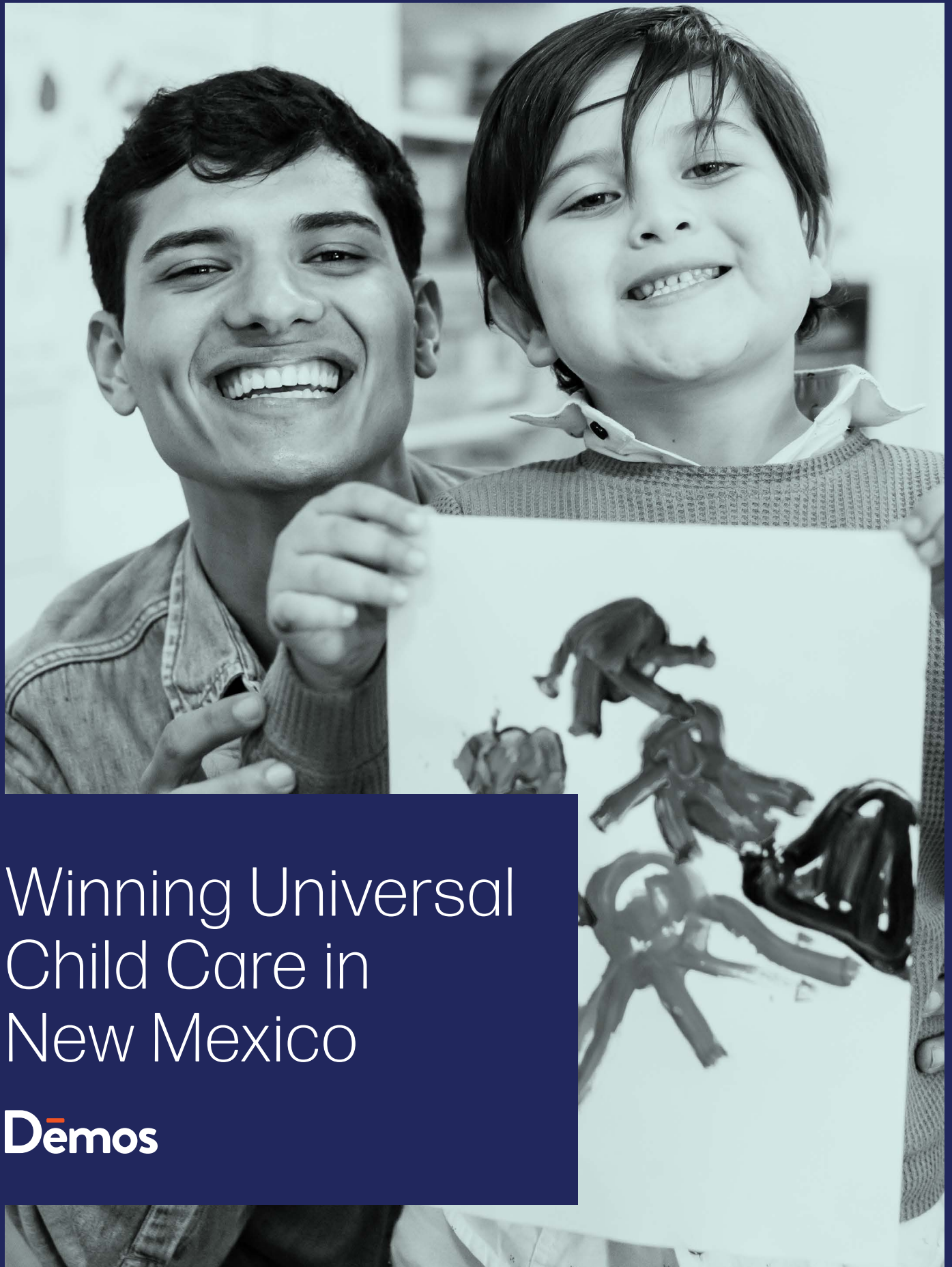




Winning Universal Child Care in New Mexico

Demos

About Dēmos

Dēmos is a non-profit public policy organization working to build a just, inclusive, multiracial democracy and economy. We work hand in hand to build power with and for Black and brown communities, forging strategic alliances with grassroots and state-based organizations.

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Executive Summary

In 2025, New Mexico became the first state in the nation to offer universal child care, culminating a more than decade-long effort led by a broad coalition of advocates, parents, educators, and community organizations.

This case study examines how movement organizations in New Mexico successfully led the fight for one of the most ambitious social policy victories in the country despite significant financial, political, and structural barriers.

Historically, the problems with New Mexico's child care system mirrored national challenges: high costs and limited access for families, low wages for workers, and inadequate funding to deliver a high-quality public good. Movement organizations took four key steps to overcome these obstacles:

- 1 A power-building electoral strategy:** Early coalition efforts focused on public education, grassroots organizing, and legislative advocacy through the Invest in Kids Now coalition. While these efforts built widespread support, a small group of powerful legislators repeatedly blocked progress. In response, advocates adopted a strategic electoral approach, successfully unseating key opponents in 2020 through coordinated Democratic primary challenges. This shift in political power unlocked legislative approval for a constitutional amendment, which voters passed overwhelmingly in 2022, leading to the use of the Permanent Fund for early childhood education.

- 2 Identifying funding for universal child care:** Recognizing child care as essential infrastructure and inspired by similar policy models in other states, advocates identified a viable funding source in the state's Land Grant Permanent Fund (Permanent Fund), creating a pathway to finance universal child care.
- 3 Long-term coalition and grassroots organizing:** Sustained investment in coalition building and grassroots organizing created a strong, multiracial base of support rooted in the experiences of working families.
- 4 Framing and narrative strategies:** Advocates developed clear, accessible messaging that framed child care around immediate economic needs rather than abstract policy arguments. These narratives, delivered by trusted community members, helped build broad statewide support across diverse constituencies.

New Mexico's experience offers key lessons for other states. Transformative change requires the alignment of policy, organizing, electoral, and narrative strategies over time. Identifying credible funding sources is essential, but it's insufficient without generating the political will to act. Most importantly, durable victories depend on long-term investment in grassroots power and leadership from impacted communities.

While New Mexico has achieved a historic milestone, implementation challenges remain. Movement organizations continue to advocate for workforce expansion, infrastructure development, and equitable access. The state's ongoing efforts underscore that passing legislation is not the endpoint, but part of a longer process of building and sustaining public goods. Ultimately, New Mexico demonstrates that universal child care is not only possible but achievable when movements build power, stay rooted in community needs, and pursue bold, coordinated strategies over time.

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Introduction

In the fall of 2025, New Mexico became the first state in the country to launch a universal child care policy.

A series of policy changes in preceding years had already raised the eligibility for state-subsidized child care from families earning up to 150 percent of the federal poverty line to families earning 400 percent of that measure.

When the governor announced that beginning in November 2025 the state would guarantee no-cost universal child care to every family regardless of income, New Mexico took the final step in a journey that began nearly a decade and a half before. Under the new policy, child care in New Mexico would become widely available, accessible, and affordable, and New Mexico would become the first state in the country to commit itself to providing child care as a universal public good for its residents. In the first half of 2026, New Mexico doubled down on this commitment by budgeting up to \$700 million to child care programs over the next five years and \$60 million toward raising wages and establishing longer-term career pathways for child care workers.¹

A universal child care system must make high-quality child care available, accessible, and affordable to all who need it.² Without significant public investment, the private market costs to providers and workers of delivering care and to parents of paying for care severely limit and strain the families that actually receive care. Other states and Washington, D.C., have taken action to provide child care publicly, though none of those jurisdictions have yet implemented a universal program. Federal efforts to establish universal child care came closest more than half a century ago before being squashed by a presidential veto. The COVID-19 pandemic brought child care back to the forefront of many policy discussions more recently, but no federal policy to provide universal child care has yet come close to passing.³



A billboard designed and paid for by the Center for Civic Policy as part of a decade of public pressure on state legislators to fund early childhood education. Photo courtesy of the Center for Civic Policy.

So how did a coalition of New Mexican parents, educators, community groups, and policy advocates win one of the most ambitious policies in the country? And what can the New Mexico example show us about the viability of similar efforts in other states?

This case study explores those questions and draws from interviews with key community leaders, organizers, and advocates at the center of the coalition that won this policy. The case study begins by providing historical context and background on the need for universal child care in New Mexico and the unique conditions that gave rise to the coalition and campaign. Next, it provides an overview of the campaign and the critical moments for building the necessary movement power and political momentum for passing the policy. Following this is a review of the key strategies and lessons from the coalition and the campaign's success that point the way forward for the further development of New Mexico's own policy and the potential for other states to adopt policies that establish child care as a public good. The case study concludes with a look to the future and how New Mexico offers an important example for the rest of the country in the current political moment. Ultimately, New Mexico demonstrates that universal child care is not only possible but achievable when movements build power, stay rooted in community needs, and pursue bold, coordinated strategies over time.

Child Care and the New Mexico Context

Child care is an essential, if often underfunded and inaccessible, public good. Children require high-quality care to survive, grow, and thrive.

Parents frequently rely on professional child care to keep their kids safe and healthy while they go off to work or school. To enable economic activity, our economy depends on a workforce that needs child care. However, despite its obvious importance and far-reaching impact, child care has historically been treated as a matter of private concern for families with limited public support or programming to help meet the child care needs of families and communities.⁴ While there have been brief moments when communities and policy-makers have explored how to make child care a universally available public good, none of these efforts have led to sustained public investment in child care at the federal level that could meet the need.⁵

Nationally, 65 percent of kids age five and under have all available parents in the workforce.⁶ Without federal funding to support universal child care at a national level, only 15 percent of the children who are eligible for publicly subsidized child care end up receiving it (typically through a combination of state and federal dollars).⁷ Child care costs have risen faster than inflation in recent years, and it is currently more expensive than public college in 38 states and Washington, D.C.⁸ Because child care is so unaffordable, it makes it even more difficult for working families to pay for it. The high cost of child care pushes 134,000 low-income families into poverty and 446,000 middle-class families into a lower income bracket every year.⁹

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At the same time, the early childhood educators (ECEs) who provide child care are grossly underpaid. Women make up 94 percent of child care workers, and Black and brown women are overrepresented in one of the worst paid jobs in the economy.¹⁰ Low compensation in the child care workforce is a systemic issue: Approximately two in five child care workers earn wages insufficient to meet basic needs, necessitating reliance on public assistance to support their families.¹¹

Until recently, the story of child care in New Mexico mirrored many of these national trends. For years, New Mexico ranked last in child well-being, a composite index of multiple measures. Lack of access to affordable child care negatively affects child well-being, making children more likely to fall behind their peers.¹² Child care costs put immense financial pressure on families. A report found that in 2019, child care costs took up between 11 and 40 percent of household income for New Mexican families with one child; for families with two children, it could consume between 20 to 80 percent.¹³ Despite the financial burden that child care placed on families, child care workers were making only \$10 per hour, below the living wage for an adult with no children in New Mexico. Child educators in New Mexico often lived in poverty, and more than a quarter of the child care workforce received Medicaid.¹⁴

The child care system in New Mexico, like much of the rest of the country, was a classic example of a broken market—costs too high for parents to reasonably afford, most working parents financially unable to leave their jobs to care for their children themselves, and child care workers unable to earn a living wage providing an essential service.¹⁵ The basic solution to this problem is widely recognized and has been shown to be highly effective: Recognize child care as a public good and invest in it accordingly.¹⁶

Child Care Cost per Household in New Mexico in 2019



11-40%

1 CHILD HOUSEHOLDS



20-80%

2 CHILD HOUSEHOLDS

The arguments for treating child care as a public good—one that is high-quality, available, accessible, and affordable—are well documented. Universal child care is associated with cognitive, academic, and social development for kids, and with long-run gains that extend into adulthood.¹⁷ It increases parental well-being¹⁸ and makes it more likely for mothers to reenter or stay in the workforce.¹⁹ Research has even shown that investments in early childhood development, like universal child care, are a cost-effective strategy for growing the economy, even during a budget crisis.²⁰ Many of those arguments led New Mexico to expand pre-kindergarten programs in 2005, but those programs still only covered a portion of the demand for child care before kids entered kindergarten.²¹

Universal child care is associated with cognitive, academic, and social development for kids, and with long-run gains that extend into adulthood.

For similar reasons, many other countries have adopted and invested in universal child care—policies that allow families to easily access the care they need while paying little to no fees for high-quality child care.²² The U.S., however, spends less than half the average of what other peer countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) spend on child care.²³ Many European countries invest significant public funds in child care, and several countries have established a legal guarantee of child care for children and their families.²⁴ While many countries have strengthened their child care systems to ease costs for families and support stable, well-paying roles for early childhood educators, the U.S. has largely placed this financial responsibility on individual families.²⁵ Over the last half century, conservative opponents have successfully thwarted efforts to expand public support for child care for decades, claiming it is so expensive it would amount to “fiscal irresponsibility”²⁶ and that it is “not possible” for the federal government to pay for it.²⁷

However, if proponents of universal child care are able to overcome those claims and establish the view that child care is an essential public good, the question changes from “if” public dollars should be invested in child care to “how” those dollars can be located in the budget. Though New Mexico is one of the poorest states in the country by some measures,²⁸ it also has a unique source of funding with the potential to fund a massive investment in child care: the Land Grant Permanent Fund (Permanent Fund).²⁹

The Permanent Fund, created by New Mexico's state constitution, allows the state to save and invest the revenues it derives from the extraction of natural resources, principally oil and gas.³⁰ The Permanent Fund has been valued at billions of dollars for years, and as of 2024 it was worth more than \$30 billion.³¹ When New Mexican organizers and advocates attended a conference on child welfare in 2008, they heard a presentation on how Nebraska had tapped its own permanent fund (in combination with philanthropic donations) to help pay for early childhood education.³² "Could we do that too?" asked the New Mexican advocates. Once they compared the Permanent Fund to the Nebraska fund, they realized the Permanent Fund was a much bigger revenue stream — big enough to fund the audacious idea of universal child care in New Mexico.³³

Advocates soon realized that funding child care through the state's Permanent Fund would be politically difficult. While the Permanent Fund had long supported K-12 education, extending its use to early childhood programs required amending the state constitution. That process involved legislative approval, a statewide referendum, and, due to New Mexico's statehood provisions, ratification by the U.S. Congress and the president.³⁴ While advocates explored other funding options, they quickly assessed that they did not have the political power to move those substantial funding increases forward in order to support universal child care statewide.³⁵

Having identified a viable and substantial funding source in the Permanent Fund, and with more organizations warming up to the idea, a multiracial coalition of working people soon began to form around the idea of child care for all New Mexicans.³⁶

The Campaign

New Mexico Voices for Children (Voices), a state nonprofit policy and research organization, began to convene a coalition of organizations in 2010 called “Invest in Kids Now.”³⁷

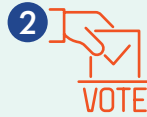
Voices invited several key organizations to build out the coalition and to jointly lead it, including Organizers in the Land of Enchantment (OLÉ), a grassroots member organization of working families; Catholic Health Initiatives St. Joseph’s Children, a Catholic philanthropy focused on child welfare in New Mexico; and the Center for Civic Policy (CCP), a civic engagement and public policy organization in New Mexico. While the coalition came to include many more organizations over time, Voices, OLÉ, St. Joseph’s, and CCP would go on to play critical roles in the campaign for universal child care.³⁸

Previously in New Mexico, child care advocates had largely been white and middle-class, and they had pursued a strategy of building power by aligning with powerful policymakers, which made those advocates “nervous” about holding those elected officials accountable.³⁹ The base-building organizations within the Invest in Kids Now Coalition largely organized nonwhite and working New Mexicans; nearly all of the lead organizations in the coalition were led by women of color.⁴⁰ “It was a multiracial coalition driven by communities of color, driven by everyday folks, driven by parents and family members and workers who either worked in child care or depended on child care,” noted Amber Wallin, the former executive director of Voices.⁴¹ By organizing this base to fight for the coalition’s policy goals, it centered “people who had been absent from the fight” previously and those “who were willing to engage in politics in a way that traditional advocates had not been.”⁴²

Steps to Securing the Funding for Universal Child Care in New Mexico



1
Passing legislation in the state capitol to support a constitutional amendment to allow the Permanent Fund to include funding for child care.



2
Holding a statewide referendum for voters to approve amending the state constitution.



3
Ratification of the amendment to New Mexico's Constitution by the U.S. Congress and the president.

Over the next decade, the Invest in Kids Now Coalition would repeatedly push the Democratic-controlled state legislature to pass a joint resolution allowing voters to decide on a constitutional amendment to allow the Permanent Fund to pay for child care. The House passed a bill seven times, and each time the bill would then die in the Senate.⁴³ A powerful group of Democratic state senators, led by Senator John Arthur Smith, prevented the bill from coming to a vote or even making it out of the Finance Committee that Senator Smith chaired.⁴⁴ Senator Smith, one of the most influential Democratic leaders in the statehouse, held a reputation as a budget hawk and earned the nickname “Dr. No” for his rejection of spending proposals.⁴⁵ John Daniel, a senior adviser with the Center for Civic Policy, noted that Senator Smith, as chair of the Finance Committee, “had so much power and leverage that he could punish [Democrats] if they didn’t go along.”⁴⁶ A former Republican governor of the state viewed Senator Smith as “probably the most influential legislator in the New Mexico Legislature,” and advocates who saw their proposals die in his committee feared backlash if they criticized him openly.⁴⁷

During this time, the coalition ran campaigns to educate communities about the universal child care proposal and build a broad base of support.⁴⁸ Starting in 2014, Invest in Kids Now organized The 1,000 Kids March, an annual event at the state capitol building where parents and kids called on legislators to use a portion of the Permanent Fund to



Speaker Martinez, sponsor of the constitutional amendment legislation, joins early educators and parents at a rally at the state capitol. Photo courtesy of OLÉ.

pay for universal child care.⁴⁹ Child care workers organized marches, knocked on doors, held meetings, gathered signatures for petitions, and lobbied their elected representatives, pushing for them to invest in universal child care.⁵⁰ By 2016, St. Joseph's and the coalition launched a website and an accompanying ad campaign modeled after the state tourism agency's ad campaign called the "New Mexico Truth." The campaign highlighted the state's child poverty levels and failure to invest in a universal child care policy.⁵¹ The coalition sent delegations to meet with legislators who opposed using the Permanent Fund to pay for the policy to demonstrate popular support for the idea and to test if a political compromise could potentially change their minds. In 2018, OLÉ and a legal organization, the New Mexico Center on Law and Poverty, successfully sued the state government for denying child care reimbursements through state programs under existing law, bringing even more attention to the urgent need for affordable and accessible child care.⁵² This raised the eligibility cutoff for free child care from 150 percent of the federal poverty line to 200 percent—an improvement, but it still fell far short of meeting the child care needs of families across the state.⁵³

The coalition had assembled a broad grassroots organizing effort of parents and child care workers, conducted extensive education efforts to explain their policy and how they would pay for it, developed sophisticated online media and ad campaigns, and engaged elected officials in good faith—and still they found themselves blocked by Senator Smith and fiscally conservative Democrats in the legislature. Unable to persuade their opposition, organizers and advocates turned to an electoral strategy: primarying the conservative Democrats who stood in their way.⁵⁴



Left: Hundreds of early educators meet with Speaker Martinez to discuss implementing a wage and career ladder. Photo courtesy of OLÉ.

Right: Children at a 2013 rally organized by the Center for Civic Policy outside the Albuquerque Country Club, where Senator John Arthur Smith was scheduled to speak. Photo courtesy of the Center for Civic Policy.

Some of the groups advocating for universal child care had backed a primary challenger to Senator Smith in 2012.⁵⁵ Senator Smith beat the challenger by less than 500 votes, and he would not have another contested primary for eight years.⁵⁶ During that period, key members of the coalition had noticed how effective this strategy had proven in New York, where primary challengers ousted conservative Democratic state senators who regularly allied with Republican lawmakers to block progressive legislation.⁵⁷ New Mexico had already seen a wave of progressive candidates take office in 2016 and 2018, reshaping the legislature, even if conservative Democrats still retained power. And for the first time in the state's history, a majority of the Democrats in the state house were women.⁵⁸ Many of those newly elected officials were teachers, organizers, and mothers, which brought a notably different perspective to the legislative chamber.⁵⁹ If child care advocates could break the logjam in the Senate with a new cohort of progressive legislators, they would be able to get their proposal through the Senate Finance Committee and have the numbers to pass their policy.

More than a decade of coalition organizing had laid the groundwork for a more direct challenge to Senator Smith and conservative Democrats still blocking their path. Because the Invest in Kids Now Coalition was primarily focused on non-electoral work, both because of the skill sets of its members and because of the need to remain compliant with their 501(c)(3) organizational structure, a new coalition was created. Additionally, not all of the advocacy organizations supporting universal child care had bought into the idea of challenging the most powerful Democratic politicians in the state legislature.⁶⁰

OLÉ, the New Mexico Working Families Party (a grassroots party for the multiracial working class),⁶¹ the Center for Civic Action (the 501(c)(4) partner organization to CCP), and ProgressNow New Mexico came together to create No Corporate Dems in 2019.⁶² These organizations, particularly OLÉ and the New Mexico Working Families Party, represented a broad and racially diverse base of working-class communities and voters.⁶³ Other organizations also joined the effort, including labor, abortion rights, and environmental advocacy groups who were also frustrated with conservative Democratic leadership blocking progressive policies.⁶⁴ This set up a showdown with Senator Smith and other high-ranking conservative Democrats in 2020.⁶⁵ The No Corporate Dems coalition carefully recruited candidates to challenge the five conservative Democrats who had consistently blocked universal child care proposals from reaching a vote, including Senator Smith (chairman of the Senate Finance Committee) and Senate Pro Tempore Mary Kay Papen.⁶⁶



OLÉ Leader and provider, Olga Grays, speaks during a training session. Photo courtesy of OLÉ.

Timeline of Key Policies for Securing the Funding for Universal Child Care in New Mexico

- FEB. 2011** ● Legislature proposes first version of constitutional amendment to allow a distribution from the Land Grant Permanent Fund for early childhood education.⁶⁷
- MAR. 2019** ● Governor signs Senate Bill 22 to establish the Early Childhood Education and Care Department.⁶⁸
- FEB. 2020** ● Governor signs House Bill 83 to establish the Early Childhood Education and Care Fund.⁶⁹
- MAR. 2021** ● Legislature passes House Joint Resolution 1 to place a constitutional amendment to fund child care on the ballot.⁷⁰
- NOV. 2021** ● Governor Lujan Grisham expands eligibility for child care from 200 percent of the poverty line to 400 percent of the poverty line and increases reimbursement rates to child care providers to raise wages for child care workers making less than \$16 per hour.⁷¹
- NOV. 2022** ● 70 percent of New Mexican voters support amending the state constitution.⁷²
- DEC. 2022** ● U.S. Congress and president approve amendment to New Mexico's state constitution.⁷³
- SEP. 2025** ● Governor Lujan Grisham removes income limits for child care assistance to families.⁷⁴
- MAR. 2026** ● New Mexico passes legislation to budgeting up to \$700 million for the next five years on child care and provides \$60 million to establish a career ladder and wage increases for child care workers.⁷⁵

Even as No Corporate Dems built campaign infrastructure and recruited candidates to beat conservative incumbents, the Invest in Kids Now Coalition notched additional, intermediate victories that lent momentum to their efforts. In 2020, the governor signed a bill to establish the Early Childhood Education and Care Fund and provided it with a one-time endowment of \$300 million.⁷⁶ The earnings from this fund would annually provide the greater of \$30 million or five percent of the average value of the fund for early childhood education programs and services.⁷⁷ The Invest in Kids Now Coalition viewed this as a step in the right direction but still falling far short of what was needed to fund child care across the state.⁷⁸



Supporters campaigning for the constitutional amendment, which New Mexico voters approved by more than 70 percent in November 2022.
Photo courtesy of OLÉ.

In July 2020, the challengers won four out of the five races, unseating both Senators Smith and Papen and reshaping the landscape of power in New Mexico state politics.⁷⁹ Four women, three of whom were women of color, upset the conservative Democratic incumbents, and the number one issue driving that outcome was tapping the Permanent Fund for early childhood education.⁸⁰

In 2021, House Joint Resolution 1, the legislation for beginning the state constitutional amendment process to fund universal child care, swiftly passed in the state legislature. The House passed it by nearly a 2-1 margin before it sailed through the Senate Finance Committee (where it had stalled so many times previously under Senator Smith).⁸¹ It then passed by a comfortable majority in the Senate.⁸² (Because the legislation involved a constitutional amendment, it did not require the governor's signature, though Governor Lujan Grisham publicly supported the legislation and the amendment.⁸³) This put the proposal for a constitutional amendment to use the Permanent Fund to fund child care up for a popular vote in 2022.⁸⁴

Organizers and advocates launched the Vote Yes for Kids campaign to build support leading up to the election. The coordinated statewide campaign organized political support and endorsements for the amendment from a range of elected officials, including Governor Lujan Grisham, and ran a sophisticated voter outreach operation.

The campaign mobilized people directly impacted by the issue of child care. Eli Cuna, the campaign manager for Vote Yes for Kids, explained that the field operations across the state relied on “child care providers and the families in need of child care,” as well as “women, nonbinary folks, and youth of color” to canvass in support of the amendment.⁸⁵ Many of the canvassers were parents, working people, and Latina, and they were members or volunteers with OLÉ and other movement groups in New Mexico. Together, they “knocked on a half million doors ... to ensure they [would] reach 110,000 identified supporters,” which was one-third of the number needed to win the amendment.⁸⁶ Many of the canvassers would either knock doors with their kids or be able to use the child care provided by the campaign at the canvassing sites, which enabled many parents to be more involved in the outreach opportunities.⁸⁷ In November 2022, the measure passed overwhelmingly with more than 70 percent approval.⁸⁸ Advocates framed the amendment as a matter of self-determination, emphasizing that the Permanent Fund represented resources belonging to New Mexicans rather than the federal government.⁸⁹



Supporters celebrate the passage of Constitutional Amendment 1 in November 2022. Photo courtesy of OLÉ.

Nonetheless, securing the approval of Congress remained a final obstacle. The organizing efforts shifted to the New Mexico congressional delegation and their staff to move the state constitutional amendment through federal approval. The New Mexico congressional delegation introduced legislation as early as 2021 in anticipation of voters approving the constitutional amendment.⁹⁰ After passage through the U.S. Senate in July 2022, New Mexico’s House of Representatives secured passage in December 2022.⁹¹ There were “some tenuous weeks” when coalition organizers and advocates feared it might not make it through Congress.⁹² But with additional advocacy from Native American voters and tribal advocacy organizations, as well as targeted outreach in districts represented by persuadable members of Congress, Senate leadership ultimately folded the amendment into the 2022 omnibus spending package, which passed Congress and was signed into law on December 23, 2022 by President Biden.⁹³

Investing in Universal Child Care

The federal government's approval of the state constitutional amendment occurred at a crucial moment when COVID funding for child care was running out.

Several years prior, New Mexico had raised its child care eligibility from 150 percent to 200 percent of the federal poverty line (the result of litigation from OLÉ and a legal organization, the New Mexico Center on Law and Poverty, in 2018). Using COVID relief funds in the wake of the pandemic, New Mexico expanded eligibility again in 2021, this time covering families making 400 percent of the poverty level, and boosted the reimbursement rates for providers to fund a minimum wage for child care workers making less than \$16 per hour in 2022.⁹⁴ With increased eligibility for families and higher minimum wages for child care workers, the state's expenses for providing child care had increased, and COVID relief funds were beginning to dwindle. When Congress and the president approved the state constitutional amendment to tap the Permanent Fund to pay for child care in December 2022, it not only assured resources for the existing child care programs—it opened the door to dramatically expanding those programs.⁹⁵

After receiving federal approval for tapping the Permanent Fund, New Mexico was also able to make use of an early childhood education fund established with excess mineral, oil, and gas revenue in 2020.⁹⁶ The Early Childhood Education and Care Fund was originally seeded with a one-time \$300 million investment in 2020, and it grew when the state's rainy day fund was at its statutory limit and when investment gains occurred.⁹⁷ The initial disbursement from the early childhood education fund would be \$20 million in Fiscal Year 2022, and it would be either \$30 million or five percent of the recent average value of the fund.⁹⁸ When the constitutional amendment went into effect in 2022, it created an annual payment of an additional 1.25 percent of the Permanent



Fund's year-end value into the early childhood education fund—this added an additional \$126 million in Fiscal Year 2023.⁹⁹ In the years since then, with increasing revenues from oil and gas combined with the fund's growing market investments, the early childhood education fund has expanded to over \$11 billion as of January 2026.¹⁰⁰ Annual distributions from the fund, which started at \$20 million in FY2022, have grown to at least \$500 million in FY2026.¹⁰¹

In September 2025, Governor Lujan Grisham issued an executive order to remove means-testing from how executive branch agencies provide support for child care, effectively providing free child care to all families, regardless of income, and the legislature codified the policy and the governor signed it into law in March 2026.¹⁰² The final bill passed in 2026 allowed the state to spend \$700 million from the early childhood education fund over the next five fiscal years, and \$60 million of that would be set aside to establish a career ladder and increase pay for child care workers.¹⁰³

Key Strategic Lessons

Parents, child care workers, organizers, and advocates relied on several key strategies to win universal child care in New Mexico:

1. a targeted electoral strategy capable of shifting power in their state,
2. identifying a sustainable funding source for child care,
3. long-term coalition and grassroots organizing efforts, and
4. compelling public narratives.

While the strategies used in this campaign were developed by New Mexican organizations to fit the specific needs of their state, there are important takeaways that apply in a broad range of states and political settings. In fact, the organizations interviewed for this case study regularly noted how they had drawn on and adapted strategies for their fight that had already shown promise in other states. Namely by expanding on Nebraska’s policy of tapping its permanent fund to pay for child care and later applying a similar electoral strategy to what had worked for progressives in New York.¹⁰⁴

1. Power-Building Electoral Strategy

A central lesson from the New Mexico Invest in Kids Now Coalition’s experience is that it takes more than just political party majorities to achieve governing power—and sometimes this means challenging and replacing powerful elected officials.

For years, a small bloc of moderate, business-aligned Democratic lawmakers functioned as internal veto points, repeatedly blocking legislation despite broad public and legislative support.¹⁰⁵ Advocates initially pursued a conventional strategy of trying to persuade and

pressure key policymakers by using research, public education, coalition building, and direct lobbying. While these efforts were necessary for building up a broad base of community support for universal child care over time, they were not sufficient on their own to overcome opposition from well-positioned lawmakers capable of thwarting the coalition's legislative efforts.¹⁰⁶

In response, the coalition ultimately adopted a strategy aimed at replacing specific Democrats who opposed the bill, and it proved quite successful. “We realized we had to play in the electoral arena,” said John Daniel, a senior adviser with the Center for Civic Policy. In 2018, organizers set up the “No Corporate Dems” political action committee. No Corporate Dems successfully challenged a few state house seats in 2018, setting the stage for what Daniel characterized as the “electoral earthquake” in 2020, when challengers defeated the president pro tem, the chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, and the chairman of the Education Committee.¹⁰⁷

Andrea Serrano of OLÉ explained the reason for the shift in strategy from persuading legislators to challenging them at the ballot box: “We stopped begging these really terrible senators to see our humanity, and we just moved them out of the way.”¹⁰⁸ “I wish we’d recognized sooner that we needed to go all-in on an electoral strategy,” said Eric Griego, former state director of the New Mexico Working Families Party.¹⁰⁹ The educational work that took place over nearly a decade of engaging voters, knocking on doors to discuss the importance of child care, and gathering petition signatures was important for elevating the issue among the general public, and the lobbying visits to the capitol and meetings with legislators were important for identifying exactly where the legislative impasse existed.¹¹⁰ But in the end, these strategies did not change those key senators’ votes, leading organizers and advocates to stop targeting key opponents like Senator Smith because it “simply hadn’t worked.”¹¹¹ Shifting to the electoral strategy became a way to “make sure the voters would be the ones with the last say.”¹¹²

“We stopped begging these really terrible senators to see our humanity, and we just moved them out of the way.”

ANDREA SERRANO, OLÉ

Nearly everyone interviewed for this case study noted the importance of unseating the conservative Democratic senators who had blocked child care legislation for nearly a decade. But there was good reason for why such a strategy had not been tried earlier.

“We should have taken [them] out in 2016 if possible, but we didn’t have the ability at that point,” explained Griego.¹¹³ That’s because Senator Smith and other conservative Democrats, like the president pro tem and the chairman of the Education Committee, had a united philosophy of fiscal conservatism, a deep bench of wealthy campaign donors, and they controlled key political positions (controlling committee appointments and chairing powerful committees where they could block bills from advancing to a general vote) that made it difficult for other senators or advocacy organizations to go against them for fear of risking other legislative priorities.¹¹⁴ Several interviewees explained that it was difficult to “emphasize enough how strong these lawmakers were, how entrenched they were,” and how shocking their defeat was for much of the New Mexico political establishment.¹¹⁵

Some organizations even split off from the child care coalition when the No Corporate Dems coalition was formed because they thought those senators were “unbeatable,” opting instead to broadly support Democrats in the general elections.¹¹⁶ However, this friction with potential allies did not outweigh the priorities of the coalition. As Oriana Sandoval of the Center for Civic Action explained, “We took a lot of heat. They had this very protective, collegial culture in [the Senate]. We were not popular with party leaders or the Democratic caucus in the Senate. But we don’t work for the caucus. We work for our communities.”¹¹⁷

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The broader lesson is clear: Intra-party challenges are sometimes necessary to achieve transformative change. Effective campaigns must identify where power resides, focus on key decision-makers, and be willing to contest those positions directly. Ultimately, New Mexico shows that winning transformative policy requires not only changing minds but changing who holds power.

2. Identifying Funding for Universal Child Care

A major obstacle to investing in a public good, even a popular one like universal child care, is figuring out how to pay for it. Starting in 2008, when advocates coalesced around the idea of using the Land Grant Permanent Fund to pay for child care, they realized they had a unique and credible funding strategy to pay for an ambitious proposal.¹¹⁸ The Invest in Kids Now Coalition brought together organizations that could provide the budgetary, policy, and legal analysis needed to demonstrate how the Permanent Fund could be used to support their goal. This took significant legal and economic research from key members of the coalition, and the early years of coalition efforts were spent trying to understand how the fund worked and making sure there was a viable legal path for tapping it.¹¹⁹

However, even though they had identified a funding source for their policy on paper, the coalition faced daunting challenges. Tapping the Permanent Fund would require a state constitutional amendment—a steep hurdle, given that it must win approval from the state legislature, voters in a popular referendum, the United States Congress, and, finally, the president of the United States.

Beyond the procedural hurdles, the conventional political wisdom in New Mexico at the time held that the Land Grant Permanent Fund was off limits for any new expenditures. The Permanent Fund invests oil and gas royalties and then uses the earnings on these investments to stabilize and diversify the state's budget.¹²⁰ This guards against fluctuating prices (and tax revenue) in volatile commodities like oil and gas, which underpin much of New Mexico's annual revenue. State political leaders framed the Permanent Fund as something that could be used only under extreme circumstances and that tapping this fund for child care would be fiscally irresponsible.¹²¹ Opponents stoked fears that using the Permanent Fund to fund child care at scale would spend it down too much and prevent the investment revenue from keeping up with the state's increasing costs from inflation, downturns in the market, and providing expanded services, and that it could even risk financial stability for the state as a whole.¹²²

The coalition overcame these challenges with a policy and legal strategy that clarified the path forward and with fiscal research that demonstrated the sky would not fall if a relatively small portion of the Permanent Fund went toward child care.¹²³ While the more nuanced fiscal argument and counter arguments were not enough on their own to win over opposing policymakers, they did demonstrate a detailed and grounded level of fiscal knowledge that gave confidence to the coalitions advocating for child care.¹²⁴

New Mexico presents a unique funding structure, and not every state has a Land Grant Permanent Fund worth billions of dollars. How to fund public goods is an age-old challenge for progressive movements, and advocates in other parts of the country might wonder how they could hope to secure enough funding to establish a universal public good like child care. Fortunately, there are already experiments underway to develop comparable funding sources in other regions.

Washington, D.C., created an Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund in 2021 to establish pay parity for child care workers and attract and retain more educators in early childhood classrooms.¹²⁵ D.C. paid for this critical component of expanding and subsidizing the child care workforce by establishing a fund through a tax on city residents earning more than \$250,000 per year.¹²⁶ Montana passed a state infrastructure bill in 2025 that initially seeded a child care trust with \$10 million that will grow with interest.¹²⁷ In January 2026, San Francisco announced that it would provide child care for free or at heavily reduced prices for families earning up to \$310,000 per year by appropriating funds approved from a 2018 voter proposition known as Baby Prop C.¹²⁸ Prop C created an additional tax on leases of commercial property with receipts over \$1 million, and it designated 85 percent of this revenue for child care and early education.¹²⁹ New York Governor Kathy Hochul and New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani also announced in January 2026 an initial investment of \$4.5 billion of existing state revenue to expand child care to cover all children in New York City and eventually the state.¹³⁰

The experience of advocates and organizers in New Mexico underscores that funding alone does not produce universal child care; political will does. While the state's Permanent Fund provided a potential revenue source, advocates stress that it took years of organizing by a broad coalition of parents, early childhood educators, and grassroots groups to make that funding politically viable.¹³¹ Through sustained campaigns, protests, coalition building, and electoral strategies, these groups reframed the fund from an “untouchable” asset into a public investment in children and families.¹³² Their success demonstrates that transformative

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policy change depends on collective action capable of reshaping both public narratives and policymakers' priorities, ultimately unlocking resources that had long been labelled as untouchable.

3. Long-Term Coalition and Grassroots Organizing

Multiple members of the Invest in Kids Now and No Corporate Dems coalitions noted that early, sustained relationships laid the groundwork and necessary trust for later, more intensive campaign efforts.¹³³ For example, Andrea Serrano of OLÉ noted how the Center for Civic Policy had a long history of convening tables of like-minded organizations in New Mexico and that their relationship with OLÉ stretched back to before she became OLÉ's executive director in 2017.¹³⁴ OLÉ was also a founding member of the New Mexico Working Families Party, which was later led by Eric Griego, a former executive director of New Mexico Voices for Children and one of the advocates collaborating with other child care organizers and advocates as early as 2008.¹³⁵ Additionally, coalition members had learned to "flex their muscles" together beyond just the fight for child care, collaborating on campaigns related to the census and to redistricting at times.¹³⁶ Groups were able to work together relatively smoothly because of that "trust [they] had in one another."¹³⁷ Everyone was willing and able "to stay in [their] own lanes" because of that extensive prior collaboration and familiarity.¹³⁸

Coalition building extended beyond grassroots groups to include policy organizations, faith institutions, philanthropic actors, and national partners. As the coalition grew, it necessitated the development of ongoing tables for better coordination. Year-round base building—including large-scale, coordinated canvassing efforts that knocked on more than half a million doors—helped identify, educate, and mobilize a durable constituency of "child care voters."¹³⁹ When the groups launched their electoral strategy, they shared data and electoral turnout infrastructure such as voter

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lists and networks of volunteers.¹⁴⁰ This long-term, coordinated approach proved critical to passing the 2022 constitutional amendment with a decisive majority and in sustaining pressure on elected officials to deliver on their promises.

Transformative policy change requires long-term investment in coalitions and grassroots organizing. Effective coalitions are not simply aggregations of organizations but vehicles for political education and sustained civic engagement. New Mexico demonstrates that when organizing is deep, inclusive, and aligned with a clear strategy, it can reshape political conditions and make ambitious policy victories possible.

4. Framing and Narrative Strategies

Advocates and organizers in New Mexico experimented with a variety of framing and narrative strategies throughout their campaign and surfaced valuable information on messaging that resonated with the broader public, as well as more targeted constituencies. Over more than a decade of working together in coalition spaces, organizations gradually developed a shared vernacular in their campaign messaging. By the end of the campaign, “we were all saying the same language,” such as describing opponents of universal child care as “wealthy and well connected.”¹⁴¹

Early messaging emphasized the “return on investment” and economic efficiency of universal child care. This had some traction with policymakers and policy experts, but not enough to overcome the opposition of fiscal conservatives in the Senate.¹⁴² The efficiency argument proved even less effective with the general public. Frames that centered the everyday impacts on child well-being and the immediate financial relief that universal child care would provide for families were more powerful.¹⁴³ The political candidates supported by the No Corporate Dems coalition often relied on a slightly different framing that emphasized how incumbents were unaccountable to their constituents and unwilling to fight for policies, including universal child care, that their communities heavily supported.¹⁴⁴ Still, there was no “silver bullet” message, and organizers noted the need to adapt language for different audiences and political moments over the many years of the coalition’s work.¹⁴⁵

The seven-month campaign to turn out support for the 2022 constitutional amendment provided a unique opportunity to see how organizers’ messages would work across different parts of the state and vastly different constituencies. Oftentimes, complex, policy-heavy messaging landed flat in door-to-door engagements. As Eli Cuna, the coordinator of the



Vote Yes for Kids campaign explains, “What really resonated at the doors was when we would say, ‘This [Permanent Fund] is your money. If you had a blank check, what would you pay for right now, today?’ And they would always say, ‘Child care, health care, and housing.’ Those were the three things that kept coming up.”¹⁴⁶

The messengers themselves proved equally as important as the messaging. The constitutional amendment campaign used a “promotora” model that uses a community-based outreach strategy, engages directly impacted people (often Latina, immigrant mothers), and encouraged canvassers to speak from personal experience.¹⁴⁷ The promotora model of identifying and recruiting respected neighbors and community members proved effective in a variety of settings across the state—rural, urban, Native, immigrant, working-class, and wealthy. When asked to sum up why the promotora model had such an impact, Cuna observed, “The lesson is what we all know: Those closest to the pain are the best messengers.”¹⁴⁸

The New Mexico example demonstrates several important lessons for others:

1. Effective framing and narrative strategies must be rooted in people’s immediate needs and lived experiences;
2. effective narratives translate complex policy into widely understood values; and
3. the messenger can sometimes matter just as much as the message.

Conclusion

New Mexico's path to universal child care demonstrates what it takes to win transformative policy change: coordinated power building, long-term organizing, strong coalitions, and narratives rooted in people's lived experiences.

At its core, this victory was about building and exercising power. Advocates and organizers succeeded not just because their policy was sound but because they built a multiracial coalition full of working people capable of reshaping the political landscape. Over the course of a decade of organizing and civic engagement, they fostered a broad and deep community understanding of child care as an essential public good, and, when persuasion alone proved insufficient, they shifted who held decision-making power. The campaign shows that change at this scale requires both winning the argument and contesting power where necessary.

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Sustained investment in coalition building and grassroots organizing was critical to building the movement infrastructure needed to win. Years of base building and coordination created the foundation for success. These efforts ensured the campaign remained anchored in the experiences of those most affected — parents, providers, and workers — while building the political strength needed to unseat political opponents and to pass a constitutional amendment with overwhelming support.



The campaign highlights the importance of clear, accessible narratives. By focusing on affordability, family stability, and child well-being, advocates translated a complex policy into a compelling and widely resonant demand. Paired with trusted community messengers, this approach helped generate broad public support.

Lastly, New Mexico's experience underscores that policy wins are only the beginning. Ensuring adequate workforce capacity, infrastructure, equity, and quality will require continued organizing and coalition alignment.

For advocates elsewhere, the key lesson is not to replicate New Mexico exactly but to recognize that ambitious investment in public goods becomes possible through long-term power building, strategic alignment, and accountability to communities. New Mexico offers both inspiration and a roadmap for turning bold ideas into reality.

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