teacher feedback and coaching as a critical area of improvement for 55 percent of low-performing schools in its SSRAs. While there are many reasons principals may not prioritize the practice of observing classrooms and providing feedback, one contributing factor could be a lack of clarity around its purpose and potential impact. At one CSI/MRI school visit, a principal shared that they conducted classroom walkthroughs and noted areas for improvement, but when asked by PSB specialists how they used the feedback, the principal said it was “just for [them],” demonstrating a gap in understanding of the connection between observation and the goal of improved instruction. At another low-performing school, the principal noted that they simply did not know how to provide helpful feedback to teachers. By contrast, the principal of Red Rock Elementary School, a Spotlight school in Gallup, told LFC staff she usually conducts three to five classroom walkthroughs a week, accompanied by feedback to teachers through a district-created Google form and one-on-one meetings.

**The principal of Red Rock Elementary, a Spotlight school in Gallup, usually conducts three to five classroom walkthroughs a week, accompanied by feedback to teachers through a district-created form and one-on-one meetings.**

**Instructional coaches can provide teachers with feedback to improve their overall practice and tailor instruction to the particular needs of the students in their classrooms.** The responsibility for instructional leadership and feedback has traditionally rested with principals, but many schools and districts now also employ instructional coaches, recognizing coaching requires specialized skills and that principals’ managerial duties can affect how teachers perceive their feedback. A 2018 meta-analysis published in the Review of Educational Research found coaching improved instruction and was also correlated with improved student achievement in a subset of studies. In New Mexico, 66 school districts and 85 charter schools collectively employed 1,077 instructional coaches in FY24 for \$96 million in federal and state dollars. At Albuquerque Collegiate Charter, LFC and PSB staff observed instructional coaches engaging in real-time feedback with teachers. The expectation at Albuquerque Collegiate is that coaches are in the classroom weekly, if not daily, to help teachers improve and tailor their instruction to the needs of their students. At La Union Elementary, teachers also reported receiving regular observation and feedback from a school-embedded instructional coach. Those examples illustrate the potential impact of systematizing feedback and coaching practices and prioritizing them in both school and district scheduling and budgeting. However, simply increasing the number of instructional coaches alone does not in itself guarantee successful student outcomes. For example, Albuquerque Collegiate had a calculated ratio of five teachers per instructional coach in FY24 compared to the statewide average of 20

**At La Union Elementary, a Spotlight school in the Gadsden school district, teachers reported receiving regular observation and feedback from a school-embedded instructional coach.**

teachers per instructional coach. However, a school with a lower ratio in FY24—one teacher per coach—was designated as a CSI school.

**Table 5. Comparison of Teacher Development Systems in Spotlight and CSI/MRI School Support and Readiness Assessments**

Spotlight School	CSI/MRI School
<p>"At La Union Elementary, support and accountability are critical components of instructional improvement. An instructional coach actively influences teaching practices, working closely with teachers to enhance classroom instruction. Clear expectations are set around proficiency scales, learning targets, and student growth metrics, guiding instructional planning and evaluation."</p> <p>- La Union Elementary SSRA, p.3</p>	<p>"The feedback provided has trended towards the general and anonymous ("I saw a lot of ___ this week, but not a lot of ____.") There is an opportunity to more closely tie observational data and feedback, such that teachers are given insight into their instruction that helps them develop a reflective practice."</p> <p>- CSI/MRI SSRA</p>

Source: LFC review of PED PSB assessment documents

**Districts spent \$26 million on professional development in FY24 but the state does not collect more specific information about how that money is spent; forty percent of SSRAs of low-performing schools identify professional development as a critical area of growth.** In FY24, districts in New Mexico spent \$26 million on professional development from federal, state, and local sources. However, the state does not collect more specific information about the type or quality of that professional development. The question of what constitutes effective professional development has been a central focus of education research in the past decade, spurred by a 2015 report from TNTP, an education non-profit, that raised questions about the effectiveness of teacher professional development, and the metrics used to assess its impact. In the years since, many researchers have attempted to identify and articulate the differences between effective and ineffective professional development. One meta-analysis, published by the Learning Policy Institute in 2017, analyzed 35 studies and concluded effective professional development is 'job-embedded,' emphasizing sustained collaboration, active problem-solving, and alignment with real classroom challenges. The report cites coaching and PLCs as examples of a 'job-embedded' approach, in contrast to more traditional models, like one-time conferences and workshops. Studies have shown 'sit-and-get' approaches to professional development typically lack systems for follow-up support or implementation monitoring, resulting in minimal changes to classroom practices.

While research supports the effectiveness of coaching and PLCs in improving teacher performance and student outcomes, more recent studies have moved away from endorsing a singular model of effective professional development. Instead, they emphasize the importance of school districts building capacity for in-house evaluation of professional development programs to ensure they are having the intended effect.

**Figure 8. A Model for Evaluating the Effectiveness of Professional Development**

1. Teachers gain a deeper understanding of how teaching and learning happen in the classroom.
2. Builds motivation to change their classroom techniques.
3. Gives teachers the opportunity to use the new techniques they have learned.
4. Embeds the new techniques in ongoing instruction.

Source: Review of Educational Research, December 2023.

Reflecting that push, in 2020, the federal Institute for Education Sciences published a tool called “Evaluating Professional Learning” designed to help districts structure those evaluations. However, the state may need to distribute the tool to districts and assist them in developing those processes. At one CSI/MRI school, teachers noted almost all of their district-mandated professional development was unrelated to their classroom instruction needs. In contrast, Gadsden district leaders told LFC staff that their approach to professional development involves structured evaluation to ensure alignment with instructional goals. The district also noted that principals, instructional specialists, and coaches attend trainings before teachers, ensuring they can effectively support and evaluate their classroom implementation.

***PED does not currently collect or analyze data about teacher performance.*** Many studies have found that students who are assigned to highly effective teachers grow academically up to three times faster than their peers—equivalent to an additional year of learning in some cases. However, considerable research has also demonstrated that metrics like master’s degrees and years of experience are not reliable indicators of teacher effectiveness, underscoring the need for a more comprehensive system to evaluate teacher performance and target professional development. State statute requires annual performance evaluation of all licensed school employees (NM 1978 22-10A-19). PED has used several teacher evaluation systems over the last two decades. The current system, which was used for the first time in the 2023-2024 school year, requires that principals conduct annual evaluations through Elevate NM. Teachers are evaluated on 19 indicators across four domains, with ratings on a four-point continuum from ‘Innovating’ to ‘Not Demonstrating.’ However, the results of those evaluations are not systematically collected nor analyzed at the state level. As a result, the state lacks the ability to monitor individual teacher effectiveness over time or to develop data-driven statewide training initiatives to address systemic areas of need among educators.

***Many studies have found that students who are assigned to highly effective teachers grow academically up to three times faster than their peers.***

## **High-performing schools have robust systems for monitoring student learning and addressing performance gaps.**

To improve student outcomes, schools need to systematically monitor what students are learning and identify where they are struggling. State-mandated summative (end-of-year) assessments, like the New Mexico Measures of Student Success and Achievement (NM-MSSA) and the SAT, while valuable for accountability, are too broad and the results are too delayed to be useful for day-to-day teaching. High-performing schools instead rely on frequent formative assessments (quizzes, exit tickets) and regular interim assessments (Istation, MAPS) to provide insights into student understanding. Those districts and school leaders systematize

expectations around assessments and help teachers track and interpret assessment data over time, allowing them to identify patterns and adjust instruction accordingly. Additionally, teachers involve students in monitoring their own data, encouraging them to set goals and take ownership of their progress.

**Expectations around regular assessment help teachers pinpoint what students know and where they may need support; 34 percent of SSRAs identify formative assessment as an area for growth.** There are many ways to gauge student learning, including formative assessments that guide immediate instructional adjustments and interim assessments that provide a broader view of progress toward key benchmarks. Employing multiple methods allows teachers to identify areas where students are excelling or struggling, and loop back to material that students did not grasp. It also provides critical data for referring students who need additional support to specialists or intervention programs. However, if districts and school leadership do not establish clear expectations and systems for assessment, teachers may rely on intuition rather than data to guide their instruction. There is considerable evidence that formative assessment can improve student outcomes, but thirty-four percent of SSRAs identify formative assessment as an area for growth. The evidence is less conclusive regarding interim assessment, but studies show it can benefit students when used to guide instruction. During site visits to CSI/MRI schools, PSB and LFC staff noted that in some cases, interim assessments were administered, but the results were not being incorporated into instruction. At one CSI/MRI school, the principal’s misunderstanding of interim assessments exacerbated the issue; they attributed declining student proficiencies to increasing test difficulty, rather than gaps in learning revealed by the data. By contrast, teachers at Spotlight schools reported clear, school- or district-wide expectations for using regular assessments, including systems to support them in interpreting results and adapting their instruction.

**Figure 9. Definitions of Assessment Types Discussed in this Report**

**Formative assessment**

Regular check-ins to assess learning, and adjust instruction accordingly, like quizzes and class discussions.

**Interim assessment**

Formal tests (IStation, MAPS) to assess student progress toward larger academic goals; often selected and, in some cases, mandated by the school district.

**Summative assessment**

End-of-unit or end-of-year tests of what a student has learned. New Mexico’s annual statewide summative assessments (NM-MSSA and SAT) are mandatory and used for accountability purposes.

Source: LFC.

**Table 6. Comparison of Formative Assessment in Spotlight and CSI/MRI School Support and Readiness Assessments**

Spotlight School	CSI/MRI School
<p>“Common formative assessments (CFAs) are utilized to gauge the transfer of learning, allowing educators to measure how well students apply knowledge and skills over time. These assessments provide insights into areas where students may need additional support or enrichment, informing future instruction.”</p> <p>- Hatch Valley Elementary SSRA, p.2</p>	<p>“Interviewees could not explain how staff and students know what students have learned. There are no expectations around daily or weekly formative assessments. This lack of assessment means that gaps in understanding are not necessarily being addressed regularly.”</p> <p>- CSI/MRI SSRA</p>

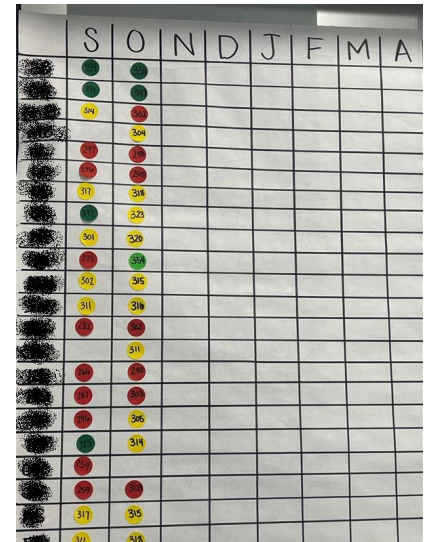
Source: LFC review of PED PSB assessment documents

**Establishing schoolwide systems for tracking assessment data over time helps identify patterns, revealing why certain students may be struggling.** When a student is consistently struggling with a concept or skill, it signals they need additional help. However, identifying those patterns requires consistent monitoring of their progress over time. At one CSI/MRI school, PSB specialists spent considerable time with the principal discussing the need to create a system for associating grade-level proficiency percentages with individual students and following their trajectory consistently over time—a practice that had not previously been standard at the school. The interaction highlighted the critical need for the state and districts to better communicate expectations around assessment and provide training in how to use assessment data most effectively. One strategy some school leaders use to promote data literacy is the creation of secure data walls in staff spaces, where individual student performance is tracked over time by classroom. Data walls provide a visual representation of progress while also fostering accountability.

**When school leadership provides teachers with time and systems for analyzing student assessment results, they can group students by current skill levels and target instruction.** High-performing schools use assessment data not only to identify struggling students but also to design targeted instructional interventions. At Hatch Valley Elementary, a Spotlight school, teachers create 10-day action plans for individual students based on monthly iStation standardized assessment results, focusing on specific skills that the student needs to master. Those 10-day plans also inform how students are grouped for additional instruction, allowing teachers to address learning gaps or provide advanced content for students who are ready to move ahead. That approach, often referred to as flexible grouping, relies on frequent and intentional analysis of assessment results to identify skill gaps and areas of strength. Research supports the idea that clustering students for targeted instruction leads to significant gains in learning outcomes. After implementing the 10-day plans, teachers at Hatch Valley Elementary reassess students to monitor improvement, ensuring student groups evolve with learning.

**Encouraging students to monitor their own progress helps them understand their strengths and areas for growth, making them active participants in their own learning.** Research suggests that when students track their progress using structured tools, they may develop a stronger sense of control over their learning, which is associated with improved academic outcomes and modest gains in motivation. SSRAs of low-performing schools indicate that is not always happening. By contrast, at La Union, all students, K-6, are responsible for maintaining their own ‘student trackers,’ which are designed to make academic goals and progress tangible for students by visually displaying their achievements and areas needing attention. Some teachers in the upper grades at La Union also schedule weekly time for students to log onto PowerSchool, a learning management system, to track their grades in an effort to teach students goal-setting and self-advocacy.

**Figure 10. Effective versus ineffective data wall tracking**



The first data wall breaks down the absolute score and proficiency level of individual students (initials blurred) by month, making it easy to follow progress over time.



In the second data wall, it is difficult to follow an individual student's progress over time.

Source: LFC site visits.



## High-performing schools have robust systems for communicating with both internal and external stakeholders.

Clear and consistent communication within schools ensures teachers, staff, and administrators are aligned on shared goals, creating a unified team focused on improving student outcomes. Externally, frequent updates on student progress help families stay engaged in their children’s education, equipping them to provide meaningful support at home. By establishing strong communication systems, schools build trust, accountability, and a sense of shared ownership for student learning.

***When teachers, staff, and administrators are all clear and aligned on school goals, it creates a unified team working towards the same outcomes; 46 percent of SSRAs of low-performing schools identify internal communication as a critical area for growth.*** Effective communication is essential for the functioning of any organization, including schools. That communication can take many forms, including weekly newsletters, staff meetings with clear agendas, teacher handbooks, leadership check-ins, shared calendars, and performance dashboards or data walls. However, many school leaders, particularly new principals, have not had prior experience managing teams or developing effective communication systems. During site visits to CSI/MRI schools, PSB specialists and LFC staff frequently heard communication was a key challenge, with leadership either failing to communicate or communicating inconsistently. At one school, a teacher described the lack of communication from the principal as “destabilizing.” At another school where communication was identified as a critical area for growth, the PSB team walked the principal through the process of creating a weekly staff newsletter as an alternative to their previous system of scattershot emails. While a staff newsletter is just one example, it can be highly effective. Teachers at Hatch Valley Elementary praised their principal’s weekly newsletter for serving as a centralized source of information, helping them stay on top of events and instructional priorities.

**Table 7. Comparison of Communication in Spotlight and CSI/MRI School Support and Readiness Assessments**

Spotlight School	CSI/MRI School
<p>“There is a clear communication from/to leadership and staff to ensure all are in the know of direction and areas of need.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Albuquerque Collegiate Charter SSRA, p. 3</li> </ul>	<p>“Staff seem to be unsure of what is happening and the expectations of the leader. Teachers are confused on processes and upcoming events.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- CSI/MRI SSRA</li> </ul>

Source: LFC review of PED PSB assessment documents.

**Regular updates on student academic progress encourage families to stay actively involved in their child's learning.** Research consistently shows that parental involvement is an important contributor to student success, with higher parental expectations linked to better academic outcomes. However, for families to support their children effectively, they need clear and timely information about their child's progress, including specific areas where additional help may be needed. While most schools rely on quarterly report cards and periodic parent-teacher conferences to communicate this information, high-performing schools often go beyond these traditional methods, using multiple channels to ensure parents are informed and engaged. For example, Hatch Valley Elementary has clear, school-wide expectations for teachers to communicate with families using multiple methods. Every student at Hatch Valley has a 'take-home' folder. In addition to homework, teachers include progress reports, flyers about school events, and printed assessment results from the school's monthly Istation testing in those folders. Assessment results can be more actionable for families than traditional report cards since report cards don't always reflect actual proficiency or identify specific areas where students need extra support. In addition to take-home folders, Hatch Valley also uses ClassDojo, a digital communication platform, for regular updates. In a PSB focus group, parents expressed gratitude for the level of communication from the school, with one of them noting that through the communication the teachers are "constantly verbalizing what their expectations are for my kids, what they're doing to help them get there and what I need to do to help them." For parents who want even more engagement, the school offers family nights, where parents learn games and teaching strategies to help students continue to practice specific hard-to-master skills at home.

***For families to support their children effectively, they need clear and timely information about their child's progress, including specific areas where additional help may be needed.***

## Recommendations

The New Mexico Public Education Department should:

- Collect and analyze data about teacher performance in order to identify opportunities for additional support and professional development;
- Require districts to report on professional learning associated with HQIM; and
- Require districts to administer interim assessments at least biannually, and to send the results of those assessments to students' families within one month of administration.

New Mexico public school districts should:

- Set clear expectations for principals regarding district-wide, evidence-based core practices;
- Ensure all schools within the district have established systems for monitoring student learning, tracking student progress over time and using that information to guide instruction;
- Provide time within district-wide calendars for teachers to participate in structured collaboration focused on data analysis,

standards-aligned lesson planning and strategies for improved instruction;

- Provide district-wide tools that help incorporate the state's grade-level standards into day-to-day instruction;
- Provide professional learning associated with district-purchased HQIM;
- Evaluate professional development programs according to the standards outlined by the Institute for Education Sciences; and
- Consider innovative staffing structures that increase collaboration among teachers.

Principals and other school leaders should:

- Develop or strengthen school-based systems for providing teachers with frequent, specific, actionable feedback about how to improve their instruction;
- Develop or strengthen school-based systems for connecting state grade-level standards to lesson plans and available curriculum materials;
- Develop or strengthen school-based systems for regularly monitoring student learning, tracking student progress over time and using that information to guide instruction;
- Develop or strengthen school-based systems for regularly communicating with families about students' learning progress; and
- Provide time within school calendars to ensure all teachers have opportunities for structured collaboration both within and across grade levels focused on data analysis, standards-aligned lesson planning, and strategies for improved instruction.

## Implementing evidence-based practices requires effective, consistent district and school leadership

Implementing promising practices requires more than just knowledge of what works; effective, consistent district and school leadership is necessary to turn evidence into action. While some promising practices may require additional resources, many can be realized through thoughtful allocation of existing resources. However, when district and school leaders lack clarity about their responsibilities or are out of alignment on goals, efforts can become fragmented, making it difficult to sustain practices over time. This challenge is especially pronounced in New Mexico, where one in three principals leave their job every year. Frequent leadership transitions disrupt initiatives, shift priorities, and create gaps in accountability, leaving schools unable to establish the systems of practice needed for lasting improvement. Addressing those challenges requires investing in leadership retention and development.

***“Everyone is working hard. Everyone is doing what they think is best. But it’s not systematic.”***

- New Mexico  
education leader

### **Districts play an important role in ensuring schools have the support they need to implement promising practices.**

Studies have shown it often takes three to seven years for sustained school improvement. While ultimately it is principals and teachers who must implement many of the evidence-based practices outlined in the last chapter, districts and charters play an important role in supporting those efforts. Districts hire principals and, as the primary recipients of state funding, can prioritize their budgets to support improvement efforts, ensuring schools have access to the tools and training necessary to sustain evidence-based practices over time. The traditional characterization of a district’s remit is ‘buses, budgets, and buildings,’ but a growing body of research indicates highly effective districts also focus on instructional leadership. That includes setting a clear and shared vision for student success, providing targeted professional development to build teacher and principal capacity, and using data systems to guide decision-making and track progress—all evidence-based practices for improving schools, reinforced and supported at the district level.

***Effective collaboration between schools and districts requires clarity about their respective roles and responsibilities.*** When districts move beyond the ‘buses, budgets, and buildings’ model to incorporate instructional leadership, they need to clearly define expectations around the roles and responsibilities of the district and its component schools to avoid confusion or duplication of efforts. A 2009 meta-analysis found the most effective districts have clear, non-negotiable expectations around practices,

***A 2009 meta-analysis found the most effective districts have clear, non-negotiable expectations around practices, but give school leaders autonomy in their actual implementation.***

but give school leaders autonomy in their actual implementation, a management strategy with well-documented efficacy in fields outside of education. In other words, districts specify the ‘what,’ while school leaders are responsible for the ‘how.’ The Priority Schools Bureau refers to the strategy as ‘tight & loose’ expectations in its District Support Guide, a document that outlines the bureau’s vision for how districts can support school improvement.

***District funding priorities influence the implementation of school-level practices.*** While some of the evidence-based practices outlined in the previous chapter can be implemented at the school level, many require districts to prioritize funding to succeed. For example, districts purchase curriculum materials, allocate time and money for professional development, and select the interim assessments used to standardize tracking of student progress. If a district opts not to purchase high-quality instructional materials or to set aside time in the district calendar for professional learning, schools may struggle to implement those practices.

***Research shows increasing instructional time has a positive impact on student outcomes when that time is used well.*** Past LFC reports and many research studies have highlighted the benefits of additional instructional time for closing achievement gaps and improving student outcomes. For example, a 2021 LFC Early Childhood Accountability Report found low-income students who participated in high-fidelity K-5 Plus programs and prekindergarten had higher academic proficiency than their peers. Additionally, a 2021 meta-analysis of school improvement since NCLB found extended learning time to be one of the most consistently effective interventions. Between 2007 and 2022, the Legislature funded K-3, K-5, and K-12 Plus programs encouraging districts to add additional instructional and teacher collaboration time to their calendars. In 2023, the Legislature added K-12 Plus into the State Equalization Guarantee funding formula, with districts and charter schools exceeding certain calendar minimums (180 days for 5-day-a-week schools) receiving additional funding. In FY24, 64 out of 89 districts and 74 out of 102 charter schools collectively qualified for \$113 million in K-12 Plus funding, with roughly 21 percent participating in Tier 2 of the program, which involves additional calendar days. Although additional instructional time can be an effective intervention for at-risk students, the quality of instructional time matters as well. Analysis of FY24 data does not show a correlation between districts that opted for a longer calendar year and student achievement or school-level NM Vistas scores, but there are a number of confounding factors including a lack of insight into how schools and teachers used the additional time.

### **Case Study: Gadsden Independent School District**

A 2019 LFC report estimated the return on investment for a variety of ‘interventions’ or evidence-based practices, many of which would likely require district support, and found that the highest benefit-to-cost ratio practice was providing content-focused coaching for teachers (Appendix B). The Gadsden Independent School District has implemented this practice and is also a data outlier, with many schools in the district consistently performing better than their demographic peers. While attributing that success to a single variable would be overly simplistic, Gadsden has prioritized funding for instructional coaches in recent years. Many districts use federal Title I funds allocated to low-income schools to reduce class sizes by hiring extra teachers, a low ROI intervention, but Gadsden instead uses it for instructional coaches that work with teachers across the district. In an interview with LFC staff, the Superintendent cited that as one example of how the district aligns its spending with core instructional priorities.

Source: LFC.

## **Hiring and retaining effective principals is one of the highest-impact strategies for school improvement, but New Mexico has high rates of principal turnover.**

Effective leadership has been a core tenet of school improvement for decades, with a number of studies in recent years showing principals can have almost as large of an effect on student outcomes as individual teachers. For example, a 2021 Wallace Foundation meta-analysis found replacing a principal at the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile in effectiveness with one at the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile increased student learning in math and reading by almost three months, annually. However, that same meta-analysis found when principals turn over frequently, it has the opposite effect, negatively impacting student outcomes as well as teacher retention and school climate. Given that the average principal has the potential to affect many more students than the average teacher, investing in recruiting and retaining highly effective principals is a high-impact strategy for school improvement. Nevertheless, PED currently does not collect and analyze data about principal effectiveness.

### ***According to available PED data, approximately one in three New Mexico principals left their schools annually between FY18 and FY22.***

National research shows principal turnover often has a negative impact on student and school outcomes. LFC staff analyzed the most recent available PED staff assignment data to determine principal turnover during a 5-year period between FY18 and FY22, using standardized full names as a unique identifier. The analysis looked at principals who left their school after a given year, those who left their district and those who did not reappear in subsequent years in the dataset, suggesting they may have left the profession or moved out of the state. On average, 29 percent or roughly 1 in 3 New Mexico principals left their schools each year over the analyzed period, with an average of 70 percent of those principals leaving the dataset entirely (Table 8). As a result, of the principals present in the dataset in FY18, only 34 percent remained in FY22. That turnover rate puts New Mexico well above national averages. In FY21, the National Center for Education Statistics calculated that roughly 20 percent or 1 in 5 school principals left their school in the previous year, with 10 percent of principals leaving the profession altogether.

***A 2021 Wallace Foundation meta-analysis found that replacing a principal at the 25th percentile in effectiveness with one at the 75th percentile increased student learning in math and reading by almost three months, annually.***

**Table 8. New Mexico Principal Turnover**

Percentage of Principals Not Returning After Specified School Year

	% Left Dataset	% Left District	% Left School
2017-18	20%	26%	34%
2018-19	21%	24%	32%
2019-20	19%	22%	24%
2020-21	21%	24%	28%
2021-22	22%	24%	28%
<b>5-year Average</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>29%</b>

Source: LFC analysis of PED staff assignment data

**Effective principals are skilled in three areas: organizational management, developing and managing people, and supporting instruction.** The 2021 Wallace Foundation meta-analysis found the most effective principals are skilled in three interrelated areas: organizational management, development and management of people, and instructional support. Organizational management includes skills that transcend the educational context, like the ability to analyze and use data to develop strategic goals, and plans for executing on them. Similarly, the skills required for developing and managing people are not unique to education and include effective communication and building trust with both staff and school stakeholders. Instructional support is defined as deep expertise in best practices for student learning, and the ability to provide concrete feedback to teachers rooted in that expertise. While not all effective principals are equally skilled in all of those areas, ineffective principals are typically unskilled in one or more areas.

**Eighty percent of School Support and Readiness Assessments (SSRAs) of low-performing schools include leadership as a critical area for growth.** As noted above, effective principals have to excel in organizational management, people management, and instructional support, but evidence from School Support and Readiness Assessments conducted by PED’s Priority Schools Bureau (PSB), as well as site visits, reveals many principals struggle in one or more of these areas. Eighty percent of SSRAs of low-performing schools identified the leadership domain as an area for improvement, second only to instructional infrastructure. Within the leadership domain, most of the identified opportunities for growth are related to either organizational or people management, suggesting principals may need additional training and support in those areas.

**Effective principals reduce teacher turnover and attrition, which remains a significant challenge for New Mexico despite recent increases in educator salaries.** Despite considerable investments in recent years, principal and teacher retention continues to be a challenge. Of the \$1.7 billion increase in recurring spending on education since FY18, 60 percent (or \$1 billion) has gone to educator salaries and benefits. However,

**Figure 11: Skills of an Effective Principal**

1. Organizational management
2. People management
3. Instructional support

Source: 2021 Wallace Foundation report 'How Principals Affect Students and Schools.'

in a recent joint policy brief, LFC-LESC analysts noted, “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.” Effective principals are key to addressing those challenges. There is robust research linking effective principals to lower levels of teacher turnover, especially among high-performing teachers who are most likely to have a positive impact on student outcomes.

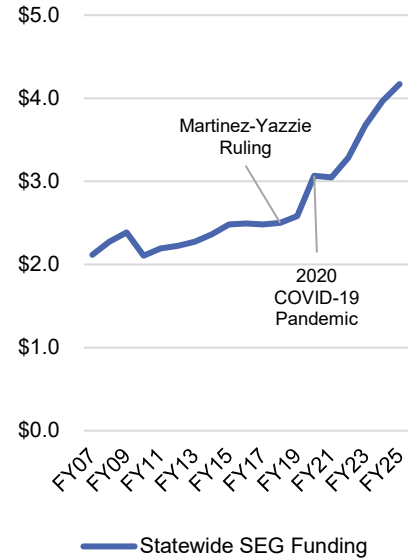
***PED does not collect and analyze data about administrator performance.*** Principals are second only to teachers in their influence on student outcomes, and effective principals are more likely to retain effective teachers. However, research suggests principal effectiveness is not easily measured on the basis of credentials or tenure. Therefore, there is a need for a more comprehensive system to evaluate principal effectiveness and areas for growth. PED started using a new administrator evaluation system, Excel NM, in the 2024-2025 school year. The evaluation system was developed by a statewide taskforce, and administrators are evaluated using a rubric on “five essential practices:” organizational advancement, instructional core, talent, culture and safety, and personal integrity. Each essential practice encompasses several elements and principals are rated on a four-point continuum from “Minimally Demonstrating” to “Innovating.” The practices and elements are consistent with research about what makes for an effective principal. However, as with the teacher evaluation system, Elevate NM, the results of those evaluations are neither systematically collected nor analyzed at the state level.

## School leaders need targeted training and support to drive school improvement.

Research highlights that professional development, coaching, and robust preparation programs can reduce principal turnover and improve student outcomes. The Legislature has invested in a variety of PED leadership development programs in recent years in addition to increasing principal pay, but the department does not systematically track the impact of those programs on student outcomes or teacher retention. Given that studies show the effectiveness of professional development varies significantly by model, it is essential for the state to rigorously monitor its interventions to maximize the impact of those investments.

***Research suggests robust principal preparation programs, in-role professional development and improved pay are promising practices for reducing turnover and improving the quality of school leadership.*** While the fact of principal turnover is well-documented, there is less robust research into the reasons why principals leave their jobs. A 2019 Learning Policy Institute meta-analysis of available studies distilled key drivers of principal turnover into five broad categories: professional development, working conditions, salaries, decision-making authority, and high-stakes accountability policies. Within those categories, there is considerable

**Chart 10. New Mexico Public School Funding**  
(in billions)



Source: LFC analysis of PED and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data.

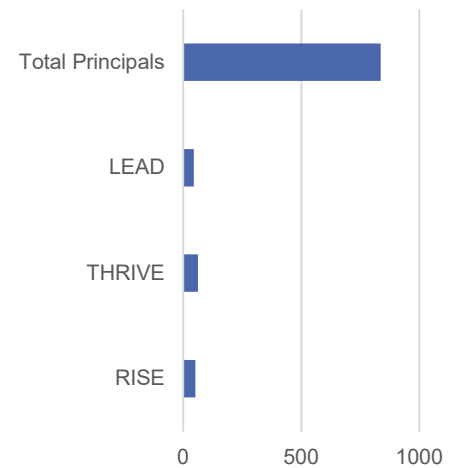


evidence that access to high-quality principal preparation programs, internships, and on-the-job coaching reduces principal turnover and increases tenure, even at high-needs schools. There is also some evidence that increasing principal pay may reduce turnover, although not all studies find a correlation.

**The Legislature has increased principal pay in recent years while dedicating additional resources to principal preparation and ongoing professional development.** In New Mexico, principal pay is tied to Level 3 teacher salaries, with statute specifying the minimum salary for principals is that of a Level 3-A teacher multiplied by an applicable responsibility factor. In 2023, the Legislature increased the applicable responsibility multiplier for principals at all school levels with the effect of raising salaries across the board. Currently, the lowest-paid principal in New Mexico makes \$87.5 thousand and the lowest-paid assistant principal makes \$80.5 thousand. In FY24, the Legislature also allocated \$2 million to support principal residency pilots across the state and \$5 million for school leader professional development. The Legislature has provided \$22 million to PED in line-item appropriations for school leader professional development programming since FY19. Those programs include LEAD, which is targeted to new principals as well as deans and assistant principals aspiring to principalship, THRIVE, which is focused on training principals to provide better feedback and coaching to teachers, and RISE, which is for principals seeking to improve their competency as leaders. In each of those programs, the principal meets monthly with a performance coach and also participates in a series of workshops with the whole group. The programs are serving around 14 percent of the state’s 837 principals this fiscal year—more than the capacity of the programs listed on PED’s website. However, participation in these principal coaching programs is determined through an open application process, which means those enrolled may not be the principals needing the most support.

**While the research literature suggests targeted professional development, including coaching, is a promising practice for improving principal effectiveness and student outcomes, PED does not systematically track the impact of its leadership development programs on student outcomes or principal retention.** Research suggests targeted professional development for principals—particularly programs focused on improving instructional leadership (teacher development, classroom observation) and data-driven decision-making—can impact student outcomes. There is also research that suggests coaching can help principals operationalize evidence-based practices. A recent RAND study found a specific principal performance coaching model led to increases of as much as 5 to 7 percentage points in student test scores, with the most significant benefits accruing to schools serving low-income students, students of color, and those with lower baseline achievement. However, the study also found a different coaching model had no measurable effect on student achievement, possibly because the coaches were out-of-state, or because of lower program completion rates. That example underscores the importance of rigorously evaluating the impact of

**Chart 11. Principals Participating in PED Leadership Development Programs FY25**



Source: PED

**A recent RAND study found a specific principal performance coaching model led to increases of as much as 5 to 7 percentage points in student test scores.**

specific models of professional development. Currently, PSB administers surveys to track perceptions of school leader effectiveness before and after participation in the RISE program, collecting feedback from the school leader, their teachers, and their supervisor. While the surveys offer some insight, RISE participation is voluntary, and the absence of a control group makes it difficult to assess the program's efficacy systematically. Without longitudinal data connecting participation in leadership development programs (LEAD, THRIVE, RISE, etc.) to student outcomes or principal retention, PED lacks the means to fully evaluate or refine its strategies for supporting school leaders.

## Recommendations

The Legislature should consider:

- Appropriating funding to pair principals with performance coaches in a randomized study that would help measure the impact of job-embedded principal professional development on principal retention, teacher turnover, and student outcomes.

The New Mexico Public Education Department should:

- Collect and analyze data about principal effectiveness to target additional support and professional development;
- Analyze data about principal turnover in order to identify turnover patterns and target support; and
- Monitor and measure the impact of its leadership development programs including RISE, THRIVE and LEAD.

New Mexico public school districts should:

- Provide onboarding and professional development support to principals (particularly in the areas of organizational management, personnel management, and instructional support) to reduce turnover.

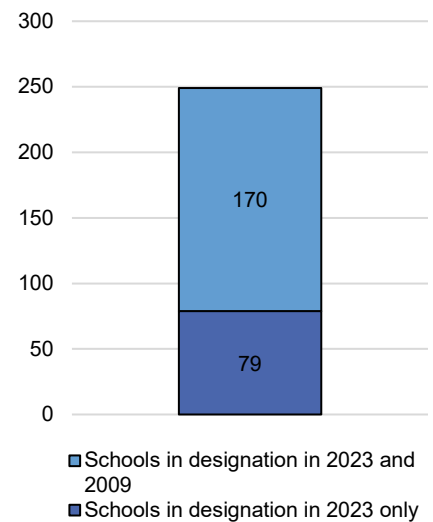
## New Mexico’s current accountability system is not aligned to produce better student outcomes

The purpose of an accountability system can be broadly summarized as ensuring all students receive a high-quality education, and all schools are organized to support that goal. Although there is no agreed-upon process for achieving that, it could be argued the essential steps are 1) defining what a high-quality education means 2) evaluating how schools are performing relative to that definition 3) developing systems to move schools towards the high-quality ideal. As noted earlier in the report, New Mexico has taken a variety of approaches to accountability over the last 20 years, with mixed results. In SSRAs and site visits, LFC and PSB staff observed deficiencies in core practices at many schools that have been labeled as ‘needing improvement’ for decades, suggesting the state’s past approaches to accountability have been unable to drive meaningful, lasting change.

While many schools did exit improvement designations in 2024, that was largely due to changes in the underlying calculations rather than measurable improvement in student outcomes or school practices. The state’s current efforts to improve school practices, introduced in the 2023-24 school year after a multi-year accountability pause, lack mechanisms for systematic tracking or evaluation.

**Sixty-five percent of schools designated as ‘needing improvement’ in 2023 received the same designation in 2009, suggesting past accountability efforts have failed to spur lasting change.** Multiple federal and state administrations have taken different approaches to encouraging schools to change practices, with some accountability systems emphasizing consequences and others support. While both approaches have their proponents, neither has clearly moved the needle. PED’s 2023 NM Vistas scores identified 145 schools as CSI or MRI. Of those schools, 65 percent were also designated as needing improvement (based on annual yearly progress) in 2009. The persistence of the same schools in this category over decades suggests the accountability system, and the support structures associated with it, have not motivated sustained changes in school practices.

**Chart 12. Schools Persistently Designated as ‘Needing Improvement’**



Source: LFC analysis of PED data.

## Recent changes to the accountability system allow low-performing schools to leave improvement designation without improved proficiency or changes in practices.

The current accountability system is focused on encouraging improvements at the state’s lowest-performing schools, particularly those designated as CSI or MRI. As a result of recent changes to NM Vistas, 73 schools exited CSI or MRI status in November 2024. However, those changes in designation are more reflective of changes to the state’s methodology than actual improvements in student outcomes or school practices. Consequently, low-performing schools that PSB identified as needing substantial improvements in fall 2024 were almost immediately notified they had exited CSI/MRI designation, despite no significant changes in practice. This inconsistency has practical implications: schools that exit designation lose access to federal funding and state oversight, leaving them without resources needed to address persistent challenges and improve outcomes.

**PED amended the NM Vistas calculations in 2024 to make it easier for schools to exit improvement designation and to assign less weight to academic proficiency.** Under federal law, PED must consider certain variables when differentiating between high- and low-performing schools, however, it has considerable discretion in the specific calculations associated with those variables. It has used that discretion to amend its calculations multiple times since submitting its initial plan for compliance with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) in 2017. In 2024, PED submitted its latest amendments to USDE suggesting changes to various aspects of the accountability system. Among them were revising the state’s proficiency targets, making it possible for schools to exit CSI and MRI designations annually, instead of on a three-year cycle, and changing the calculations underlying the NM Vistas index. The USDE approved many of those proposed changes in October 2024, resulting in mid-year redesignation of many schools.

**Of the schools exiting CSI or MRI improvement designation under the 2024 NM Vistas calculations, 63 percent saw declines in either math or ELA proficiency, or both.** PED’s November 2024 Vistas release resulted in 73 schools previously designated as CSI or MRI shifting to Traditional status. However, those changes in designation status do not reflect major improvements in student proficiency. Schools leaving CSI/MRI improvement designation had a one percentage point decrease in math proficiency and two percentage point increase in English Language Arts (ELA). Roughly 41 percent of the 73 schools that exited CSI/MRI designation saw a decline in either math or ELA proficiency while an additional 22 percent of schools saw declines in their overall proficiency rates in both.

### Figure 12. Changes to PED’s 2024 NM Vistas calculation that made it easier for schools to exit improvement designation:

- Allowing schools to exit CSI, MRI and ATSI designations annually rather than every three years;
- Calculating student growth as a relative change, not an absolute one;
- Assigning points for students ‘nearing proficiency’ (Performance Level 2); and
- Assigning additional weight to student growth.

Source: LFC analysis of PED amendments.

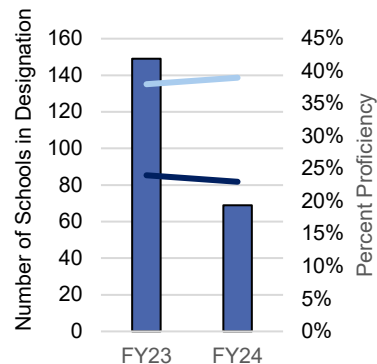
**Table 9. Comparison of Statewide and Median 2023-2024 Proficiency Rates for Schools that Exited Designation**

	Math	ELA
Median proficiency rate for schools that exited CSI/MRI designation between 2022-2023 and 2023-2024	10%	25%
Statewide proficiency rate	23%	39%
Percent difference	-56%	-36%

Source: NM Vistas data.

**A seeming lack of coordination between PED divisions undermines school improvement by sending mixed messages about the importance of changing school practices.** Within PED, two distinct divisions handle different aspects of accountability: the Assessment, Research, Evaluation and Accountability (AREA) division calculates NM Vistas scores, while the Priority Schools Bureau (PSB) is responsible for enhanced oversight of schools designated by NM Vistas as CSI or MRI. As noted above, PED’s amendments to ESSA in the fall of 2024 resulted in schools being able to leave ATSI, CSI and MRI designations annually, even though schools are only designated as ATSI, CSI or MRI every three years. PED did not articulate a rationale for the change in its submission to the USDE, but the result has been mixed messaging for schools, in part because the two divisions do not seem to coordinate their calendars. For example, in the fall of 2024, PSB conducted SSRAs of a number of CSI and MRI schools based on 2022-2023 NM Vistas data, only for AREA to redesignate the same schools as Traditional days or weeks later using 2023-2024 data.

**Chart 13. Schools Designated CSI or MRI Versus Average Statewide Proficiency**



— Average Statewide ELA Proficiency  
— Average Statewide Math Proficiency

Source: LFC analysis of PED data.

**Table 10. Proficiency Rates at Visited Schools**

School	2022-2023		2023-2024	
	Math	Reading	Math	Reading
CSI/MRI School 1	10%	13%	3%	11%
CSI/MRI School 2	9%	16%	21%	23%
CSI/MRI School 3	6%	10%	14%	15%
CSI/MRI School 4	10%	21%	16%	26%
CSI/MRI School 5	4%	11%	10%	10%
Statewide	24%	38%	23%	39%

\*All visited schools exited CSI/MRI designation in 2023-2024

Source: NM Vistas.

**Deficiencies in core practices remain at schools that exited their improvement designation under the new calculation.** PSB and LFC staff observed deficiencies in core practices at CSI/MRI schools during site visits and in reviewing SSRAs. Despite that documentation of room for improvement, many of those schools exited designation under the new NM Vistas calculation, including all five CSI/MRI schools that LFC staff visited. Those schools are all now classified as ‘Traditional,’ despite declining ELA and/or math proficiencies at several of them. Given that the site visits occurred in the fall of 2024, and the designation changes were based on data from the 2023-24 school year, the change in designation cannot be attributed to changes in school-level practices. That misalignment undermines PED’s theory of school improvement—that sustained changes in school practices lead to improved student outcomes—and sends conflicting messages to schools regarding the state’s expectations. Without clearer communication and better coordination between divisions, PED risks undermining the credibility and effectiveness of the accountability system as a whole.

**Without clearer communication and better coordination between divisions, PED risks undermining the credibility and effectiveness of the accountability system as a whole.**

**Schools leaving improvement designation no longer receive monitoring or financial support from the state.** Schools under CSI or MRI designation at the start of FY25 were eligible to receive non-competitive grants of between \$110 and \$125 thousand dollars from PED in federal Title I funds for school improvement, with additional funding available in FY26 and FY27. Schools exiting designation under the November 2024 Vistas received \$7.6 million in Title I grant funds in FY25—however, because these schools exited designation, they will lose access to similar amounts of additional funds in FY26 and FY27. In addition, those schools are not required to participate in any additional monitoring visits from PED. Moving low-performing schools from MRI or CSI to Traditional designation limits the resources available to help improve student performance.

**Schools exiting designation under the November 2024 Vistas received \$7.6 million in Title I grant funds in FY25—however, because these schools exited designation, they will lose access to additional funds in FY26 and FY27.**

## **PED assesses schools for the presence or absence of evidence-based practices but does not track performance over time.**

PSB's SSRA protocol is an effective tool for evaluating schools' strengths and areas for improvement. However, a lack of systematic tracking of resulting recommendations makes it challenging to consistently monitor progress. By adopting a more structured evaluation framework and tracking tools, PSB could provide clearer benchmarks for progress and strengthen its ability to support schools effectively.

**PSB employs a comprehensive protocol to evaluate a school's strengths and weaknesses, but its findings are inconsistently communicated.** As noted previously, PSB's SSRA protocol includes data review, surveys, interviews with school stakeholders and classroom observations. All of that information is reviewed by the full SSRA team, ensuring there is robust support for the conclusions drawn. Then, the team leader is responsible for writing a summary report that communicates the conclusions of the assessment to schools and the public at large. The reports are narrative, with promising practices, opportunities for growth, and potential next steps described in each of PSB's five "domains" of effective practices: 1) culture & equity, 2) leadership, 3) instructional infrastructure, 4) talent management, and 5) support & accountability. They do not include a list of expected evidence-based practices (such as classroom walkthroughs) or a structured rubric for tracking their implementation. While the practices PSB promotes are supported by research, the semi-structured nature of the SSRA reports results in widely varying levels of detail about schools' current implementation of evidence-based practices, and areas for improvement. For example, during a site visit to a CSI/MRI school, interviews revealed that the principal did not know how to access the attendance system and could not provide the school's overall attendance rate—a problem the PSB team noted had come up at another school in the district as well. However, the final SSRA report does not mention attendance or the lack of an attendance system. Strong research evidence suggests certain practices should be foundational at all schools, including

**While the practices PSB promotes are supported by research, the semi-structured nature of the SSRA reports results in widely varying levels of detail about schools' current implementation of evidence-based practices, and areas for improvement.**

the collection and analysis of data about student learning, robust teacher professional development and collaboration, and structured processes for classroom observation and feedback. While many of the SSRA reports do mention those practices, there is no consistency in whether they are mentioned, or in the assessment of how faithfully those practices are being implemented. PSB should adopt a rubric based in its SSRA protocol that tracks a school’s implementation of the state’s expected evidence-based practices along a continuum, across all five domains. PED has a high-level self-assessment rubric for schools and districts to evaluate their practices (Multi-Layered Systems of Support or MLSS), however the Bureau should develop a more detailed rubric for use in school improvement assessments involving PSB personnel and contractors. Per the bureau’s articulation of ‘tight & loose’ expectations, that would ensure schools and districts are clear on ‘what’ the state expects them to do while leaving them with considerable flexibility regarding ‘how’ to achieve those ends.

**Figure 13. Excerpt from a School Support and Readiness Assessment (SSRA) Summary Report**

<p><b>DOMAIN 5: SUPPORT &amp; ACCOUNTABILITY</b>  <i>To what degree do school leaders establish and communicate expectations, monitor progress, provide support, and hold staff accountable?</i></p>
<p><b>Promising Practices:</b></p> <p>Teachers and staff report that they feel supported by their school leadership. They are provided feedback regularly and consistently. Teachers know what is expected of them, and the structures and systems help hold people accountable for their responsibilities. School leadership conducts walkthrough observations to ensure that Corrective Teaching Plans (CTP) are being used.</p> <p>Leadership takes a coaching approach with their teachers to develop best practices and help teachers improve their craft. Progress monitoring occurs weekly, contributing to the supportive tone amongst teachers, staff, and leaders.                      has many long-term employees in the building.</p>
<p><b>Opportunities for Growth:</b></p>

Source: PED School Improvement website.

**Other states employ more structured qualitative analyses when assessing schools to clearly articulate expected practices and allow for tracking of school progress.** Other states conducting assessments of schools often use a more structured format to provide feedback. Massachusetts, for example, employs a matrix centered around four domains: Effective Instructional Practices and Resources, Student-Specific Supports and Access, Learning Environment, and Data-Driven Progress Monitoring. Within each domain, schools are evaluated on a subset of descriptive indicators, like “high-quality professional learning,” along a four-point continuum: initial, emerging, established, or robust and sustainable. Each step on the continuum includes a description of the practices that either are or are not present related to the indicator. The matrix is employed both for initial evaluations and follow-up monitoring, making

it easy to track whether a school is progressing on the continuum towards sustainable practices, or not.

**Figure 14. Massachusetts Assessment Matrix**

#	Indicator	Initial	Emerging	Established	Robust and Sustainable
2c	<b>Tiered Support Systems</b>	There is no clearly defined framework for providing tiered support to students at the different tiers (universal, targeted, intensive).	Tiered supports are provided in some areas across academic, social-emotional, and behavioral domains but not systematically. The school is in the process of setting up structures, processes, and resources to identify and address student needs across these tiers.	The school has necessary structures, processes, and resources in place to systematically address most students' academic, social-emotional, and behavioral needs across three tiers; however, some barriers (e.g., staffing, schedules) still exist to meeting all needs consistently and coherently.	The school ensures all student needs are systematically identified and addressed across three tiers. Tier 1 delivers universal support through high-quality instruction and proactive strategies for all students. Tier 2 offers targeted interventions to a smaller group requiring additional support. Tier 3 provides individualized and specialized support to a select subset of students with unique needs. Systems are in place and effectively implemented, with evidence of improvement.

Source: MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

**PSB destroys the information collected during its SSRAs after writing the summary reports.** After completing its summary report, PSB says it destroys all underlying documentation, including interview notes and classroom observation worksheets, making it difficult for a third party, like the LFC, to validate its conclusions without accompanying PSB staff on school site visits. That policy, which PSB says is necessary to build trust with schools and districts, runs contrary to best practices in transparency and accountability, which emphasize preserving documentation to allow for independent verification and oversight. The Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, a professional organization, has accuracy standards that recommend “systematic information storage methods” and that findings should be “clearly and completely documented.”

**PSB does not systematically track implementation of its recommendations or a school’s progress towards stated goals.** Following the initial SSRA, PSB conducts monitoring visits. The stated purpose of the monitoring visits is to “provide essential information on the progress of schools identified for Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) and More Rigorous Intervention (MRI).” Schools are supposed to receive a single monitoring visit in their first year in designation and three annual monitoring visits in subsequent years. PSB visited less than a third of CSI/MRI designated schools for initial monitoring visits in school year 2023-24 but visited 90 percent of CSI/MRI schools for beginning-of-year 2024-25 monitoring visits. The School Improvement and Transformation Monitoring (SIT-M) protocol says the visits will “include school leader interviews and evidence and data reviews



to assess progress and document progress toward identified goals.” Following the visits, PSB publishes a summary report, similar to the SSRA summary report, on its website. The reports do not follow a consistent format between years, with the 2023-24 reports focused on evaluating a school’s progress towards addressing opportunities for growth identified in the initial SSRA, and 2024-25 reports focused on a school’s progress towards meeting goals identified in its state-mandated Data, Accountability, Sustainability and High Achievement (DASH) plan. While a school’s DASH goals should theoretically align with areas of growth identified in the SSRAs, there is no systematic tracking of the initial SSRA goals and their implementation. Also, similarly to the SSRA reports, the SIT-M reports follow a semi-structured format that complicates tracking a school’s progress in implementing evidence-based practices over time.

***PSB does not directly disseminate the findings of its SSRAs to key education stakeholders, including school board members and parents.*** Transparency and stakeholder engagement are widely understood to be key drivers of meaningful school improvement. Currently, the PSB shares the findings of its SSRAs in summary reports which are reviewed by the school’s leadership and then posted to the PED website. While that process technically makes the reports publicly available, school stakeholders, including parents and school boards, are unlikely to discover them on their own. By developing additional mechanisms to alert stakeholders to the reports, PSB could enhance awareness of improvement efforts and encourage broader participation in the improvement process.

## **PED does not have a strategy for encouraging best practices in all schools.**

While this report highlights observed differences in practice between high- and low-performing schools, there is room for improvement at all schools. However, the current accountability system is focused almost exclusively on low-performing schools, reinforcing the perception that only low-performing schools need to change, while overlooking opportunities for growth and innovation in higher-performing schools. A more robust and proactive approach to accountability would communicate clear expectations for all schools, create mechanisms for regular evaluation and reporting related to their implementation of evidence-based practices and encourage collaboration. That would allow schools to learn from one another and ensure that no school is exempt from the responsibility to improve, even as additional resources remain focused on those with the most urgent needs.

**While it is appropriate for PED to prioritize resources to the state’s lowest-performing schools, the current accountability system does little to support improvement efforts at the majority of schools.** PSB focuses on a narrow subset of ‘priority’ schools—those in CSI/MRI designation. These designations currently encompass the lowest-performing 5 percent of Title I schools, schools with graduation rates below two-thirds and those struggling to improve the performance of specific subgroups. It may not be feasible or appropriate for PED to directly assess and provide support to all schools. However, PED can provide a framework for evaluating school practices and create mechanisms to build capacity and foster improvement across the state. Examples of those mechanisms include inter-school visitations, where educators observe and adapt exemplary practices and centralized knowledge repositories for sharing case studies, lesson plans, and innovative programs. By creating mechanisms that enable schools to share successful strategies and support one another, the state can foster system-wide improvement and collaboration while maintaining targeted support for those with the greatest needs.

**The Priority Schools Bureau has developed a replicable protocol that districts or schools could adopt to conduct their own assessments.** Well-functioning organizations regularly evaluate their strengths and weaknesses to identify opportunities for growth and address challenges proactively. While the PSB developed the SSRA protocol to evaluate low-performing schools, as this report demonstrates, its value extends to schools of all performance levels. When conducted with a focus on improvement, such third-party assessments can provide valuable insights. The protocol is publicly available on PED’s website, making it accessible to schools and districts interested in pursuing their own evaluations. Regular third-party assessments of all schools in New Mexico would not only reinforce expectations for continuous improvement and foster a growth mindset but also serve as an early warning system, identifying and addressing issues before they escalate.

**PED requires all schools submit annual improvement plans, but there is little evidence that the plans work as intended.** Under ESSA, schools in CSI or MRI designation must submit annual school improvement plans to the state. In part to comply with that mandate, PED requires all schools to submit annual improvement plans, known as Data, Accountability, Sustainability, and High Achievement (DASH) plans. As described by PSB, DASH plans are designed to “set a vision and define a process” for improving student outcomes by promoting evidence-based practices and supporting effective organizational systems such as distributed leadership. Each school is expected to form a core team, including a district representative, to identify root causes of performance challenges and develop actionable solutions. Plans are then supposed to be reviewed by the district to ensure alignment with instructional priorities and parts of them are posted publicly to encourage broader stakeholder engagement. Despite their basis in sound principles, there is little evidence that DASH plans fulfill their intended purpose. School improvement goals are self-identified

**Table 11. Number of Schools in CSI and MRI Designations FY23 and FY24**

School Designation	FY23	FY24
CSI - Low Performance	42	12
CSI - Graduation Rate	26	19
CSI - Subgroup	40	12
MRI - Low Performance	7	2
MRI - Graduation Rate	29	24
Total CSI and MRI	144	69
Total Schools	839	837

Source: PED data.

**Regular assessments of all schools in New Mexico would not only reinforce expectations for continuous improvement and foster a growth mindset but also serve as an early warning system, identifying and addressing issues before they escalate.**

and often inconsistent from year-to-year, relying on the core team, if there is one, to know what practices to prioritize to improve student outcomes. Without the benefit of a rigorous third-party evaluation like an SSRA, core teams must rely on their own self-diagnosis, which may or may not be developed through a structured process.

## Recommendations

The Public Education Department should:

- Modify its NM Vistas calculations so that schools 1) exit CSI, MRI and ATSI designation on the same three-year cycle that they are designated 2) cannot exit designation if their overall proficiency has declined 3) cannot exit designation without demonstrating improvement in school practices 4) receive points in the proficiency index for students at Level 2 or ‘nearing proficiency’ only when they move those students from Level 1 to Level 2;
- Develop a rubric that tracks schools’ implementation of best practices and use the rubric in the department’s assessment and monitoring visits for schools starting in the FY26 accountability cycle;
- Retain and archive all documentation collected during school assessments and school improvement monitoring in a centralized digital repository with a clear organizational structure;
- Share their School Support and Readiness Assessment reports with the relevant school board;
- Partner with district leadership to adapt the SSRA protocol into a uniform triennial evaluation process for all schools and provide districts with clear timelines, tools (e.g., reporting templates, observation protocols), and professional development to implement the evaluation system consistently starting in FY27; and
- Distribute the Priority Schools Bureau’s School Support and Readiness Assessment protocols to the New Mexico Coalition of Educational Leaders and the New Mexico School Board Association as a model for annual review of effective school practices and organizational management.

New Mexico public school districts should:

- Work with PED to develop a standardized school assessment framework and implementation timeline for triennial school evaluations; and
- Publish assessment results and planned improvement actions on the district’s website, ensuring transparency and accessibility for parents, stakeholders, and the broader community.

## Appendix A: Comparison of Calculations for A-F School Grades and NM Vistas Points

**2012 New Mexico A-F School Grades Points Calculation**

Indicator	Elementary/Middle School Points	High School Points
Current standing (ELA & math proficiency)	40	30
School Growth	10	
Growth of Highest Performing Students	20	15
Growth of Lowest Performing Students	20	15
Opportunity to Learn (Attendance, culture survey)	10	8
Graduation Rate		17
Career and College Readiness		15
Bonus: Student and Parent Engagement	5	5

Source: LESC Bill Analysis

**2024 New Mexico Vistas Index Points Calculation**

Indicator	Elementary & Middle Schools Points	High Schools Points	K-2 Schools Points
Math Proficiency	20	15	
Reading Proficiency	20	15	25
Math Growth (SGP)	15	5	
Reading Growth (SGP)	15	5	
English Learner Progress (SGP)	10	5	10
Science Proficiency	10	10	
Regular Attendance	10	10	10
College & Career Readiness		5	
Graduation Rate Growth		5	
4-Year Graduation Rate		10	
5-Year Graduation Rate		8	
6-Year Graduation Rate		7	

Source: PED Accountability Measures Overview

## Appendix B: Benefits of Results First Interventions

Intervention	Total Benefits	Benefit-to-Cost Ratio	Chance Benefits Will Exceed Costs	Effect Sizes	
				Test Scores	Graduation Rates
Consultant teachers: Literacy Collaborative	\$20,964	\$32	99%	0.428	
Case management in schools*	\$15,036	\$79	96%	0.026	0.109
Per-pupil expenditures: 10% increase for one student cohort	\$12,570	\$1	56%	0.120	0.101
Tutoring: By adults, one-on-one, structured	\$12,526	\$7	95%	0.213	
Tutoring: By certificated teachers, small-group, structured	\$12,291	\$15	97%	0.209	
Teacher professional development: Use of data to guide instruction	\$11,234	\$132	98%	0.117	
Consultant teachers: Online coaching	\$10,053	\$93	92%	0.082	
Consultant teachers: Content-Focused Coaching	\$8,342	\$190	94%	0.107	
Tutoring: By non-certificated adults, small-group, structured	\$7,410	\$32	78%	0.126	
Teacher professional development: Targeted	\$6,829	\$38	79%	0.071	
Teacher experience	\$5,702	\$13	99%	0.058	
Consultant teachers: Coaching	\$5,267	\$28	81%	0.060	
Summer learning programs: Academically focused	\$5,005	\$8	88%	0.064	
Charter schools: Urban charter schools	\$4,694	\$5	94%	0.044	
Teacher professional development: Induction/mentoring	\$4,390	\$6	60%	0.046	
Tutoring: By adults, one-on-one, non-structured	\$3,616	\$5	74%	0.061	
Class size: Reducing average class size by one student in kindergarten	\$3,095	\$11	99%	0.052	0.018
Teacher performance pay programs	\$1,936	\$22	87%	0.019	
Teacher professional development: Online, targeted	\$1,862	\$9	61%	0.020	
Class size: Reducing average class size by one student in grade 1	\$1,685	\$7	93%	0.027	0.010
Charter schools: Overall impact	\$1,387	\$1	55%	0.013	
Charter schools: Non-urban charter schools	\$1,075	\$1	45%	0.011	
Class size: Reducing average class size by one student in grade 2	\$935	\$4	78%	0.014	0.006
Class size: Reducing average class size by one student in grade 3	\$696	\$3	69%	0.010	0.004
Class size: Reducing average class size by one student in one grade, 4-6	\$537	\$2	62%	0.007	0.003
Class size: Reducing average class size by one student in one grade, 9-12	\$532	\$2	53%	0.004	0.003
Class size: Reducing average class size by one student in one grade, 7-8	\$414	\$2	59%	0.004	0.002
Teacher professional development: Not targeted	\$19	\$0	38%	0.000	
Teacher graduate degrees	(\$19)	(\$0)	7%	0.000	

\* Case management has a total of 12 monetized outcomes  
Source: Results First using New Mexico assumptions

Source: 2019 LFC Results First Educational Interventions Report

## Appendix C: Site Visits

### Demographics and Proficiencies of Schools Visited

#### Spotlight Elementary Schools (2023-24 Designation)

	Total Enrollment	Percent Hispanic Students	Percent Native American Students	Percent Students with Disabilities	Percent Gifted Students	Percent EL Students	Percent Low-Income Students (FII)	Percent Proficient Reading	Percent Proficient Math
Hatch Valley Elementary	179	98%	≤ 2%	10%	≤ 2%	43%	77%	51%	n/a
La Union Elementary	358	91%	≤ 1%	16%	≤ 1%	38%	53%	54%	38%
Red Rock Elementary	289	30%	39%	11%	6%	14%	58%	53%	49%
Albuquerque Collegiate Charter School	187	46%	≤ 2%	17%	≤ 2%	28%	71%	66%	29%

#### CSI/MRI Elementary Schools (2022-23 Designation)

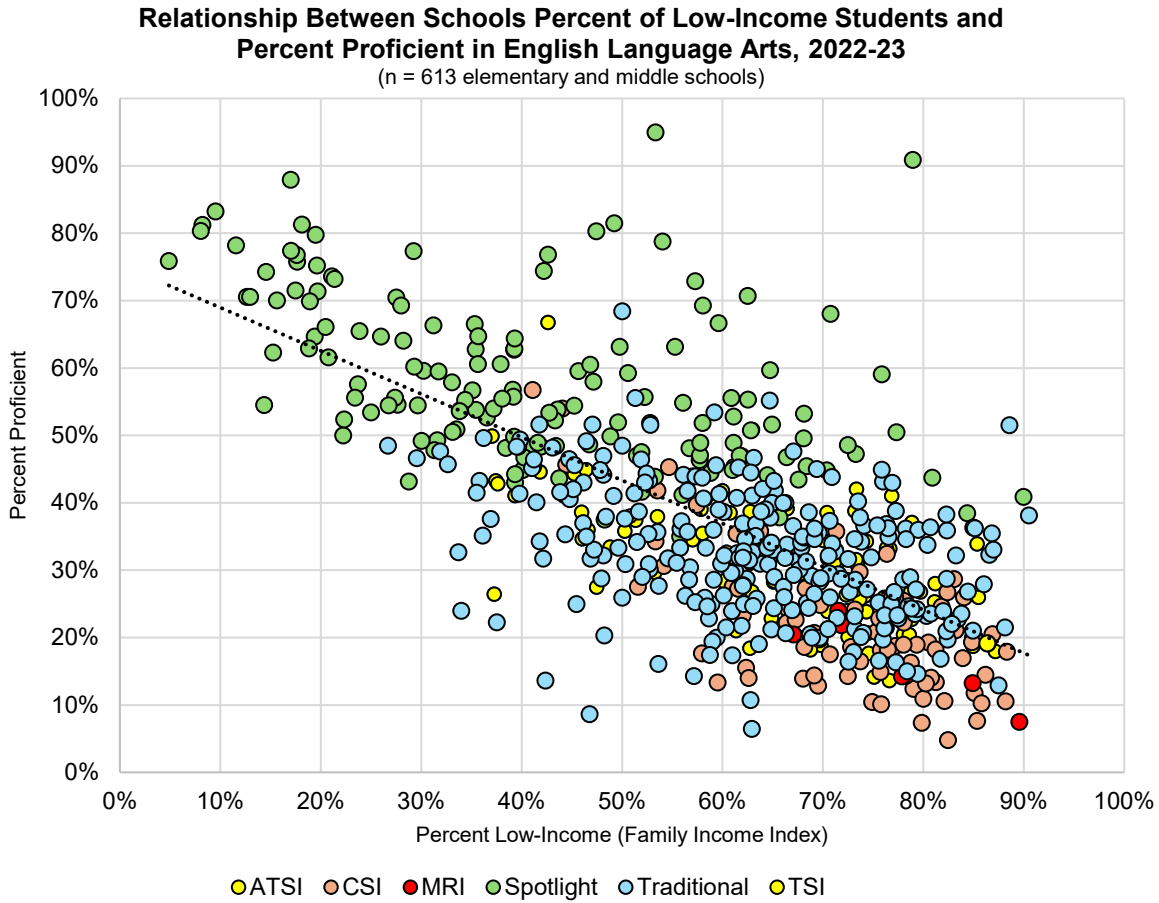
	Total Enrollment	Percent Hispanic Students	Percent Native American Students	Percent Students with Disabilities	Percent Gifted Students	Percent EL Students	Percent Low-Income Students (FY24 FII)	Percent Proficient Reading	Percent Proficient Math
CSI/MRI School 1	248	10%	88%	13%	≤ 5%	21%	59%	13%	10%
CSI/MRI School 2	93	91%	≤ 5%	15%	≤ 5%	16%	62%	16%	9%
CSI/MRI School 3	182	57%	≤ 5%	16%	≤ 5%	≤ 5%	76%	10%	6%
CSI/MRI School 4	400	12%	80%	11%	≤ 5%	32%	83%	21%	10%
CSI/MRI School 5	276	≥ 95%	≤ 5%	12%	≤ 5%	66%	82%	11%	4%

#### Statewide Demographics (2023-24)

	Total Enrollment	Percent Hispanic Students	Percent Native American Students	Percent Students with Disabilities	Percent Gifted Students	Percent EL Students	Percent Low-Income Students (FII)	Percent Proficient Reading	Percent Proficient Math
Statewide	311,284	57%	10%	19%	4%	19%	55%	39%	23%

Notes: LFC staff selected schools to visit based on considerations such as NM Vistas designations, academic proficiencies, school demographics, geographic diversity, scheduled PED CSI/MRI school site visits, and agreement from Spotlight schools for an LFC/PED site visit. The data point on percent of students who are Hispanic at La Union Elementary in this table comes from 2022-23 data since the available data point for 2023-24 had a data error.

# Appendix D: Relationship Between ELA Proficiency and Family Income



Source: LFC analysis of PED data.