

B i t e - S i z e

🍏 PED released statewide chronic absenteeism rates for the 2023-2024 school year, reporting a chronic absence rate of 32.8 percent, down from 39.2 percent in the 2022-2023 school year. While a significant decrease, New Mexico continues to see higher than national rates of chronic absenteeism.

🍏 LESC staff will present a proposal on possible modifications to the state equalization guarantee (SEG), the state's public school funding formula, to the SEG study group on October 3. The study group will have the opportunity to weigh in and provide feedback on possible changes.

🍏 The closing fiscal year 24 (FY24) lottery tuition revenues totaled \$51.1 million compared with \$50.5 million for fiscal year 23 (FY23). This adds to the overall tuition fund balance with the New Mexico Lottery reporting a total fund balance of \$982.8 million as of July 22, 2024.



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Representative G. Andrés Romero, Chair / Senator William P. Soules, Vice Chair / Gwen Perea Warniment, Director / September 2024

From the Chair

Happy fall semester!

The thing that makes the LESC distinct from other interim committees in the Legislature is the fact that so many of our members currently do work in schools, or have worked in schools. It is impressive in terms of collective years of experience in education, but also the diverse roles members have played: educational assistants, teachers, administrators, and school board members. This gives the LESC a deep understanding of the education challenges we face and multiple ideas on how to solve these complex issues.

The LESC is also unique in having a wonderful full-time staff to study education in our state. The LESC staff works tirelessly with rural and urban school districts, families and educators, students, community and educational organizations, and business leaders to present a complete picture of New Mexico's educational landscape and give voice to the various stakeholders in our communities who care for and depend on our educational systems.

I mention the wealth of experience we have at LESC because during the fall months, we will be working hard to craft a comprehensive education budget that reflects the values of our New Mexican educators and students. Our hope is to create a budget that allows New Mexico to support effective teacher recruitment and retention efforts, ensure appropriate training and learning for our educators, and expand funding to support student-lead initiatives, all in service of our students statewide.

To do this, we need continued engagement from all who have a stake in education and the future of our state. As previously noted, we ask that all stakeholders stay engaged in processes as we ready for the rapidly approaching 2025 legislative session--partnership will make all of our efforts stronger.

A First Look: Spring 2024 Assessment Results

As fall arrives, so does the state's assessment data. The Public Education Department (PED) recently shared preliminary spring 2024 assessment results with LESC staff, providing an early look at student performance. While the data is still being validated, initial trends highlight both challenges and areas of progress.

In reading, 38 percent of students were proficient, matching last year's results. However, math proficiency dropped from 24 percent in 2023 to 22 percent in 2024, signaling continued struggles, especially in higher grades where declines were sharpest.

A closer look reveals important patterns across grade levels. In reading, third and 11th grade students saw the largest declines, while students in grades four through eight either improved or maintained outcomes. Math results, however, were more concerning. While third and fourth graders made modest gains, all other grades saw a decline. Particularly troubling, 11th graders dropped from 16 percent to just 11 percent proficient, raising concerns about high school math instruction.

Racial and ethnic disparities in

performance remain, but there are signs of narrowing achievement gaps. White and Asian students saw modest declines in reading, while Black, Hispanic, Native American, and Pacific Islander students posted significant gains. Native American students have shown steady improvement, with reading proficiency rising from 17 percent in 2020 to 24 percent in 2024. Unfortunately, math proficiency declined across all racial and ethnic groups, with Black students seeing a particularly steep drop from 20 percent proficient in 2023 to just 9 percent in 2024.

A striking trend in the 2024 data is the narrowing gap between economically disadvantaged students and their more affluent peers. Non-disadvantaged students saw declines in both reading and math, with reading proficiency dropping from 48 percent to 43 percent and math from 33 percent to 26 percent. In contrast, economically disadvantaged students made gains, with 31 percent proficient in reading and 16 percent in math. While the growth for disadvantaged students is encouraging, the decline among their non-disadvantaged peers suggests broader social and ecological factors are impacting

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Taking Stock of Healthy Universal School Meals Implementation

In 2023, New Mexico began offering free healthy universal school meals statewide. This measure, unanimously supported by the Legislature and signed into law by the Governor, represented a statewide commitment to making sure learners across the state can show up to school without having to worry about a most basic need: hunger.

By July 1, 2023, the program went into effect, providing free meals to all public school students, regardless of income. With over 900 schools participating for the current 2024-2025 school year, LESC staff have worked to understand how implementation is going. In addition to reviewing statewide data, staff also completed in-depth interviews with eight school food authorities representing a cross-section of the diverse educational contexts in New Mexico.

Uptake has been high, with largely

positive experiences reported. In addition to the state bill, a significant driver behind the program's expansion was a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) rule change that lowered the eligibility threshold for schools to qualify for federal reimbursement. This allowed more schools to maximize their reimbursement and eliminate the need for meal applications.

LESC staff found the program faces challenges such as staffing and infrastructure limitations that make it difficult for schools to comply with the freshly prepared meal requirement. Schools also report difficulties in finding trained staff and adequate kitchen facilities. Additionally, new USDA nutrition standards, such as reductions in sodium and added sugars, have caused some dissatisfaction among students due to taste changes, although locally grown requirements of the state program

have resulted in meal quality increases locally.

Despite these growing pains, feedback from parents and students has been positive, with families appreciating the financial relief and many students noticing improvements in meal quality. Still, there are ongoing concerns regarding food waste, especially as students adjust to healthier options.

For fiscal year 2026 (FY26), LESC staff recommend funding at \$48 million to continue supporting the program and ensure its long-term success. Additionally, continued support from the PED is crucial in helping schools navigate the program's complexities. With sustained funding and technical assistance, the program has the potential to improve not only students' nutrition but also school attendance and academic performance over time.

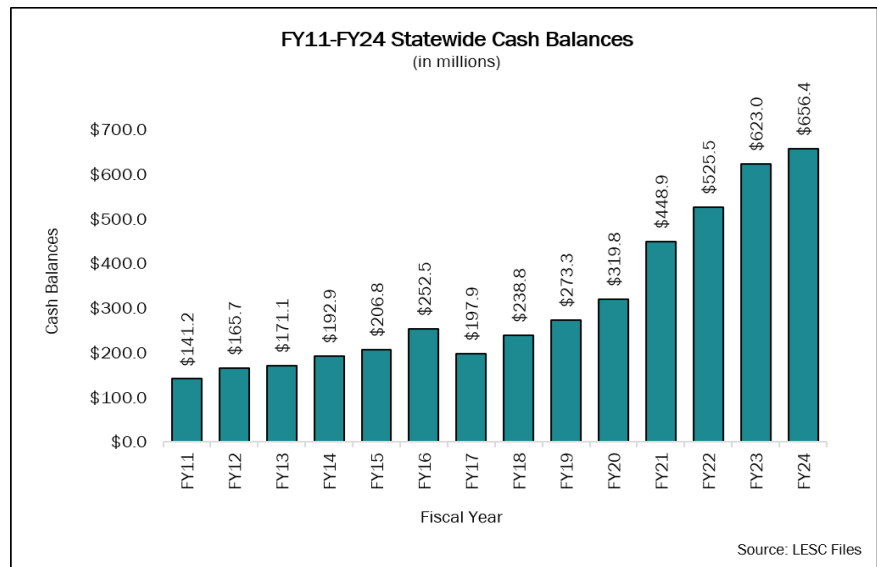
A First Look: Spring 2024 Assessments

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all students.

Despite these challenges, there may be evidence that recent legislative investments are helping the state's most vulnerable students. Initiatives like structured literacy and targeted funding through the at-risk index have supported students, while efforts tied to the *Martinez-Yazzie* lawsuit have also helped improve outcomes. As the validation process continues, policymakers and LESC staff will need to examine these trends closely.

School Cash Balances Increasing Statewide



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Cash balances held by school districts and charter schools continue to grow across New Mexico with total cash balances reaching approximately \$656.4 million at the end of FY24, up from \$141.2 million at the end of FY11.

At LESC's September interim meeting in Albuquerque, staff will present a brief discussing several factors school districts and charter schools have cited as contributing to substantial growth in cash balances. This hearing is scheduled for 9:30 in the morning on September 18.

Staff will also present budget and policy considerations as the LESC continues to assess the contributing factors to the growth of cash balances and the resulting opportunity costs incurred by students and educators.