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List of unaccounted-for students now 2,522

PED, partners down to hardest-to-reach students

SANTA FE — The New Mexico Public Education Department and its partners are searching for the final and hardest-to-reach students after months of work to determine that all New Mexico students are safe and receiving education services despite the pandemic.

As of this week, about 2,500 names remained on a list once numbering over 12,000 of students who were enrolled in public schools last spring but not this fall and were therefore feared to be outside the educational system.

A cross-agency team has been whittling the list since November by working with districts, cross-referencing databases, making phone calls and making COVID-safe home visits. In the first months of the effort, the list dropped by thousands each month, but now the going is slow.

Of the remaining unaccounted-for students, 100 are believed to be homeless, a figure calculated by comparing the unaccounted-for list to a list of students who were in a federal program for homeless students last spring.

“We’re getting close, but the last ones are the hardest to reach,” said Katarina Sandoval, the Public Education deputy secretary leading the project. “We are still doing everything we can. Ultimately, we want to ensure that every student is accounted for, but we also have to consider the fact that they’ve possibly moved outside our systems.”

The PED and its partners — the Early Childhood Education and Care Department; the Indian Affairs Department; the Office of African American Affairs; the Children, Youth and Families Department, the Human Services Department and the Graduation Alliance — have called hundreds of families since early January, talking directly to some and leaving messages for others. Those who didn’t call back received a second and sometimes third call.

In mid-February, the partners were down to about 2,700 unaccounted-for students, including some 650 for whom no recent contact information existed. A cross-check with a national database turned up contact information for about 550 of those, and outreach to those families is now under way, with almost 200 already located and accounted for so far.

Some students are turning up on their own to re-enroll as in-person learning expands across New Mexico. When students re-engage with learning, the state partners don’t always know why they left in the first place. However, an earlier analysis indicated most had enrolled in private schools (26 percent) or moved out of state (23 percent). About 15 percent were found to be enrolled in a public school, and 7 percent are being home-schooled. About 3 percent have dropped out of school altogether.

There are now fewer than 100 students on the original list for whom no contact information is available. Those names are being sent back to the 18 school districts and charter schools where they were once enrolled with instructions to keep looking.

Districts are required to report enrollment and attendance data to PED at regular intervals, beginning in late October. That data is usually not released until it is carefully verified — a weeks-long process — but because of growing public concern about disengaged students amid remote and hybrid learning models, the department broke protocol in November by announcing the unverified data suggesting more than 12,000 students were unaccounted for

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