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Santa Fe Indian School hopes new schoolyard will give students room to grow

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Taven Vallo, 17, of Acoma Pueblo and president of the National Honor Society at Santa Fe Indian School, puts down farolitos week for the Carleen Carey Bonfire. The school was one of nine in the country selected to receive a newly developed schoolyard through a federal pilot program. The redesign of the schoolyard will also serve as an applied learning project for students, in they'll create a survey and analyze its results, examine budgetary constraints and learn to compromise.

Luis Sánchez Saturno The New Mexican

Christie Abeyta envisions Santa Fe Indian School as a thriving campus, filled with spaces that celebrate Indigenous culture, art, language and teachings, something that's closer to reality now that the school has been selected to receive a newly developed schoolyard through a federal pilot program.

Privacy - Terms

“We want to remain in line and in tune with place, as place is significant to Native people. Everything revolves around your place in this world,” said Abeyta, the school’s superintendent.

The campus’ open-air environments — a community garden, outdoor classrooms with facilities to prepare traditional meals and plazas where students interact, dance and sing together — are a start, she said. But she said she believes the school community and tribal elders will have even more ideas on ways to enhance the campus as the school joins the Tribal Community Schoolyards Pilot Program, a new partnership between the U.S. Bureau of Indian Education and the nonprofit Trust for Public Land.

Santa Fe Indian School is one of nine Native American schools across the country — and one of two in New Mexico — selected to receive the upgraded schoolyard.

Danielle Denk, the community schoolyards initiative director for the Trust for Public Land, said the new program is designed to transform vacant or drab schoolyards in Indigenous communities into vibrant spaces for outdoor learning and play.

The Trust for Public Land has constructed more than 200 community schoolyards in the past 25 years, she said, adding the yards improve community health outcomes by providing space for outdoor activities and climate resilience by reducing the effects of urban heat islands and conveying water to prevent flooding.



Students walk on campus last week at Santa Fe Indian School, one of nine Indigenous schools in the country selected to receive a new schoolyard through a federal pilot program that aims to shift Native American boarding schools away from their traumatic history and create spaces that embrace Indigenous traditions. The school hopes to install new walkways, outdoor classrooms and natural catchment systems.

Photos by Luis Sánchez Saturno/The New Mexican

Community schoolyards also improve educational outcomes, Denk said, because the outdoor environment offers a stimulating space for learning.

In many places, the outdoor schoolyards also have decreased behavioral incidents. Denk noted one Philadelphia school in which student suspension rates dropped from 30 per year to zero after the Trust for Public Land constructed a new schoolyard.

The Tribal Community Schoolyards Pilot Program is intended to offer the same benefits in tribal community schools, Denk said.

“At the Department of the Interior, we have a solemn duty to honor and strengthen the federal government’s nation-to-nation relationships with tribes,” Interior Secretary Deb Haaland, a member of New Mexico’s Laguna Pueblo, said in late November when she formally announced the pilot program.

program. “Today’s announcement affirms that commitment and will bring increased and much-needed resources to Indigenous communities.”

The program marks the beginning of an effort to shift Native American boarding schools away from their traumatic history and instead create spaces that embrace Indigenous traditions and students as assets rather than deficits, Abeyta said.

The Trust for Public Land and Bureau of Indian Education selected the nine participating schools based on maximizing benefits for local people, Denk said, saying the agencies decided “when we do this, let’s be intentional about where we work to have the biggest impact.”

Sites were selected based on two primary criteria. First, officials used localized data — including the proportion of the population that identifies as people of color; the percentage of low-income households and children living in poverty; and the number of adults with less than a high school education — to generate an environmental justice score. Then they generated a health score based on factors like the local COVID-19 death rate, the number of days per week people experience mental unhealthiness and levels of physical inactivity.

These scores generated a short list of schools, from which the Trust for Public Land and Bureau of Indian Education selected the final pilot schools — a mix of residential and day schools operated by tribes and by the Bureau of Indian Education.

Wingate Elementary School in Fort Wingate was the second New Mexico school to participate in the pilot program, joining schools in South Dakota, Idaho, Montana, Arizona and Wisconsin.

Students, teachers, school and tribal leaders and community members will assist in designing and creating the yards, Denk said.

“With tribal and Indigenous voices leading the design, creation and activation of these schoolyards, there’s amazing potential to infuse centuries of knowledge into these schoolyards to connect tribal and Indigenous communities to their culture and inspire future generations of tribal and Indigenous leaders,” Trust for Public Land President and CEO Diane Regas said in a news release.

With assistance from the University of New Mexico and input from students and staff, Santa Fe Indian School officials have planned out their ideal campus footprint, Abeyta said. The pilot program will allow the school to build out new elements on that map.

Abeyta hopes to see the construction of new walking paths for students with signs offering historical and cultural information, outdoor classrooms that lend themselves to discussions of ecology and natural catchment systems to limit flooding on campus.

Collaboration with tribal leaders and the school community was the most important aspect of the process, she said: “What do they envision for the build out of our campus? What does the ideal schoolyard look like for a Pueblo, Navajo, Apache student who comes to Santa Fe Indian School? In that thought, there’s so much that potentially could be considered.”

The outreach and design phases of the project will double as an applied learning project for students at Santa Fe Indian School, Denk said. Throughout the process, students will create a survey for fellow students, parents, teachers and community members and analyze its results, examine budgetary constraints and learn to compromise.

Fundraising for the nine new schoolyards — which are expected to cost \$16 million — will be led by the Trust for Public Land and begin in 2023. The trust expects to raise most of the projects’ funding through public sources supplemented by private philanthropic donors.

Abeyta is excited about the possibilities.

“The potential is endless. I think that we’ve done an awesome job so far in doing it for ourselves with limited to no resources. Now that we have funding and resources, it can only get better,” she said.

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Reporter