

Breaking the Cycle

How Santa Fe Public Schools Is Building a Culture of College and Career Readiness

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Santa Fe Public Schools, located in New Mexico's capital city, serves approximately 11,500 students across a district situated in one of the oldest cities in the United States. The city's distinctive cultural blend is deeply woven into the fabric of the school system: Many Spanish families trace their roots back hundreds of years; there is a large and vibrant immigrant population from Mexico and Central America; multiple Native American communities are represented; the district serves a significant Anglo population; and many retirees are drawn to the region's climate and landscape. This remarkable community creates a student body that is both culturally rich and incredibly diverse, with students bringing a wide range of experiences, languages, and needs to the classroom.

Even with the rich cultural milieu of the community, the district faces significant challenges. Santa Fe is a high-need district where many families encounter linguistic and socioeconomic barriers that can make navigating school systems and postsecondary planning more difficult. Many students take on major responsibilities at home—working to contribute to their families financially, serving as interpreters at medical appointments or other essential settings, and helping with childcare for younger siblings. These realities, while reflecting the resilience and interconnectedness of the community, also directly impact students' ability to plan for and focus on their futures.

Previous Struggles to Build and Sustain a Comprehensive CCR Culture

Against this backdrop, the district has long struggled to build and sustain a comprehensive college and career readiness (CCR) system and culture. Previous efforts to adopt CCR platforms—including both Naviance and SCOR—fell short of creating the cohesive, district-wide approach that leaders sought. The district also considered utilizing a free CCR option from the state but ultimately recognized that technology alone would not drive the cultural and systemic transformation needed.

Salvador Polanco, Santa Fe's College and Career Readiness Coordinator for the past year and a half, emphasized that the district needed more than just another platform. It needed a fully integrated system embedded in everyday practice and a partner equipped to support deep, sustained change. He underscored

Previous Struggles - cont'd

that the scale of the work extended beyond logistics and technology; it required a fundamental shift in how students and families think about the future. This search for both the right tool and the right partnership ultimately led the district to the SchoolLinks platform.

A Strong Start with SchoolLinks

The 2024-25 school year marked Santa Fe Public Schools' first year with SchoolLinks, and Polanco described the rollout as a clear success. From the outset, implementation was defined by strong collaboration, hands-on support, and a highly responsive SchoolLinks team—factors that truly distinguished SchoolLinks from other platforms the district had used.

He attributed the success to a combination of strong district leadership and SchoolLinks' structured implementation approach. At the district level, college and career readiness had been elevated as a strategic priority by the superintendent and senior leadership, providing a solid foundation for adoption. Regular weekly meetings, consistent technical and strategic support, and collaborative problem-solving with SchoolLinks then helped turn that vision into tangible progress. Polanco described it as a powerful "confluence of strong support from SchoolLinks and strong support from district leadership" that enabled the initiative to gain real traction in its first year.

SchoolLinks has now been rolled out across all secondary schools in the district. All four of the district's high schools—three high schools and one international magnet school—have fully implemented SchoolLinks for all of their 9th-12th grade students. And 8th graders are using it to begin their career exploration before entering high school. This comprehensive adoption ensures that students across the district have access to consistent CCR tools and experiences as they prepare for their futures.

Embedding SchoolLinks Engagement into the School Day

In an effort to make college and career readiness a central part of students' educational journeys, SchoolLinks is embedded directly into their regular school experience. At the high school level, SchoolLinks activities are built into student advisory periods, where advisory teachers facilitate structured engagement with the platform. This intentional approach ensures that every student, across grades 9-12, has regular and ongoing opportunities to explore pathways, set goals, and track progress throughout the year.

Principals have fully embraced the platform and played a key role in supporting building-wide adoption within advisory periods. In addition to this weekly touchpoint, students meet individually with counselors once per quarter, where SchoolLinks is central to the conversation. The work students complete in the platform serves as a springboard for deeper discussions about goals, course planning, and postsecondary pathways.

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On an ongoing basis, Polanco and a colleague at the district level meet weekly to review SchoolLinks completion data. Using the platform's built-in analytics, they can easily drill down by school, grade level, advisory group, or counselor roster to identify trends and target support. These insights are then shared with school teams to sustain strong engagement across all sites. Polanco emphasized that the accessibility of SchoolLinks' data has been transformative—enabling him to quickly find the information he needs to monitor progress and make timely, data-informed decisions.

Ensuring All Students Have Personalized Learning Plans

One of the most significant impacts of SchoolLinks in Santa Fe has been on the development of personalized “next-step” learning plans for students. Polanco shared that, even in the first year of implementation, the district made major strides in this area. Prior to SchoolLinks, the district’s personalized planning process was not where it needed to be. That changed last year, with the adoption of SchoolLinks that coincided with a new state directive requiring students to have approved next-step plans on file.

Using SchoolLinks, the district saw a dramatic increase in completion rates, with nearly 80% of students finalizing plans that were reviewed and approved by students, counselors, and guardians. This collaborative process ensured that each plan was thoughtful, coordinated, and meaningful—representing a significant improvement over previous years. The district is now aiming for full 100% participation this year.

As a critical component of this, the work students do throughout SchoolLinks directly feeds into the creation of these personalized plans, making the process more authentic and student-driven. Santa Fe has already begun this work with eighth graders to ensure students enter high school with clear goals in place, and hopes to eventually start this engagement as early as seventh grade.

Breaking the Cycle Through Future-Focused Conversations

Since adopting SchoolLinks, Santa Fe Public Schools has seen a meaningful shift in the types of conversations happening between counselors and students. Historically, much of the district’s counseling work has focused on supporting students’ emotional well-being—a critical need in a community where many families face poverty and significant

home-based challenges. While this work remains essential, SchoolLinks has helped counselors expand their focus to include consistent, intentional college and career readiness conversations.

With SchoolLinks as a shared framework, counselors and students are now engaging more regularly in discussions about future goals—exploring postsecondary options, researching colleges and scholarships, considering trades and industry certifications, and planning for life after graduation. These conversations are happening more frequently and with greater depth than before, which Polanco emphasized is a major step forward for the district.

This shift is particularly powerful in New Mexico, where students who graduate high school well-prepared have access to significant opportunities, including free college tuition through state programs and in-state tuition reciprocity with neighboring states. Polanco and his team want students to start thinking about these possibilities early and to have meaningful conversations with their counselors, families, and guardians. SchoolLinks has become a key catalyst in making those conversations routine rather than rare.

Polanco described this work as “breaking the cycle”—of poverty, of limited opportunity, and of students not fully envisioning their postsecondary paths. By equipping counselors and students with the right tools and structures, SchoolLinks is helping the district open doors and create new possibilities for its students.

School-Level Innovation and Impact

Beyond districtwide implementation, individual schools in Santa Fe are using SchoolLinks in unique ways to meet their students’ needs. School counselors are managing the Course Planner feature at their specific sites. This has allowed them to adapt the tool to fit their specific program offerings and scheduling structures and the SchoolLinks support team works directly with them as needed. This site-level ownership has allowed schools to tailor the platform to their contexts.

SchoolLinks has also become a valuable asset within the district's AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) program, which operates in two high schools and several middle schools. AVID is a nationally recognized program that prepares students for college by providing academic support, teaching critical thinking and organizational skills, and fostering a college-going culture. As both CCR Coordinator and AVID District Director, Polanco has seen firsthand how AVID teachers and site coordinators are using SchoolLinks features—such as assessments, “Find Your Path,” and interactive activities like “Would You Rather”—to enrich college and career readiness conversations with students. The alignment between AVID's mission and SchoolLinks' interactive tools has been powerful. Students who complete AVID already outperform district averages in graduation, attendance, and employment rates, and SchoolLinks is helping to amplify and extend that impact.

Looking Ahead: Building Systems for Lasting Change

For Santa Fe Public Schools, long-term success with SchoolLinks means every student leaves high school with a clear, personalized plan for their future and the support to make it a reality. Polanco is aiming to reach 100% completion of personalized “next-step” plans—a goal that is so much more than just a data point. Polanco noted that these plans really integrate so many important components of CCR progress and success—they reflect students' goals, strengths, and aspirations while integrating key milestones such as counselor meetings, activity completion, and parent engagement.

Bringing families into this process is central to that vision. The district aims for every parent to log in to SchoolLinks and actively engage with their child's planning journey. For a community where many families face barriers to technology access—including households without email addresses or personal devices—this is an ambitious but deeply meaningful goal. The personalized plan serves as a powerful anchor, connecting students, families, and schools around a shared commitment to postsecondary success.

The district is also working to ensure that 90% of students complete SchoolLinks scope and sequence activities on time, keeping every student on track and giving schools real-time insight into where support is needed. As Polanco put it, the goal is to build a system where students are consistently thinking about and preparing for their futures and where no student falls through the cracks when it comes to college and career readiness. The SchoolLinks scope and sequence is a powerful tool in achieving that vision.

Looking forward, Santa Fe is preparing to implement the SchoolLinks Career and Technical Education (CTE) module to strengthen awareness of career and technical education pathways and integrate them into students' personalized plans. This will also give the district, for the first time, robust data to track student participation in CTE courses and pathways—a game changer for aligning programs with student interests and workforce opportunities.

For other districts considering a CCR platform, Polanco's advice is clear: “Highly consider SchoolLinks.” He emphasized both the platform's user-friendliness and the strength of its customer support. Polanco described the SchoolLinks team as a constant partner, explaining how the combination of a strong platform and dedicated support drives meaningful change: “SchoolLinks is a really good platform, and that support takes it above and beyond.” Together, Santa Fe Public Schools and SchoolLinks are laying the groundwork for a future where every student has a plan, every family is engaged, and every pathway is within reach.

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