



STATE OF NEW MEXICO
Public Education Department

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NEWS RELEASE

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PED launches program to get students connected

New Mexico Student Connect will help families access available assistance

SANTA FE – The Public Education Department has launched a program to help thousands of New Mexico students quickly get the digital connections they need by accessing available federal assistance.

The [New Mexico Student Connect program](#) is part of a broader strategy to make reliable, high-speed internet and digital devices universally available for public education, even in areas with no internet infrastructure.

“Since the pandemic started, we have been investing in and supporting the rapid deployment of digital devices and internet connections. By the time the new school year starts, we will have used every resource available to make sure that every student in the state has what they need to participate, not only in the remote learning program, but also in the many other ways we use technology for learning,” Public Education Secretary Ryan Stewart said. “We are getting people connected and closing the digital divide.”

The [New Mexico Student Connect](#) program, operated on PED’s behalf by broadband consultant CTC Technology and Energy, has already made calls to 1,000 students and families to see if they have high-speed internet and digital devices and know about [the Emergency Broadband Benefit](#) program. That federal program offers eligible households a \$50 per month credit on broadband internet service from participating providers (\$75 a month for households on tribal land), and a one-time \$100 credit for the purchase of a computer or laptop.

That outreach will bring millions of federal dollars to New Mexico to help bridge the digital divide.

Congress appropriated \$3.2 billion to create the Emergency Broadband Benefit as part of a nearly \$900 billion COVID-19 relief package passed in December 2020. The benefit is paid directly to internet service eligible providers and appears as a credit on the participant's bill.

[New Mexico Student Connect](#) will help families apply for that benefit during direct outreach, or families can contact a help desk -- by phone at 1-888-723-4505 (toll free) or [online](#) -- for support with connectivity issues. The help desk currently offers support in English and Spanish, with plans to quickly add Diné (Navajo) and Zuni.

[New Mexico Student Connect](#) is starting its efforts by working with the 23 focus groups identified in the landmark Yazzie-Martinez consolidated lawsuit. Those districts are Alamogordo, Albuquerque, Bernalillo, Cuba, Española, Gadsden, Gallup-McKinley, Grants-Cibola, Hatch, Jemez Valley, Lake Arthur, Las Cruces, Los Lunas, Magdalena, Moriarty-Edgewood, Peñasco, Pojoaque, Rio Rancho, Santa Fe, Silver City, Taos, Tucumcari and Zuni. The effort will expand to other districts in the near future.

On April 30, 1st Judicial District Judge Matthew J. Wilson reaffirmed the urgency of the need to get students connected by ruling that the state must immediately determine the need for digital devices and connectivity for at-risk students and their teachers, and to ensure this technology is supplied to any student in those districts needing them. On May 18, [the judge entered a written order](#) applying his ruling to the 23 focus districts.

The Public Education Department began collecting that data on May 6 through a digital survey for those who could complete it and through school district data-sharing elsewhere. The information arrived in various formats that the PED has compiled into a single database.

Preliminary analysis indicates that almost 40,000 of about 199,000 students (20%) enrolled in the focus districts lack broadband internet service at home and about 12,000 (6%) lack the technological tools they need for successful learning despite public, private and nonprofit efforts throughout the pandemic to close the digital divide.

The PED continues analyzing the data to determine digital access for the entire state -- not just the focus districts.

"We're going beyond the court order and making sure every child in New Mexico has what they need to succeed academically in the digital age," Stewart said.

CTC is also gearing up to help school districts apply for a second federal program when a 45-day application window opens next week. [The Emergency Connectivity Fund](#) covers reasonable costs for eligible schools to provide laptop and tablet computers; Wi-Fi hotspots; modems; routers; and broadband connectivity for off-campus use by students and school staff. Schools -- not individuals -- apply for this funding.

The Emergency Connectivity Fund began with \$7.1 billion appropriated through the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, a \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package that was signed into law

March 11. ECT funds will be awarded through the federal E-rate program, which helps make educational technology more affordable.

That program will help provide at least temporary connections for tens of thousands of New Mexico students who live in internet deserts -- places where no one has ever laid fiber. Additionally, PED is working with the Department of Information Technology to find longer-term infrastructure options.

“To be clear, this is a network issue not a Public Education Department issue. Nobody has built the broadband network to serve these students,” said Patrick Mulhearn of CTC, which is working with the state to collect data and develop and implement solutions.

The Public Education Department worked throughout the pandemic to expand digital access. That work included distributing 6,282 Chromebooks; providing 102 Cradlepoint wireless routers and adapters; and, in partnership with the Indian Education Division, allocating funds for 101 mobile hotspots and 700 residential hot spots in Indigenous communities.

“This new data shows how much more work remains to really close the digital divide once and for all,” Stewart said.

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The New Mexico Public Education Department partners with educators, communities and families to ensure that all students are healthy, secure in their identity and holistically prepared for college, career and life. Currently, the NMPED serves more than 317,000 students in 187 districts and charter schools. Find an abundance of resources for administrators, educators, families and students at [New Mexico Public Education Department \(state.nm.us\)](https://www.state.nm.us/education/) or follow the PED [at NMPublicEducationDepartment](https://www.facebook.com/NMPublicEducationDepartment) on Facebook and [@NMPED](https://twitter.com/NMPED) on Twitter.