

How Mission: Graduate took on chronic absenteeism in the New Mexico State Legislature — and won

Under a new state law in New Mexico, every school will be required to develop strategies for preventing chronic absence and to collect and report data about students who miss too much class time. [New Mexico Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham signed House Bill 236 into law](#) earlier this spring, with unanimous approval from the House and the Senate.

This major victory was achieved with support from Mission: Graduate, a StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network member in Albuquerque. Mission: Graduate has spent the last five years delving into chronic absenteeism as a key barrier to high school graduation. Mission: Graduate worked closely with a state representative to revamp the state’s compulsory school attendance law. The partnership helped to draft the legislation, served as an expert witness during the recently concluded legislative session and worked with executive and legislative staff to improve the bill to ensure passage during the session.

“Our efforts finally paid off in a big way,” said Angelo Gonzales, chief strategy officer at United Way of Central New Mexico (Mission: Graduate’s backbone organization). “We are excited about the new changes to state law, and we are already planning to work with the New Mexico Public Education Department to help schools and districts understand what this will mean for them.”



Starting with data

At StriveTogether, [we know that attendance is a predictive indicator](#) — a signal to educators that students with too many absences may be falling behind. StriveTogether’s partnership with national organizations like Attendance Works helped us learn more about how deeply [a student’s performance can be impacted by missing a few days a month](#). Chronic absence is defined by the U.S. Department of Education as missing 15 or more days during the school year.

Students who improve their attendance are more likely to graduate. In 2018, the four-year graduation rate for New Mexico students was 73.9 percent — 11 points lower than the national average. During the 2016-17 school year, 17.5 percent of New Mexico students were chronically absent. The disaggregated data also showed a clear disparity between students of color and their white peers.

At the same time, policymakers were beginning to pay attention. The Legislative Education Study Committee read the [“No Time to Lose: How to Build a World-Class Education System State by State”](#) by the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL). The report analyzes the world’s top performing countries to find what’s common across policies and practices and the U.S. has consistently ranked in the middle. Following passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act, the report encourages legislators to create new state plans giving greater authority and flexibility for state and local governments to make education decisions. In short, NCSL named the urgency and asked policymakers all around the country to collaborate with stakeholders at the local level.

Cultivate a policy champion

Mission: Graduate leaders understood the great convergence of interests among potential partners. By 2018, New Mexico had submitted its state plan and even included language to improve practices, but state law had not yet been updated to reflect the shift toward chronic absenteeism. During the session that followed, Mission: Graduate released its own research brief to inform partners about chronic absenteeism — describing key drivers, data and evidence, and a set of policy recommendations.



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At the same time, a state legislator from Albuquerque’s South Valley — Rep. Patricio Ruiloba — had also been working to convince his colleagues about the need for change in the state’s compulsory school attendance law. A former police officer, Ruiloba now leads restorative justice work in schools and sees the impact of chronic absenteeism on students every day.

“The factors involving chronic absenteeism manifest through lack of communication, awareness and collaboration,” Ruiloba said. “Families, students and staff are the school-based resources and can work together to navigate the social issues, fear and conflicts occurring in our schools. Remove these barriers, and have real communication and reduced consequences.”

When the New Mexico General Assembly met in 2018, Rep. Ruiloba filed a bill on compulsory attendance law, drawing from his background to embed an approach that doesn’t rely on punishment. Unfortunately, the bill did not make it to the New Mexico governor that year, but it opened the opportunity to engage more partners.

Mission: Graduate’s High School Graduation Network and research brief made clear what they needed in the community. Not only did they want to support students to show up at school, they were looking to create a positive, diverse and inclusive school climate where all students feel they can belong. The Network spent two years testing this approach with over 40 school-based teams who monitored learning and success through consistent communication. These proven strategies shaped this policy effort.

Collaborative leadership

Once the 2018 session was over, Rep. Ruiloba and Gonzales began meeting immediately to improve language, share data and provide community voice. Ruiloba pulled together leaders and legislative staff and later [invited Gonzales as an expert witness](#) to present findings with the Legislative Education Study Committee. Gonzales highlighted Mission: Graduate's [Every Day Matters](#) campaign, identified potential gaps in current law and shared data-informed recommendations. For example, the partnership found that schools were incentivized to focus only on unexcused absences, despite research showing that all absences matter.

When state legislators returned for the 2019 session, the [Attendance for Success Act](#), sponsored by Rep. Ruiloba, sailed through both the House and the Senate. The new legislation proposes that all schools collect and report chronic absence data, using the 10 percent threshold recommended by Attendance Works. Schools with chronic absence rates higher than a certain threshold will have to create attendance improvement plans.

“These practices, including the formation of attendance teams, are the same practices that we have been training schools to adopt through our attendance and engagement strategy,” Gonzales said.

“The legislation provides guidance and structures for schools to respond to absenteeism,” Ruiloba added. “The collaboration with school districts, schools, students and families allows for accountability with all partners. Data will inform schools to examine their discipline policies and provide alternatives to suspension for general disruptive behavior, which can be a precursor for chronic absenteeism.”



Next steps

Gonzales credits the data for the success of this policy initiative. “The only way to close these gaps is to use disaggregated student data to inform strategies that are highly targeted to specific populations of students.”

Mission: Graduate is already planning to work with the New Mexico Public Education Department to build workshops into their fall attendance conference to help schools and districts understand what the changes will mean for their day-to-day work.

“This is a probably the single greatest accomplishment of my time with Mission: Graduate,” Gonzales said. “We are all very excited about this first venture into public policy, and I’m hopeful that this is just the beginning of what we can achieve in the policy domain.”