

# CENTERING STUDENTS' PAST AND PRESENT TO ADVANCE EQUITY IN THE FUTURE



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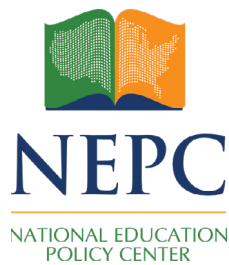
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## **Executive Summary**

This policy memo is centered on student recommendations put forth at the conclusion of a six-week summer institute between Cuba Independent School District and the University of Colorado Boulder. Students were asked to engage with different research mediums (such as survey methods, interviews, qualitative data analysis, and photovoice) in order to better understand the context of education within Cuba, New Mexico. We engaged the student researchers in an arc of understanding the education history of their community, as well as the present equity aims of Cuba ISD. This policy memo aims to be a launching point for future debate and discussion in Cuba ISD, and to provide district and state leaders a succinct summary of recommendations directly from their own student researchers. We have grouped the 11 student recommendations into five broad categories: 1) Re-envision and expand mental health services for Cuba ISD students, 2) Create and ensure access to creative learning and community building spaces, 3) Build stronger student-teacher relationships and support Cuba ISD teachers, 4) Re-envision and expand ongoing college access pipelines, and 5) Build more opportunities for student voice and authentic engagement with decision making. For each category, we start by providing some context about the current challenge that the specific student recommendation aims to address. We then share the recommendations, which are summarized from students' public presentations. Lastly, we briefly provide evidence or examples of similar reforms from education research and practice.

While this policy memo centers a single district in recommendations, it implicates more than a singular district's efforts to put student voice at the center. The engagement and process described here can be used in other districts to center student knowledge. While reflective of the unique Cuba context, the ideas and thoughts of this cohort of intellectually, culturally, linguistically, and racially diverse low-income students is instructive for the nation as a whole. The gaps these students identified suggest where our school systems need the most support, and their solutions provide us with creative ways to get there.

## Engaging Students in Equitable Transformation

Cuba Independent School District (Cuba ISD) is engaged in what the district describes as a multi-year strategic effort to move “the academic and social well-being of our kids upwards which helps our students get a solid and equal education.”<sup>1</sup> Like most rural school districts around the nation that serve predominantly low-income children of color, a core challenge in Cuba ISD is to provide all students with a high-quality education while also addressing the economic, racial and social inequality their community continues to endure. While research is clear that schools cannot overcome these inequalities alone,<sup>2</sup> Cuba ISD leaders and educators are using the unique infusion of federal relief funds and increased state funding, resulting from successful recent school finance litigation, to reach these goals.

In this context, the Cuba ISD Superintendent reached out to the University of Colorado Research Hub for Youth Organizing (a collaborative project of NEPC and CU Engage, both of which are centers housed at the CU Boulder School of Education) to develop a way to center their students’ ideas and knowledges in their ongoing school system transformation. The result was a Summer Research Institute for middle and high school students. The Institute was held during the spring and summer of 2021, and it was co-designed and co-led by Cuba ISD leaders and educators and Research Hub graduate students and faculty, including the two co-authors of this policy memo. The leaders of the Institute invited Cuba middle and high school students to spend six weeks researching the history of education equity in their community and then making recommendations to school and community leaders. This report shares recommendations developed by those Cuba student researchers for continuing to advance equitable reforms in the years to come. We reference these young people as *student researchers* throughout the report as they conducted informal research within their community that informed their recommendations.

Critical to understanding these recommendations from students is understanding the unique time and place of the 2021 Summer Research Institute. The Institute was the first time most of the students, teachers, and researchers returned to in-person learning, as the worst of the pandemic began to wane. We developed the Institute to meet this unique challenge; together, we hoped to create an extraordinary space that allowed students to reflect on the powerful history of their community while also applying their knowledge of the challenges faced by their families and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic and online schooling. While we have crafted this report in part for Cuba ISD leaders, we also offer it to other leaders as an example of the creative, rich, and equity-centered recommendations young people can provide if we are brave enough to ask.

## Understanding the Cuba ISD Context

Cuba ISD serves the town of Cuba as well as several surrounding communities and chapters of the Navajo Nation. The high desert and forested mountains include open space, parks, and forest managed by the US government, Navajo Nation, and State of New Mexico. These spaces house a region rich in history, geology, ecology, recreation, ranching, art, and culture. With approximately 750 permanent residents,<sup>3</sup> the small town of Cuba, New Mexico is located off a major state highway, nestled up against the Jemez Mountain Range along

the Continental Divide. The town and the surrounding community served by Cuba ISD are relatively secluded from more populated surrounding cities like Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and Farmington. The town has limited local services; larger infrastructure like hospitals, government offices, universities, and major shopping are roughly an hour away.

In 2020-2021, 605 students were enrolled in Cuba ISD,<sup>4</sup> distributed across its one high school, one middle school, one elementary school and two preschools (one in the village of Cuba and one in Ojo Encino). While some Cuba students live in town, the majority travel long distances to reach school. The student population is 71% Native American, primarily from the Navajo Nation, 27% Hispanic/Latino, and 2% Other. Within the 71% Native American identifying population, 50% of the students identify as multiracial, Native, and Hispanic/Latino. 100% of the students in Cuba ISD qualify for Title 1, and 99% qualify for the federal Free and Reduced Lunch Program. In addition, 40% of Cuba's students are identified as English Language Learners, 15% as part of the Special Education program, and 19% as homeless. Some teachers and staff are from the local community (several teachers even graduated from Cuba High School), while others commute to Cuba from surrounding communities and cities.

Cuba ISD's current strategic plan began in 2019 and continues to evolve and persist, as Cuba and the world endure the COVID-19 pandemic. Implementing the community schools model districtwide allows the school district to meet the unique needs of its students and families. For example, when the pandemic hit, Cuba ISD redesigned its bus routes to use them for food and resource distribution as well as social support services.<sup>5</sup> It increased technology access so that every student has one-to-one laptop access and USB drives with a week of course material. It also distributed hotspots and worked with satellite internet providers to increase internet access, and it provided solar panels for electricity to several rural homes—to make it possible for students to learn synchronously with teachers and peers. During the summer, the district opened its cafeteria to provide the local community with access to hot food for breakfast and lunch. The district partnered with faculty at The University of New Mexico (UNM) to provide a professional development program focused on equity. An extra

*Implementing the community schools model allows the school district to meet the needs of its students and families.*

full-time counselor was hired to provide additional supports to students. Working within its rural and fiscally constrained context, these are the sorts of strategies the district has used to center students and families in a time of great need.

In addition to the COVID pandemic, Cuba ISD is tackling several other education challenges. Notably, the district was a lead plaintiff in the landmark 2019 *Yazzie/Martinez v. State of New Mexico* lawsuit that resulted in a final judgment in favor of the plaintiffs.<sup>6</sup> The judgment details how the State of New Mexico failed to provide students, both those with disabilities and those from predominantly low-income, Indigenous, emergent multilingual backgrounds, with the services necessary for them to learn and become successful.<sup>7</sup> The judgment is clear that insufficient funding is not an adequate excuse for the state not to have provided these services.<sup>8</sup> The *Yazzie/Martinez* order requires the state to provide districts with adequate funding to achieve student success.<sup>9</sup> Cuba ISD is working to enact the order by engaging in research partnerships, offering ongoing professional development for teachers, introducing more social-emotional learning goals for the district, implementing cultur-

ally relevant curriculum redesigns, and ensuring more early childhood programs in order to support students from birth through 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

## **A Few Key Details About the Summer Research Institute**

The Summer Institute is one of the several equitable initiatives being advanced by Cuba ISD leaders. Research Hub faculty and graduate students joined Cuba ISD administrators, educators and students in a co-design process to develop the six-week curriculum. Thirty students attended the full Institute. The open enrollment and recruitment process resulted in a group of students who were racially and ethnically diverse in learning difference and achievement, in grade level, in linguistic status, and in gender. Cuba ISD used federal funding to support a contract with CU Boulder, salary for teachers, student transportation and facilities, and salary for the students. Enrolled students ages 14 and older were paid by the hour as district research interns, making a maximum of \$1,200 over the six weeks. Given the rural nature of the area, there are few job opportunities for young people. This source of summer employment and the opportunity to learn about how to submit hiring and payroll paperwork was therefore a critical part of the program.

Over the course of the Institute, the students (who, again, we refer to as student researchers) were asked to engage with different research mediums (such as survey methods, interviews, qualitative data analysis, and photovoice) in order to better understand the context of education within Cuba, New Mexico. We engaged the student researchers in an arc of understanding the education history of their community, as well as the present equity aims of Cuba ISD. We then engaged the student researchers in future social dreaming<sup>10</sup> about the future of their district. This policy memo presents 11 policy recommendations that the student researchers proposed in a public presentation to the Cuba community on July 28th, 2021.

## **How We Aim to Center Student Recommendations**

Students are obviously key stakeholders in any learning environment. Less obvious is that there is ample evidence that engaging students in transforming education systems can lead to creative, culturally relevant solutions while also ensuring that students and teachers engage in sustaining solutions.<sup>11</sup> A goal of this policy memo is to lift up the ideas and knowledge of young people in the Cuba ISD district reform process with the hope that student voice can be a guiding principle in that larger process. While the students center their home district in the recommendations, it is our hope that they speak to a larger audience of stakeholders within rural districts and education broadly, exemplifying how schools can use federal funding to support their students through the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

This policy memo also aims to be a launching point for future debate and discussion in Cuba ISD, and to provide district and state leaders a succinct summary of recommendations directly from their own student researchers. We have grouped the 11 student recommendations into five broad categories: 1) Re-envision and expand mental health services for Cuba ISD students, 2) Create and ensure access to creative learning and community building spaces, 3) Build stronger student-teacher relationships and support Cuba ISD teachers, 4)



Re-envision and expand ongoing college access pipelines, and 5) Build more opportunities for student voice and authentic engagement with decision making. For each category, we start by providing some context about the current challenge that the specific student recommendation aims to address. We then share the recommendation, which is summarized from students' public presentations. Lastly, we briefly provide evidence or examples of similar reforms from education research and practice.

## **Re-Envision and Expand Mental Health Services for Cuba ISD Students**

### **Context**

Roughly one-third of the student researchers made a general recommendation for expanding mental health services for students across the district. Students' recommendations about the need for additional mental health services are connected to the unique moment of students returning to in-person schooling for the first time in a year as well as the ongoing mental health problems in their communities. With the move to remote schooling, students were unable to see their friends outside of their screens. This was in part because they lacked access to transportation and in part because of the risk of spreading COVID to their community.

Cuba ISD student researchers talked about counseling already being provided in the district as a safe and trusted route for accessing support. They also spoke positively about other wraparound services provided by the school district. They were candid in appreciating the many ways they feel supported. However, the students made clear that more was needed. They were also clear that the physical isolation of living in a geographically diffuse, rural community creates challenges in terms of accessing mental health services. For students in Cuba, bus routes can take over two hours because students come from surrounding towns. The great distances families are dispersed also means students lack access to mental health services outside of school. Student researchers explained that if the students don't meet with a counselor or group in school, they likely would not be able to access groups or counseling elsewhere. This is similar across the rural mountain plains region, with many rural areas unable to provide the same type of mental health services as urban regions because of a lack of transportation and other resources needed to implement evidence-based supports.<sup>12</sup> The fact that students feel like school is the only realistic place to get mental health services presents a tremendous challenge for the community and school district. Aware of these challenges, Cuba ISD has already invested in additional counseling staff and extended counseling hours as part of its reform efforts. These recommendations from students make it clear that this expansion is critical and should continue.

### ***Recommendation 1: Create more robust programming for mental health services during and beyond the calendar school year.***

Students very much appreciate the mental health services they currently access throughout the school year. However, they reported that mental health supports do not feel as robust

during the summer. For example, students attending the Summer Institute were only on campus for four (very packed) hours a day and relied on school buses to get to and from the program. This kind of schedule left much less time for counselors to reach them. As one student explained, mental health crises don't stop just because it is summer, but their access to school is much less in the summer. In addition, some students shared that they personally have been able to access individual and group therapy during the academic year, but not all of their friends have the same opportunity to attend group therapy due to schedule or time constraints. In their final presentations, students argued that an important step towards equity is increasing access to mental health services for more students throughout the entire calendar year. The student presentations on mental health were so impactful to school district leaders that one of the final posters is now framed in the Cuba ISD boardroom.

### ***Recommendation 2: Bring culturally relevant and creative mental health supports into the schools and community.***

Students also want to expand the *kinds* of mental health support the school offers. They recommended an increase in behavioral circles, healing and restorative justice circles, and support groups for students. Students noted that these different groups can be helpful to create better discipline practices. They also contended that the groups would create space for community building. The student researchers explained that different students feel comfortable in different kinds of spaces, so offering several alternatives respects their diversity. They also recommended innovative ideas like therapeutic service animals that could come into classrooms or be placed in central locations so that students have a grounded physical experience when they are in high-stress situations or having mental health crises. Similarly, they recommended having more opportunities to go on hikes and decompress with trusted adults. They suggested having regular opportunities for teachers and staff to share life lessons and strategies for success, like we did for thirty minutes each morning during the summer program. Lastly, students recommended that both the high school and middle school create meditation rooms—with tea, calm music, fidget toys and a trusted adult that provide students with space and some time (5-10 minutes) to self-regulate and step out of a stressful moment for a few minutes throughout the day.

### **Examples from Research and Practice**

These first two recommendations align well with work Cuba ISD leaders and counselors are already engaged in. Based on previous plans, and motivated by recommendations from the student researchers, Cuba ISD has increased mental health services in the school year and in the summer. As one example, they began a therapy dog program in the fall of 2021.

The kinds of recommendations proposed by Cuba students advance both the social emotional learning of students and their mental health. Research suggests that schools serving large numbers of low-income students and students of color should attend to the different staff positions they have in their districts, the types of services offered, and the district policies aiding students' mental wellness in the face of disproportionate trauma from the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>13</sup> Additional research supports efforts of districts to increase their support for student wellbeing by offering programming such as trauma-informed training for staff,



social-emotional curriculum interventions, and restorative practices to increase student self-regulation.<sup>14</sup> These recommendations are also supported by adult leaders in New Mexico; for example, prior to the pandemic the New Mexico State Superintendents Association issued recommendations for increased mental health services within schools and expanded pathways for increased wraparound support.<sup>15</sup>

Across the U.S., several schools and school districts are experimenting with new strategies for increasing mental health supports as part of increasing equity and educational opportunity. Denver's Dr. Martin Luther King Early College (MLK) high school is one example of how sustainable mental health services that allow for student autonomy can create more equitable reform.<sup>16</sup> MLK has put three full-time mental health professionals in place for students; it also offers a full-time nurse and trauma specialist. Similar to the recommendations from Cuba student researchers, MLK has added a "Place of Peace," a soothing decorated room where the community can receive emotional and behavioral support. MLK has programming to bring families and students together in order to encourage healthy relationships at home. The school also has a therapy dog on campus three days a week, and ongoing yoga programs for students to practice mindfulness.<sup>17</sup>

## **Create and Ensure Access to Creative Learning and Community Building Spaces**

### **Context**

In a recent report on education equity in New Mexico, the Learning Policy Institute (LPI) recommended that high-poverty schools expand after-school activities and support a more holistic approach to school-based programming.<sup>18</sup> This expansion creates a space for schools to add creative learning and community-building activities while also becoming community hubs and spaces for more integrated support for families. Recommendations from Cuba ISD student researchers are well aligned to the LPI report. Student researchers want more opportunities to learn informally and build community outside of their academics and formal sports activities. Some mentioned the need for paid jobs and internships or volunteer opportunities to diversify their experiences. But the most pressing problem that the student researchers shared is the need for informal, low-stakes, creative spaces to engage with each other and explore passions like anime, astronomy, weaving, hiking, roller skating, watching movies, or playing pickup basketball. The student researchers were quick to point out that the school has a wonderful sports program for competitive athletes, but that beyond this (and classes) there was little to do in the town of Cuba or in the rural communities they commute from. Student researchers explained that the lack of fun, healthy things to do connects to both the physical and mental health problems that they see in their community.

### ***Recommendation 3: Expand formal and informal sports activities across Cuba ISD and the Cuba community.***

Student researchers recommended increasing club and intramural sports, the number of varsity high school teams, and informal spaces to be active for their broader community and

across all grade levels. Student researchers want the opportunity to play sports including pickup basketball, volleyball and soccer, or to re-launch the community roller skating program at St. Francis Park, in ways that would feel noncompetitive and supportive to building friends and community. For example, students within our program often played games of pickup basketball and volleyball throughout their break times and explained that it was a great way to see, and be in, community with their peers. Other students explained that the Summer Institute hike on the local Fisher Trail was the first time they had ever explored trails near school. They felt that time to hike with classmates and teachers would allow them to spend more time together socially and outside of a purely academic context.

#### ***Recommendation 4: Increase the number of and access to activities that connect to students' interests and identities.***

Student researchers called on Cuba ISD leaders to create and fully fund (with resources and teachers) new spaces that help students explore their interests and identities. Students shared a love of anime, theater, movies, astronomy, and hiking. They want the opportunity to explore these passions in and outside of class. Ideas included an animation and drawing class, an anime club, more frequent theater productions, a movie club that hosts movie nights at the school in the evening and weekends, regular science class field trips to study local ecology, geology and paleontology, and being released from class to go hiking with local scientists (in the way that competitive athletes get released from class to attend games).

Students also recommend building new spaces that support their diverse identities. Several student researchers shared that creating a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) or Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) for their school community could provide important support for students who may feel hyper-visible in such a tight-knit community. Other students mentioned creating casual spaces to speak in languages other than English. Still other students talked about creating an informal space to learn about the diversity of art in their community—from traditional Navajo weaving to modern visual art, to pop music, to dance. They would like space within the school system to learn about the artistic wealth that surrounds them.

#### ***Recommendation 5: Increase flexible transportation options for students to participate in these sports and creative spaces.***

Students recognized that, other than the resources to actually create these activities, the next biggest barrier is continued lack of transportation and flexibility within the bus schedule. Two possible options that they identified are, (a) working to expand the school day with the kinds of enriching activities described above for all students at all grades, and (b) making the sports buses open to all students.

#### **Examples from Research and Practice**

Cuba ISD leaders and educators are already beginning to implement these recommendations. They created a karate class and are hoping to add baseball and softball games as well as identity-based groups. Transportation continues to be a challenge, but the district has

expanded bus options for students participating in their outdoor classroom program.

Research on expanding learning time provides several proven examples of how to create enriching learning opportunities that are accessible to all students.<sup>19</sup> Specific to the first recommendation, research documents that informal, school, or community-sponsored sports activities are an effective way to support students' cultural identity formation,<sup>20</sup> build community, and tackle health challenges like teen-onset obesity and diabetes, depression, and suicide.

There are also several proven models that expand the learning day, or days of school per year to provide enrichment to all students. The Generation Schools model brings in community organizations and enrichment programs to lead classes for students at all grade levels. Each grade benefits from the opportunity for enrichment, while teachers use the extra school day time to plan and coordinate.<sup>21</sup> Similarly some schools transform administrative homeroom time into an engaged advisory or seminar one day of the week. In the advisory model, like the one at Colorado's New Vista High School, students loop each year with the same teacher to engage in a four-year rotating equity curriculum, receive graduation and college planning, and participate in social activities led by classmates.<sup>22</sup> Alternatively, in the seminar model, teachers offer a specialty seminar each semester focused on a topic they are passionate about, and students select a different seminar each semester. Importantly, seminars focus on relationship-building and informal learning and are not graded with extra assignments. As another example, at Pocomoke High School in Maryland all students participate in *Your60*, an expanded lunch hour within every school day for students to select and direct their learning based on their needs and interests. They select from an array of choices, including club activities, spending time with community mentors, and discussion groups to address issues in their community such as LGBTQ+, racism, and sexism. They spend time every day in those groups.<sup>23</sup> In both the seminar and advisory models, students also benefit from forming strong relationships with more adults—something that research has shown time and time again to be critical to student academic success.<sup>24</sup>

At the forefront of these student recommendations is a focus not just on the amount of time students spend in their school buildings but the quality and use of their time. This is echoed in literature emphasizing that students should have a variety of relevant non-instructional tasks, project-based learning (such as illustration and comic book design), opportunities for self-directed learning that are often seen in afterschool activities, and a broader curriculum, if districts are expanding their policies for equity.<sup>25</sup> Further, the types of learning and ways students are able to engage in afterschool spaces highlight the expansive and consequential nature of these spaces as important sites for student engagement.<sup>26</sup>

## **Build Stronger Student-Teacher Relationships and Support Cuba ISD Teachers**

### **Context**

Student researchers expressed a desire for greater, more authentic relationships with their

teachers. They explained that living in a small community means that teachers are your school family—they take care of you, they know you, and they love you. One group of students created an art project with a web to signify the ways that they saw their school community as an interconnected ecology of people who are supporting one another's well-being and learning. Teachers played an important role in this web. In another presentation, student researchers noted the ways that teachers are seen as key supports in the mental and emotional well-being of the overall school community. Students also explained that the informal learning spaces they had over the summer—learning about teachers' educational journeys in morning circles, interviewing teachers for data collection, or informally chatting while working on research projects—allowed them to build strong relationships. They wanted more of these opportunities throughout the school year.

The student researchers connected the idea of teachers' salaries to the idea of teachers having extra time to provide them supports outside of regular instruction. A second group of students created a video counter-story that drew from each student's different experiences and the greater awareness of the demands on teachers that they learned about in their research.<sup>27</sup> The video touched on the salaries for teachers, the ways students saw their peers giving pushback, and the multiple asks on teacher's time. Student researchers explained that teachers often take time to ask about (and then buy them) favorite snacks, to provide them extra support after school, to find them and their families extra resources, or to help them navigate a health crisis. Other students explained that they know that their teachers are also their coaches, club sponsors or restorative circle facilitators. These student researchers were clear that they want all teachers—in Cuba, but also across the nation—to be compensated for all of the work that they do.

### ***Recommendation 6: Create opportunities for meaningful relationship building between students and teachers.***

Cuba ISD students understand that life in school is interconnected to their academic success and well-being. They want more time to build authentic relationships with their teachers throughout the school day. Students want their teachers to know them on a more personal level, and they want chances to understand their teachers as people with complex histories and lives outside of the classroom. Students asked for more opportunities for mentorship and ongoing support for planning their college and career options. Students also saw this recommendation as a mutually beneficial process; knowing their teachers better would make them engage more and support teachers in class, while teachers knowing them better supports their success and well-being.

### ***Recommendation 7: Increase teacher salaries, and give them time to succeed at all parts of their job.***

Cuba ISD students see how hard their teachers work. They also know that teachers get paid a lot less than other professionals. Cuba ISD students feel that their teachers—like all teachers—have large workloads and should be paid to reflect the critical roles they are fulfilling in students' lives.

## Examples from Research and Practice

CISD is already working to create more spaces for teachers and students to build meaningful relationships. All district students now participate in a social-emotional learning period daily. The time is structured to allow more people on campus to support emotional issues as they come up throughout the day but also to give teachers and students time together outside of academic content.

The importance of ongoing intentional relationship building between teachers and students is well established in the academic literature,<sup>28</sup> as is teacher support<sup>29</sup> and compensation.<sup>30</sup> There is ample evidence that students benefit from authentic caring relationships within their school building.<sup>31</sup> Students often perform better when they feel as though there are caring adults within their school building, which helps students find an increased support network to lean on if there are difficult circumstances within their personal lives.<sup>32</sup> Hillsdale High School in San Mateo, California provides a strong model of a school that has strong student-teacher relationships. They have instituted teacher-led Small Learning Communities (SLCs) that are rooted in the idea that learning is inherently social and that schools should be creating structures for building meaningful relationships between students and teachers.<sup>33</sup> These SLCs are then connected to greater school “houses” or cohorts of students that have a consistent team of teachers they interact with but are intentionally placed heterogeneously in some classes to promote relationality within and across the cohorts. In a self-study completed by the school in 2013, 90% of students agreed that at least one teacher on campus knew them well. The school is well known for its climate and culture, serving as an example of how placing relationships and teacher support at the center of a district structure can create opportunities for student success.

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Teachers in the United States are underpaid, based on comparisons to other developed countries and based on their years of education.<sup>34</sup> This teacher pay gap exists throughout the State of New Mexico, but the Cuba ISD Board of Education recently increased the base of each salary level and instituted a retention bonus for all teachers. While this is helping

Cuba ISD recruit and retain highly qualified teachers, it is still a long way from the sentiment expressed by the students, seeking that teachers be paid the same as other comparably educated professionals.

Research establishes that in addition to increased salaries, teachers need to feel a sense of support across the spaces they work within.<sup>35</sup> For example, teachers need relief from current time pressures, in order to be successful and effective in all of the many roles they take on in a school and in the lives of their students. While teachers throughout the U.S. take on many roles, this challenge is even greater in small communities.<sup>36</sup> Cuba ISD students echo a call among many researchers: When teachers feel a lack of support, respect or increased workload, they leave the profession.<sup>37</sup> Further, the research is clear that there is a “support gap” between high-income and low-income schools, with the latter providing less support for teachers—resulting in greater teacher turnover in low-income districts.<sup>38</sup>

## Re-Envision and Expand Ongoing College Access Pipelines

### Context

Cuba's small size and geographic isolation impacts access to higher education opportunities. New Mexico has several college access programs that support Native American and Hispanic/Latinx students, like the American Indian Summer Bridge Program at the University of New Mexico<sup>39</sup> and the Legislative Lottery Scholarship that covers a portion of tuition and fees for New Mexico residents starting their second semester at any public university in the state.<sup>40</sup> However, Cuba ISD's small size and physical distance from colleges and universities means that there are fewer university and college recruiters visiting the high school, and day trips to visit regional colleges and universities are challenging. Many students in Cuba ISD would be the first in their family to attend college. Research shows that first generation college students need extra support in learning about and navigating the college application and financial aid processes, as well as support in order to persist through college.<sup>41</sup> While some Cuba ISD student researchers remember a visit from a local recruiter, most student researchers in the program talked about needing more ongoing support and resources for learning about higher education options.

In their final presentations, students talked about how meaningful the group field trip during the institute to University of New Mexico Albuquerque was and how much they learned about the University of Colorado Boulder from their visiting research faculty. This became the starting point for their requests to learn more about local and regional options and engage in meaningful dialogue around their post-secondary options. Several times throughout the summer, student researchers asked visiting speakers and their own teachers how they paid for college, how they found scholarships, and how they handled being far away from everyone they know. Students were especially interested in learning about the several Native-serving institutions within a couple hours drive from Cuba ISD.<sup>42</sup>

### ***Recommendation 8: Create a stronger, more supportive college-going culture in Cuba ISD.***

Students want more college and career supports between 6th and 12th grade. Cuba students surveyed one another and found that many of their peers want to pursue a post-secondary education yet they were unclear on how to obtain scholarships in order to be able to attend these institutions. Students are asking for help navigating the often-convoluted structures of application and matriculation. They also want expanded opportunities to attend college fairs, learn about the colleges and universities their teachers and administrators attend, and strategies for people from rural low-income communities adjusting to living in a new space.

### ***Recommendation 9: Provide more opportunities to visit to local universities and colleges.***

Students are largely unaware of what life on a college or university campus might look like. The summer visit to UNM allowed students to envision life at a university and created a lot



of energy and excitement about post-secondary options for students in the program. Students see ongoing college visits as a way of creating a stronger pipeline from high school into institutions of higher education.

## **Examples from Research and Practice**

Cuba ISD has identified college and career planning as a key goal in its strategic plan. The district currently has two high school counselors who support students in post-secondary planning, and one K-12 counselor who engages Native American students and families in college and career planning. The recommendations from the students support this current work and call for it to expand even more.

Challenges in college access and persistence for Native American and Latinx students is well established in the literature. Total college enrollment for American Indian/Alaska Native students has remained largely stagnant since the 2000s.<sup>43</sup> Native students are often placed at the margins of higher education conversations, yet they offer unique perspectives and complex stories due to complex tribal histories, unique place-based knowledge and ongoing community and cultural support.<sup>44</sup> Latinx students face challenges as well. Many are first generation college students and do not have the same social or cultural capital of their traditional peers.<sup>45</sup> Further, only about 54% of Latinx students who have matriculated to college end up graduating, as compared to their white counterparts at 64%.<sup>46</sup> While 31% of adults between the ages of 25 and 34 hold a bachelor's degree, Latinx adults lag behind that number with only 13%.<sup>47</sup> Latinx enrollment rates are increasing, but there is still work to be done to support Latinx students in reaching parity within institutions of higher education.

A report on education equity in New Mexico proposed that long-term collaborations between public and private higher education institutions are needed to create more robust and accessible pathways for college success in the state.<sup>48</sup> Further, researchers emphasize the need for a more robust pathway of career and technical education experiences for students across New Mexico in order to increase postsecondary success, no matter the choice or path students take.<sup>49</sup> One way this could come to fruition is by expanding the different post-secondary institutions that Cuba ISD brings to campus. We are particularly intrigued by Engaging Latino Communities for Education (ENLACE) through the University of New Mexico, which is a statewide higher education access program that works in partnership with rural areas.<sup>50</sup> Other schools in the area are also working to expand access through dual enrollment programs or building in time for students to work on business and nonprofit plans as they consider college and post-secondary life.<sup>51</sup>

An exemplar, showing how a high school can put in place a package of resources for robust college and career pathways, is seen at Social Justice Humanitas Academy in San Fernando, California. The school offers multiple options for students to enroll in college-level courses through a local community college, as well as programs that support students' post-secondary aspirations including college visits, FAFSA support for parents, and post-graduation summer programs to support students in their transition beyond high school.<sup>52</sup> In addition, the school provides strong academic supports needed for students to be prepared to enter college, including ongoing tutoring opportunities and Advanced Placement courses that are available and encouraged for every student on their campus.

## **Building More Opportunities for Student Voice and Authentic Engagement with Decision Making**

### **Context**

Like many other students around the nation, Cuba students explain that school and district leaders do ask for their input and routinely ask them to fill out surveys about their educational experience, ways of learning, and well-being needs.<sup>53</sup> The current education system has several spaces for students or parents to answer surveys, leave anonymous feedback, or offer community comments. Yet there are far fewer places for students and parents to know if or when feedback is meaningfully enacted within the district.<sup>54</sup> Cuba ISD student researchers explained how the process they engaged in during the Summer Institute was a unique experience—having time to research an issue, work with peers, teachers, and researchers to reflect on the problem, envision new solutions, and then present their ideas directly to school leaders and teachers. Students describe a tangible difference between being asked to answer questions on a survey form and being given the time and trust to thoughtfully develop strong ideas based on knowledge and research. When the students asked their peers if they felt that they were able to have their voices heard within the district, 71% of their peers within the program said no.

Fortunately, the small size of Cuba ISD and the commitment of its leadership and teachers makes it possible for students to talk directly with the Superintendent, other administrators and teachers in a regular and sustained way. For example, over the course of the Summer Institute, Cuba ISD leaders came to listen to students, and several spent time in morning circle meetings sharing their own educational challenges and ideas for change. These conversations and spaces allowed students to engage as partners in thinking about systemic inequities like racism and classism, as well as regional problems like transportation and personal challenges like having to leave home and move somewhere very different to pursue higher education. This shift, from being the subject of the education system to partners in creating meaningful changes that reflect their unique identities and needs, is something that Cuba ISD student researchers want to continue.

***Recommendation 10: Create a student policy committee that regularly meets with adult decision makers to share student expertise and create ongoing communication between students and the administration.***

Students are clear that they want to increase student rights and their voice on their campuses. They see an opportunity to create a committee made up entirely of students to share their ideas and decisions in an organized way. More than just a student council that plans activities, the student policy committee would benefit from the district sharing information about current education challenges or future education reforms. The committee would have time to meet with each other and gather feedback from other students, and it would then make recommendations directly to the school and district administration. Importantly, students want to provide input about problems they experience even if it is not the top priority for the adult leaders. They also want to share their feedback while decisions are still being developed, not just in reaction to decisions already made.

### ***Recommendation 11: Increase opportunities for student voice in daily decisions throughout the year.***

Student researchers recommend that Cuba ISD leaders increase the number of times and ways for students to share their ideas and for adults to implement student ideas throughout the day and year. For example, teachers should create a culture of asking for student ideas and opinions in class and in public spaces. Being able to weigh in on daily decisions, like an opportunity to eat lunch in the cafeteria or outside, or choosing the topic that a guest speaker is invited to talk about, are both ways of increasing student voice. Students should not have to attend a formal decision-making body to feel heard; listening to students should be a part of the culture of every Cuba ISD space.

### **Examples from Research and Practice**

The creation of the 2021 Summer Research Institute launched Cuba ISD's efforts to create more opportunities for students to guide equitable changes on their campuses and schools. In addition, student researchers are included in the district's Equity Council. But the Superintendent and educators are committed to doing more in the future.

There is ample research about the benefits of students engaging in civic action within their school community—it increases the civic knowledge and efficacy of students and can help ensure more systemic change as part of a reform.<sup>55</sup> There is also evidence that low-income students, like those in Cuba ISD, do not have the same access to these opportunities as their affluent peers.<sup>56</sup> There are several strategies for elevating student voice, including student-led conferences, student government or councils, youth-led participatory action research, student journalism, and student surveys.<sup>57</sup>

Further, centering student voices can lead to transformation of marginalizing systems. Critical civic inquiry—the process where students participate in creating change within schools and districts<sup>58</sup>—provides a useful model for implementing Cuba ISD recommendations. This process helps students develop their voice in order to create transformation within their community, whether that be school systems, policing, or curriculum. The student policy committee, as recommended above, can also help students learn how government works, see how others participate in the civic process, and grapple with how they see themselves as civic leaders within their own communities.<sup>59</sup> By creating different avenues to bring in authentic student perspectives and student voice, districts create opportunities for meaningful civic engagement and greater potential for long-term civic engagement as adults.<sup>60</sup>

Student engagement and autonomy is a central part of Oakland International High School in Oakland, California. The school is guided by core principles that include localized autonomy and responsibility of students. In addition, groups of students lead their teachers every October through their community highlighting the important services, places and people within their lives.<sup>61</sup> By engaging in these community walks, the school is placing student expertise and leadership at the center of their learning and breaking down walls between the community and the school. Authentic student engagement can also carry into the curriculum, which is an approach used at Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School in Bronx, New York. The school works to nurture students' inquiry and curiosity by having students

investigate authentic issues—a process that challenges students to collaborate with another, take personal responsibility in the project, and care for their co-investigators, all while leaning into the uncertainty of inquiry. Students create their own portfolios for benchmarks and then share a final performance task with their teachers in order to demonstrate their growth and mastery.<sup>62</sup> Embedded in both of these exemplary high schools is the idea that student experience and authentic engagement are at the center of pedagogical design.

## What We Can Learn From CISD Student Researchers

Cuba ISD has made significant progress since our research institute wrapped up over the summer. Students presented their ideas to district leaderships, and they have together made headway with each of the eleven recommendations listed below.

<b>Re-Envision and Expand Mental Health Services for Cuba ISD Students</b>	
1	Create more robust programming for mental health services during and beyond the calendar school year.
2	Bring culturally relevant and creative mental health supports into the schools and community.
<b>Create and Ensure Access to Creative Learning and Community Building Spaces</b>	
3	Expand formal and informal sports activities across Cuba ISD and the Cuba community.
4	Increase the number of and access to activities that connect to students' interests and identities.
5	Increase flexible transportation options for students to participate in these sports and creative spaces.
<b>Build Stronger Student-Teacher Relationships and Support Cuba ISD Teachers</b>	
6	Create opportunities for meaningful relationship building between students and teachers.
7	Increase teacher salaries, and give them time to succeed at all parts of their job.
<b>Re-Envision and Expand Ongoing College Access Pipelines</b>	
8	Create a stronger, more supportive college-going culture in Cuba ISD.
9	Provide more opportunities to visit local universities and colleges.
<b>Build More Opportunities for Student Voice and Authentic Engagement with Decision Making</b>	
10	Create a student policy committee that regularly meets with adult decision makers to share student expertise and create ongoing communication between students and the administration.
11	Increase opportunities for student voice in daily decisions throughout the year.

Cuba ISD has instituted a therapy dog program on campus to support student mental health and support. The district has brought in professional development for its teachers to support LGBTQ+ youth and to create a more welcoming and inclusive environment for students and staff. The district has continued expanding the Social Emotional Learning hour within the high school in order to support ongoing check-ins and social time with students. Additionally, in that hour, staff members have created structured information sessions about

post-secondary choices and how to make an informed decision, given the broad spectrum of universities and colleges. Further, the district has increased wages for teachers and are continually looking for ways to use federal funding to increase culturally responsive training and curriculum with teachers and staff.

However, this policy memo implicates more than a singular district's efforts to put student voice at the center. The engagement and process described here can be used in other districts to center student knowledge. Moreover, the insights into the issues that these Cuba ISD see as important as they return to school amidst an ongoing pandemic may be informative for leaders in other school districts. Not surprisingly, the top issues the students identified are all reflected in current media conversations and research: expanding mental health services, making time for creative learning and community building, building stronger student-teacher relationships, paying teachers like the professionals they are, expanding college access opportunities, and creating ways for students to make real decisions in their schools. While reflective of the unique Cuba context, the ideas and thoughts of this cohort of intellectually, culturally, linguistically, and racially diverse low-income students is instructive for the nation as a whole. The gaps these students identified suggest where our school systems need the most support, and their solutions provide us with creative ways to get there.

These recommendations are extremely interconnected. Making time for creative learning and informal space to build relationships with teachers and giving students more decision making in daily decisions are, for instance, also ways to expand mental health support in schools. Every aspect of these programs can build confidence and strength in students for the rest of their lives. As another example, helping teachers feel supported and respected ensures that a school district has a community of adult leaders ready to support the youth leaders they are developing. And expanding learning time creates the space for all of these other interactions and supports to be implemented. In the summer of 2021, when this group of students and educators came back together in person for the first time in a long time, the participants opened up a unique window into the best parts of our education system—the people, the supports, the spaces—that so many had gone without. The leaders of Cuba ISD asked their young people to guide them forward, and 30 young people rose to that challenge. In doing so, they provided a model of engagement and a set of recommendations that other leaders, in New Mexico and around the nation, can embrace in the years ahead.

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