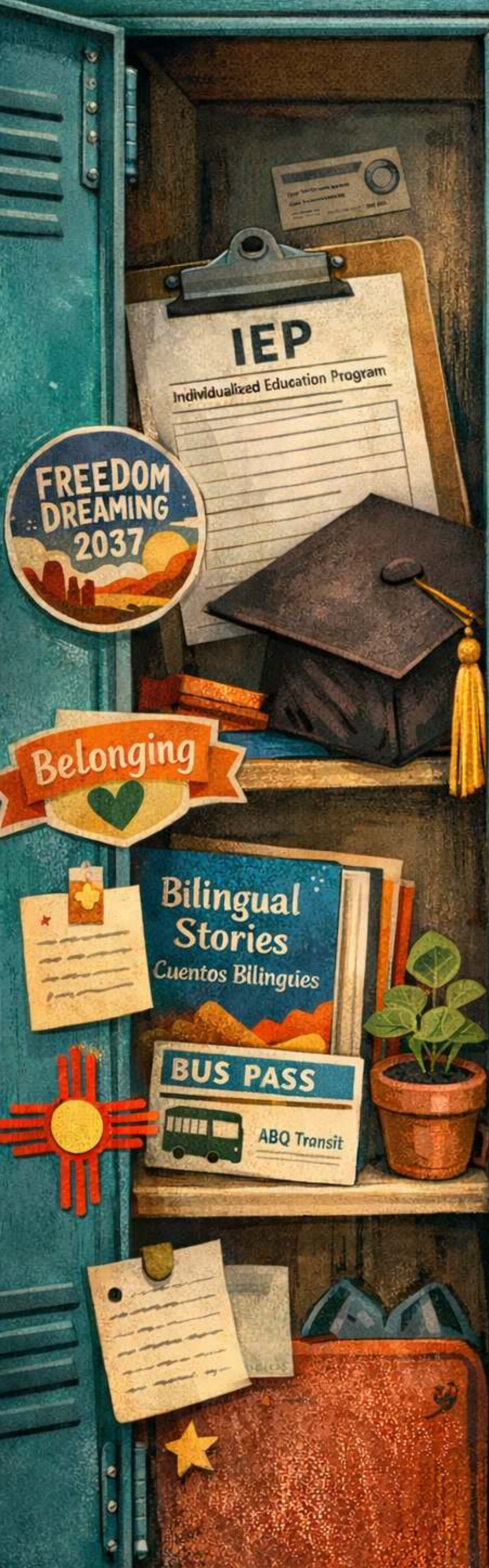




Transform Education New Mexico

EQUITY LITERACY ACTION GUIDE

*A Community-led
Directive for Change*

Building Schools Our Children Can Trust

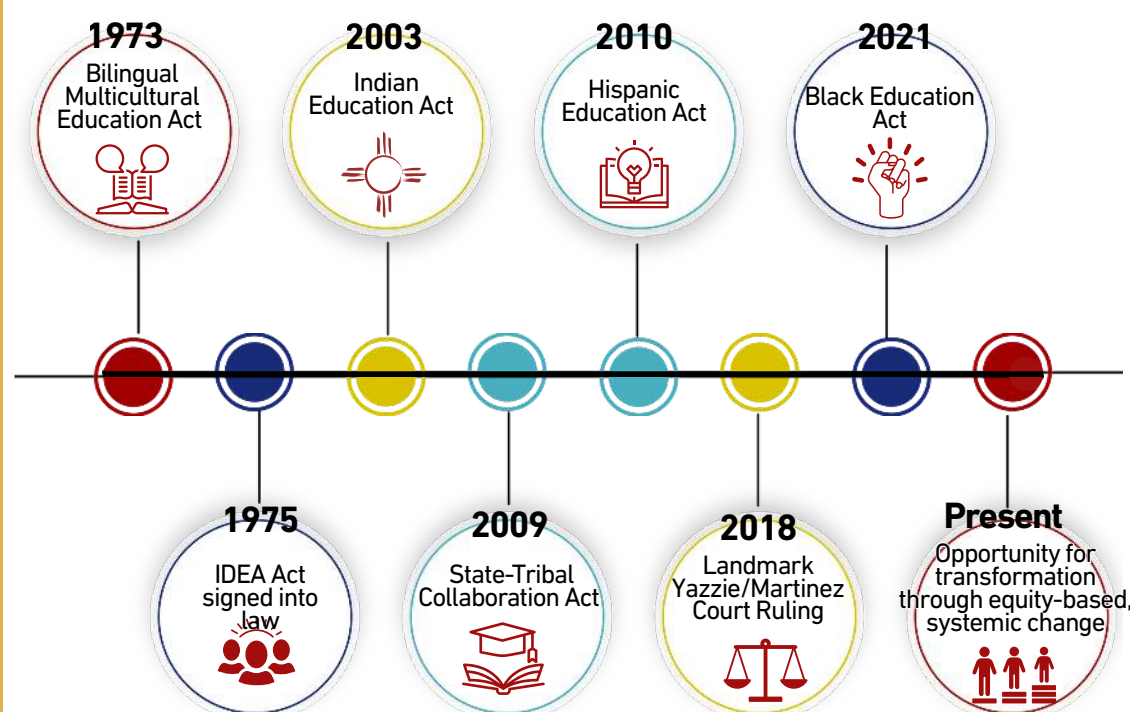
Listening to What Our Children Tell Us

In every classroom across New Mexico, our children are waiting. Without having the words to describe policy change the way adults do, they tell us in other ways—sometimes by disengaging from school, withdrawing trust, or quietly questioning whether schools are truly built for their well-being. At Transform Education New Mexico, **our mission is to move our collective future forward by transforming schools into places rich with opportunity, deep connection to culture, and rooted in the strengths of families and communities.**

Policy Foundation Exists in New Mexico

What our children are waiting for is a system so caring and supportive that they no longer have to hope for relevance or wonder whether they will have a teacher who sees them, believes in them, and knows how to meet their unique needs. **More than fifty years ago, their elders fought to protect language, culture, and racial identity in our classrooms.** The Bilingual Multicultural Education Act (BMEA) laid the groundwork for honoring heritage and belonging in schools. Alongside it, the Indian Education Act (IEA), the Hispanic Education Act (HEA), the Black Education Act (BEA), and the State-Tribal Collaboration Act reaffirm that the dignity of our children is not an add-on to education—it is the starting point.

And the same is true for our children with disabilities. **Long before today, families and advocates secured protections to make sure that students with disabilities are not pushed to the margins or expected to fit into systems that were never designed with them in mind.** The federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), New Mexico special education law, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act require that students with disabilities receive a free, appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment—not as charity, but as their right. These laws affirm what our communities have always known: every child has gifts to offer, and every child deserves what they need to learn, grow, and thrive.



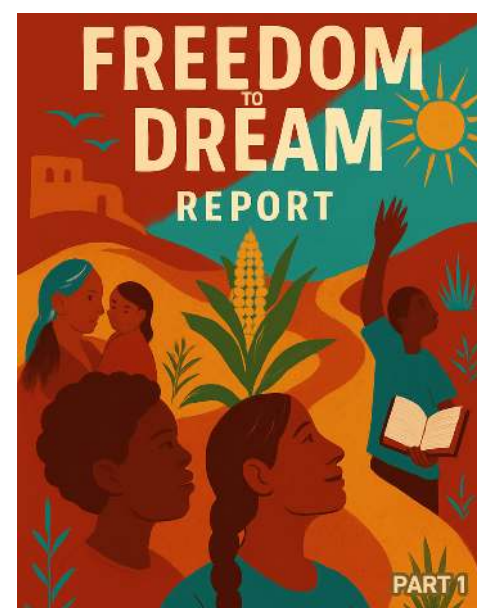
Moving Forward Carefully and Intentionally

A high-functioning education system, like a bridge or an airplane, must be built with intention and precision—not only so that it works, but so that it carries our children safely toward the futures they dream for themselves. When the foundation is weak or incomplete, we see the consequences in real time: students losing trust, families feeling unheard, and communities carrying the weight of gaps they did not create.

For decades, New Mexico has lived with underinvestment and without a comprehensive plan to build the kind of education system our children deserve. It is no surprise, then, that our state ranks near the bottom in education, child well-being, and economic and health outcomes. This is not a reflection of our children—it is a reflection of the system they inherited. To serve our children, we must design our schools to specifications rooted in our values: honoring language, culture, community, and the full humanity of every child. Precision matters because their futures matter.

And when we ask young people what they need, their answer is clear. They want schools where they are safe. Where they are seen. Where they are cared for. Where learning is hands-on and relevant. That is both the blueprint and the destination.

See the full findings in our *Freedom to Dream* report, where young people share their perspectives on what makes a school safe, engaging, supportive, and inspiring for every student to learn and grow.



transformeducationnm.org/freedom-dreaming-2037/

The Current Reality of New Mexico Students

Most students **do not** see their language, identity, or community in their learning

Too many **students with disabilities are denied their least restrictive environment** and, through restraint and seclusion, pushed out of school

Chronic shortages of **teachers, counselors, and support staff; high turnover among leaders**

School infrastructure **needs attention and updating**

Community voice and expertise is not consistently included in decision-making

Funding remains **fragmented**; not guided by a shared vision
Landmark equity and Special Education Acts are under-implemented

The **evaluation and accountability approach** is not fair or productive (it is not equity driven)

What a Well-Built Education System Looks Like

- **Culturally & linguistically** responsive educators and leaders
- **Curriculum** that reflects New Mexico's communities and meets specialized learning needs

- **Structures and supports** for students with special needs
- **Inclusive classrooms and schools** that welcome all students and families

- **Fully staffed schools** with low turnover and strong relationships

- **Equitable and adequate infrastructure** — transportation, technology, and buildings

- **Community expertise and student voice** in decision-making

- **Full, stable funding** driven by a statewide plan carefully designed to address capacity and resource gaps at every level of the system

- The evaluation and accountability approach is **fair and productive** (it is equity driven)



Equity transforms school systems by providing students with the resources they need to thrive. The gap between vision and reality demands more than acknowledgment—it calls for transformative action.

Who are you holding in mind as you read this section? What do students need most from a system built with care and intention?

The next section, **Educational Equity Explained**, defines the principles and commitments needed to build a system that truly delivers on the promise of equity for every student.

Building Schools Our Children Can Trust Means Building Equity

The word equity gets used a lot—but many people still aren't sure what it really means. It sometimes gets mixed in with buzzwords like "diversity" and "inclusion," or confused with the idea of equality, which in its simplest definition means treating every person exactly the same.

Equity is something much more practical and powerful. In education it means building a system where every child can succeed—not by treating all students the same, but by making sure each student's strengths and backgrounds are fully harnessed.

The Equity Literacy Institute reminds us that equity isn't only about good intentions or awareness of personal bias. It also requires an acknowledgement that injustice and racism are embedded in policies, unexamined practices, and traditions. As a result, we must change the way education practices, cultures, policies, and systems operate so they stop creating barriers and start removing them.

What Equity Looks Like in Education

We prioritize change for the students who have waited the longest for meaningful access to high-quality learning. When students can engage in real-world projects, connect with their communities, and develop as leaders and creative thinkers, we begin to build schools that young people can truly trust.

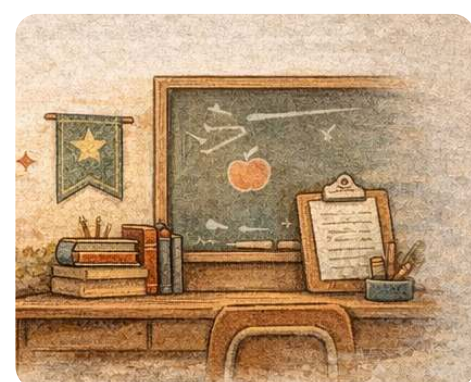
A Shared Vision for New Mexico

The first step toward statewide equity is unifying around a multicultural, multilingual, place-based framework for education—one that reflects the identity, strengths, and future of our state. This kind of vision requires leadership from all of us: families, educators, young people, and policymakers. State-level leaders have a unique role to play by:

- Aligning the state around a community-created vision, goals, and framework.
- Measuring what we value, instead of what is easiest to measure.
- Ensuring that districts and schools have both the materials and capacity (human and financial resources) and the blueprint (a clear, community-rooted plan) needed to build a high-functioning system.

Just like a bridge or an airplane, our education system must be built with intention and precision—not only so it works, but so it carries our children safely toward the futures they imagine for themselves.

With an equity driven blueprint that outlines a strong statewide framework and a solid foundation, schools and communities can provide the stability, tools, and support needed to make equity real—so every classroom becomes a place of joy, connection, and relevance.



Note: We use the term "blueprint" to highlight that equity work requires more than a simple plan—it's a detailed, intentional guide mapping how policies, practices, and resources can work together to support every student. Unlike a plan, a blueprint is actionable, rooted in evidence and community input, and designed to guide implementation with precision.



Strengthening Our Equity "Muscles"

System-level change is essential, and each of us can take concrete steps to build our own capacity to collectively enact equity in New Mexico. This is what we call equity literacy—the knowledge and skills to recognize inequities, respond to them, and redesign systems so they don't keep repeating the same patterns. It takes a deep commitment to equity to not look away from the reality that policies and traditions continue to reproduce racial and systemic inequities in New Mexico today.

Building equity literacy is how individuals, communities, and policymakers become stronger partners in creating the schools our children deserve.

Two additional resources to "dig deeper" into equity literacy:

- [Avoiding Racial Equity Detours](#)
- [LAB Developmental Model](#)

The gap between vision and reality demands more than acknowledgment—it calls for transformative action. The next section, **Full and Fair Investment**, describes the financial aspects of building a system that truly delivers on the promise of equity for every student.

Cultivating Equity and Justice Skills

Are You Equity Literate?

As you read each stage, check the statements that currently feel true for you or your work. There is no “right” place to be. This is simply a tool for reflection and growth.

RECOGNIZING It starts with **RECOGNIZING**, which includes...

- ☐ Being curious about ways school policies and practices disadvantage some students in mostly unintentional ways;
- ☐ Rejecting deficit ideology, or the view that outcome gaps (in test scores or graduation rates, for example) are caused by the cultures or mindsets of students of color, students in low income families, or other students from marginalized communities;
- ☐ Noticing subtle bias in learning materials and classroom interactions.

REFLECTIVE ACTION It deepens to **REFLECTIVE ACTION**, which includes...

- ☐ Fostering conversations with others about equity concerns in our education system;
- ☐ Cultivating in others the ability to analyze bias and inequity in classroom materials, classroom interactions as well as school and state-level policies and practices;
- ☐ Intervening effectively when biases or inequities arise in a classroom, school, or state-level context.

REDRESSING It changes to **REDRESSING**, which includes...

- ☐ Proactively advocating against inequitable practices and policies and advocating for equitable practices and policies, rather than responding only when individual instances of bias or inequity arise;
- ☐ Recognizing and addressing the root causes of disparities in educational outcomes and experiences rather than addressing only the symptoms of these disparities;
- ☐ Understanding how biases and inequities operating in classrooms, schools, and at the state level are connected to larger societal conditions.

ACTIVELY CULTIVATING It morphs to **ACTIVELY CULTIVATING**, which includes...

- ☐ By instinctively applying an equity lens to every policy, pedagogy, practice, program, and process decision;
- ☐ Prioritizing the interests and needs of the students and families whose interests and needs are not typically prioritized;
- ☐ Understanding that equity is a baseline commitment that should inform everything. It is not a program, strategy, or event to layer on top of other programs, strategies, or events.

SUSTAINING It becomes **SUSTAINING**, which includes...

- ☐ Understanding that equity progress often elicits concerns and complaints from people who are accustomed to more than their fair share of access and opportunity, and being able to recognize these complaints as an indication of progress, not a reason to roll back progress;
- ☐ Knowing how to communicate with certainty and confidence a commitment to equity even in the face of these concerns and complaints;
- ☐ Being cautious of the constant barrage of popular programs and strategies that pose as increasing “equity” but have little to do with equity while staying committed to embracing a long-term transformative approach.

Building Schools Our Children Can Trust Requires Full and Fair Investment

When We Get Honest About Money, We Get Honest About Equity

We can't create equitable outcomes with inequitable dollars. For generations, New Mexico has asked its public schools to do more with less. While the State is spending more today than it did a decade ago, this comes after decades of chronic under-investment. Between 2008 and 2015, total state funding for public education fell by nearly 12%(1). One study conducted in 2020 found the funding gap in New Mexico to be \$1.9 billion annually, or almost \$6,000 per student per year(2).

These numbers reveal the true story: we didn't build what our children needed, and we haven't yet fully acknowledged and repaired the damage. Years after the Yazzie/Martinez ruling, schools still operate in under-resourced conditions, leaving students without the supports, resources, and environments they need to thrive. The unspoken truth is that even with recent increases, New Mexico's K-12 spending per pupil in 2023 was just below the national average, but this means little when national averages themselves fall below adequacy(3). And as the Learning Policy Institute reminds us, money matters—not just how we spend it, but whether we have enough to begin with(4). This is why the Court was clear in the Yazzie/Martinez ruling:

“ PED or the legislature may find ways to have the funding already allocated spent more efficiently, but the weight of the evidence... suggests that more money will have to be allocated to education. ”

2008-2015

State education funding dropped nearly **12%(1)**.

2020

Study identified a \$1.9 billion annual gap, nearly **\$6,000 per student(2)**.

2023

New Mexico's K-12 spending per pupil was **just below the national average**.

Near the national average DOES NOT mean adequate(3).

The Court also made another important point: New Mexico has options. While it did not direct the State to choose any specific revenue source, it explained that multiple sources exist and that it is the Legislature's job to select the options that best serve New Mexico. What matters most is not the exact source of revenue, but how lawmakers use State revenue to fully fund a system that adequately educates historically underserved children.

The Difference Between What We Have and What We Need

In today's reality, school administrators, district leaders, and educators are forced to ration resources and stretch staff and programs while teachers, parents and students often end up taking the blame when "achievement" doesn't improve—even though the system itself is underfunded and under-resourced.

As public school finance expert David Hinojosa has emphasized, if New Mexico can "match its strong principles and goals of equity and multiculturalism with a formidable finance system that appropriately invests in its students and educators as reflected in The Essential Building Blocks for State School Finance, the state will be poised to realize equity and opportunity for all students." A significant barrier currently in New Mexico is that the school finance system is similar to many others with a "patchwork of arbitrary laws untethered to the actual cost of providing a high-quality education to every child in every school"(5).

Sources:
(1) Center on Budget Policies and Priorities; (2) The Century Foundation; (3) ASI, University of Miami, and Rutgers; (4) Learning Policy Institute; (5) David G. Hinojosa, J.D.: New Mexico's 2019 School Finance Reforms and The Essential Building Blocks for State School Finance.

Even after the court ordered the State to include cost estimates in the Martinez-Yazzie Action Plan, they are not included. Without knowing how much a high-functioning education system costs in New Mexico, it is not possible to determine how large the funding gap actually is. For example, while funding in New Mexico has increased recently for English language learners and students from low income families, this occurred in the context of not knowing how much it costs to effectively serve them in the first place. Other states that have examined funding for these two groups specifically have found that funding levels are well below what they should be(6).

The gap between vision and reality demands more than acknowledgment—it calls for transformative action. The next section, **Balanced Evaluation and Accountability**, describes the kind of evaluation and accountability needed to build a system that truly delivers on the promise of equity for every student.

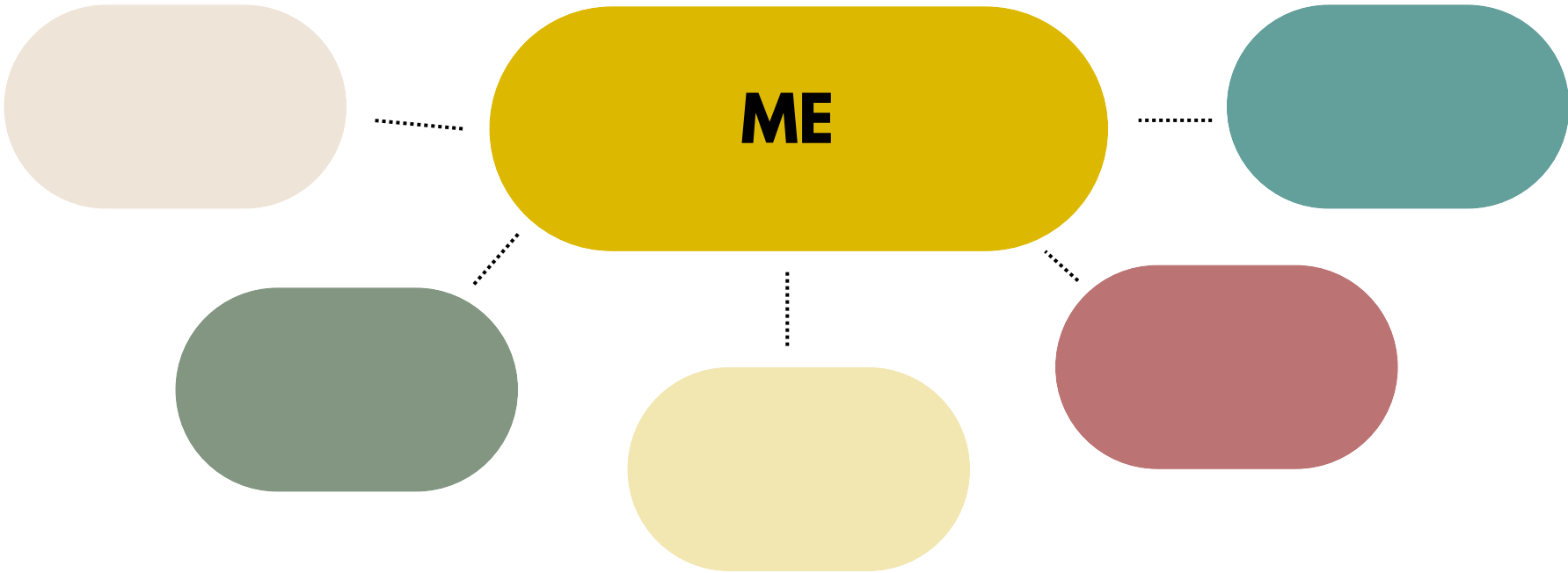


Source:
(6) Learning Policy Institute: [Funding Student Needs A Review of State Funding Policies for English Learners and Students From Low-Income Backgrounds](#)

Your Role in Building Equity

As you reflect on what you’ve learned in this guide about challenging inequitable systems and building equitable ones, consider the spaces where you already have influence and where your influence needs to grow to better support students and communities. *Example: child’s school/classroom, IEP meetings, legislative town halls, community organizations, family conversations, etc.*

Use the map to name those spaces. **Circle** where you currently show up most. **Star** where you see opportunity to grow.



What patterns do you notice in your map?

Where does most of your influence currently live? Where does it feel unfamiliar, uncomfortable, or underdeveloped? What surprised you?



“What future generations inherit is defined by whether we stand up or lay down.”

–Regis Pecos (adapted)

Building Schools Our Children Can Trust Requires Balanced Evaluation and Accountability

The Idea Behind “Balanced Evaluation”

We all understand balance in everyday life—keeping a budget, sharing responsibilities at home, or making sure every child on a playground gets a fair turn. Balance is about steadiness, fairness, and seeing the full picture before making a decision. In education, though, the systems we use to judge what “works” have rarely been balanced. They lean heavily on narrow measures, overlook the voices of those closest to the classroom, and often reinforce the very inequities we are trying to solve.

Balanced evaluation shifts this by widening the lens: it brings together multiple forms of evidence, honors community wisdom, and examines impact through an equity-centered frame. It is transformative because it challenges the old, unequal ways of determining success and replaces them with a fuller, fairer understanding that reflects the realities of our students, families, and educators.

What we need is a fair and holistic way of looking at how schools are doing—a “balanced look at what works.” Right now, the state mostly judges schools by test scores, which is like judging a garden only by how many flowers bloom without checking whether the soil, water, and sunlight were enough to help the plants grow. A fair and balanced evaluation approach in education looks at the resources, support, and opportunities every student has, and asks whether teachers and schools have what they need to succeed.

To make sure schools are truly supporting every student, we need to ask the right questions about equity and opportunity. It’s not enough to look at test scores alone—we must consider whether students feel seen, supported, and connected to their learning and their school community. The questions below can help guide families, educators, and community members in thinking about whether every child has what they need to succeed and thrive.



Basic Equity Checklist for Public Education in New Mexico

These are the types of questions that should be integrated into the evaluation of education in New Mexico - many emerged in the Freedom Dreaming 2037 conversations with youth across the state. But asking good questions is only the first step in transforming our schools. The key is to address issues quickly with solutions that are rooted in equity.

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Do all students see themselves, their families, and their communities in the curriculum? | ☐ Are strong and positive relationships between students and teachers as well as teachers and school administrators the norm? |
| ☐ How high is student engagement and what are the primary barriers to engagement? | ☐ Do all students feel their learning styles and individualized needs are being met? |
| ☐ Do all secondary students feel their education is relevant and preparing them for their futures? | ☐ Is every school in New Mexico fully staffed? |
| ☐ Are all students learning about the many contributions of their ancestors in the U.S.? | ☐ Is every school strongly connected to the families it serves and local organizations, businesses, and post secondary institutions? |
| ☐ Do all students feel affirmed and acknowledged when it comes to their identities? | ☐ Is turnover low among teachers and principals? |
| ☐ Are all students supported to maintain and become proficient in their home languages? | ☐ What gaps exist across and within districts in terms of buildings, technology, and transportation? |
| ☐ Are all students educated in their most inclusive, least restrictive environment? | ☐ Are family and community members, educators, and students involved in decision making at the school, district, and state levels? |

“You can’t build something this stable, that is this unequal, by accident.”

– Dr. Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade

A Deeper Dive Into What A Balanced Evaluation Approach Is

Embedded in a comprehensive plan that captures the specifications of a well-built education system is an evaluation approach that is balanced, holistic, and based on equity principles. Evaluative questions should include whether:



Capacity & Staffing

Human and resource capacity gaps at all levels are being addressed in a manner that is rooted in community wisdom and participation. This requires greater emphasis on addressing personnel shortages at every level in the system from the classroom to the New Mexico Public Education Department. Bilingual and Special Education teachers, Native language educators, and ancillary staff must be prioritized.



Culture & Curriculum

The education system honors and integrates the diverse cultural, linguistic, and lived experiences of all students, including those with disabilities, and these values are evident in curricular choices and availability. Instructional content must be challenging, relevant, and connected to the lived experiences, histories, and futures of students and it must foster critical thinking and civic engagement.



Relationship & Belonging

Relationships among school, district, and state personnel, students, and parents are based on mutual respect, care, and reciprocity, fostering a sense of interconnectedness and belonging. More emphasis must be placed on creating school and classroom environments that are welcoming and affirming where meeting the unique needs of each student and nurturing their strengths are top priorities.



Assessment Practices

Assessment practices are holistic, culturally relevant, and used as tools to inform instruction and learning, rather than for mere compliance and ranking. The focus must shift toward ensuring all students have an equal opportunity to learn what they are assessed on, resulting in greater use of authentic and performance based assessments, which are more relevant and honor the many ways students can demonstrate their skills and knowledge.



Investment & Accountability

The state is investing in ways that prioritize the well-being and holistic development of all students, with continuous, inclusive monitoring and feedback loops to ensure accountability and sustained progress. This requires more emphasis on whether the inputs, resources, and capacity in the system are sufficient to result in the desired outputs and outcomes.

The gap between vision and reality demands more than acknowledgment—it calls for transformative action. The next section, **Shared Leadership**, describes the kind of leadership needed to build a system that truly delivers on the promise of equity for every student.

Building Schools Our Children Can Trust Requires Shared Leadership

Moving from Typical to Transformational Leadership

New Mexico’s state leaders have a powerful opportunity to move toward shared decision making that is grounded in clear, equity-driven specifications for what students need to succeed. Across the state, interest is high and expertise is deep. By uniting this collective capacity, New Mexico can realize the vision articulated by youth during the Freedom Dreaming 2037 conversations: an education system that honors community aspirations and prepares every student for success.



Shared Leadership in Service to Students and Communities

Shared leadership in service to students and communities offers a path forward. It reduces top down decision making driven by a few people who may not understand what is happening in communities most impacted. Instead, decisions are made collaboratively and rooted in trust, transparency, and shared responsibility. New Mexico already possesses extraordinary expertise through its advisory councils, including the Bilingual Multicultural Education Act (BMEA), Indian Education Act (IEA), Hispanic Education Act (HEA), Black Education Act (BEA), and the State’s Special Education advisory body. These councils along with Tribal leaders, educators, higher education partners, and members of community-based organizations represent lived experiences and professional knowledge that should be meaningfully integrated into system design and implementation. Students and family members also have much to contribute.



SHARED LEADERSHIP

Long-term Equity-centered Transformation

When leadership is shared and directly connected to community wisdom, energy and resources can be used to pursue long-term, equity-centered, community-driven transformation as opposed to continuing to default toward trends and short-term fixes. Imagine the final Martinez-Yazzie Action Plan reflecting this important shift in decision-making and power sharing. New Mexico could serve as an example at the national level by adopting a multicultural, multilingual place-based framework, balanced evaluation and accountability, and transparency as it pertains to capacity, resource, and funding gaps systemwide.

As one outstanding New Mexico middle school teacher reminds us, “teamwork makes the dream work.” **The shift from typical to transformational leadership is not about relinquishing responsibility; it is about sharing it – intentionally and transparently – in service to students, families, and communities across the state.**

Typical Approach	Transformational Approach
Top-down isolated leadership without a unified equity-based vision and goals; ongoing deep collaboration is lacking	Shared leadership in service to students and communities; with a unified equity-based vision and goals; collaboration is ongoing and meaningful
English-focused, corporate-driven approach influenced by political agendas and outside interests	Multicultural, multilingual, and place-based framework driven by NM students, families, educators, Tribal leaders, higher education partners, special education experts, and community-based organizations
Imbalanced evaluation and accountability that over emphasizes test scores with inadequate attention to necessary inputs, resources, and capacity	Balanced, holistic evaluation and accountability that focuses on identifying and providing the necessary inputs, resources, and capacity
Transparency is low with little clarity about capacity, resource, and funding gaps systemwide	Transparency is high, capacity and resource gaps are clear, and systemwide costs are estimated

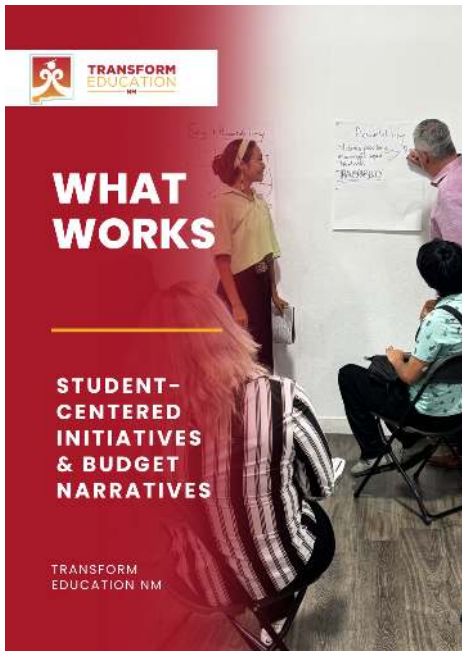
The gap between vision and reality demands more than acknowledgment—it calls for transformative action. The next section, **What Works**, summarizes eight proposals designed to help build a system that truly delivers on the promise of equity for every student.

Building Schools Our Children Can Trust Requires True Responsiveness

Transform Education New Mexico (TENM) is a statewide coalition of education advocates, including educators, Tribal leaders, community organizers, families and students, united in our commitment to ensuring New Mexico’s public schools meet the needs of all students.

TENM created eight specific proposals to help address the Martinez-Yazzie lawsuit titled our “**What Works**” proposals. The initiatives included are a starting point for transformation that can grow, be sustained, and be strengthened over time. Their success depends on investing in and developing our teachers, administrators, and partners in the field, and on building the capacity needed to carry this work forward beyond any single administration. While some strategies are ready to scale and others remain in early stages of development, all represent essential steps toward a future our young people and communities deserve. They are a first take on the immediate and future investments needed to transform our system and are not intended to be a comprehensive list.

To explore the full set of strategies and recommendations in greater depth, visit: transformeducationnm.org



- All of our students are capable of being successful if we take responsibility for responding to and meeting their needs:
 - Students with Disabilities,
 - English Language Learners,
 - Students from low-income families, and
 - Indigenous Students
- The strategies to engage young people are inherently local. While national expertise can be very valuable, especially to inform special education improvements, we must also be able to build the capacity to root this work in our own context.
- Minimizing practices like exclusionary discipline and informal removal is critical so that students can engage, learn, and be successful in inclusive environments responsive to their behavioral needs.
- Relevancy, connection and purpose starts with local graduate profiles/portraits and plays out differently in every region of the state.
- Student emotional and physical wellbeing is fundamental for real, authentic student engagement.

Here’s Why We Can’t Accept Incremental Change

The Court ruled our State was failing our students in 2018 and we know their educational experiences are still marked by inequities that deny them the education, dignity, and opportunities they deserve. Evidence includes persistent shortages of teachers, high attrition rates among new teachers, shortages of nurses, social workers, and school psychologists, high turnover among school and district leaders, very few curriculum options for teachers that are culturally and linguistically responsive and place-based, and high rates of seclusion and expulsion among students with disabilities.

What is needed to address these examples and many others not included here, are targeted, sustained investments and capacity building. Creating caring and relevant learning environments for students occurs best when ensuring work environments are good for teachers and school leaders. As Freedom Dreaming 2037 youth participants expressed loud and clear - the deadline is set. **It’s time we start taking real transformative steps toward building schools our children can trust.**

Now that you’ve strengthened your equity literacy and understanding of how systems shape student opportunity, name **three** concrete ways you will show up for students and communities using an equity lens. These can be small or bold, personal or collective. What matters is that they are real and actionable.

☐

☐

☐



TRANSFORM EDUCATION NM



PUBLISHED 2026