



**WESTERN**  
NEW MEXICO UNIVERSITY

*The New Mexico Center of Excellence in  
Early Childhood Education  
is a New Mexico Gem*



**Winter 2022/23**



## Introduction

Before the pandemic, Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham's administration spearheaded a new legislative designation, creating *New Mexico's Centers of Excellence*. Four *Centers of Excellence* were established in 2019, each located at a New Mexico higher education institution to connect the research capabilities of New Mexico's colleges and universities with economic development and workforce to grow critical industries in the state. Earlier this year, the New Mexico Legislature designated the first *Center of Excellence* since the start of the pandemic in the field of early childhood at Western New Mexico University (WNMU).

Unlike other self-designated early childhood centers, the *New Mexico Center of Excellence for Early Childhood Education* has received this legislative distinction for having developed a full-service center providing early childhood and family services for decades. While the *New Mexico Center of Excellence for Early Childhood Education* (NM CoE ECE) at WNMU delivers the highest quality early childhood education and care, an active research site, family counseling center, professional development, and numerous teacher preparation programs, it is the systems integration of early childhood services with the WNMU Family Counseling Center that earned the recent distinction. The NM CoE ECE has been a leader in innovative service provision, training, and education in the complex field of early childhood care and education for many years. As the '*Center of Excellence*' legislative designation implies, Western New Mexico University has been working to provide services and supports locally and to extend that reach across the state with the goal of improving early childhood in every part of New Mexico.

For over 25 years, Western New Mexico University has centrally integrated its services and programs that focus on early childhood, blending early education with early intervention, early care with mental health support, and professional development in all areas. This integration of early childhood services, training, care, education, intervention,



and support produces a multi-faceted gem in the community. Like a gemstone, the services and programs offered are the facets that meet, overlap, and integrate into the center. Light can enter through any facet, diffusing back out through all gem facets, illuminating the whole. Following the metaphor of the *New Mexico Center of Excellence for Early Childhood Education* as a gem, this paper examines and explains each facet and how the facets integrate into the core to produce an early childhood and family center that is more than the sum of its parts.

## Services

Above all, the *New Mexico Center of Excellence for Early Childhood Education* is a service provider for the state. When looking at the many sides of the gem, four main groups are directly served by NM CoE ECE; children, families/parents, students, and professionals. The following section details the numerous services provided for each of these groups and how this service provision supports children and families throughout the state.

## Children

### *Early Childhood Care and Education*

The *New Mexico Center of Excellence for Early Childhood Education* operates two licensed childcare and education centers in Silver City that serve the surrounding area; the WNMU Child Development Center and the Growing Tree. The centers serve children of WNMU students, staff, faculty, and the community ages 8 weeks to 5 years old.

The Child Development Center/PreK has consistently operated under the state's highest quality rating within licensed childcare, 5 STAR, while also holding national accreditation for the highest quality standards within the National Association for the Education of Young Children. The educational approach of the center is to promote the primacy of play in children's development in a child- and family-centered context, respecting each family's uniqueness and diversity.

The other childcare and education site, Growing Tree, is also a 5 Star, nationally accredited infant and toddler program located at the Silver Consolidated Schools campus. Growing Tree serves the children of Silver High School teen parents, WNMU students, and, as space allows, the community. The priority of Growing Tree is to provide a quality early learning experience for infants and toddlers whose parents are attending high school and/or college. The Growing Tree also serves as a lab site for WNMU education students.

When thinking of the CDC and Growing Tree as facets of the NM CoE ECE gem, early childhood educators further refine the crystalline structure through emergent curriculum that involves intentional and careful planning of indoor and outdoor activities based on seven areas:

- Communication: Listening, language, reading, and writing
- Early Science: Exploring & investigating natural phenomena
- Early Mathematics: Relating, counting, shapes, sorting, and measuring
- Physical Development: Fitness, coordination, hygiene, health, and well-being
- Creativity: Art, music, and movement
- Approaches to Learning: Independence, problem-solving, thinking and perseverance
- Social Skills: Appropriate behavior, manners, and being a part of a group

Both the Child Development Center and Growing Tree offer children the opportunity to expand and develop in playful, well-designed environments and with an appropriate planned curriculum based on the belief that every child enters the world eager and able to learn. Play is foundational in ALL stages of life and acts as the positive and joyful thread in relationships and learning.

#### *NM Early PreK & PreK*

Besides providing the highest-quality infant and toddler care, the CDC also operates six Early PreK and PreK classrooms. The NM CoE ECE has been consistently awarded grants for these classrooms from the New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care department. The focus of WNMU's CDC Early PreK and PreK classrooms is to:



- Provide fun and educational developmentally-appropriate activities for young children
- Expand early childhood community capacity
- Support linguistically and culturally appropriate curriculum
- Emphasize school readiness in areas of early literacy and early conceptual content

Another service provided by the NM CoE ECE that benefits children is the provision of counseling and clinical support for young children in the foster care system in southwestern New Mexico. In a contract with New Mexico Children, Youth, and Families Department, the Family Counseling Center serves as the Judicial District 6 Infant Mental Health Team and offers therapeutic services for children birth through five in state custody, their families, and foster/adoptive families.

#### Families/Parents

The second group that benefits from services provided by the *New Mexico Center of Excellence for Early Childhood Education at WNMU* are families and parents in the communities served by the broader umbrella of the NM CoE ECE. Families grow through an increased understanding of child development as they integrate into the programs and participate in the highest quality experiences of planned educational programs. Parents have peace of mind that their children are receiving the best care. The community benefits by participating in a research-based model for early childhood education family support services.

The NM CoE ECE's Family Counseling Center (FCC) offers many services for parents and families. The FCC offers ongoing classes for parents to provide developmental guidance and training, which targets the dyadic connection between the infant and the parent to improve interactions and family relationships. Parenting classes

in the fall and spring semesters include *Playful Relationships with Children*, *Confident Parenting*, and *Circle of Security* parenting classes.

A parent participant said, "We took parenting classes where we learned about why play is so important. I learned so much during the parenting classes. I recommend the CDC family therapy services to all my friends and family. I know that they have a profound impact in our community and are a valuable service."

The FCC also provides a wide range of family counseling services, supporting families with access to therapeutic services in areas of challenges, including anxiety, grief, loss, divorce, and abuse. The WNMU Family Counseling Center, within the Center of Excellence, provides comprehensive family support focused on developmentally appropriate mental health services for children and their families.

One family's experience with FCC,  
"For over three years, my family has participated in the WNMU Family counseling Center services. We have engaged in individual counseling sessions, play therapy for our children and couples counseling. The WNMU counseling services has helped us all cope through some of the most challenging times of our lives. The amount of growth the progress we have made has been incredible. The therapists have always been attentive to our needs as individuals and as a family."

Students

Some of the clear benefits cited by students in the *Center of Excellence* early childhood and counseling academic programs are small class sizes, access to professors, mentorship, and high-quality field experiences. For example, the website, *Intelligent.com*, states that WNMU's College of Education students enjoy "one-on-one care from their professors."

In addition, the smaller class sizes ensure that students receive more attention from professors and mentors. Students also have access to an advisor who can help them navigate their way through their program/s. Graduate students have a mentor who meets with them each semester for guidance and support.

Students have said about classes in the Center of Excellence,

- "Awesome class! Excellent reading material and resources. Makes you want to learn more."
- "Great instructor. Great resources and interesting assignments."
- "Great and informative class with opportunities to work and collaborate with others and the instructor"

From a recent student letter to professors,

"As I sat here reflecting on my experience over the last 2 ½ years getting my Master's in Trauma Informed Practices, I felt this overwhelming gratitude for all of you. I have been through a life-changing journey, and I wanted to thank all of you. I can't begin to tell you how full my cup was when I presented my culminating project for you at WNMU. I was overwhelmed by your encouraging and thoughtful comments about my growth and past projects. I have learned so much more than subject matter from all of you. You have touched my mind and heart, and I want to continue helping others from what I have learned from you. I appreciate all of you so much and thank you for creating our new master's program. I know that it will benefit so many children's lives."

The professional development and credentials offered through the College of Education and the Family Counseling Center combine to open many diverse career pathways for students interested in the early childhood field. Some of these include:

- Mental health clinician
- Clinical Social Worker
- Supervisor or administrator
- Consultant
- Credentialed early intervention (EI) provider
- Child development specialist
- Family support specialist
- Home visitor
- Registered play therapist
- Early childhood educator
- Health professionals (occupational therapists, speech and language pathologists, pediatricians, nurse practitioners)

#### *High Quality Lab Sites Support Teacher Training*

The Child Development Center and the Growing Tree serve as lab sites for WNMU education students. Students enrolled in WNMU's Early Childhood Education degree programs have access to two childcare centers that exemplify best practice care and education, serving as model sites for students to observe young children's development and growth and to interact with various ages of young children as students go through their degree program. The field experience provided at these two sites is exceptional,



integrating practice through the mentorship of experienced professionals who provide teaching, instructional models, and demonstrations in an authentic setting with children. The CDC and Growing Tree teaching staff are professionals in their field, with training and experience mentoring up-and-coming future teachers. Students learn through laboratory opportunities, observational experiences, and the application of theoretical classroom material in an actual childcare and education center.



State regulations require that students enrolled in early childhood education degree programs engage in field experience or practicum, placements with infants, toddlers, and preschool children. The Child Development Center and Growing Tree are some of the

only 5 Star, NAEYC-accredited sites offering practica placement with these age groups of young children. Infant/toddler classrooms with 5 Star ratings as practicum-placement sites are challenging to come by in New Mexico, and the *New Mexico Center of Excellence for Early Childhood Education* operates two of them. The possibility of completing training in childcare centers that receive the highest quality rating is reported by students as "really important for exposing me to what best practice looks like for when I return to work in my own community."

#### Professionals

The fourth main group served by programs provided by the *New Mexico Center of Excellence for Early Childhood Education* are professionals in the fields of education and counseling. This facet of the gem may be the most widespread across the state, with professionals at all levels of the field enrolling in WNMU's programs to gain credentialing and professional development beyond their degrees.

#### *Education Licensing Credentials*

WNMU's College of Education offers numerous pathways for professionals in the early childhood field, including those who wish to gain the credential to become a licensed teacher in New Mexico. The *New Mexico Center of Excellence for Early Childhood Education* has an Alternative Licensure program in early childhood education for those who already have a bachelor's degree and would like to obtain an educator's license to teach young children. This program results in a graduate certificate that can be used towards completing a master's degree or can stand alone as the credential to obtain a New Mexico Public Education Department teaching license. Enrollment in this program allows students to begin work in the classroom while taking coursework and working through the program.

According to the NM Legislative Education Study Committee (LESC), most new teachers in New Mexico are professionals coming into the field by way of Alternative Licensure programs. Additionally, many currently licensed teachers in New Mexico also take advantage of this program when they are looking to pick up additional licenses as they expand their career options within the field of education. All of WNMU's Alternative Licensure programs have rigorous classroom field experience and mentor support built into the coursework.

### *Counseling Professional Development*

Another integrated service that supports the field of early childhood offered is professional development for counselors, therapists, and behavioral health providers. For example, the Center of Excellence Family Counseling Center offers a *Community of Practice and Learning Collaboratives* for clinicians to provide trainings and information on clinical practice with children and families, infant/young child development, best practices in the field of infant mental health, as well as facilitating ongoing peer-to-peer support for professionals who provide these services.

The Early Childhood Family Counseling Center (FCC) works to increase the number of mental health providers across the state who are credentialed to work with young children and their families and to support the ongoing clinical growth of rostered clinicians in New Mexico. Professional development opportunities include Association for Play Therapy (APT) and National Board of Certified Counselors (NBCC) approved trainings for professional Continuing Education Credits (CEUs).



Another professional development opportunity offered by the FCC is the *Annual Family Counseling Center's Conference*. This annual event has been hosted by the *New Mexico Center of Excellence for Early Childhood Education* for the last twenty years, bringing in speakers with expertise in the early childhood field that focus on topics that range from brain science to play therapy techniques. Professionals throughout the state attend this conference each year, gaining new knowledge from recent research, networking with other professionals in the field, and receiving (CEUs) for attendance and participation.

## Programs

### Early Childhood Educator Preparation Programs

A significant facet of the *New Mexico Center of Excellence for Early Childhood Education* at WNMU is its educator preparation program. Starting as The Normal School of New Mexico in 1893, the mission statement of the school read,

*The mission of the Normal School is to supply the grammar schools of the territory with competent and carefully trained teachers, devoted to their chosen profession and conscious of its splendid possibilities.*

This sentiment still applies, with WNMU offering 6-degree pathways and certificate programs within early childhood education. Students enrolled in WNMU Education programs will be the teachers of New Mexico's future, while many WNMU Education students are currently teachers seeking further professional development and credentials.

### *Degree Programs and Coursework*

The degrees and certificates offered within the *New Mexico Center of Excellence for Early Childhood Education* at WNMU are designed for students at all levels of their careers in education. Beginning with entry-level trainings and certificates through advanced graduate work, NM CoE EC offers:

<b>Certificate/Degree Program</b>	<b>Concentration</b>
Certificate	Early Childhood Education and Family Support
Associate of Arts	Early Childhood Education and Family Support
BA/BS Early Childhood Care & Education without licensure	Early Childhood Care & Education
BS Early Childhood Education with licensure	Early Childhood Care & Education
Master of Arts in Teaching	Early Childhood Education
Master of Arts in Early Childhood Education	Trauma-Informed Practice

The Associate of Arts in Early Childhood Education and Family Support prepares students for various careers, including teaching children ages birth-3rd grade, childcare provider, home visitor, parent support specialist, early interventionist, and program development specialist. The *Center of Excellence's* Early Childhood Programs offers two bachelor's degree professional pathways leading to either a New Mexico Early Childhood Teacher License or a bachelor's degree without licensure. For students who wish to go on to graduate school, two master's degrees are offered; one focused on

general early childhood education, and the other focused on trauma-informed practice. In addition, the College of Education will soon announce a doctoral degree program focusing on childhood trauma; its effect on overall development, including social and emotional skills, trauma-informed instructional environments, and practice with children.

#### *Program and Faculty Quality*

In seeking to meet the state's need for teachers, other universities and colleges are looking to offer quick college credit for in-service training workshops, credit for prior experience, and shortening semesters to 8 weeks in attempts to push more students rapidly through programs. However, research has shown that teachers who enter the field this way, with hurried training and preparation, are far more likely to leave within five years of commencing work in the classroom. On the other hand, WNMU's Early Childhood degree programs maintain high standards, such as full 16-week semesters, rigorous exit requirements that demonstrate skill with real children/students and embedding practical field experiences with mentors into all levels of its teacher preparation programs. In addition, the WNMU early childhood teacher preparation courses are taught by highly qualified, doctoral-level professors with extensive backgrounds in the classroom, early intervention, home visiting, early childhood curricula design, and research. Unfortunately, not all of the teacher preparation programs in this state can say this.



#### *Family Counseling Center*

While the WNMU Early Childhood Program is focused on providing the highest quality early care and education for children, operating an active research site, and offering numerous teacher preparation programs, it is the existence of the Family Counseling Center (FCC) which distinguishes the program from others and is an essential factor in the legislative designation of *Center of Excellence*. Embedding a comprehensive mental health program within an early learning center was a novel approach twenty-five years ago when the FCC was established and is no less innovative today. As research continues to bolster an understanding of the critical importance of the first five years of life on learning and development throughout the lifespan, the FCC offers a model for fully integrating infant and early childhood mental health services within an early care and education setting.



As a foundational component of the WNMU Early Childhood Program highlighted in the *New Mexico Center of Excellence* recognition, the Family Counseling Center

provides comprehensive, family-centered, developmentally appropriate mental health services for children and their families. The FCC supports young children directly using relationship-based modalities, including Play Therapy, Child-Parent Psychotherapy, Group, Individual, and Filial Play. In addition, children from birth through five years old in the foster care system receive therapeutic services through the FCC as the contractor that serves on the Judicial District 6 Infant Mental Health Team.

Comments from a local dad,  
"During our time at the WNMU Child Development Center's Family Counseling Center we participated in one-to-one therapy where we learned how to play. It taught us how to connect with kids in meaningful way. We learned so much about our own emotions and our children's. Through play they learned how to self-regulate. In addition to the individual therapy, our children had group therapy where they learned how to play with our children."

Further, the FCC offers a myriad of indirect services to administrative staff, interns, and practicum students, with a particular focus on collaborating with teachers to create a learning environment that nurtures and enhances the social and emotional development of the children in their classrooms. Classroom support includes facilitating trainings, developing classroom strategies, offering reflective consultation, and modeling interventions. In addition, the FCC is often instrumental in creating relationships with families and offers connections with community resources.

As part of the *New Mexico Center of Excellence for Early Childhood Education*, the FCC is uniquely qualified to train, supervise, and mentor a highly-skilled, specialized workforce of counselors, therapists, social workers, and behavioral health providers. This includes longstanding participation and leadership roles in a statewide *Learning Cohort and Community of Practice in Child-Parent Psychotherapy* for children in custody.

A recent student experience, "I completed my Master's in Professional Counseling internship at the WNMU Child Development Center's Family Counseling Center between 1/2020 and 5/2021. My internship experience at the FCC provided exemplary education and training in working with young children and their families. I worked under the supervision and tutelage of three experts in the field- each offered a different perspective and specialty. They were flexible, highly knowledgeable in their field and supportive both during and after my program."

The FCC teamed with the counseling department to design a 12-credit graduate certificate in Early Childhood Mental Health. This certificate is offered through the Counseling Department targeting counseling students wanting to gain specialization in Early Childhood, which could include School Counselors or MA TIP Students wanting to gain more insight into infant mental health practices.

The FCC also offers the *Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Certificate* to support the social, emotional, and relational development of infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and their families. This certificate program provides an opportunity to acquire the knowledge and develop the competencies relevant to pursuing an endorsement as an Infant Family Specialist, Infant Mental Health Specialist, or Infant Mental Health Mentor. These courses also support some requirements to become a Registered Play Therapist. Students will have a foundation to bring an infant and early childhood mental health lens to their workplace or other early childhood settings.

## Research

The NM CoE ECE is an active research site in early childhood leadership, innovative program design, and child development. Dr. Cindy Martinez, Early Childhood Associate Dean, and Dr. Shannon Rivera, Early Childhood Asst. Professor recently presented at the National Association for the Education of Young Children conference in 2022. This presentation highlighted some innovative program design features that incorporate student/teacher residencies, mentorship training, and the direct implementation of coursework.

This presentation was based on a pilot project examining alternative pathways in the preparation of early childhood teachers through Culturally-Responsive and Culturally-Sustaining Pedagogy that integrates students' previous learning and funds of knowledge with current theory and classroom practices. The project aimed to investigate experiences that advance the students' qualifications through the combination of coursework and classroom experiences while examining pathways for credentialing non-traditional students to meet current workforce demands.



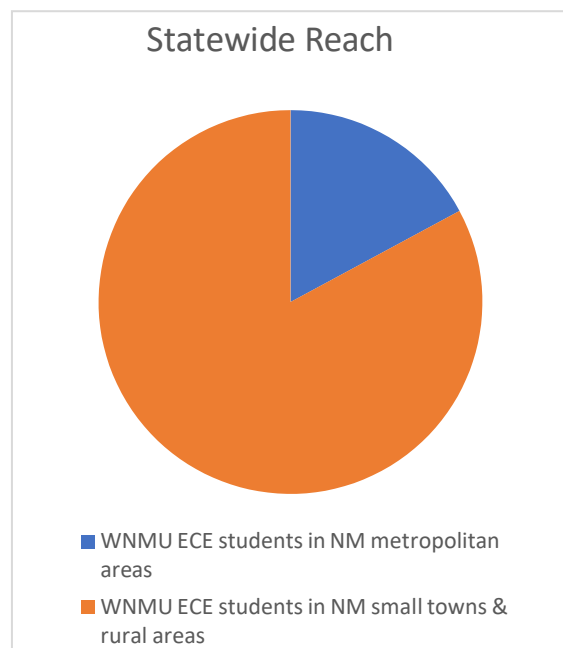
Currently, the NM CoE ECE is also hosting a two-year research project called, *The Treasure Map Experience*, which studies cognitive development in abstract thinking, symbolic representation, and language learning in young children. This state-wide project is based in the NM CoE ECE and presently has research sites at the First Presbyterian Child Development Center in Santa Fe, the WNMU Child Development Center in Silver City, and adding a site in Las Cruces in 2023. This project is part of a more extensive examination of young children's cognitive development conducted by WNMU Early Childhood Professors Dr. Wenjie Wang and Dr. Annabelle Black Delfin, which has already yielded two academic papers in peer, reviewed journals.



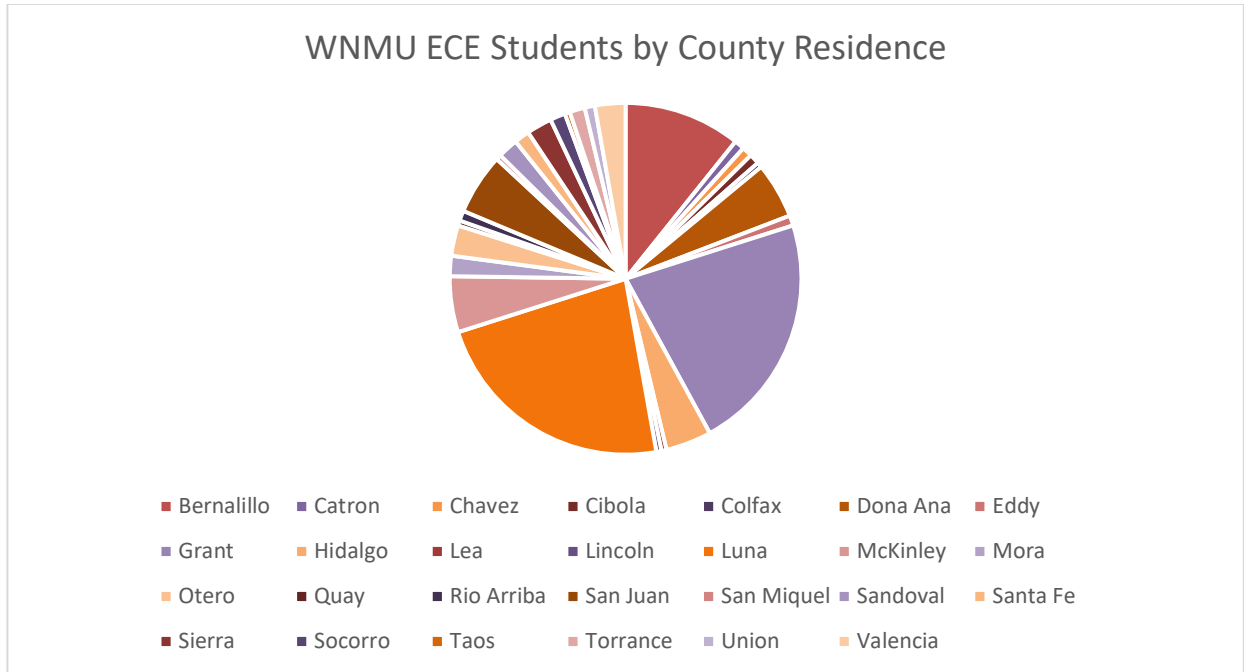
## The New Mexico Center of Excellence for Early Childhood Education

### Statewide Reach & Influence

The influence of the WNMU teacher preparation, counseling, and early childhood professional programs can be seen in most school districts and many licensed childcare centers in New Mexico with each passing year as graduates take up positions throughout the field of early childhood education. One thing that accounts for this is that WNMU pioneered online coursework in early childhood education. Online education allows students to access quality educational opportunities, providing a positive way for diverse student populations to meet their educational goals, especially in a geographically large and mostly rural state. Highly trained faculty and small class size are key components of online teaching and learning at WNMU. In addition, much early childhood and other education classes require field experiences with the support of a mentor that occurs on-site in the student's community. As it is understood that most of the students enrolling in education preparation programs are simultaneously employed in clinics, classrooms, schools, and agencies across the state, it is vital to support working students with affordable and convenient options like online programs with community support.



Currently, in 2022, WNMU has early childhood education students enrolled who reside in all four quadrants of the state and almost all counties. While many of these students live in metropolitan areas, most live (and work) in small towns and rural communities in New Mexico. This enrollment data suggests that WNMU educates and training teachers in many rural districts across New Mexico. These rural districts are small but vital to their communities and county. Highly qualified teachers in these rural districts are essential to that community's overall health and well-being. Therefore, WNMU is filling gaps across the state by educating, training, and supporting students to become highly qualified teachers in their communities.

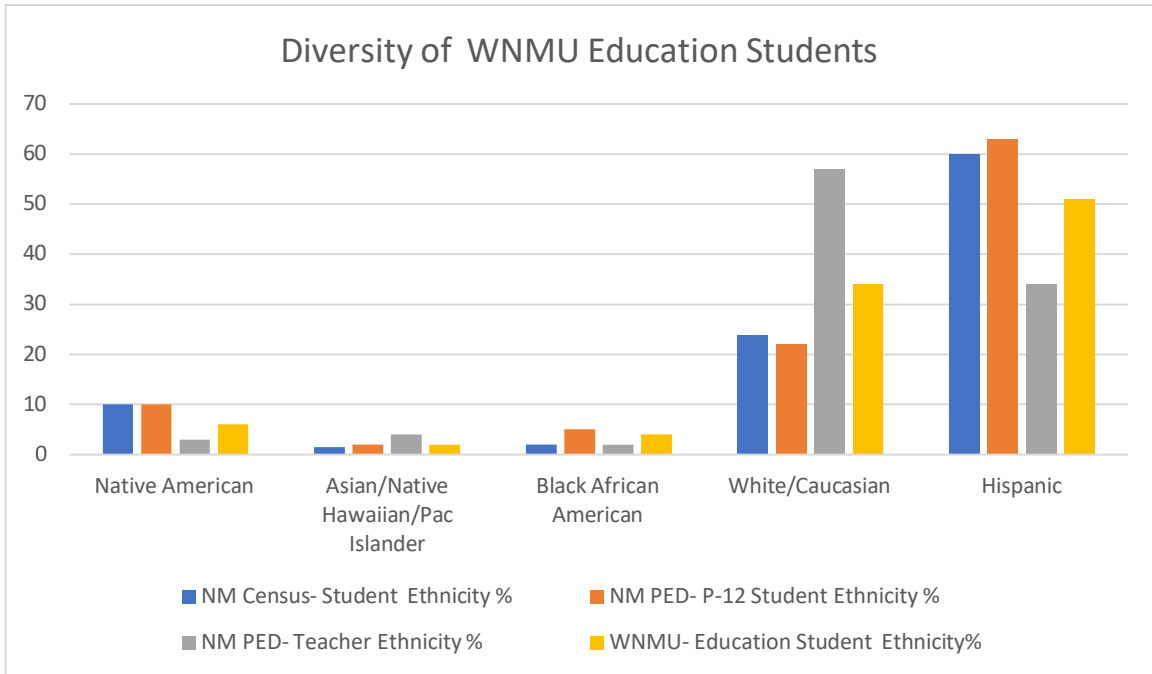


*Diversity in New Mexico's Educator Workforce*

In 2021, Western New Mexico University's College of Education received a score of A+ in the area of 'Program Diversity' from the *National Council on Teacher Quality*. Programs earn this score when "the percentage of enrolled candidates of color exceeds the diversity of the state teacher workforce by 10 or more percentage points and also meets or exceeds the diversity of the local population." WNMU was 13.8 percentage points more diverse than the New Mexico teacher workforce and 6.5 percentage points more diverse than the local population.

In other words, Western New Mexico University Education students (many of whom are already licensed teachers seeking further credentials) more closely reflect the demographics of the state's students than the overall New Mexico licensed teacher population reflects the demographics of the state's students.

As part of an initiative to bring greater diversity into the teaching workforce, a teacher residency program was started this year. Teacher residency programs are teacher preparation programs that combine college coursework with working and applying learning in the classroom under the supervision of a mentor. Teacher residency programs aim to address teacher preparation and decrease the diversity gap by recruiting students who can become teachers hired in their home communities and other parts of the state.



**Data Source:** KIDS COUNT Data Center, Annie E. Casey Foundation; Population Division, U.S. Census Bureau 2011-2020; LESC Hearing Brief: Educator Workforce: Supply and Demand, October 12, 2022

When the ethnic diversity of WNMU's Education students is compared to the ethnic diversity of New Mexico public schools' PreK-12 students, it can be seen that WNMU is working to decrease the diversity gap between the student population and licensed teachers.

#### *Leadership*

Western New Mexico University has been a leader in education in this state since the university's inception in 1893. This tradition continues with WNMU demonstrating leadership in education, especially early childhood education, across New Mexico on numerous councils and committees that seek to advance and improve child well-being and education. Representation on these councils and committees is vital as the higher education institutions collaborate for the children of New Mexico. The *New Mexico Center of Excellence for Early Childhood Education* is built upon this history of leadership infused within education from the university president to the early childhood professors and program directors.



	WNMU Position	Statewide Leadership Position/s
Pres. Joe Shepard	President of WNMU	Chair of the Council of University Presidents (2019 to present)
Dr. Debra Dirksen	Dean of the College of Education	Chair of the New Mexico Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (2022-23)
Dr. Cindy Martinez	Associate Dean of the College of Education	Co-chair, New Mexico Early Childhood Higher Education Task Force (2018-2022); Member, New Mexico Early Childhood Higher Education Task Force (2022-ongoing); Appointed Jan. 2023 Early Childhood Education and Care Department Advisory Council
	Director, Early Childhood Education department	Advisor, Governor's Early Learning Advisory Committee (appointed: Oct. 2022)
Dr. Shannon Rivera	Asst. Professor Early Childhood Education	Advisor, Governor's Early Learning Advisory Committee (appointed, two terms: June 9th, 2015 - Aug. 2019)
Dr. Wenjie Wang	Asst. Professor Early Childhood Education	Member, New Mexico Early Childhood Higher Education Task Force (2022-ongoing)
Angel Toyota-Sharpe	Director, Early Childhood Family Counseling Center	Member, NM Association For Play Therapy
		Member, NM Infant Mental Health Board
		Member, The Early Childhood Programs Board
Christina Riddle	Administrative Director, Family Counseling Center	Appointed Jan. 2023, Board Member NM Association of Infant Mental Health Board of Directors

Another example of state leadership in early childhood education emerging from the NM CoE ECE can be seen in the innovative program design that is responsive to current conditions and needs 'on the ground' in New Mexico. Several faculty members from the *New Mexico Center of Excellence for Early Childhood Education* have recently redesigned the exit requirements for the early childhood graduate programs to reflect more in-depth, culturally-responsive, and relevant opportunities to demonstrate authentic mastery of competencies with real-world application. In addition to a comprehensive exam option, students are offered the choice of four assessment routes for completing the program that have been developed to better support students in their current and future career pathways. The added exit requirement options, called Early Childhood Trauma-Informed Practices Capstone Project (TIP Capstone Project), include opportunities for students to demonstrate mastery of program competencies through:

- Comprehensive Written Exam
- Curriculum Unit Design, Implementation, and Presentation
- Academic Writing Project with Mentor
- Professional Development Project and Presentation
- Action Research Project with Mentor

Upon admission into the Masters of Arts Early Childhood Education Trauma-Informed Practices (MA ECED TIP) program, students will meet with an advisor/mentor to chart their program plan, including selecting one of the above projects to complete over four semesters. Each project is designed to support students' diverse education and career ambitions, whether classroom teaching, professional consulting, academic writing, research, or a doctoral program.

The process by which the TIP Capstone Projects came about will be presented to a statewide audience in February of 2023 at the New Mexico Higher Education Assessment and Retention Conference. This presentation, *'Promoting Competency-Based Early Childhood Programs in Higher Education through Culturally Responsive Assessment,'* will highlight how providing graduate students options in how they want to demonstrate their mastery of the program is reflective of each of their locales and cultures across the state. Additionally, most graduate students at WNMU are already working in the early childhood field somewhere. Therefore, with the students identifying the topic and focus of their TIP Capstone Project and implementing that project through their work in the early childhood field, the projects are highly reflective of the diversity emergent in the New Mexico landscape and, in this way, are culturally responsive.

In taking the lead with this innovative assessment design and presenting it to colleagues in the state, the MA ECED TIP program provides a model for other graduate programs in education seeking to incorporate authentic forms of culturally relevant assessment that demonstrate mastery in a competency-based program. In addition, the projects that are produced and implemented by graduate students across the state can also serve as products (i.e., a curriculum unit, a professional development series, an academic paper, or a research study) that can be used to further understanding of early childhood, child development, and trauma-informed practices in the various communities and school districts across our state.



#### *NM Preschool Teacher Support Site*

When the pandemic began, WNMU was the only higher education institution in New Mexico that launched a free information and support site for all early childhood teachers called *NM Preschool Teacher Support Site*. This still active repository site hosted all of the information and documents from the Public Education and Early Childhood Education and Care departments regarding COVID protocols and policy changes for teaching in person and remotely. The site also provided many teacher materials and resources to support a workforce that was asked to carry on while completely changing how education was to be provided during that difficult time.

Since schools and learning centers have returned to in-person learning, this site has shifted to act as a point of reference for official news from the Early Childhood Education and Care Department (ECECD) pertaining to reporting requirements, data collection, official forms, organized materials and resources that preschool teachers can use in the instruction of children in preschool settings. This site still operates and is hosted by the NM CoE ECE in partnership with NM ECECD.

#### *Satellite Learning Centers*

In 2022, WNMU's College of Education re-opened the Gallup branch, which closed during the pandemic, intending to offer more access and opportunities in rural and Native communities to certificate and degree programs that support current and future teachers in New Mexico. The College of Education also operates a learning center in Deming, New Mexico, adding other dimensions to our programs' student population. Additionally, having an online presence serves students in all areas of the state.

WNMU's Early Childhood Programs *Center of Excellence* has recently received endowment funding to help support a director position to move the development of a bilingual education pathway to be located in the Deming Learning Center forward beginning Fall 2023 from the NM Early Childhood Education and Care department. The goal is to hire an Early Childhood Bilingual Program Director to expand, support, and

recruit Indigenous and Bilingual educators living and working in the borderlands of rural southwest New Mexico. WNMU's Deming Learning Center is situated in a centralized location with the ability to reach Early Childhood pre-service teachers in communities such as Columbus, Lordsburg, Animas, Hatch, and Truth or Consequences. In addition, these communities' unique linguistic and cultural needs can be targeted by providing coursework, mentoring, coaching, and overall social, emotional, and financial support in a combination of Spanish and English options.



By reaching into all regions of the state, from high-quality childcare, early childhood research, family counseling, and teacher preparation, among other programs, *WNMU's Center of Excellence in Early Childhood* has shown that it merits the legislative designation. Moreover, providing the New Mexico early childhood field with this depth of training, care, practice, and support in New Mexico by New Mexicans is culturally responsive and improves early childhood across the state.

### Rankings

Recently, the website, EducationDegree, ranked teacher education programs of the American western mountain region and selected WNMU as the 'Best Degree Program in Education' for New Mexico 2022. Additionally, the WNMU College of Education was featured with the site highly recommending WNMU's College of Education, stating that the college offers "outstanding academic and career support."

Another website that ranks higher education programs, Intelligent.com, designated WNMU as providing the 'Best Education Degrees 2022' in New Mexico. Giving WNMU a score of 88 overall, the rating site compared program strength, student readiness, return on investment, cost, and student engagement to identify top schools in the state based on tuition fees, credit requirements, and the available formats for coursework. This ranking site noted, "Future teachers can feel assured they will have an engaged education, with plenty of one-on-one care from their professors."

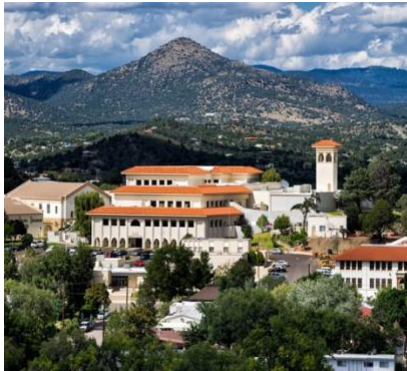


The National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) released the education program 'grades' as part of their ongoing *Teacher Prep Review*. WNMU was given the grade of A+ for graduate education programs. Grades were derived from examining two critical issues often portrayed as competing goals: the academic standards for teacher preparation and programs' contributions to racial diversity in the teaching profession.

### Current Trends and Recommendations

### *Culturally-responsive Curricula*

In recent years there has been a push to move New Mexico's curriculum, in general, to be more culturally responsive to the vast diversity in our state. A culturally-responsive curriculum usually indicates a curriculum that values and incorporates the student's culture and prior learning. In addition, culturally responsive teaching seeks to create teaching and learning experiences grounded in the context of a student's community and culture, making that experience more relevant and meaningful for the student and the community. Culturally responsive teaching seeks to reduce language barriers and decrease systemic discrimination while increasing representation and consistently communicating high expectations. With the mix of field experiences in local communities, a great deal of student choice and direction for learning focus and demonstration embedded in programs, and diversity in coursework, the NM CoE ECE can empower students to engage.



Many innovative curricula design changes are underway, from instruction to assessment in *Center of Excellence* programs. Students are exposed to multiple perspectives through their coursework and field experiences as they move through the program/s. As such, students have many options for demonstrating competency by incorporating culturally relevant information and practice from the education certificates to the graduate degree programs.

### *Work-based Learning*

A trend that has been showing up in numerous education reports centers on 'work-based learning.' The New Mexico Legislative Education Study Committee (LESC), in a recent report (2022), recommends several versions of 'work-based learning.' i.e., partnerships between education institutions and workplace settings where students can gain field experience and academic credit concurrently. Although there are differences in the definition of these work-based learning programs, such as Career Technical Education (CTE), Future Focused Education (FFE), and Residency programs, the commonality is that the workplace is viewed as another education site. As stated earlier in this paper, the NM CoE EC has multiple instances and versions of work-based learning embedded in its degree programs. Many courses in the degree pathways require short-term field experiences, as well as the two practica required in the AA degree, the additional practicum in the BA programs, and student teaching, which of course, takes place in a classroom.

The WNMU College of Education also has a *Teacher Residency* program, with 27 students placed in paid residencies working full-time as classroom teachers. In addition, a veteran teacher serves as a mentor working alongside them for an entire school year. Over half of the students in residencies are in early childhood education settings.

#### *Strong District Partnerships*

In another LESC report from 10/2021 focusing on teacher preparation, strong partnerships with school districts are recommended for educator preparation programs to 'help address specific school district hiring needs and allow teacher-candidates to become familiar with their local school community before becoming the teacher of record.' This is another recommendation that has been addressed within the *Center of Excellence's* field experiences for students in early childhood programs. Working closely with school districts is a must, as most students enrolled in WNMU education programs are already employed in schools as they complete their coursework. In addition, the NM CoE ECE has a full-time position devoted to student placement in field experience settings, such as public schools in local school districts.

#### *Adverse Childhood Experiences and Trauma*

In 2020, the NM CoE ECE launched a master's program in early childhood education focused on trauma-informed practices (MA ECED TIP). This program is designed for New Mexico's early childhood educators. It is partially in response to issues raised in the Yazzie/Martinez court case and the 2022 Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative that found that one in six New Mexico children had experienced as much as three or more adverse childhood experiences.

The program's scope includes in-depth information on early childhood developmental processes, especially with regard to how developmental processes are affected by trauma. Also mentioned earlier, the MA ECED TIP program has redesigned its final assessment options to reflect the local need and culture in the various communities of New Mexico where our students live and work. Since many of the students enrolled in this program are current teachers in classrooms across the state, the reach of this program can begin to be seen. With each successive graduating class from this master's program, New Mexico's educator workforce is bringing highly relevant and recent research on the effects of trauma on child development and learning into contemporary classrooms.

## Conclusion

The *New Mexico Center of Excellence for Early Childhood Education* is a gem, providing services that benefit children, families/parents, students, and professionals all over New Mexico. These groups form four of the facets of the gemstone that meet with other facets, such as the *Center of Excellence* educator preparation programs and degree pathways, family counseling, child development centers, early childhood research, and innovative program design. Like a crystalline structure where the various facets converge in the center, forming the gem, the intersection of these services described here with the people who benefit from the service provider has given rise to the NM CoE ECE. In this way, child well-being and education are at the center of the gem that is the *New Mexico Center of Excellence for Early Childhood Education*. All of the programs, degrees, certificates, practica hours, lesson plans, graduates, interventions, therapies, presentations, and other outcomes that materialize from this gem of an institution are laser-focused on improving child well-being and education in New Mexico. And it is starting to show.



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