

NM center on law and poverty

Alleviating Poverty Will Improve Education in New Mexico

Executive Summary

In order to significantly and permanently improve educational outcomes in our state, New Mexico must address child poverty. New Mexico consistently has some of the highest rates of child poverty in the country. The vast majority of New Mexican children are low income. At the same time, New Mexico's schools consistently rank at the bottom of national averages on educational achievement and graduation rates. Child poverty and low educational outcomes are directly related. Research over the past 40 years has shown that poverty has a direct impact on cognitive development, resulting in low-income children starting school less ready to learn than higher-income students. In fact, economic status is the best indicator of a child's success in school. New Mexico's high rates of students living in poverty pose explicit challenges to New Mexico's teachers, schools and education system that interfere with fixes that may have worked in the educational systems of states with less poverty. In order to significantly and permanently improve educational outcomes in New Mexico, we must both alleviate child poverty and address the needs of students living in poverty. New Mexico can provide more supports to children living in poverty by increasing families' incomes, strengthening the safety net, increasing access to health care and ensuring the children and their families are not hungry. At the same time, New Mexico can provide adequate funding to its education system to meet the specific needs that low income students have that are so often a prerequisite to succeeding in school.

The New Mexico Center on Law and Poverty recommends that New Mexico develop a comprehensive approach to addressing child poverty and improving education that includes the following steps:

- 1. Reduce the rate of child poverty and the negative impacts of poverty:**
 - A. Increase the working families tax credit;
 - B. Increase the state minimum wage
 - C. Increase asset development of low income families
 - D. Enroll all eligible low income children and families in Medicaid, SNAP/food stamps and other assistance programs
 - E. Increase the number of School Based Health Clinics in New Mexico
- 2. Invest in quality early childhood education and pre-K programs and K-3 Plus.**
- 3. Adequately fund public schools and focus education resources and reform initiatives on the needs of low-income students:**
 - A. Increase funding for the public schools
 - B. With an increased education budget, reform the state's K-12 funding formula to better direct additional resources to meet the needs of low-income students

- C. Study the distribution of the state's most qualified, experienced teachers, and ensure that they are serving the most at-risk students
- D. Avoid punitive interventions – such as third grade retention - that disproportionately impact low-income students

4. Dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline:

- A. Gather district by district data on suspension and expulsion rates by race and income
- B. Replace zero-tolerance policies with positive behavioral strategies
- C. Minimize police presence, arrests and referral to juvenile justice system on school campuses

5. Collect and report the performance of low-income vs. non low-income students.