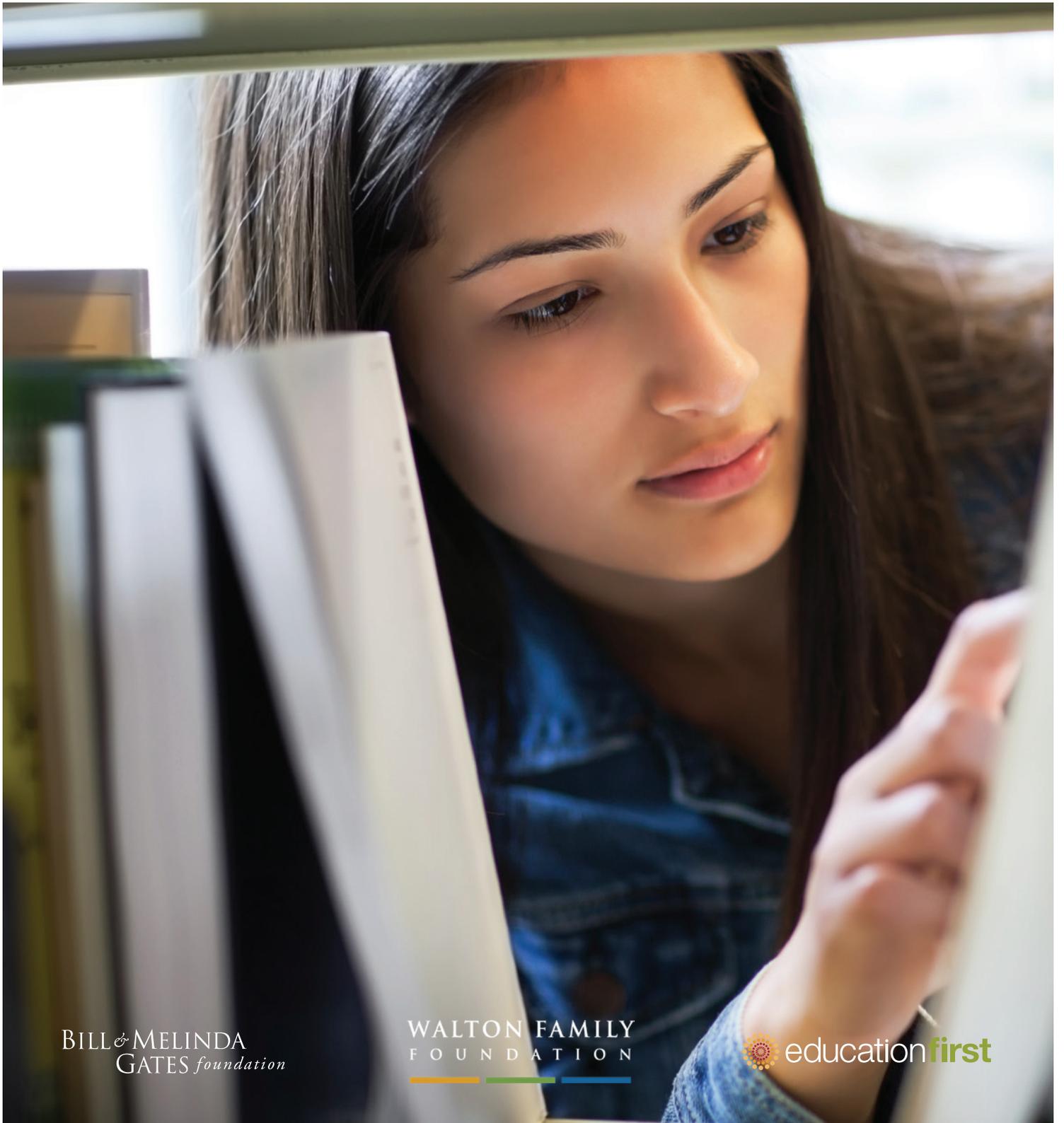


The New Mexico Graduation Equity Initiative





Introduction

The vast disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic prompted states and school networks to pause standardized tests and ask hard questions about the role and influence of traditional, once-a-year exams. This amounted to an opportunity to reimagine and redefine K-12 assessment and accountability alongside the students, families, teachers, and school leaders most familiar with the possibilities and pitfalls of our current approach.

The Innovations in Assessment and New Measure Grant Program, founded in 2020 by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Walton Family Foundation, and Education First, was developed to support this work.

The grant program supports new assessments that measure learning across multiple domains and capture student readiness for college or career, while continuing to provide the detailed data that an equitable approach to accountability requires. The grant program also supports a new strategy to create assessments: one that uses human-centered design principles, to more broadly share planning and decision-making power and build on the expertise of the people most proximate to the problem.

Five grantees are developing new measures to assess student learning across multiple domains. In contrast to traditional, top-down program design, these grantees are engaged with this work at the grassroots level, with a particular focus on how institutional, systemic, or ideological biases influence the experiences of some individuals and groups. These grantees are using **human-centered equitable design**, which builds on the expertise and experiences of students, families, and educators (informed by [Christine Ortiz's methodology](#)¹).

The experiences of these grantees can inform assessments that more fully meet the needs of students, families, teachers, and school leaders. While no one test will perfectly assess all that we need to know about student learning, a richer menu of options and base of knowledge rooted in the direct experiences of the people most proximate to the problem can support the high-quality measures of learning that all students and educators deserve. Such measures can capture the breadth of student achievement, with explicit connections to the broad range of knowledge and skills that nurture thriving adults across diverse cultures and communities.

Equitable Design in Action



¹Ortiz Guzman, Christine M., *Just Design, The equityXdesign Book*.

Engaging Communities to Design New Visions of Student Success

The high plateaus of the desert Southwest have been home to the Zuni tribe for a thousand years—and to their ancestors, the Ancient Puebloans, for thousands more. Today, in what is now called New Mexico, about 6,000 members live in Zuni Pueblo, one of 19 pueblos in

cultures.” A dynamic new vision of student success informs that work: a detailed **“Portrait of a Graduate”** that weaves together goals for academic achievement and career readiness with habits of mind to empower taking risks and working hard, social and emotional

attainment in New Mexico, dictated by leaders in Santa Fe and rooted in Eurocentric definitions of success. Community-based profiles place an explicit value on local knowledge, culture, and values, in contrast to the region’s long history of colonization, inequity, and structural and institutional racism. They also inform a complementary effort to expand pathways to a high-school diploma beyond standardized testing. Starting with the class of 2024, all New Mexico students can choose to fulfill state graduation requirements through tests, portfolios, or community-based projects called capstones. This replaces the current system, which requires students to either pass tests or request a waiver allowing them to demonstrate college and career readiness through a capstone as a “non-traditional” alternative.

Both are part of an effort across New Mexico to craft a more inclusive system to define and assess success in K-12 public schools, one that is rooted in the unique values and goals of diverse communities across the state.



the state, where communities blend elements of modern-day, mainstream American life with distinct cultural traditions, values, and religious practices.

That includes Zuni Public Schools, with a stated mission “to create a thoughtful nurturing environment that meets the needs of all students in traditional and contemporary

development to foster resilience and community connections, and knowledge and skills to participate fully in Zuni culture, including maintaining “a strong Shiwí identity while navigating and adapting in the world.”

Community-based graduate profiles like Zuni’s are a far cry from the typical vision of educational

Key Facts

Who:

The **New Mexico Graduation Equity Initiative**, formed by Future Focused Education and the New Mexico Public Education Department, along with the Center for Assessment, Center for Innovation in Education, local school district leaders, educators, parents, students, and community members across the state.

What:

Support communities to replace high-school graduation requirements with more relevant paths that connect to students' lives, including by developing:

- Unique, district-level graduate profiles that meet state requirements, articulate what students should know, understand, and be able to do when they graduate high school, and reflect local cultural values and goals.
- Aligned community-based capstone projects that allow students to demonstrate college and career readiness and earn a diploma, including guidance for districts and professional development for teachers.

Why:

A landmark court ruling in 2018 declared that New Mexico was failing to provide all students with a sufficient and uniform system of education, in violation of the state constitution. The court ordered New Mexico to fully fund and deliver the programs and services needed to meet the needs of all students, particularly students who are Native American, have disabilities, are experiencing poverty, or are English-language learners. The decision also required the state to “ensure teaching is tailored to the unique cultural and linguistic needs of students, including English-language learners and indigenous communities.” With the full support of the governor’s office, state education officials have joined with advocates and community leaders to craft an inclusive, relevant new approach to accountability and assessment.

How:

First, the project team conducted “empathy interviews” with educators and students and families from indigenous and immigrant backgrounds to define the problem as experienced by the people most proximate. Next, they brainstormed solutions with stakeholder focus groups to identify possible solutions, which resulted in a focus on capstones. Then, they revised and expanded the solution to add graduate profiles as well, to better address underlying concerns and take a vertical approach to reform. Finally, the team is supporting districts to prototype graduate profiles and capstones through various communities of practice, including those for educators and students.

Civil Action Starts a New Era in New Mexico Education

New Mexico has traditionally lagged national averages in a variety of student outcomes. The state has among the lowest four-year high-school graduation rates in the United States, at 76.8 percent in 2021. The rate was 71.5 for Native American students, 74.7 for English-language learners, and 68.0 percent for students with disabilities.

Persistent inequities spurred two civil lawsuits in 2014, both alleging that the state’s system of public education was failing in its constitutional duty to provide a sufficient and uniform system of education. The court agreed in its landmark *Martinez/Yazzie v. State of New Mexico* ruling in 2018, which declared “no education system can be sufficient for the education of all children unless it is founded on the sound principle that every child can learn and succeed.” The state was ordered to improve and expand funding, programs, and supports to ensure all students are prepared for college and career.

New Mexico did not appeal the decision and has taken several steps to comply with the court order, including expanding funding

and establishing equity councils at every school district. It also has set an ambitious goal for growth in literacy and math proficiency: 60 percent of K-12 students by 2030. In 2016, just 37 percent of students met that standard, according to the [New Mexico Statewide Literacy Framework](#) report. In addition, in 2019 the state’s Public Education Department convened a [task force](#) to review and make recommendations to improve assessment practices in the state.



Equity is an urgent priority and pressing challenge in New Mexico public schools. Three-quarters of students are non-white, including 62 percent Latino and 11 percent Native American. Nearly two-thirds of students are from families experiencing poverty and nearly one in three is an English-language learner.

The state has a rich tradition of cultural diversity, including 23 unique indigenous tribes and pueblos.

New Mexico has a long history of colonialism, which is reflected in the top-down approach to educational accountability via standardized testing. Sole reliance on such metrics is “fundamentally flawed” and “intended to prove that white supremacy culture and values were superior to the language, culture, and knowledge that are essential to New Mexico families and communities,” according to a description of the Graduation Equity Initiative published by Future Focused Education.

That was at the heart of the court ruling that spurred this work, said Tony Monfiletto, executive director of Future Focused Education.

“The lawsuit said that the disparities are rooted in the state’s inability to deal with the languages, cultures, lived experiences, and values of local communities, and the inherent flaw in assuming that you can judge all students in the same way, no matter where they come from, what their histories are, and what their communities value,” he said.

Co-Designing With Communities

Defining the Problem: Empathy Interviews

The New Mexico Public Education Department initiated this project because of its commitment to



addressing equity through assessment policy and practice. The effort was championed by Gwen Perea Warniment, who was named director of the state Legislative Education Study Committee in May 2022.

The project team began its work by conducting 18 empathy interviews with educators, students, family members, and young people disengaged from school. These were typically long conversations with open-ended questions that allowed participants to reflect and tell stories that illustrated the disconnect between academic expectations, in-school experiences, and student and community needs.

A veteran art teacher described the stark difference between the values of her school and the indigenous community it serves:

“For the last 20 years, western linear thinking has still been dominant; it’s been hard to get people to think more holistically,” she said. “We had end-of-course exams for students in academics. Meanwhile, there are world-renowned artists in their own tribes, and we are missing how much students could learn from them . . . The Pueblo has a creative economy, lots of arts festivals, even a film industry. This takes a whole different way of thinking. We need to stay away from a canned

curriculum that is highly scripted. It creates no love of learning for the kids.”

The principal of an elementary school serving immigrant students and families described state tests as “interfering with equity.” She went on to explain:

“I know we need consistency from school to school, but we need to know how we can have more creativity. We need more assessments to choose from. . . For example, some of our students have never traveled or even seen the ocean, how can they take a test that focuses on other places and the ocean? We need to look at the question items to make sure that



they are accessible and relatable to my students.”

A Chicano father of two noted: “If you’re a good student or student athlete, then the school works for you.” But that wasn’t the case for his children, one of whom dropped out of high school. “The teachers didn’t care about his life. I was constantly going to meetings about his failure. And there were no successes to talk about.”

And a male, Spanish-speaking high-school student struggling to stay engaged recalled happier days in elementary school: “I like being around my friends and I like going to PE. The rest of the classes are



hard and I end up giving up. I’m a hands-on person. Books and learning from computers are not the way I learn. If they did hands-on math, I’d do much better... I used to be a good student in elementary school, when we would actually do things.”

These interviews helped the team identify structural and inherent

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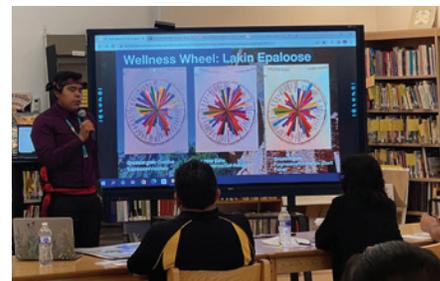
racism as root causes of the persistent inequities in student outcomes, informing this problem statement:

“To address the education system’s history of structural and inherent racism, New Mexico’s high school students need a more expansive learning and assessment system that honors their cultural and linguistic strengths while providing feedback and other engaging opportunities—allowing students to take ownership of their learning, build strong identities, and see a rich future ahead.”

Crafting Solutions: Focus Groups and a Two-Step Approach

Next, the team convened focus groups to identify solutions to the problem. They used a “vertical” strategy in grouping stakeholders at various organizational levels

together: administrators, teachers, and students. This approach was an important aspect of the equitable design process: “so much of the work over the past decade has been top-down, compliance-driven, command-and-control-oriented,” Monfiletto said. A vertical strategy “lets young people have a voice and gives teachers power to connect to each other, which is an emergent strategy as opposed to a top-down strategy.”



Members were paid for their time participating, which the team identified as an important strategy to share ownership of the process and avoid extractive knowledge mining where community wisdom is collected by outsiders. The focus groups produced a long list of possible reforms, including project-based learning, dual-language instruction, community engagement strategies, cultural events, internships, portfolios, and capstones. The project team analyzed responses to identify trends and common themes, which



identified capstones and graduate profiles as primary solutions.

The selection of capstones had also “come out of the narratives of young people” shared in empathy interviews, Monfiletto said:

“It became clear that those kids were living in a system that was alienating them, making them give up who they were and where they came from in order to be successful,” he said. “The capstone project is the affirmation of community and the affirmation of young people, their culture and their language.”

These in-depth projects, which culminate in a public presentation of a student’s findings, would promote key critical-thinking and academic skills in a relevant context. For example, students at Health Leadership High School in Albuquerque complete yearlong capstones in their senior year. Every student identifies and investigates a problem in their community, partners with local organizations to study and take action, and shares their findings and progress in a culminating

presentation. Recent projects have included expanding services and outreach to the homeless population, reducing infants born with drug dependencies, and destigmatizing teenagers’ mental-health struggles.

However, capstones on their own would not fully address the challenge. Schools and districts would also need to develop graduate profiles. These would establish a new vision of the knowledge, skills, and attributes that students should demonstrate before

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“The capstone project is the affirmation of community and the affirmation of young people, their culture and their language.”

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leaving high school—in other words, the mastery that a capstone would assess.

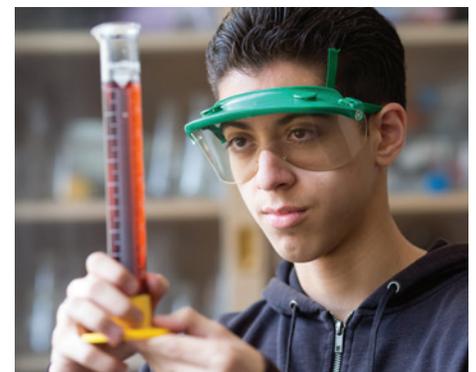
Through developing graduate profiles, communities could articulate what their children would need to thrive in adulthood, including goals that support employability, cultural knowledge, and linguistic diversity. An aligned capstone would serve both as a learning and assessment

opportunity, one that supported deeper learning that occurred within and reflected the needs and values of a student’s home community.

Full Participation: From Prototyping to Co-Creation in Communities of Practice

With these goals in mind, the team then shifted to supporting local districts and communities to develop profiles and prepare to pilot capstones. They connected school and community leaders interested in pursuing this work in Communities of Practice, which meet monthly to discuss proposals and share feedback on them as they evolve. The team also supports and/or leads focus groups in communities looking to develop graduate profiles.

This rapid-testing phase has been difficult to implement because it conflicts with many indigenous cultures’ norms. Trusting relationships are typically rooted in the relatively



slower-moving tradition of storytelling, rather than a protocol-shaped, mission-driven focus group. In addition, the project’s future-minded framing itself has occasionally been problematic. For example, a discussion question asking participants to envision the world 50 years from now unintentionally violated a tribal taboo.

“Deliverables, timelines, those kinds of constraints are antithetical to many of our communities in New Mexico,” said Lisa Harmon-Martinez, Learning by Doing Director at Future Focused Education. “In many, time is cyclical—circular, not linear. So the process itself is antithetical to the work that we’re doing, trying to disrupt white supremacy culture in school.”

Along the way, team members have built relationships and shifted ways of working to help smooth these

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bumps. For example, trusted gatekeepers pre-review discussion questions and materials before they are presented within a focus group setting to ensure they are linguistically and culturally appropriate. And overall, the emphasis has shifted to community members leading discussions rather than team members.

“I think outside of rapid-cycle prototyping, the way to really do this

is through long-term relationship building and understanding the community, which really isn’t possible when you’re organizing multiple focus groups for rapid-cycle prototyping,” Harmon-Martinez said. “One model that is working is to co-create tools and then test them with schools, and let the schools do the work and co-create with community. . . It’s very similar to a prototyping process, but longer-term instead of a few months.”



The team also is leading Communities of Practice with educators, to demystify and equip them to lead capstones in their schools, and with student interns, to conduct participatory research. In 2021, a survey led by student researchers revealed what their classmates believe should be required to earn a diploma: kindness, confidence, respect, integrity, empathy, and community involvement.



Looking Ahead



The policy environment has shifted in New Mexico. In the recent past, students had to pass standardized tests in order to graduate high school. A competency-based standard was available by special dispensation, as an “alternative” pathway to earn a diploma. Now, every local school board can allow students to graduate by passing tests, meeting local competency benchmarks through portfolios or other projects, or completing capstones.

The team is creating specific tools and guidance for educators looking to lead capstones at their schools. In many cases, this amounts to establishing open channels of communication for like-minded teachers to envision what capstone tools and protocols might be, so they can create them on their own. In other cases, educators need the basics, such as examples of what capstone projects are and should look like upon completion.

Key to these continuing efforts is the financial support of the Innovations in State Assessment grant program and the strong commitment of the New Mexico Public Education Department, including Secretary of Education

Kurt Steinhaus, and Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham. While grant programs end and political leadership can change from one election cycle to the next, the project team believes that the work on the ground can outlast current conditions.

“For anything to stick and last beyond any one administration, it needs to be rooted in the community, beyond just the school,” said Monfiletto. “The graduate profile work, the capstone projects—these happen in the community and the learning is transparent to the people in the community. They can see what young people are learning, and they’ll value it.”

