



CREATIVE PATHWAYS

STUDENT SUCCESS THROUGH
ARTS-FOCUSED CHARTER SCHOOLS

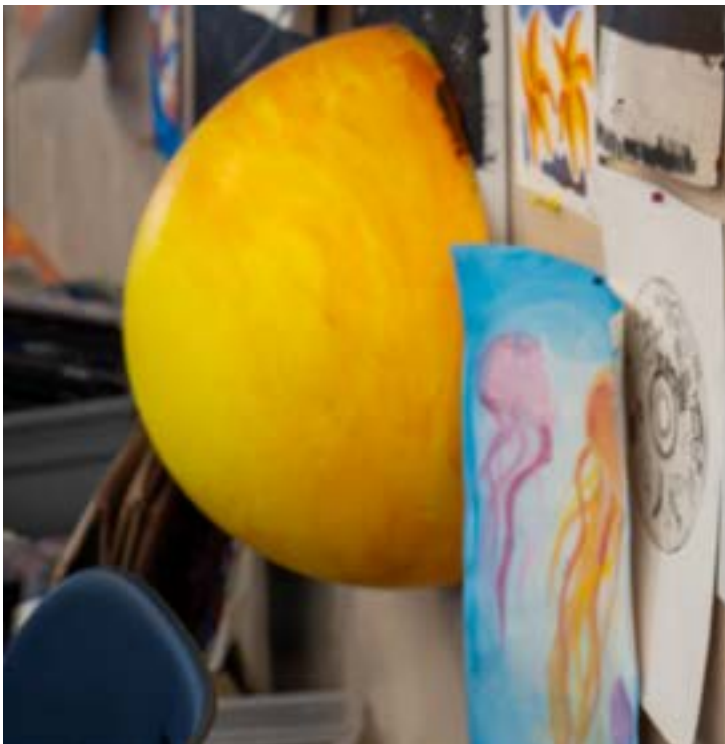
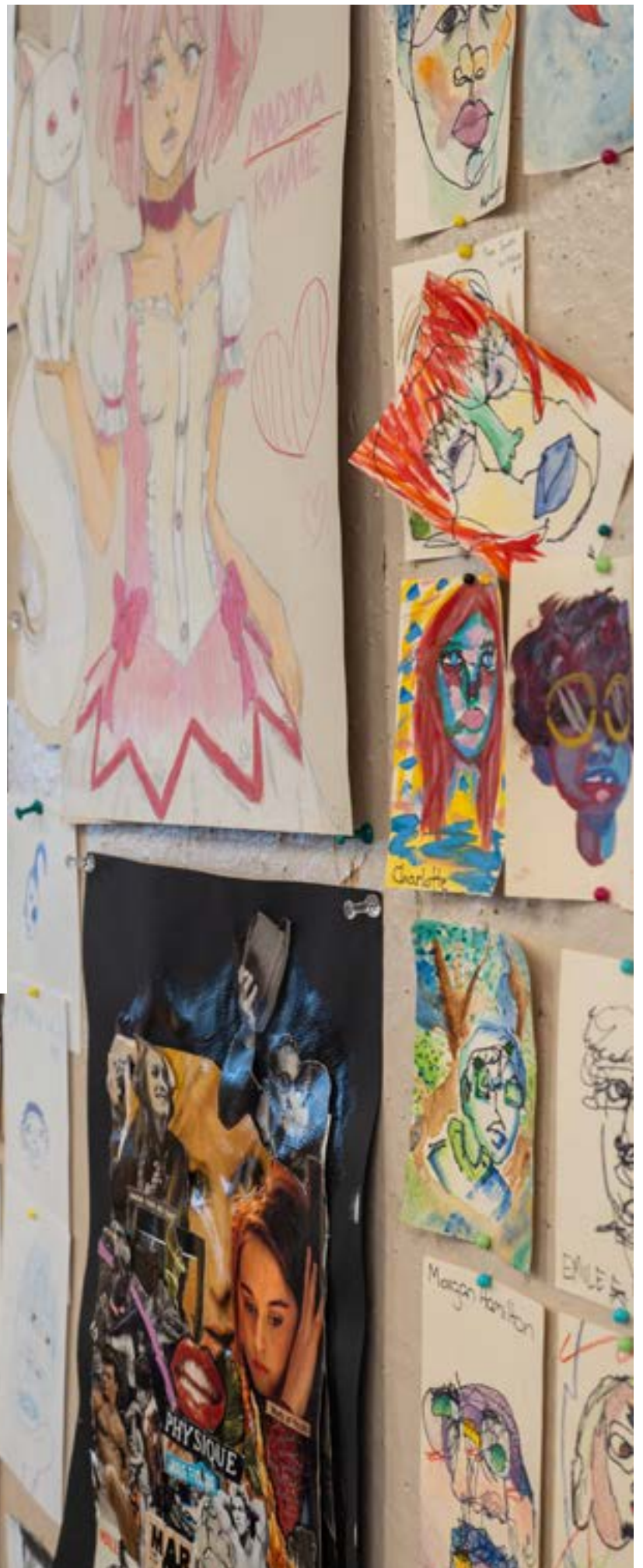
JUNE 2026

A Best Practices Report

How New Mexico's arts charter schools are helping students thrive through creativity, culture, and academic excellence

New Mexico Arts Charter Schools At A Glance

- 9 Arts-focused public charter schools statewide
- Serving students in grades K-12
- Located in Albuquerque, Santa Fe, Taos, and Las Cruces
- Programs include dance, music, media arts, theater, visual arts, culinary arts, and dual-language arts integration



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INTRO

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*The arts
has been
the biggest
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New Mexico’s nine arts-focused charter schools create many different pathways to student success.

Some train flamenco dancers and classical guitarists. Others run TV production studios or teach second-graders to bar graph in character as fairy-tale scribes.

They range from a K-8 school of 200 students in Taos to a statewide residential high school in Santa Fe, from a four-year-old startup on Albuquerque’s west side to a 15-year-old institution with alumni working at Netflix.

What they share is a conviction that the arts are not decoration on the margins of a real education but a way of learning that reaches students where other methods do not.

The results bear that out. One school profiled in this report climbed from one of the state’s lowest ratings to the highest designation: Spotlight School.

Others have earned Spotlight status year after year.

Students are completing dual credit courses, winning Emmy awards for student films, and earning scholarships to conservatories and universities across the country.

Alumni are working as professional dancers, filmmakers, costume designers, and television producers.

These schools also serve some of the state’s most vulnerable populations: high percentages of Hispanic students, Native American students, students with disabilities, and students from low-income families. Arts integration gives those students ways to demonstrate knowledge and find confidence that standardized tests alone cannot capture.

This report profiles four arts-focused charter schools in depth and provides brief profiles of the other five, illustrating the breadth and variety of arts-centered learning opportunities available across New Mexico.

“The arts has been the biggest missing link in public education,” said Glenna Voigt, a founder of the New Mexico Academy for Media Arts and a former commissioner on the Public Education Commission,

the state’s charter authorizer. “People are hungry for it. Teachers are hungry to create. And the arts have provided that platform for students to really have a voice.”

The schools highlighted in this report represent a range of arts education models, geographic regions, grade levels, and student populations found across New Mexico’s arts charter sector.





Grades 9-12

New Mexico School for the Arts

Santa Fe



Opened: 2010
Enrollment: 300–350 students

Cruz Gallegos started playing violin at seven, absorbing Suzuki melodies while his older brother practiced viola in the next room.

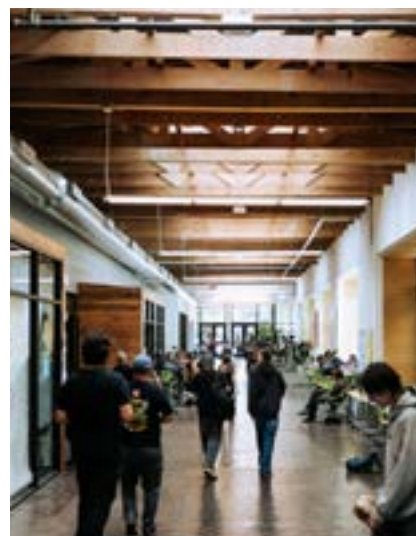
His kindergarten teacher noticed him humming those Suzuki tunes during quiet time and asked his mother when she planned to enroll him in the Youth Symphony.

“I was like, oh, probably not,” Monica Gallegos recalled. “I said, that’s his brother’s thing. He’s probably going to do sports.” But the teacher persisted. So Monica asked Cruz directly. “And he said yeah, I’ll try it. I think it’d be fun.”

Cruz tore through the first two years of material in nine months. But despite his

talent, school was a struggle. The Santa Fe native bounced from public school to private school, supplementing with private instructors and the Youth Symphony, never finding an institution that could match his intensity.

“He wasn’t getting it in school,” Monica said. “He was not even remotely close to getting challenged and performing to his potential.”



Then Cruz enrolled at the New Mexico School for the Arts (NMSA) in Santa Fe as a high school freshman. Monica picked him up after his first day, bracing for the usual adjustment anxieties. Instead, she heard:

“Mama, it’s great in there. You can be yourself and it’s okay.”

NMSA outperformed statewide proficiency rates in reading, math, and science in 2025, with reading proficiency exceeding 78 percent—nearly double the state average. The school has earned the state’s highest rating: Spotlight designation.



NMSA exists because of a specific piece of legislation. The New Mexico School for the Arts Act, signed by Governor Bill Richardson in 2008, created the state's only public arts high school with a residential program.

The law was itself a compromise. A group of parents, including Cindy Montoya, who is now president of the school's affiliated nonprofit Art Institute, had originally wanted to create a separate statewide school district. When that proved politically impossible, a charter school became the fallback.

The law also created an unusual funding constraint: state per-pupil dollars cannot cover the cost of arts programming. That responsibility falls to the Art Institute, which raises approximately \$2.5 million annually from private donors and foundations.

The school opened in 2010 in a small elementary building, graduated its first class in 2012 and earned designation as a National Blue Ribbon School in 2016 for closing academic achievement gaps. In 2019 it moved into a



converted mall in central Santa Fe, near the Rail Runner commuter train station, which provides access for students commuting from Albuquerque and points south.

The campus now draws students from more than 55 communities across a geographically vast state. Academic classes run from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Then comes a three-hour arts block, from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m., five days a week.

Over four years, a student receives more than 2,000 hours of instruction in a chosen discipline, more than some college programs. NMSA offers five departments (dance, music, theater, visual arts, and creative writing) and plans to add film by August 2026.

“It’s not an arts integration program,” said Eric Crites, the head of school.

“It is an academic program from 9 to 2, and then it’s art mastery.”

That distinction matters. Unlike schools that weave arts into academic subjects, NMSA treats its arts curriculum as a parallel track of equal seriousness. Teachers do not withhold arts instruction as a consequence for academic struggles. Nor do “we keep kids from going to math class if they’re not passing theater,” Crites said with a touch of irony.

The growth mindset philosophy that governs the arts block, where every mistake is a learning moment and formative assessment is constant, is meant to carry over into academics as well.

Karina Hean, the visual arts chair who has taught at NMSA for 13 years, said students often arrive expecting something more akin to conventional schooling.

“They’re going to come in

expecting the predictability of normal public school training,” she said. “There’s one way to do a thing, and this is how you do it, and the teacher is going to show me exactly how to do it, and there won’t be any discovery.”

Her department scaffolds risk-taking into the curriculum, rewarding experimentation over safe choices. By senior year, students mount thesis exhibitions with artist statements, biographies, and five-minute public talks about their work.



The residential program, which opened in a purpose-built 60-bed dormitory in April 2024, has transformed the school’s statewide reach. Students living more than 65 miles away qualify for a five-

day residential program; those beyond 125 miles can stay seven days a week, going home once a month.

The dorm is now publicly funded through a two-year pilot from the state legislature, making it free for families. Before the new facility, the program operated in rented spaces with a maximum capacity of about 40 students and no weekend option.

The difference has been immediate. Jeremiah Noriega, a senior from Deming, came to NMSA after meeting students from the school at a mariachi conference. He was the first student from Deming to enroll.

With the advent of the seven-day program, three more students from Deming followed. “Coming here was an eye-opener,” Noriega said. “There’s tons of different styles that we play here. It has definitely helped me develop a more complex ear.”

Ash Chavez, a senior in visual arts, came to NMSA from a small K-8 school in Santa Fe whose art teacher told him

to grab his passion and run with it.

Growing up, his family could not afford art materials. “My materials were anything I could find,” he said. Now, after his four years at NMSA, a professional art collector has expressed interest in buying his work. He has been accepted to the Institute of American Indian Arts but is uncertain about affording college.

“I don’t need a degree to tell me to know how to draw,” he said. “All I need is a pencil or something that I can sketch on.”

Between half and two-thirds of NMSA graduates pursue something in the arts after graduation, Crites estimated. Some go to programs like Juilliard (New York City) and the Berklee College of Music (Boston). Others study biology but minor in dance, or pursue engineering while maintaining an artistic life.

Alumni have returned to teach at the school: the dance teacher, the residential director, and a creative writing instructor are all graduates.

Monica Gallegos, watching her son discover jazz

violin alongside his mariachi passion, said the school's range of exposure has been transformative.

“We have Dizzy Gillespie playing in our house. We have Chick Corea playing in our house,” she said. “When my husband and I were growing up here, we didn't have access to anything like this.”





Grades 6-12

Public Academy for Performing Arts

Albuquerque

The Public Academy for Performing Arts (PAPA) in Albuquerque is the oldest arts charter school in New Mexico. Bob Perls, a former state representative who wrote the original New Mexico Charter School Act, co-founded it with his wife and two other parents in 2001.

The school opened in 2002 as a middle and high school program.

Perls, a pianist who had been transformed by his own high school chorus program, wanted a school that would use the performing arts to engage students across the curriculum. “The idea was not to have separate performing arts classes,” Perls said.

“The idea was to integrate performing arts in every class, in every subject.”

The school has evolved from that original vision, but the integrative impulse remains. Executive Director Tamara Lopez, now in her third year leading PAPA after a decade

at the school in other roles, described a site-specific goal requiring every core teacher to integrate arts into academic instruction at least once per semester.

In practice, it happens more often.

A sixth-grade special education teacher uses warm and cool colors to teach prime and composite numbers. A history class offers students the option of demonstrating mastery through a painting, a poem, or a song. A science teacher once had students stand up and move through the water cycle with their bodies.

“Big surprise, kids are really able to demonstrate mastery through the arts,” Lopez said.

The school enrolls about 450 students. All middle-schoolers take both a dance class and a music class, alongside other arts electives. The dance program alone has roughly 377 students enrolled. The range of offerings is wide: ballet, jazz, contemporary, hip hop, flamenco, film production, theater, choir,

orchestra, band, and visual art.

By high school, students begin to specialize, though not all do.

PAPA exceeded statewide proficiency rates in reading, math, and science in 2025, including a reading proficiency rate 16 percentage points above the state average, earning it Spotlight designation from the state.

Fabian Sisneros, who teaches both AP English and Flamenco, embodies the school’s integrative philosophy. Sisneros trained with Joaquin Encinias, the founder of the flamenco dance program at the University of New Mexico. He has watched his flamenco enrollment grow from fewer than 20 students to 120.

He also teaches AP English with a curriculum hyper-localized to New Mexican literature, bringing in living authors for students to meet. The parallel between flamenco and literature, he argued, is that both must be received from living people in a living community.

Opened: 2002
Enrollment: 450-500 students





“Flamenco is academic,” Sisneros said. “I’m telling you right now, my flamenco class is just as important as your math class.”

Josh Heard, who teaches musical theater and seventh-grade social studies, came to PAPA nine years ago from Albuquerque’s Duke City Repertory Theater. He described the arts as a space where students are forced to confront topics directly, to collaborate physically with other people, and to take themselves out of their own experience.

“So much of our lives today, we think that we’re actually connecting with one another, but really what we’re doing is we’re seeing an image that’s often curated to be

something else,” Heard said. “Art pierces through that.”

Both teachers, like educators at every arts school visited for this report, returned to the theme of failure. In conventional academic settings, failure is, unfortunately, seen as something to avoid. In the arts, it is a prerequisite for growth.

“Failure is an option. As a matter of fact, it’s a prerequisite,” Sisneros said. “No one comes into any of our arts classes with the expectation of having some sort of skill set that’s already necessary to succeed.”

Students confirmed the shift. Eternity Boyden, a freshman who had dreaded going to her previous school, where

she felt targeted in PE and disconnected from teachers, said PAPA was “a night and day difference.”

Ash Nyght, a senior graduating as valedictorian with a 4.4 GPA and 45 dual-credit college hours already earned, plans to attend the University of New Mexico through a program that will pay for a bachelor’s degree and hold a spot in medical school. “I think academics and arts integrated doesn’t just make kids the same academically as kids in traditional schools, it helps make them better,” Nyght said.

Cat Younis, a senior who transferred from another public charter school as a sophomore, said PAPA



“Create not the stars of tomorrow, but the whole human beings of today”

helped her discover her voice both as a performer and as a leader. “You couldn’t keep me off the stage if you tried,” she said. She is now working on a project that connects students with mentors and community organizations throughout New Mexico.

Christine Calloway, whose twin daughters have attended PAPA since sixth grade, said the school opened doors her family could not have afforded otherwise.

“Those opportunities are one of the things that attracted us to this school, because they’d be able to participate in those activities without income really being a factor into that, because private classes are expensive,” Calloway said.

One of her daughters, so shy she would not speak to anyone for her entire sixth-grade year, has since come out of her shell entirely. “You would never tell by looking at her now that she was ever shy,” Calloway said.

Naomi Montoya taught dance at PAPA for 23 years before retiring in May 2024. She also danced professionally with an Afro-Cuban and Brazilian samba company while teaching, and she used those connections to bring guest artists into the school for master classes and workshops.

The school’s motto, that it aims to “create not the stars of tomorrow, but the whole human beings of today,”

came from its founding members. Montoya said the phrase captures something she has seen play out over two decades of graduates.

“The arts can enrich everyone’s quality of life,” Montoya said. “It teaches you empathy. It teaches you things that you might not otherwise experience.”

Sisneros said he would love for schools like PAPA to become the norm.

“I would love for my situation to no longer be unique,” he said. “I would love to see every middle school and high school have way more impactful and strongly supported arts programs.”



Grades 6-12

Tierra Adentro of New Mexico

Albuquerque

Opened: 2010

Enrollment: 200–250 students



The first thing an early-morning visitor to Tierra Adentro (TANM) notices upon entering its purpose-built facility on Albuquerque’s west side is that the entire building is shaking.

A large, mixed-grade class is deeply engrossed in Flamenco warm-ups in a large, hardwood-floored studio near the building’s lobby. Students’ black, studded flamenco shoes drum against the hardwood floor, reverberating through the entire first floor.

It’s an invigorating way to

start a school day, and it is unique to this New Mexico cultural arts-focused public charter school.

TANM is located along the route of the historic Camino Real. The school’s name, which means “the inland” in Spanish, refers both to Albuquerque’s position on the old trade route from Mexico and to something more personal.

“It’s asking what does your soul bring to your culture?” said Veronica Torres, the school’s co-founder and recently retired executive director.

Torres founded TANM in 2010 with Joaquin Encinias, the artistic director of the National Institute of Flamenco and founder of the flamenco dance program at the University of New Mexico. The two had worked together at PAPA, where Torres started the flamenco program while dancing professionally with Encinias’s company, the Yjastros.

The new school would be different from PAPA in a fundamental way. Where PAPA offers students a wide menu of exploratory arts, TANM channels every student through a focused

curriculum rooted in New Mexican cultural arts, with flamenco at its center.

In sixth through ninth grade, every student takes flamenco dance, visual art, and flamenco guitar. In tenth grade, they choose one or two to study in depth. The school also offers a bilingual seal, with Spanish language arts woven into the eight-period daily schedule.

“A lot of people don’t know how much flamenco is a part of New Mexican culture,” Torres said. “When the Spaniards came through, they had flamenco dancers with them as they traveled.”

The school enrolls about 240 students in grades six through twelve. Its demographics are about 85 percent Hispanic, reflecting both the neighborhood and the school’s cultural mission.

But Torres was clear that flamenco at TANM is not restricted to any one heritage. “We’re Americans doing a very Spanish art form,” she said.

Torres, a former competitive track athlete who did not begin dancing until college, also made sure TANM students could pursue athletics. Through an agreement with Albuquerque Public Schools (APS), the largest school district in New Mexico, students can try out for sports at their home district high school while remaining enrolled at TANM.

Senior Darien Flores, a dance focus student, plays football at APS’s Rio Grande High School and earned a scholarship to Bondsville Football Academy in Florida. Aubrey Donahue, a music focus student and wrestler at

Atrisco High School, received a scholarship to wrestle at Iowa State.

“They told me, you don’t have to choose,” Donahue said. “You can still take that music and this art form with you, because Iowa doesn’t know what flamenco is.”

The school’s teachers are themselves working artists, which Torres saw as central to the model from the beginning. She recruited members of the professional flamenco community to teach, giving them steady employment with benefits while keeping them active in performance.

“Our kids love it when they get to watch their teachers perform professionally,” said Theresa Archuleta, who served as co-director alongside Torres before retiring in 2022.



The integration of arts and academics happens both structurally and organically. The school uses an alternating block schedule, with arts and academic classes on different days and all eight periods meeting on Fridays. Several Tierra Adentro staff members teach both dance and academic subjects.

Sarah Hartshorn, an English teacher who was one of the school's original dance instructors, described using a mock trial to teach argumentation and writing. She told her





students the courtroom was a performance. “I tell them ‘I see you guys in the dance studio. That confidence has to translate into your mock trial performance.’”

Janine Burford, a middle school science teacher, described watching a student struggle in her classroom and then seeing the same student shine on stage. “I can go and watch them do a performance, and then just kind of build them up,” Burford said.

She tells some of her students “I can see the diamond in you. You can’t see it yet, but it’s going to shine.”

Executive Director Genevieve Lopez, who came to TANM 13 years ago as a special education student teacher and worked her way through every role in the building, said the school’s data tells

the story. Sixth graders arrive well below grade level, a statewide pattern. By eleventh grade, students who have stayed are performing at grade level.

“If you are here and you’re sticking with us, we’re moving you,” Lopez said. “The growth is there.”

Caleb Garcia, a senior guitarist who has been at the school since sixth grade and has already performed professionally with the National Institute of Flamenco, plans to continue at UNM and pursue flamenco as a career.

Raisalynn Alvarez, also a senior, chose a different path: she completed all her nursing prerequisites through dual credit at CNM and expects to finish her bachelor’s degree in about two years.

Mateo Nuanez, a tenth grader, said he used to hate school. “Like, really hate it,” he said. “Every single class.” Tierra Adentro’s smaller size and the dedicated time for art changed that.

“Having that time to just do whatever you want is really nice,” he said. “It’s also a thing to look forward to if you’re having a bad day.”

Two TANM alumni are currently living and studying flamenco in Spain on conservatory scholarships: Madison Olguin, a dancer, and Archuleta’s daughter, and Eloy Gonzalez, a guitarist. Seven alumni are on the school’s current staff. The school has also produced alumni working at Sandia National Laboratories, in the fire department, in education, and in the film industry.

Torres said she never intended to produce only professional artists. “I’m not trying to make you professional dancers,” she told students. “But the arts teach that critical thinking, teamwork, think on your feet in the moment. If you can handle that chaos and come out looking great, then you can handle anything the workplace is going to throw at you.”



“

I can see the diamond in you. You can't see it yet, but it's going to shine.”



Grades K-8

Taos Integrated School for the Arts

Taos

Opened: 2010
Enrollment: 200–250 students

Taos Integrated School for the Arts (TISA) occupies a small campus on the edge of Taos, a town of 6,400 people in a county of 35,000.

It is located in a more rural community, where the challenges of poverty, geographic isolation, and limited opportunity shape nearly everything.

The school enrolls about 200 students. All qualify for free meals. About 32 percent receive special education services, roughly double the state average.

The demographics mirror the local district: about 60 percent Hispanic, 40 percent white and Native American. The school operates on a four-day week, Monday through Thursday, a schedule written into the original charter when founder Linda Seto opened the school in 2010.

Seto, who holds a master's degree in arts integration education, had worked in Taos public schools and seen what happened when she brought arts-based teaching methods into traditional classrooms.

"Kids really related to that kind of learning," she said. "And I

wanted it to be available for all children, not just those in private schools."

The school she built does not treat arts as a separate department bolted onto academics. Instead, arts integration is the instructional method itself. Students have dedicated classes in performing arts, visual arts, music, and Spanish.

But the distinctive feature is what happens inside the academic classrooms, where teachers are expected to weave art, drama, music, and movement into their content instruction.

In Monica Madrid's middle school science class, sixth graders studying body systems draw detailed renderings of the circulatory or skeletal system, then photograph their work for an art portfolio.

"Sometimes science can feel heavy," Madrid said. "So any chance that I can figure out how to incorporate art into it, that's what we're after."

Gina Gargone, who has served as performing arts teacher, middle school science teacher, and is currently filling in as a first grade teacher, described

building a unit on heat transfer around a simulated newscast.

Students took roles as reporters, on-site experts, and camera operators, filming a segment about a house fire that required them to demonstrate their understanding of conduction and convection. "You get to see a broader understanding of the concepts," Gargone said, "as opposed to just a traditional assessment."

When Gargone taught performing arts, she collaborated with classroom teachers on projects that blurred the line between subjects entirely. In one second-grade unit, she created a character called Queen Daphne, arriving in crown and velvet cape, while students played scribes and census counters in a fairy tale kingdom. The children acted while collecting data and practicing story structure.

Anandi Geroy, a second-grade teacher whose background is in theater, dance, and music, described a similar approach. For a unit on the solar system, she designed a "planet parade" in which students



took differentiated roles: researchers presented facts about planets, performers embodied them on stage, and audience members played ancient astronomers judging the presentations.

“Whatever the kids’ interest is, they can plug it into creative arts activities,” Geroy said.

Geroy said she would not teach at a school without arts integration. “The kids look forward to coming in,” she said. “It makes the school day fun.”

She described taking her class to a ballet and discovering that some students had never been inside a theater. “There were kids who’d never been in a real space,” she said. “It was all just theoretical.”

For a school serving a high-poverty population, those experiences carry particular



weight. Geroy also took her class to the public library as a field trip. “I was thinking, this is going to be a lame field trip,” she said. “But there were kids who’d never been to the library before, and they were like, ‘Oh my gosh, this is magical.’”

Richard Greywolf, who taught at TISA for several years and has been the school’s director for 11 years, said the school had a D rating in 2010–11, with no homework policy, no aligned textbooks, and serious behavior problems. When he became director, he restructured the middle school from self-contained classrooms into departmentalized instruction, introduced homework and aftercare, and enforced behavioral expectations.

TISA has been a Spotlight school for the past three years (2022–23, 2023–24, and 2024–25) with scores rising each year.

The aftercare program, free to families and staffed by certified teachers, runs until 5:30 p.m. About 120 of the school’s 200 students stay for it.

The school also partners with Taos Pueblo, which sends representatives weekly to work with Native students, and is piloting a Native American science curriculum developed by the Native American Community Academy in Albuquerque and Los Alamos National Laboratory. The National Institute of Flamenco

provides dance and health instruction.

TISA’s special education model uses full inclusion. Students receive initial instruction alongside their peers and are pulled out only for targeted support on specific IEP goals.

“A child, just because he’s in eighth grade and they maybe are still working on two-digit addition and subtraction, we don’t pull them out from math,” Greywolf said. “They still get the math that every eighth-grader would get.”

After eighth grade, students scatter across several options: Taos High School, Vista Grande High School (a charter focused on project-based learning), and, for a few each year, the New Mexico School for the Arts in Santa Fe, where they board during the week.

Geroy described a student who had been homeschooled on the mesa 45 minutes outside town, enrolled at TISA to find a social network, and was now applying to NMSA. “To go from that, through TISA, to be in a dorm, super socially engaged, academically engaged, artistically engaged,” she said. “Our school can be that kind of a conduit.”

“

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Two young women are in an art studio. The woman on the left has dark, curly hair and is looking down at a project. The woman on the right has dark hair with bangs, wears glasses, and is smiling while looking at the same project. The background is filled with various art pieces on the wall.

More Arts Charter Schools

New Mexico

A close-up shot of a woman's hands working on a screen print. She is using a squeegee to push ink through a mesh onto a piece of paper. On the table in front of her is a black water bottle, a wooden block with a logo, and a roll of mesh.

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New Mexico's arts charter landscape extends well beyond the four schools profiled above. Though this report could not examine each in depth, interviews with leaders at three additional schools illustrate the range of approaches and the common threads that connect them.



DIGITAL ARTS AND TECHNOLOGY ACADEMY (DATA)



DATA, serving grades 7-12 in Albuquerque, evolved from a vocational school founded in 2001. Lisa Myhre, the executive director since 2006, shifted the school's focus from keystrokes and technical skills toward what she calls the "creative economy." Students now work in film production, photography, stop-motion animation, graphic arts, drawing and painting, theater,

and creative writing, using industry-standard tools including Adobe Creative Suite, Dragonframe (the software behind films like *Coraline*), and Blender for 3D modeling. Brooks Rudolph, a film production teacher, said his students have become more interested in older, analog technologies that offer greater friction and tactile satisfaction than AI-

generated content. "They want to get more hands on," Rudolph said. The school enrolls about 200 students and serves a population similar to APS, though with a higher proportion of special education students (about 30 percent) and a rising share of low-income families. DATA holds a Spotlight designation under New Mexico's school rating system.

NEW MEXICO ACADEMY FOR MEDIA ARTS

Founded in 2007 by Glenna Voigt as the first state-authorized charter school in New Mexico, the New Mexico Academy for Media Arts (NMAMA) was built to develop above-the-line talent for the

state's growing film industry: directors, screenwriters, editors, and producers rather than crew.

The school's signature was its presentation of learning model, in which students worked all year on projects integrating core academics with media arts and defended them before panels of judges that included UNM professors and professional filmmakers.

Graduates went on to Netflix, local television stations,

and arts colleges on full scholarships.

After Voigt retired in 2016, the school experienced leadership instability and enrollment decline, falling to 123 students. Chris Jones, the new executive director, is working to rebuild the school's original mission.

"Students should come here because they're interested in careers in media arts," Jones said.

The school offers programs in film, animation, graphic design, photography, and TV production, including a green room where students produce segments for legislators and state agencies.





RIO GRANDE ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS

The newest arts charter in the state, Rio Grande Academy of Fine Arts (RioGAFA) opened in 2022 on Albuquerque’s west side, a deliberately chosen location. Co-founders Jordan Franco and Michele Platis, who both grew up without the financial means to access arts education, wrote the school’s 400-page charter application during the COVID-19 pandemic while working full time.

The school now enrolls 221 students in kindergarten through eighth grade and plans to expand to K-12. Its model has two distinct components: an arts integration program in which teachers pair academic standards with arts standards in classroom instruction, and a

daily arts period in which local artists come to teach their craft.

The roster of offerings shifts each year based on community partnerships. Recent additions include tap dance, working classroom programs, and a collaboration with the National Dance Institute.

Franco said the school outperformed the state average in seventh-grade English language arts last year. About 75 percent of students are Hispanic, and 80 percent are students of color. “There’s such a need for an art school on this side of town,” Franco said, “because the only other art schools are on the east side or closer to Old Town, which requires families to have reliable transportation.”





LA ACADEMIA DOLORES HUERTA

La Academia Dolores Huerta is a dual-language charter middle school (grades 6–8) in Las Cruces, where language, culture, and identity are woven into the daily student experience.

Students learn in both English and Spanish, with the language of instruction alternating week by week, creating a dynamic, immersive environment that builds confidence and connection across cultures.

The school prides itself on its commitment to the arts and cultural expression. In addition to their core classes, students have the opportunity to participate in electives like Ballet Folklórico, mariachi, conjunto, and art. These programs celebrate heritage,

foster creativity, and give students meaningful ways to express themselves and stay connected to their community.

At La Academia Dolores Huerta, students are part of a school environment that values culture, creativity, and belonging, helping them grow not just as learners, but as confident, culturally grounded individuals.



ALMA D'ARTE CHARTER HIGH SCHOOL

Alma d'Arte Charter High School is a student-centered school in Las Cruces where the arts are at the heart of the experience.

Serving high school students in a close-knit environment, Alma d'Arte offers a space where young people are encouraged to explore who

they are, find their voice, and grow through hands-on, creative learning.

Students can engage in a range of visual and performing arts, including visual arts, music, theatre, and dance. They spend time in studios, on stage, and in collaborative creative spaces.

The school also offers a culinary program, giving students the opportunity to build practical skills while exploring creativity through food, culture, and presentation.

This vibrant, arts-rich environment has earned Alma d'Arte recognition as a Spotlight school, the highest designation from the state, reflecting a strong, supportive community where students are empowered to thrive.

At Alma d'Arte, creativity shows up in many forms. Whether through the arts or culinary expression, students build confidence, discover their passions, and develop a strong sense of identity within a welcoming, expressive school community.

CONCLUSION

The schools in this report represent a small fraction of New Mexico's public education landscape, but their impact is outsized. They are proving, across different grade levels, communities, and art forms, that integrating the arts into education can lead to higher engagement, stronger academic outcomes, and clearer pathways to college and careers.

They are doing it with student populations that other schools often struggle to reach.

All nine arts-focused charter schools in New Mexico earned one of the top two designations from the New Mexico Public Education Department, with four earning the highest Spotlight status. Their success underscores the strength of arts-centered learning in supporting student achievement.

The demand for these schools is real. Many maintain waitlists, and school leaders describe families seeking opportunities they might not otherwise have access to.

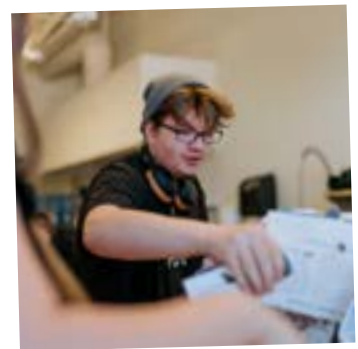
New Mexico has built something distinctive in its arts charter sector: a network of schools

that reflects the state's cultural richness, serves diverse communities, and prepares students for lives as creators, thinkers, and professionals.

"I would love for schools like PAPA to become obsolete," said Fabian Sisneros, who teaches AP English and flamenco at the school. "I would love to see every middle school and high school have much more impactful and strongly supported arts programs."

Until that day, New Mexico's arts charter schools are showing what is possible when creativity is treated not as an extra, but as an essential part of a student's education — opening pathways to achievement, opportunity, and success.





ABOUT THIS REPORT

Creative Pathways: Student Success Through Arts-Focused Charter Schools was developed by Public Charter Schools of New Mexico (PCSNM) to highlight the innovative practices, student experiences, and educational opportunities found within New Mexico’s arts-focused public charter schools.

The report is based on school visits, interviews with school leaders, educators, students, and families, as well as publicly available school performance data. While not intended to be a comprehensive evaluation of every arts-focused charter school in New Mexico, the report showcases a variety of models and approaches that demonstrate the impact of arts-centered learning on student engagement, achievement, and success.

PCSNM is a nonprofit membership organization. Its mission is to increase student academic achievement by serving charter schools and advocating for charter school quality, growth, and autonomy.

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