




A College-Located High School for the Native American Community Academy

This case study examines the journey of an urban Indigenous school seeking to develop a new facility for its high school students. After exploring several options, NACA partnered on a new co-located campus that offers a direct steppingstone to higher education for its students.

Starting Point

In 2006, the Native American Community Academy (NACA) opened as a community-led charter school dedicated to providing a rigorous academic education fully integrated with Native American culture, language, and holistic wellness. The school is based in New Mexico's largest urban center, Albuquerque. From inception through 2020, NACA has attracted students from over 60 tribal affiliations,⁴ including representation from each of New Mexico's 19 Pueblos, the Navajo Nation, the Jicarilla Apache Nation, and the Mescalero Apache Tribe.

NACA's mission is "to engage students, educators, families, and community in creating a school that will prepare our students to grow from early childhood to adulthood and begin strengthening communities by developing strong leaders who are academically prepared, secure in their identity and healthy." NACA uses a holistic approach to education through integrated content that includes Indigenous studies, storytelling, oral traditions, cultural history, Native languages, community presentations, service learning, and Native art and literature as part of a rigorous college preparatory curriculum.

SCHOOL PROFILE (2020-21 SCHOOL YEAR)	
Native American Community Academy www.nacaschool.org	
Grades Served	K-12
Enrollment and Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ 498 students¹ ❖ Started with 6th grade and expanded to 12th with cohort progression, then added K-1 and grew to K-12 as cohorts aged
Student Demographics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ 81% Native American, 17% Hispanic, 2% Non-Hispanic Caucasian² ❖ Numerous tribal affiliations ❖ 52% low-income families³
School Type	Charter School authorized by Local Education Agency (LEA)
Location(s) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Albuquerque, New Mexico ❖ Urban setting (non-Tribal land) ❖ Location 1: Indian School Campus (K-8) ❖ Location 2: NACA High School at Central New Mexico Community College (9-12)

Local Context

New Mexico is home to 23 federally recognized tribes and 9.5% of the population is Native American--a proportion exceeded only in Alaska.⁵ Albuquerque is in central New Mexico, at the foot of the Sandia Mountains and along the Rio Grande River, a waterway along which Indigenous communities have lived and practiced agriculture for millennia. According to the most recent comparative data (school year 2017-18), New Mexico ranked 50th for the proportion of all high school students who did not graduate on time and 43rd worst among states for the proportion of Native American high school students who did not graduate on time.⁶ In the Albuquerque Public School District (APS), where NACA is located, the four-year graduation

About this Document

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rate for Native Americans was just 56.2% for the school year (SY) 2019-20.⁷ Similarly, advancing from high school to college is challenging and delays are associated with reduced college success. The most recent year of college progression data (SY 2018-19) for APS shows that 66.0% of all students and 56.8% of Native American students enrolled in college the fall following graduation.⁸

Meeting Community and Growth Needs

In the 18 months leading up to NACA's charter application approval, school founder Kara Bobroff and a core leadership team conducted over 200 community engagements. These one-to-one conversations, community meetings, and sessions yielded insight and involvement from families, local tribal governments, educators, supporting organizations, and city leaders. These conversations helped identify opportunities for creating a culturally relevant school where Native youth would succeed. Initial planning began prior to that, with ongoing conversations and collaboration with APS Superintendents, who shared the understanding that a school like NACA would meet true needs. Stakeholder relationships proved key in moving those initial discussions with the district from theory to founding. NACA stakeholders expressed that they wanted a direct pathway to college for their students. As explored in the following pages, school leaders built relationships with institutions of higher education and sought opportunities via curriculum and facilities development to create access to post-secondary education.

"NACA demonstrates academic achievement, proficiency, retention, graduation, and college attendance rates that far outpace their Native American peers at the district, state and national levels. This is just one proof-point that NACA is delivering on its mission."

- Kara Bobroff, *Founding Principal*
Native American Community Academy

NACA's approach has proven to be powerful, creating an intergenerational and community-grounded model for culturally-based education and academic excellence. For the Class of 2019, the on-time graduation rate for Native students at NACA was 68.9%—a level 12.7 percentage points higher than the district. Importantly, 72.4% of NACA's 2019 graduates were enrolled in college the following fall, a level 15.6 percentage points higher than college enrollment levels of Native American students for the district.⁹

A Shared First Campus

At its inception, NACA served grade six with a small staff of dedicated teachers and few dozen students. One grade was added annually over the next six years, growing to serve grades 6-12 by 2012. Authorized by the Albuquerque Public Schools (APS) District, the school's first site was co-located at Wilson Middle School—a public school located on the older southeast edge of Albuquerque, near Kirtland Airforce Base. NACA additionally signed a short-term lease agreement to use 12 portable buildings. The fledgling charter shared the four-acre property and assets like a School Based Health Center with Wilson's students and staff. It was not fancy, but the small space fostered community and something special began to germinate.

Students indigenized the school space with their own small seasonal garden (which explored area tribal agricultural methods), construction of an horno (an outdoor earthen brick oven), and an arbor with tipi poles. As Kara Bobroff describes, "the motivation was the collective vision of a community that wanted to see something different for Native American students." The students kept coming and the school kept growing—filling 25 portable buildings at its peak. Enrollment was overwhelming the space. The school had been grant seeking and new that they were ineligible for many promising opportunities due to tax classification, which led to the establishment of the Native American Community Academy Foundation in 2010, a 501(c)(3) entity able to apply for and manage grant funds.

The Search for a Dedicated High School Site

As students advanced to high school grades, school leaders and administrators—especially the founder—knew it was time to explore options and opportunities to build a high school. NACA began to work with the University of New Mexico (UNM) in Albuquerque to identify a site for the new high school and held

community input sessions to inform school design needs (see inset box). Working with UNM, APS, and others, NACA leaders identified and assessed locations, chose a site, completed preliminary design phases, and secured construction funds; however, the project never broke ground due to significant site environmental remediation needs that were ineligible costs for secured funding. With the clock ticking, Kara Bobroff and a representative from APS looked at an available space located at the UNM School of Law that was shared with a nonprofit organization. UNM Law offered access to outdoor spaces as well as models of college pathways, including law students for kids at NACA to meet. Even though NACA had been seeking a dedicated site, upon visiting the space, Principal Bobroff stated, “we will make it work.” In the 2011-2012 academic year, NACA located its junior and senior classes to the UNM Law campus.

NACA COMMUNITY FACILITIES NEEDS

The items below are a sample of features identified through community meetings and the work of the NACA Building Design Advisory Committee.

- ❖ Outdoor garden, green house, and learning spaces
- ❖ A powerful, centralized space for gathering and ceremonial space, such as a Hogan
- ❖ Suitable parking and field space for pow-wow events
- ❖ Views to culturally significant elements, such as the Sandia Mountains and west mesa
- ❖ Health center and outdoor health and wellness resources (e.g., sweat lodge)
- ❖ Consideration of land and the earth as integral to design
- ❖ Integration of the site land into curriculum and outdoor activities
- ❖ Sustainability through renewable energy technologies and improved nutrition services

These were identified during new construction planning in 2009 and 2010. While that project did not ultimately happen, these features were realized in renovation of the Indian School campus and the construction of NACA High School at CNM.

Indeed, the shared space worked well because it allowed high school students to begin their college experience. NACA students were able to hop a quick shuttle to attend UNM’s dual credit classes, which are courses that concurrently earn high school and college credit and are offered in collaboration with an institution of higher education.¹⁰ This helped students fulfill standard state graduation requirements and spurred the development of NACA’s College Engagement Program. NACA decided to exceed state standards and better pave the way to higher education by requiring two dual credit classes for graduation. State standards require students to complete just one of several options (an honors course, an advanced placement class, a dual credit course, or a college distance learning course).¹¹ NACA’s first graduating class—the Class of 2012—was able to graduate from their high school program on a college campus.

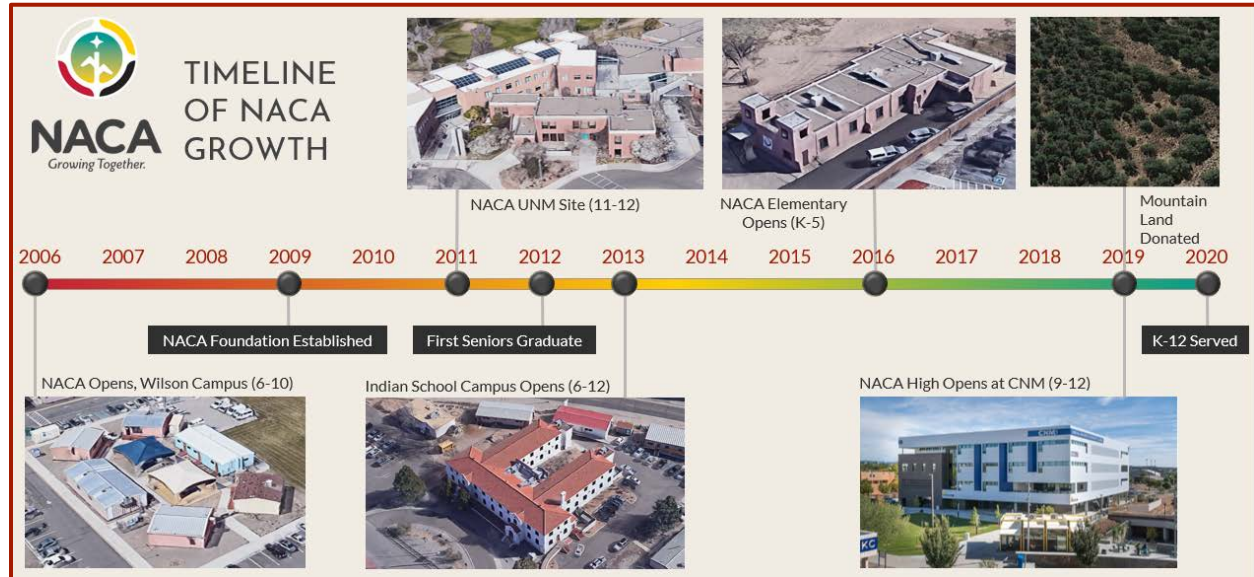
Renovation for a Dedicated NACA Campus

In 2013, the students who had been collocated on Wilson Middle School were able to find their own home at the Albuquerque Indian School, which is part of land and structures held in trust by New Mexico’s 19 Pueblos and managed by Indian Pueblo Marketing Inc. Opened in 1886,¹² this school was part of the history of educational colonization and forced removal of Indigenous children, serving as an off-reservation boarding school until 1982.¹³

NACA received a capital grant from the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration, which allowed the school to renovate and equip a School Based Health Center. Work to reclaim and indigenize the new space began with renovation design choices and a large opening celebration and ceremony. The campus now includes gardens, shade structures, and décor designed to reflect student cultures. In 2016, NACA added grades K-1 with the plan to implement a full a K-5 elementary school on the main campus, providing Native American students access to a culturally relevant education from the youngest grades and enabling families to have siblings in the same school.

Construction of a New High School

The need for a new high school was again a priority as enrollment filled NACA's Main Campus. The 11th and 12th graders were still located at UNM's law school, which eased space needs and supported links to higher education; however, the space was small and not designed for youth education. NACA continued the dream to build a high school and began working with the Central New Mexico Community College (CNM). As explored in the following section, this search ended with construction of a new facility.



The Remaining Challenge of Sports and Wellness Facilities

A long-pursued resource for NACA students is a dedicated gym and other sports and wellness spaces. This is a common issue for charter schools in general, which often only have access to facilities like athletic fields, gyms, full-service kitchens, libraries, and playgrounds by sharing amenities with third parties like district-owned schools.¹⁴ NACA initially shared space when collocated at Wilson Middle School and now uses a mixture of strategies like playing sports at city parks, installing a small playground on campus, and using private gym facilities at a cost. NACA participates in interscholastic sports competition at the junior and senior high schools in volleyball, basketball, cross-country, track and field, softball, and baseball. The school also offers club sports after school, including running and soccer, and has a robust integration of activities in academic classes. For example, as a part of NACA language class, students may participate in outdoor activities, such as stickball and archery, using the Indigenous language they are learning to describe physical movement and the rules and goals of each game.

NACA has successfully secured cash and in-kind grants to fund a playground, lacrosse programs, land-based learning programs, and after-school athletic clubs and has received an individual donation of undeveloped wildland east of Albuquerque for outdoor education. However, major capital development investments for sports and wellness facilities have remained elusive. Challenges of the current arrangements include transportation cost, time, and logistics to use outside sports locations; scheduling challenges for facility and park use; and safety concerns at city parks like the presence of drug paraphernalia litter.

Perhaps most important, this arrangement puts students in the position of feeling like interlopers or intruders at “someone else’s” site. Students need to have spaces to play that are for them and faculty and family should be able to root for the “home team” in their home space. Having dedicated sports and wellness facilities would bring opportunities for more sports and wellness pursuits. A dedicated gym, field, and track would also mean space for community gatherings, wellness activities, and other culturally affirming practices.

FACILITIES PROJECT HIGHLIGHT

CNM Education Collaborative Building



Project Cost	\$35 Million
Construction Time	18 months
Project Dates	Opened August 2019
Financial Resources	Mill Levy Bonds issued by APS
Project Summary	New Construction of a four-story Education Collaborative Building located on a community college campus. The facility has a total of 80,000 square feet of internal space, and over 5,000 square feet of outdoor terraces. The joint-use facility is shared with: College and Career High School (an APS magnet school) and CNM's Teacher Education and Early Childhood Multicultural Education programs.
Design Highlights	The building meets Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Silver certification and has 252 roof-mounted photovoltaic solar panels (enough to power 15 houses). Almost 90% of construction waste (2,300 tons) was recycled or diverted from landfills. The design reduces indoor water usage by 32%, saving 91,205 gallons of potable water per year. ¹⁵

Highlighted Facility Project

Since inception, NACA has been able to leverage relationships with APS and the school participated in a pilot program that allowed several schools to tap into the district's *Capital Master Plan*. After a five-year process, NACA developed plans for a shared-use facility on CNM's main campus and raised construction funds via an APS public bond issuance.

The full cost of the joint-use building was \$35 million with funding sources split evenly between CNM and APS. CNM's \$17.5 million came from voter-approved bonds. The \$17.5 million from APS came from voter-approved bonds and a mill levy.¹¹ Tapping APS bonds was helpful for the NACA team because they did not have to manage the funds; they simply accessed them and focused on designing the school they wanted for their students. As noted by founder Bobroff, "most philanthropic sources will not fund facilities. They will fund programs, capacity, and growth but not buildings. So, looking to other partners such as city, county, tribal governments, state, and federal partners and assessing if they were a good fit was especially important."

The new high school is ideally located in the heart of CNM's downtown main campus and allows students to use the school's transit system, parking lots, computer labs, libraries, health center, and trades programs. CNM has the largest undergraduate student enrollment in the state with several campuses and technical training sites located in metropolitan Albuquerque.¹⁶ It is the primary feeder to the nearby University of New Mexico.

NACA shares the facility with a magnet school, the College and Career High School, and CNM's Teacher Education and Early Childhood Multicultural Education programs. NACA high

school students are given a head start to their higher education journey with access to Advanced Placement classes, dual credit courses, college counseling, access to scholarships, and shared resources for books, media, and supplies. In return, CNM students preparing to become teachers benefit from learning about the Indigenous teaching methods and learning models used at NACA.¹⁷

Some of the unique features found in the new high school learning space include the Eagle Room, which is used as a quiet space and place for meditation. It is a room where students can regroup and refocus their emotional energy. The new facility has three state-of-the-art science labs and plenty of outdoor space with large wrap around balconies that look out over the city. There is also space for a roof-top garden, with raised beds to support experiential learning in science, agriculture, and wellness.

Project Learnings

- Every charter school administrator should expect to become an expert in facilities. Embrace the challenge and surround yourself with those who know more than you do on the topics of real estate, financing, construction project management, building codes, and facility maintenance. Make friends with architects, accountants, legal counsel, contractors, community foundations, and local construction unions. Reach out to others to strengthen the school's network of knowledge support.
- Do not put financial stress on a school, especially a new school. As Kara Bobroff highlighted: "You don't want to find yourself in a situation where you can't pay for the school lease and the cost to cover the lease becomes dependent upon your enrollment because that starts to compromise other aspects of what you're trying to achieve."
- Establishing a school foundation can open new funding streams, like grants only available to 501(c)(3)s.
- Look to collaborate and partner with others in the community to help cover and share in facility costs.
- Community colleges (such as CNM) are a strong supporter of Native Americans in higher education. Entering partnerships with local institutions of higher education can strengthen a school's presence in the community and create a solid and clear path for student higher education success.
- Be patient. Trust your gut and wait for the right opportunity to develop a permanent site that furthers your mission and supports the needs of your community. Having a viable temporary location gives you the time needed to make good investment decisions. Plan for what you want and don't settle for less. At one point, APS offered a less than desirable site and Principal Bobroff turned it down, despite encouragement from others. This decision held space for the new high school.
- Learn from dashed plans, like NACA's initial facility build project. From that process, NACA was able to strengthen the community's position and to find a long-term solution for a high school that placed students directly on a college campus. Increasing access to higher education while students are in high school can positively impact higher education attainment.
- Be sure when designing and building new learning environments to consider the ideas and input of students, staff, and community members. Establishing a design committee to review input and ideas is a healthy way to involve others in the build process.
- Consider hiring a planner and/or transitional project manager to help complete a move into a new facility. The logistics of planning, timing, and carrying out efforts required to move from one facility into another are complex and stressful. Even if you are only moving across the street, a little planning effort will go a long way to help students, parents, and staff settle into the new space.
- Ensure adequate time and resources are available to school administrators, teachers, and students during the transition into a new learning environment. Expect it to take longer than you estimate!
- There is always a path forward—you may just have to create it. Limited thinking within systems that do not support new ideas are bound to limit results. Too often, a new leader of school becomes overwhelmed, making it difficult to hold space and energy for the long-term vision. Think boldly and do the work to make your idea a reality. Many leaders underestimate the power of unwavering focus coupled with perseverance.

Conclusion

NACA's journey from launch to a new build took 12 years. This time was valuable, as it allowed administrators to understand their students' and families' needs, which was foundational knowledge for selecting a site that supports the school mission. NACA's partnership with CNM expands the support system available to students, including dual credit programming, transition to postsecondary schooling, and coordinated on-campus supports as students pursue college degrees. As of 2018, 100% of graduating NACA seniors were accepted to a postsecondary program.

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