

GRANTMAKERS FOR EDUCATION NEW MEXICO STUDY TOUR

Building the Future for Students in College and Career



INTRODUCTION



In April of 2023, a group of education funders gathered from

around the country in Gallup, New Mexico.

After meeting up in Albuquerque, the nearest city with a large population, funders ventured by bus to their destination city in the Four Corners area, about two and a half hours away. One standout feature of the drive was the stunning scenery—the red rocks and cliffs contrasting with the golden desert landscape and blue skies overhead. The other feature that soon became apparent was the remoteness of their destination, and what that remoteness implied for the main focus of their visit: a school district that for the past several years has been building viable career pathway programs for high school students. As Mike Hyatt, superintendent of Gallup-McKinley County Schools, said, “Maybe you thought this bus ride to Gallup was long—but for many students in our district, these distances are normal when it comes to getting to school.”

Grantmakers for Education (EdFunders) and its Postsecondary Access and Attainment (PSA2) Impact Group organized the trip as a study tour to Gallup. The PSA2 Impact Group is one of several funder learning communities supported by EdFunders devoted to deeper engagement and collaboration within the education field. EdFunders planned the trip to support its mission to catalyze learning and foster connection among members. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, along with other members of the PSA2 Impact Group, sponsored the study tour. ConnectEd, Los Alamos National Laboratory Foundation and the Thornburg Foundation were integral planning partners.

The main purpose of the visit, which took place April 26 to April 28, 2023, was to learn about Gallup-McKinley’s career pathways programs,

Grantmakers for Education Postsecondary Access and Attainment Impact Group

- ACT Center for Equity in Learning
- Ascendium Education Group
- James Graham Brown Foundation
- Harold K.L. Castle Foundation
- Crimsonbridge Foundation
- Garen Family Foundation
- Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
- Greater Texas Foundation
- Lumina Foundation
- Carroll and Milton Petrie Foundation
- The Teagle Foundation
- Trellis Foundation



On the road from Albuquerque to Gallup. Learning and sharing took place everywhere on the study tour – including on the journey to rural New Mexico.



which provide opportunities for young people in the district to explore careers like digital media, architecture, health sciences and automotive industry while still in high school. During the visit, tour participants visited high school classrooms dedicated to these career pathways classes, such as a garage-sized space housing a few pick-up trucks and a classroom set up for health sciences training that featured two human-sized dummies that reacted to voice commands. Tour participants also had the opportunity to hear from New Mexico state legislators about the state's education initiatives and funding priorities.



Local educators and civic and business leaders from neighboring communities shared their perspectives with the group. The Four Corners regional vision is to build out a comprehensive strategy that drives economic development in the region.

For funders who care deeply about how the strategies they are supporting impact change within communities, nothing can replace in-person opportunities to build relationships with and hear from community-based partners. Career pathways programs, which are offered alongside core academic classes in high school, are a growing trend across the country; their appeal for students, educators, policymakers and funders lies in the ways they both expose students to different career opportunities and accelerate students' ability to earn college credit or certification while still in high school. Trips like the New Mexico tour give funders a clear line of sight into how grantmaking strategies assume different shapes and purposes depending on the specific place, its demographics, policy context and the local leaders and partners who serve as hosts and guides for the tour content. The funders on the New Mexico trip were excited not only for the opportunity to learn from and network with one another, but also for the opportunity to see career pathways programs located in geographically isolated areas that are designed to serve students from culturally-distinct backgrounds. The Gallup-McKinley school district is mostly comprised of young

people from the Navajo Nation, Hopi Tribe and Pueblo of Zuni, with a minority from Latino backgrounds.

WHAT ARE COLLEGE AND CAREER PATHWAYS?

Even as students progress through their early years of formal education, they are encouraged to think about an eventual goal of graduating from high school and entering into some meaningful postsecondary engagement. Postsecondary options can include a wide array of options including four-year college, community college, technical education or certification programs. "Pathway" is a term used to describe the journey a student might take, from middle school onwards, to explore different options for advanced education or career-related learning and training.

Education funders generally share an overarching interest in ensuring that all students have access to learning experiences that are a match for their learning needs and their strengths and their aspirations, and that they are equipped with the skills they need to be contributing members of society. While we



Students were eager to share their pathway projects at Gallup High School. Many had prepared poster presentations for the tour participants.

with education level—associate degree holders out-earn high school graduates, for example, and bachelor’s degree holders out-earn associate degree holders. However, these earning differences can vary widely from state to state, depending on the industry and labor market needs in different places. These general findings also do not account for the rise in for-profit programs that often target some of the most vulnerable student populations, or the overall increase in college tuition and student debt, which may offset higher net earnings.

are seeing a resurgence of awareness that young people can achieve strong outcomes through various routes, the sector is grappling with barriers to expanding pathway programs that are the result of well-meaning reform efforts over the last four decades. After years of criticizing vocational training programs for either being poorly-run or overused as the default option for students from lower-income backgrounds, many education leaders and advocates began focusing on increasing access to higher education, particularly for Black and Latino students. This was also a priority for the Obama Administration—in 2011-12, the small amount of federal funding that was going to vocational training programs at public high schools and community colleges shrank even further, even as some advocates and educators tried to make the case that these programs provided important pathways to economic stability for many students who were either not interested in or unable to afford a four-year college degree.

The argument for the emphasis on higher academic standards and more college-educated students was not unfounded. Research shows that on average, college-educated people out-earn people without college degrees, with earnings often increasing

The COVID-19 pandemic had profound impacts on employment and education in the United States, but in many ways, the pandemic hastened trends that were already in motion, such as the rising demand for skilled workers coupled with a drop in college attendance. As the entire country went through a massive upheaval with respect to school and work, the concept of career-connected educational experiences for high school students was also undergoing an essential makeover. Previous generations viewed vocational training programs as single-class offerings in wood or metal shop; more recent pathways programs emphasize a wider range of careers, such as healthcare or architecture. Many programs take direct aim at the financial burdens that often come with earning a higher degree by offering dual-enrollment options, so high school students can simultaneously complete their high school degrees and earn college credits from a nearby accredited institution.

As with other areas of focus within the education sector, achieving greater, more equitable outcomes with respect to the future economic prospects of high school students is an urgent priority for funders in this space. In other words, while education



funders want to help more students to achieve economic stability in their futures, funders are recognizing that college may not be the only path forward—and that the ultimate goal may be about ensuring that students can access the broadest possible range of educational experiences that match their strengths, their learning needs and their aspirations. However, the depth and breadth of educational experiences available to students is highly subject to local circumstances. These include whether or not the region has sufficiently large industry sectors that offer future employment options for young people, or whether state and local policymakers are investing not only in programs for young people but also in the infrastructure (like digital access) needed to connect young people to those programs.

These regional differences are exactly what the education funders came to learn about during the New Mexico study tour. In Gallup, New Mexico, for example, career-specific programs are clustered at different locations across the district's ten high schools, which meant that students from the less-populated areas needed to find ways to travel to where the programs are being offered. Most of the study tour participants were interested in learning about how career pathways programs could overcome the challenges of rural isolation, while also connecting to core academics and providing culturally relevant programming for a student population that was largely Native American and Latino.

COLLEGE AND CAREER PATHWAYS IN RURAL NEW MEXICO

Many of the high schools in New Mexico are located in rural areas and, as such, distance and enrollment numbers present a challenge. In the 2021-22 school year, 60 of the state's 89 school districts enrolled fewer than 1,800 students; 52 districts enrolled fewer than 900 students; and 35 enrolled fewer than 400¹. For school districts like Gallup-McKinley,

New Mexico and the Gallup-McKinley School District

New Mexico has the third-highest rate of poverty in the nation (approximately 18.4 percent, based on latest U.S. Census figures). It is the fifth-largest state in terms of total area, but 46th in population density.

The EdFunders study tour focused on the Gallup-McKinley school district, which encompasses 4,851 square miles. Other statistics about Gallup-McKinley:

- Approximately 11,000 total students enrolled.
- 79% of students are American Indian.
- 14% of students are Latino.
- 99% are identified as coming from lower-income households.
- Historic industries: oil, gas and coal.
- Future target industries: transportation, green energy, healthcare, film production and autonomous vehicles.

the geographic isolation of its schools is compounded by other challenges, like limited work-based learning opportunities, limited access to adequate broadband connectivity, and difficulty recruiting qualified teachers, counselors and administrators. At the same time, many of the students have the advantage of tight-knit, extended family structures—for example, some of the students who were acting as guides and ambassadors during the visits talked about what they had learned from their aunts and uncles about work and success.

Addressing these challenges requires imagination and work on multiple levels including the ability to find public and private funding sources and capacity-building support to help districts design and build programs that integrate core curriculum requirements with career-specific classes, and are staffed by qualified teachers. Currently, Gallup-McKinley is one of five school districts participating in the Four Corners District and Career Pathways Partnership. Four Corners is a region of the United States that encompasses the southwestern corner of Colorado, the southeastern corner of Utah, the northeastern corner of Arizona, and the northwestern

corner of New Mexico. Much of the region belongs to semi-autonomous Native American nations, the largest of which is the Navajo Nation, followed by Hopi, Ute and Zuni tribal reserves and nations. In addition, the region is undergoing an economic transition, moving away from a regional economy dependent on oil, gas and coal to growth industries, such as green energy and film production.

Because of the high populations of Native American and Latino students in rural New Mexico high schools, career pathways programs also need to be culturally relevant and adapted to the different cultural traditions and norms of each community. For example, during the visit to the health sciences classroom, funders asked about whether the curriculum acknowledged the healing practices based in the cultures of many Indigenous American tribes; the instructor answered that while the curriculum didn't specifically incorporate those practices, teachers made every effort to acknowledge the side-by-side existence of current medical science with longstanding cultural practices.

The school districts that are building these career pathways programs in rural New Mexico



Students shared their experiences in a panel discussion with tour participants. Students from 18 high schools enroll in dual credit courses through San Juan College, Navajo Technical University, and the University of New Mexico – Gallup as part of their 13th year postsecondary experience.

are deploying a wide range of strategies² to ensure that more young people think beyond high school graduation. Some of these strategies include:

- Creating “mega-clusters” of career pathways programs, instead of the 16 career foci that are offered by many career pathways programs in most states. By grouping under broad industry themes like Architecture and Construction instead of welding, for example, students can acquire a broader range of academic and technical skills and be better prepared for both college and career.
- Increasing the flexibility of high school graduation requirements, which can often be a restrictive mix of academic and elective requirements that leave little room for career-specific education and exploration.
- Increasing the number of dual enrollment options, which allow students to take college credit courses while still in high school. In New Mexico, however, many schools are located far from a two-year or four-year college offering those courses—and many career-oriented courses require hands-on, in-person learning, which doesn’t lend itself well to online learning.

Expanding the types of career pathway programs for a school district like Gallup-McKinley requires money. During the first evening of the study tour, funders heard from state education leaders such as Dr. Arsenio Romero, secretary of New Mexico’s Public Education Department, and Dr. Tracy Hartzler, president of the Central New Mexico Community College. While Dr. Romero talked of state budget increases for career technical



Tour participants learned firsthand about pathway programs by engaging with students and teachers at Gallup High School. Students and teachers collaborate to make pathway programs a learning experience.

education programs (\$40 million approved for fiscal year 2024), Dr. Hartzler gave a clear-eyed assessment of the costs for creating these programs that link high schools to community colleges. Career pathways programs often require skilled faculty and specially outfitted educational spaces. The digital media courses in Gallup-McKinley, for example, are a foundational requirement for the career pathways programs and require both stable internet and individual computer stations for students, many of whom do not have access to computers or broadband in their homes.

District leaders and pathways program developers in the Gallup-McKinley school district displayed an enterprising doggedness when discussing the resource challenges and have already deployed a wide range of strategies to resource their needs. Examples include tracking down legislators to create bills that permit transportation by vehicles smaller than school buses, thereby enabling students from more remote residences to get to school, and pursuing litigation to compel the state legislature to provide students who are low-income, Native American, English language learners, or disabled with the programs and services necessary for them to thrive.



Participants learned about Pueblo Indian history and culture from Monique Fraqua of the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center. The study tour also brought together voices from the legislative, higher education and business sectors.

WHAT THE TOUR PARTICIPANTS SAW

During the two days spent in Albuquerque and Gallup, New Mexico, the tour participants heard from many education leaders at the state and district levels, as well as numerous teachers and students involved in the career pathways programs. The itinerary included:

- A panel discussion with the state public education secretary, state legislators, education funders based in New Mexico, and a community college president.
- Visits to high schools in the Gallup-McKinley district to tour classrooms and speak with teachers and students about their pathway programs.
- Discussions with the superintendent and leaders of the career pathways work to provide context on anticipated student outcomes.

The pathways programs in New Mexico were in different stages of implementation—some had been in existence for several years and others were still in relatively early stages of implementation. However, the rich array of perspectives provided by students, teachers

and district leaders provided many take-aways for tour participants to consider in their own work.

Tour participants were struck by the honesty of the school district staff, many of whom had been involved in developing the career pathways programs from the ground up and who were candid, yet resolutely pragmatic, about the challenges they faced in creating programs in a region that is rural, economically isolated in many ways, and ranked as one of the country's most impoverished areas. "I was

completely impressed by their openness about the constraints and challenges, and also by their dedication to the work," said Alex Harris, vice president of the Harold K.L. Castle Foundation, a private Hawaii-based foundation that focuses on building resources for Hawaii's future, including investments to close achievement gaps in public education. "You could tell that these weren't people who treated ideas for change as the latest flavor of the month, and then dropped the idea when something new came along. Their candor helped us understand how they got through the challenges to a point where they could begin to see progress."

"I appreciated how much they shared when they are clearly so early in the process. I felt like they showed a lot of courage to be so vulnerable in front of funders—and it gave us so much room to think about how we, as funders, can be more targeted and helpful in our strategies to projects that are early in development," said Kelly Miyamura, program officer at the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation. Since the Weinberg Foundation focuses part of its grantmaking in Hawaii, Miyamura felt that that districts like Gallup-McKinley could learn from other districts'

experiences about how to adapt programs for local contexts and cultures.

The trip experience was densely packed with information but also with local texture and culture. For example, tour participants were served lunch that included gourmet desserts prepared by students in culinary programs in the district. They also heard from a student who shared a film from a young person's perspective about the mental health challenges of being a teenager and living in a geographically isolated region, who found support and hope through his family and friends. Finally, the group visited local trading posts and other historic and cultural sites in the Gallup community, such as the El Rancho Hotel, where everyone had dinner and heard stories about the hotel's history in hosting cast and crew members from Hollywood Westerns.

While mostly shy and reserved as a whole, many of the students opened up when asked about their presentations on their pathways program experiences or their projects which were on display. In response to a question from a tour participant about what students needed by way of support, one student said, "What we need most from our education are people who can help us stay motivated and inspire us. We can motivate ourselves but it's hard sometimes, especially if you live in a rural place like this. So, if school is a place that can motivate us about our futures and reassure us that we can learn new things, that would be really good."

TAKE-AWAYS AND REFLECTIONS FROM THE TOUR

On the return trip from Gallup to the Albuquerque airport, the study tour participants spent time discussing what they had seen and absorbed from the experience. The energy of

the discussion was tinged by awe: many people were impressed by the enterprising, optimistic orientation of the presenters, teachers and students throughout the trip and equally daunted by the scale of the challenges—the geographic isolation, the limited availability of state legislators, and the multimillion-dollar budgets needed to improve aging school facilities. As Julie Lammers, senior vice president of advocacy and corporate social responsibility for American Student Assistance put it, "I could not believe how much this school district was doing with so little—they really showed you how a dollar could go farther than one could imagine, even in a place with significant economic disparities. It was clear that they were doing everything possible to avoid duplicating effort and wasting precious resources."

In particular, the main take-aways for the group illustrated the difference between considering a grantmaking strategy within the walls of one's own organization or at a conference and seeing it live, in various stages of implementation. Some of the major themes for funders to consider are:



Participants exchanged ideas about emerging college and career pathway strategies on the bus ride back to Albuquerque. In the Four Corners area, high school enrollments range from 66 to 1,720 students, which presents interesting challenges and opportunities.



A highlight of the tour was celebrating culture and community. Funders traveled all the way from Hawai'i and the east coast to take part.

Weigh what you are funding against what you are not funding: Throughout the course of the visit, stories of progress on career pathways programs (like increased funding from the state) were counterbalanced with stories of great need (like high school buildings and classroom spaces that badly needed to be renovated or replaced). While no one funder can support everything, trips like this help give funders fresh insight into the opportunities and barriers that exist in different places and contexts and determine which ones can be addressed either through their grantmaking strategies, or in partnership with another funder. "This trip gave me all sorts of ideas for complementary grants—for example, [Kellogg] has often provided seed funding for building curriculum supporting dual-language instruction, but now I have additional ideas about how to support an integrated model of career pathways programs connected to multilingual and culturally relevant career programming for an enhanced pathway reflecting the languages of the community," said Victoria Tafoya, program officer for the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

Fund not just the program, but also the collaboration required to make the program successful: The camaraderie and

close alignment between representatives of the Gallup-McKinley school district and the career pathways program were clearly evident throughout the visit—all clearly had a "pick up the phone and just call" connection with respect to handling new issues or questions as they came up. Funders could consider more ways to support collaboration both within districts like Gallup-McKinley and with other rurally-based school districts facing similar opportunities and challenges. "I was so impressed by the cooperation and collaboration we saw within

the district—it prompted me to think more about how we could foster more multi-faceted, multi-disciplinary learning in remote locations, despite the challenges of being geographically isolated," said Colleen Curran, who is part of the Rural Grant Committee of the Nathan Yip Foundation.

CONCLUSION

This study tour reinforced what we know from other contexts: that in-person exposure to real-world programs is both motivating and eye-opening. This is especially true for education funders who at times can be far-removed from the programs they fund and the communities they serve. One after-effect of the of the pandemic may be that the more restrictive dynamics in the funder-grantee relationship have begun to shift, perhaps due to the prolonged isolation, or perhaps because funders were called to operate differently. Grantees and community-based organizations may now be more willing to be open about their funding needs—and funders may be more willing to listen.

"Working in philanthropy, you need to always stay in touch with the work that still needs to

be done, the gaps that we can help fill,” said Michael Weinberg, senior policy officer at the Thornburg Foundation. “When we talk to our boards and our senior leadership, sometimes we get questions like, ‘Do we need to be in this space if others are already funding this work?’ Being on this trip gave me more specific responses to that question. I have ideas about the structures we need to build to address issues like economic and education inequity. And most of all, I am inspired by the thought that every student in New Mexico should have the chance to explore what their future pathway can be.”

The co-chairs of the Postsecondary Access and Attainment Impact Group, Leslie Gurrola of Greater Texas Foundation and Sue Cui of Ascendium Education Group, reflected afterward that the study tour was a wonderful opportunity for postsecondary funders to learn

in person together in diverse communities. They felt the experience was invaluable for funders to see firsthand how different communities are providing strong college and career connections for students.

As Kyle Malone, associate director of external affairs at EdFunders concluded, “This was an important event for Grantmakers for Education as we seek to identify effective pathways for young people to learn and thrive. The Four Corners region of New Mexico provided the ideal context for funders to engage with students, teachers and community partners to understand the implementation of pathway initiatives that mesh with the diverse cultural backgrounds and rural environment of these communities. We look forward to providing more experiential learning opportunities like this for funders in the future.”



Students worked on digital media designs for business applications. Pathways students can choose between 16 career clusters including video technology, information technology or science, technology, engineering and math.

Endnotes

1. See Kids Count Data Center, [New Mexico: Statistics on children, youth and families in New Mexico from the Annie E. Casey Foundation and New Mexico Voices for Children](#), accessed August 2023.
2. See Hoachlander, Gary, [College and Career Pathways in Rural New Mexico: Strategies and Policy Implications](#), Connect-ED: The National Center for College & Career, August 2023.



Grantmakers for Education is the nation's largest community of education philanthropists. EdFunders members make up a diverse network of almost 300 public, private and community foundations, and others, that support public education. Working in partnership with our members, we pursue systemic approaches to equity and racial justice in education in order to make a positive impact on learners everywhere. We are a hub for new connections and ideas, a compass to help members navigate their work, a spur for collective action and a champion for positive change in education. For more information or to learn about membership, please contact us at information@edfunders.org.

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