

Native students are expelled in New Mexico far more than any other group

Written by gallupsun

Wednesday, 21 December 2022 08:50

By [Bryant Furlow, New Mexico In Depth](#), with additional reporting by [Asia Fields, Maya Miller](#) and [Joel Jacobs, ProPublica](#)



One chilly March afternoon, dozens of Navajo children spilled out of their middle school to play in the snow before heading home. Students in jackets and parkas can be seen on grainy security camera footage chasing and pushing one another to the ground.

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The next day, the principal called one of the children into her office. “She said I was expelled,” the child said in an interview, looking at his feet as he sat with his grandmother on their living room couch. “We were just playing around.”

His offense, according to school records, was “assault and battery” for pushing another student down.

The seventh grader, whose middle name is Matthew, said that was the culmination of months of being written up for “everything” — from being off-task in class to playing on the school elevator. (Out of concern that the boy will be stigmatized at school, his grandmother agreed to speak on the condition that she not be identified and that he be identified only by his middle name.)

In New Mexico, Native American students are expelled far more often than any other group and at least four times as often as white students.

Matthew’s school district, Gallup-McKinley County Schools, is responsible for most of that disparity, according to an analysis of state records by New Mexico In Depth and ProPublica. The district has a quarter of New Mexico’s Native students, but it accounted for at least three-quarters of Native student expulsions in the state during the four school years ending in 2020.

GMCS is one of the largest school districts in the state by enrollment and geography, but even so, it has just 4% of the state’s students. Twice the size of Delaware, the district sits along the western edge of New Mexico and includes wide swaths of the Navajo Nation. The Chuska Mountains stretch northward, overlooking sandstone cliffs, mesas and canyons, in a landscape dotted with piñon pine, juniper and the fossilized remnants of long-gone oceans.

About three-quarters of GMCS’s roughly 12,000 students are Native American, most of them Navajo. It has the largest Native enrollment of any public school district in the United States, according to federal figures.

Gallup and other towns that ring the Navajo Nation have a history of bias and exploitation. In a

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recent book, University of New Mexico professor David Correia wrote that Gallup's businesses, including payday lenders, unscrupulous art dealers and liquor stores, have a history of exploiting Native people.

Wendy Greyeyes, who is Navajo and an assistant professor of Native American Studies at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, said that history plays out today in a more subtle way: through school practices that lead to Native students being disciplined more harshly than others. School policies "are used to justify racist behavior," Greyeyes said.

In addition to analyzing statewide discipline data, New Mexico In Depth and ProPublica interviewed 80 people, including 47 parents, grandparents and current and former students, to understand discipline practices in GMCS schools. District officials, including Superintendent Mike Hyatt and school board President Christopher Mortenson, did not respond to repeated interview requests.

The state education department requires school districts to report all disciplinary incidents. Those reports track the type of discipline, such as suspensions and expulsions, and note whether police were involved. GMCS school officials sometimes called the police or juvenile probation officers over physical altercations, tobacco or drug possession and disorderly conduct, those records show.

Over the past decade or so, the number of expulsions and incidents involving law enforcement has dropped substantially in New Mexico. While GMCS's discipline rate has fluctuated over the past decade, it has remained far higher than the rest of the state.

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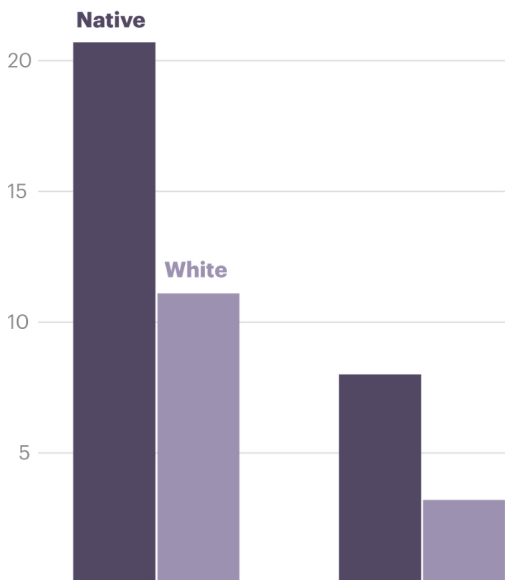
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Native Students Face Harsher Punishment Across New Mexico

Native students in New Mexico experience higher annual rates of expulsions and incidents involving police than white students. In Gallup-McKinley, students across the board are punished more harshly than those in the rest of the state, but the large Native student body is still disciplined at higher rates than white students.

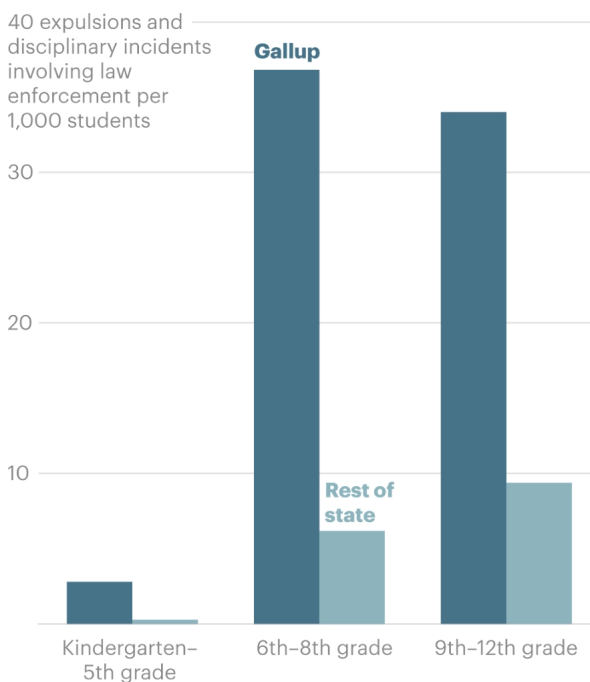
25 expulsions and disciplinary incidents involving law enforcement per 1,000 students



Source: ProPublica and New Mexico In Depth analysis of New Mexico Public Education Department STARS data. Chart by Joel Jacobs/ProPublica.

Gallup-McKinley Students Face More Frequent Severe Punishment

From elementary through high school, kids in Gallup-McKinley schools were expelled and faced discipline involving law enforcement at annual rates far higher than their peers in the rest of the state.



Source: ProPublica and New Mexico In Depth analysis of New Mexico Public Education Department STARS data. Chart by Joel Jacobs/ProPublica.

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