

# A TEST OF RESOLVE

Reinforcing High Expectations  
and Student Progress  
in New Mexico

The students and educators of New Mexico have made impressive strides in recent years. Thanks to their hard work and the support of families and communities, academic growth and achievement trends are rising at the fastest rate in years. For example, across grades 3-11:<sup>1</sup>

- Since 2015, about **13,000 more students are performing at or above grade level in English Language Arts (ELA)** and about **11,000 more have reached or exceeded grade level in math**.
- Some of our most traditionally underserved students are showing the greatest gains; **Native American students are up 8.2 percentage points in ELA** since 2015, while the state overall is up 4.7 percentage points.
- In the 2017-2018 school year alone, **5,353 more students met grade level expectations in ELA and 4,035 more students met them in math** than in the year before.

Even more impressive, students have achieved these improvements by meeting the challenging expectations laid out in New Mexico's academic standards, which are designed to address the demands of the future workforce. **More and more students are proving they can clear a higher, more rigorous bar.**

Unfortunately, this progress is now at risk. A new statewide assessment system could usher in an era of lower academic expectations. While state tests are politically unpopular, there is consensus from teachers, families, education advocates and business and higher education leaders that an objective assessment of student learning is critical to provide information on how all students are progressing and ensure no students fall through the cracks. **When assessment results point to major gaps in achievement, especially for certain student populations, it should be a call to take action and offer further support**, not to retreat from high expectations or to hide the truth about student needs.

If an inferior assessment is selected, it would send a harmful message to our students and educators, implying that we do not believe in their potential nor the idea that all students are capable of achieving at high levels. Such a move would lead to negative consequences, including:

- Students, especially our most vulnerable students, may advance from grade to grade without any recognition that they are not mastering foundational knowledge and skills.
- We may no longer be able to see how students are performing year to year. If we alter expectations, we essentially press the restart button, and may lose vital information about the most vulnerable students and severely impair their chances of success.
- A wholesale change in our annual assessment system would also impose a significant new burden on our teachers with the need for more training and technical adaptation — and time spent on those adjustments is time not spent teaching.
- Families would face new challenges as they attempt to understand assessment changes and support their child's growth.
- Student progress data from the state assessment may be delayed in being returned to educators, making it impossible for them to use to improve instruction to meet the needs of their students.

The good news is that these consequences can be avoided.

Over the past decade, New Mexico has made a bipartisan effort to improve education, first with the adoption of more rigorous academic standards in 2009, and later with the adoption of the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) exam. Our educators have worked hard to adjust their practices to align with the new standards and assessment and their dedication is paying off. **Now, we are testing the resolve of state leaders to remain committed to a path of progress that ends in a successful future for all New Mexicans.**

# Excellence for All

All students deserve the opportunity to lead productive and fulfilling lives and contribute to an ever-evolving state economy. Although accountability structures are often unpopular, these structures reveal achievement gaps and opportunities for improvement, which is particularly important for diverse populations that have been traditionally underserved by public schools.

New Mexico’s 340,000 public school students are much more diverse than the nation’s at large:<sup>2</sup>

- 61 percent identify as Hispanic (compared to 25 percent nationally);
- 25 percent are white (about half the national average);
- 11 percent are American Indian (compared to a national average of 1 percent); and
- Over 71 percent are economically disadvantaged (compared to 52 percent nationally).

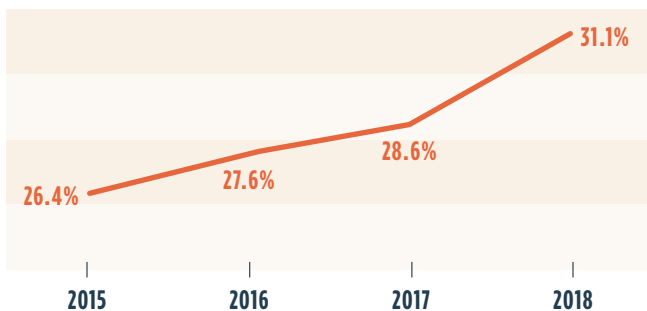
The 2018 *Yazzie v. Martinez* lawsuit ruling found that the state is failing to meet its “constitutional obligation to provide an adequate, sufficient education to at-risk students.”<sup>3</sup> The quality of our state academic standards and results on the state assessment were key factors for the court in understanding how equitably our schools are serving the state’s diverse student population. We must examine the successes and opportunities of New Mexico’s results to date to ensure we comply with the ruling and, most importantly, set every child up for success in whichever college or career pathway they pursue.

## Student Achievement on the Rise<sup>4</sup>

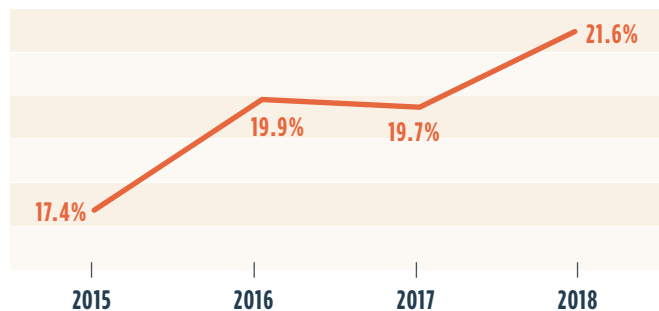
The past decade has brought promising momentum in student achievement. The leadership of Governors Richardson and Martinez put New Mexico on the right track by adopting more challenging academic standards and transitioning to a new assessment aligned to the new standards. **Educators and students have risen to this challenge, with student achievement trends showing promising improvements while still signaling critical areas of necessary improvement.**

Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate the upward trajectory of student proficiency in ELA and math since 2015. Over this period of time, the state has improved 4.7 percentage points in ELA and 4.2 in math across grades 3-11, with many individual grades and student population groups demonstrating even more dramatic improvement.

**FIGURE 1 ELA PROFICIENCY TRENDS — ALL STUDENTS**



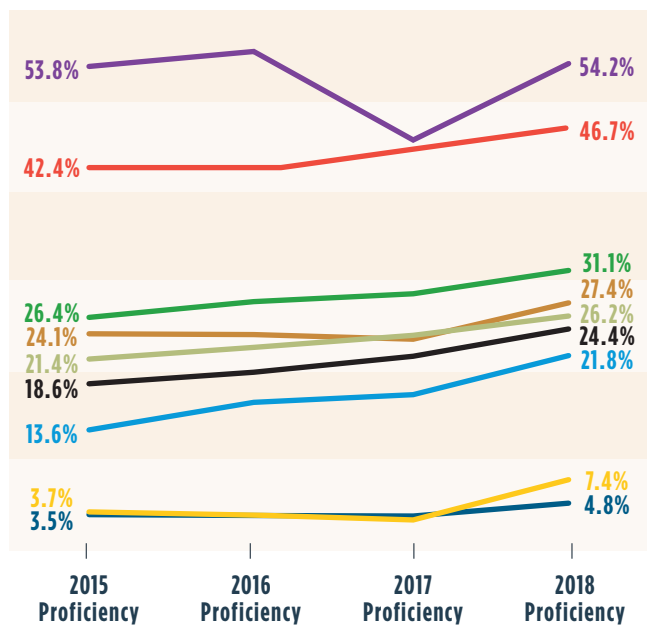
**FIGURE 2 MATH PROFICIENCY TRENDS — ALL STUDENTS**



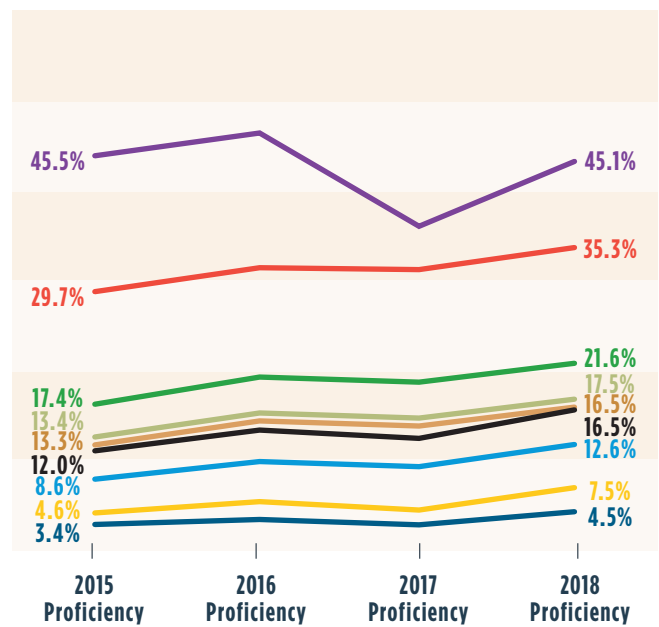
Additionally, data from the past four years shines a light on districts that are leading the way in improving student achievement, which can allow for sharing of best practices statewide. Farmington, for example, has become the best performing among New Mexico’s ten largest districts in ELA and Gallup has nearly doubled the number of students reading on grade level, while Gadsden has grown the most in math performance since 2015.

**While these trends are encouraging, we still have a long way to go in helping all students reach grade level proficiency in reading and math and master important 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills like critical thinking and problem solving.** Achievement gaps continue to persist across racial and ethnic, socioeconomic, English learner and special education designations. Figures 3 and 4 demonstrate positive trends across a variety of student groups, but also highlight the wide disparities in overall performance between white students and the state average and other groups.

**FIGURE 3 ELA ACHIEVEMENT GAPS, 2015-2018**



**FIGURE 4 MATH ACHIEVEMENT GAPS, 2015-2018**



— All                      — Economically Disadvantaged (ED)                      — Hispanic  
— Black                      — English Learners (EL)                      — American Indian  
— Asian                      — White                      — Students with Disabilities (SWD)

Even within these gaps, some encouraging trends are worth noting. In grades 3-8:<sup>5</sup>

- Since 2015, Native American students are improving in ELA at rates above the state average and are close to meeting the state improvement average in math. Hispanic students are meeting the state improvement averages in ELA and math.
- Although New Mexico ranks at the bottom of former PARCC states in overall proficiency rates,<sup>6</sup> improvement rates since 2015 for Hispanic, Native American and African American subgroups rank among the top of 18 states analyzed in a [recent report from the Collaborative for Student Success](#).

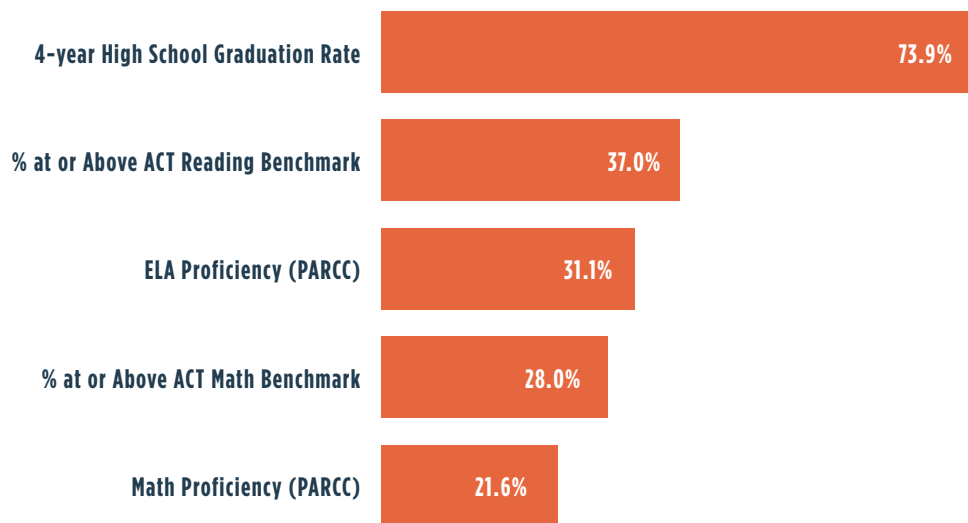
However, as the 2018 Yazzie v. Martinez lawsuit ruling emphasized, New Mexico still faces an uphill battle in preparing all students for success in college, career and life. In the ruling, Judge Singleton noted “the persistence of a significant achievement gap and the fact that the outcomes have continued over time unabated,” holding that “real improvement in proficiency should be demonstrated.”<sup>7</sup>

Gaps of fourteen to nearly fifty percentage points or more remain between the highest and lowest achieving student groups. **If New Mexico moves the goalposts and lowers expectations for student learning, we will only exacerbate these gaps and hide the truth about how the state serves vulnerable populations.** Such a move would undermine families and advocates fighting for low income, English learner and special education students.

### Disparities Across Measures

A look across a variety of academic outcomes illuminates other reasons why multiple forms of information about student progress are so critical. Despite gains in recent years, disparities clearly exist across the various outcomes. Figure 5<sup>8</sup> shows the wide range between measures like high school graduation rate and academic proficiency.

**FIGURE 5 STATEWIDE PERFORMANCE ACROSS METRICS, 2018**



While the statewide four-year high school graduation rate was 73.9 percent for the class of 2018, less than one-third of students met the ACT math benchmark or grade-level math proficiency on the PARCC exam, with reading and ELA scores also well below the graduation rate. **Sharing such data leads to important conversations about why different measures yield such different outcomes, and which interventions are necessary to lift student and school performance in weaker areas.**

## The Future of Our State Assessment System

In January 2019, Governor Lujan Grisham issued an executive order to discontinue PARCC and move to a new state assessment.<sup>9</sup> State tests can be unpopular for many reasons and they certainly do not tell the complete story of student, school and district progress. However, objective measures of student academic growth and achievement are critical to help educators, families and the public understand where more support is needed.

**At a time when there are so many pressing issues facing New Mexico’s education system and economy, we must not move away from efforts that are working for students and families.** We have an opportunity to build on the positive lessons learned, the progress made and the strong content embedded in the PARCC exam and create an assessment system that maintains high expectations and the ability to track student progress over time.

As the New Mexico Public Education Department (PED) reviews proposals for a new assessment system, stakeholders across the state continue to engage in conversations about the measures we need to demonstrate that all students are ready for success. Building on the momentum demonstrated by our students and educators, we offer several key principles to inform these conversations. **Above all, we must do what is right, even if it's not popular — holding educational excellence for every student above all else and ensuring New Mexico's next assessment best serves our students, educators and state.**

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“Reviewing my student data reassures me that my students are on track to be college- and career-ready. Isn't that what every parent wants when the tears are shed that first day of kindergarten?”

— TEACH PLUS NEW MEXICO POLICY FELLOWSHIP  
ALUMNUS JOEL HUTCHINSON

## Key Principles

New Mexico students, families and educators deserve an assessment system that is:

### 1 Rooted in Excellence

- Above all, excellence for every student must remain the central focus. We must maintain an exam that:
  - » Tests critical thinking and real-world skills;
  - » Is aligned to the high academic expectations we hold for all students; and
  - » Produces longitudinal data that is comparable to previous years and transparently demonstrates how all student populations are doing, especially in light of the Yazzie v. Martinez lawsuit ruling.
- The system must promote continuity from grade three through high school graduation, building from year to year and covering a logical sequence of knowledge attainment aligned to a rigorous curriculum.
- We must avoid an “honesty gap” between student scores on our state assessment and those on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Wide disparities between these assessments pointed to a lack of rigor in our previous state exam earlier in this decade, while PARCC results aligned much more closely with NAEP in 2015.<sup>10</sup> We must not bring our students backwards.

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“In my classroom, I value having high-quality assessment results for my students to help prepare lessons and instructional practices. Because I work hard to align my instruction to our state standards and know the assessment will assess these measures, I am empowered to give my students relevant and useful instruction that will impact their future.”

— TEACH PLUS NEW MEXICO POLICY FELLOWSHIP  
ALUMNA DAWN BILBREY

## 2 Aligned with Economic Opportunity

- Every pathway out of the K-12 system should prepare students to earn a living wage by proceeding through higher education or entering a career path. Assessments must provide opportunities for each student to demonstrate mastery of the content and skills required for the pathway of his or her choosing.
- Employers and higher education leaders must help to inform the content and desired outcomes of the assessment to ensure they can trust that students passing the exam are truly ready to enter their doors.

## 3 Designed to Responsibly Use Resources and Time

- Assessments must be accessible to students of all ability levels, including appropriate accommodations whenever necessary.
- The state saved approximately 40 percent of the cost of the previous exam with the transition to PARCC and significantly upgraded district and school technology capacity.<sup>11</sup> A new system must not increase costs or require extensive new district infrastructure.
- New Mexico must avoid the significant platform challenges other states have faced in adopting wholly new systems.<sup>12</sup> The new provider must have a proven record of delivering the assessment and all student results on time and without technology failures that place undue burden on students and educators.
- Currently, assessment data is returned to districts and schools in May or June of the same year of administration, so that it can be used to inform actions with current students. A new assessment system must not compromise this timeline and delay the delivery of results.

## 4 Thoughtfully Planned and Executed

- Over five years of the PARCC administration, educators were trained to understand the assessment and use resulting data to inform instruction. A new system must build on this training and avoid putting teachers through yet another brand-new initiative.
- In 2018, PED released the results of an extensive statewide listening tour, including several issues related to state testing that the department has already addressed, such as reducing testing time and improving training and tools for educators.<sup>13</sup> A new assessment should build on these efforts, rather than starting over.
- Families have learned more every year about how to help students prepare for the state exam, as well as how to understand exam results and seek help for those who struggle. A new system must prioritize family engagement and not create additional uncertainty or confusion.

At this moment in the history in of our public education system, it is imperative that we keep New Mexico on the rise and our students globally competitive, and that means believing in the full potential of all students as we select an updated assessment. **This is a true test of resolve for our state — to reinforce high expectations and continue progress.**

# Endnotes

- 1 New Mexico Public Education Department. "2017-18 Student Assessment Results." July 2018. Accessed July 20, 2019. <https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/PARCCBriefingPacket2018.pdf>.
- 2 NewMexicoKidsCAN. "State of Education in New Mexico in 2018." Accessed July 16, 2019. <https://nmkidscan.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2017/09/SoE-NM-WEB.pdf>.
- 3 Legislative Education Study Committee. "Yazzie and Martinez v. State of New Mexico: July 20, 2018 Decision and Order." August 17, 2018. Accessed July 15, 2019. <https://www.nmlegis.gov/handouts/ALESC%20081518%20Item%2012%20.1%20-%20Brief%20-%20Decision%20and%20Order-Yazzie%20and%20Martinez%20v%20State%20of%20NM.pdf>.
- 4 Unless otherwise specified, data in this section, including Figures 1-4, is from New Mexico Public Education Department. "2017-18 Student Assessment Results." July 2018. Accessed July 20, 2019. <https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/PARCCBriefingPacket2018.pdf>.
- 5 The Collaborative for Student Success. "Success is Trending: High academic standards advancing equity in education." Accessed July 16, 2019. <https://forstudentsuccess.org/success-is-trending-high-academic-standards-advancing-equity-in-education/>.
- 6 NewMexicoKidsCAN. "State of Education in New Mexico in 2018." Accessed July 16, 2019. <https://nmkidscan.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2017/09/SoE-NM-WEB.pdf>.
- 7 Legislative Education Study Committee. "Yazzie and Martinez v. State of New Mexico: July 20, 2018 Decision and Order." August 17, 2018. Accessed July 15, 2019. <https://www.nmlegis.gov/handouts/ALESC%20081518%20Item%2012%20.1%20-%20Brief%20-%20Decision%20and%20Order-Yazzie%20and%20Martinez%20v%20State%20of%20NM.pdf>.
- 8 New Mexico Public Education Department. "2017-18 Student Assessment Results," and "Graduation Data." Accessed July 17, 2019. <https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/PARCCBriefingPacket2018.pdf> and <https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/bureaus/accountability/graduation/>; ACT. "Average ACT Scores by State Graduating Class 2018." Accessed July 17, 2019. <https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/cccr2018/Average-Scores-by-State.pdf>.
- 9 New Mexico Public Education Department. "Memorandum: Transitioning Away from the PARCC." January 10, 2019. Accessed July 17, 2019. <https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Memo-Transition-Assessment-Spring2019.pdf>.
- 10 NewMexicoKidsCAN. "State of Education in New Mexico in 2018." Accessed July 16, 2019. <https://nmkidscan.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2017/09/SoE-NM-WEB.pdf>; New Mexico Public Education Department. "Achievement Data: Proficiencies State, District and School, by Grade 2013." Accessed July 16, 2019. <https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/bureaus/accountability/achievement-data/>.
- 11 Swedien, Jon. "All About PARCC." Albuquerque Journal, March 21, 2015. Accessed July 17, 2019. <https://www.abqjournal.com/548105/all-about-parcc.html>
- 12 Herold, Benjamin. "Online State Testing in 2018: Mostly Smooth, With One Glaring Exception." Education Week, May 8, 2018. Accessed July 17, 2019. <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2018/05/09/online-state-testing-in-2018-mostly-smooth.html?r=1672336217>.
- 13 New Mexico Public Education Department. "New Mexico Rising Together: Fifty Responses to Feedback from Our Communities." Accessed July 19, 2019. <https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/New-Mexico-Rising-Together-50-Responses-to-Feedback-From-Our-Communities.pdf>.



## About NewMexicoKidsCAN

Launched in 2018, The New Mexico Campaign for Achievement Now (NewMexicoKidsCAN) is a local non-profit organization that advocates for community-informed, student-centered and research-backed education policies. Connecting policy, instructional practice and politics we work to reimagine what is possible in New Mexico's public education system to ensure our students become the future community, civic and business leaders we need.

[NMKidsCAN.org](http://NMKidsCAN.org)



## About Teach Plus

Teach Plus is dedicated to the mission of empowering excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that advance equity, opportunity, and student success. Since 2009, Teach Plus has trained thousands of teacher leaders across the country who are driving policy changes and improving the instructional practices of teachers to create an education system driven by access and excellence for all students.

[TeachPlus.org](http://TeachPlus.org)

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