



EDUCATION IN NEW MEXICO: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

New Mexico deserves a first-class public education system. That's a tall order given our poor national ratings in education. But those ratings tell only part of the story. Many New Mexico students have done well. We know what success looks like; our challenge is to make sure all students can reach it.

My central concern is to place the well-being and future of children and their parents at the center of state government. To accomplish this objective, I am advocating for concurrent advances in education, community infrastructure, affordable and accessible health care, better jobs at better pay, and strong environmental protections. This puts education in the forefront of the work we need to do, not as a stand-alone effort, but as part of a holistic approach to transforming life in New Mexico.

COMPREHENSIVE EDUCATION

In today's world, education must be seen as a lifelong support system. Children do better in school if they are read to from birth and learn to read at an early age. Youth do better if they have a choice between learning trades or preparing for college, and have the option of obtaining a university education that won't result in years of debt. Adults do better if they can advance or change careers based on personal interests or changing conditions in the workplace.

That's why I support:

- Public funding for early childhood education
- Strengthening vocational programs
- Reducing the cost of higher education
- Building up retraining and job development programs

In addition, I support these four principles as guides for development of our educational programs:

- Education is a fundamental right which should be accessible to every New Mexican.
- All students--regardless of age, type of program, income level or zip code--must have access to a quality public education.
- Education must be tailored to the interests, aptitudes, and culture of each student.
- Education is a matter of fundamental public interest because it provides a foundation for civic and economic activities.

THE STATE OF EDUCATION

Public education in New Mexico ranks near the bottom of national assessments. Take as an example the annual report card published by *Education Week* which grades states on multiple education factors. Their January 2018 report ranked New Mexico 50th out of 51 states (including the District of Columbia) with an overall grade of D. The state scored a C-minus in the category of School Finance (35th out of 51), a D-plus in the Chance for Success category (51st out of 51), and D-minus in the K-12 Achievement Index (51st out of 51).¹

While students have shown some improvement in reading, math, and graduation rates since 2003, any such achievements have been realized in spite of deep systemic deficiencies.

This is not simply a matter of what goes on in classrooms. Rather, as a senior research associate at *Education Week* Research Center noted, “The report tries to provide a holistic view of education. Students are impacted by what goes on outside the schoolhouse doors.”²

TEACHING AS A PROFESSION

Difficulty attracting and retaining teachers is a primary condition underlying New Mexico’s educational shortcomings. The Learning Policy Institute, a nonpartisan think tank, reported that New Mexico ranks among the least attractive states in which to teach. In fact, in 2016, our state had the second-highest teacher turnover rate in the country.³

Job insecurity related to classroom testing is a major factor contributing to teacher turnover: test results count as half of a teacher’s annual evaluation. Another negative factor is low collegiality within the schools. As a spokesperson with the Albuquerque Teachers Federation stated, “It’s all about collaboration. If teachers feel like they are part of the team, they will want to be part of the game.”⁴ And finally, low salaries—especially for starting teachers—discourage entry into the field and sticking with it.⁵ A legislative education study committee reported in 2016 that “New Mexico ranks 43rd in the nation for teacher pay.”⁶

High turnover combined with low attraction has led to large numbers of teacher vacancies. In December 2016, the NMSU College of Education reported the state had more than 440 vacant teaching positions. This means that long-term substitute teachers must fill in, even though many lack

¹ *Education Week*, 17 January 2018.

<https://www.edweek.org/ew/collections/quality-counts-2018-state-grades/highlight-reports/2018/01/17/new-mexico.html>

² Olivier Uyttebrouck, *Albuquerque Journal*, 8 January 2016.

<https://www.abqjournal.com/702674/nm-49th-in-report-on-education-quality.html>

³ Kim Burgess, “NM 2nd-highest in teacher turnover.” *Albuquerque Journal*. 1 November 2016.

<https://www.abqjournal.com/879333/nm-2ndhighest-in-teacher-turnover.html>

⁴ Burgess.

⁵ Burgess.

⁶ Robert Nott, “Report: New Mexico in ‘dire’ need of public school teachers.” *The New Mexican*. 6 December 2016.

http://www.santafenewmexican.com/news/education/report-new-mexico-in-dire-need-of-public-school-teachers/article_67ad2b1b-baf9-54d2-a2ff-62e7fcb9c07f.html

teaching certification. Further, another 150 vacancies occurred that year among positions for counselors, social workers, administrators and speech therapists. Rural placements and special education teaching positions encounter the most difficulty recruiting teachers.⁷

Fewer college students are also opting for a degree in education. The NMSU College of Education reports that there has been “a disturbing drop in recent years in the number of students enrolled in teacher training programs in New Mexico.”⁸

Betty Patterson, the president of the New Mexico National Education Association, summarized the situation this way, “Teachers need to be respected, compensated and allowed autonomy to teach.”⁹

MOVING FORWARD

Creating a comprehensive public education system--as I described above--and professionalizing the teaching profession must be advanced hand-in-hand. This will require increased funding as well as changes in the way we think of and create positive learning experiences of many kinds.

As points of departure, I would suggest the following as starting points for statewide transformation of education:

- Governance
 - Replace the current top-down model of control with collaborative networks that include all stakeholders (e.g. parents, teachers, school boards, unions, universities, state agencies, businesses, etc.)
 - Educators—like all professionals—should be governed by a board of their peers who set standards for the education, licensure, and discipline of people working in their field of expertise.
 - State educational agencies should be clearly tasked with providing support and encouragement for local school boards. Programs, regulations, and policies that interfere with actions by school boards or cooperation between various governmental entities should be modified or eliminated.
 - Teachers’ unions and local school boards should be partners in developing changes to educational performance standards and teacher evaluations.

- Facilities
 - Establish a 5-year initiative to ensure that all school facilities are (a) fully functional based on common standards, (b) conducive to health and safety, and (c) can be efficiently maintained and operated.
 - Pilot development of schools as centers for community activity, where this function is supported by local school boards.

- Compensation
 - Teachers and related educational support positions should be compensated at a level sufficient to attract and retain a high-quality workforce.

⁷ Nott.

⁸ Nott.

⁹ Nott.

- The minimum wage of school employees should be \$15 per hour, and teachers should receive a cost of living raise every year.
 - Avoid use of a competitive compensation model (merit pay). It is divisive and counter-productive in a profession where collaboration and mentoring are essential.
- Teaching
 - There needs to be a cap on classroom size, to ensure that each child receives the attention he or she deserves. We cannot allow teachers to be overwhelmed in the classroom, nor should students be put in the position of being unexpectedly moved about. Hire enough teachers, provide sufficient classrooms, and leave it up to the school districts to balance out the enrollment issue.
 - Move to a “teaching over testing” method that allows local school districts to implement a set of standards tailored to the needs and objectives of the parents and children in each district and school.
 - Teachers should have greater flexibility and the resources needed to ensure that every student acquires an appropriate and sufficient foundation upon which to pursue a full and satisfactory life—especially in the face of dynamic social, economic, and personal conditions.
- Programs
 - Fund and build out a complete early childhood learning program. This must include all the things that are needed to prepare children for learning, such as healthy breakfasts and productive after-school programs. Depending on the approach taken, collateral issues must be fairly and effectively addressed. This could include: impact on existing private sector providers, transportation, family health, housing quality, and potential reduction of supplemental family benefits.
 - Model and implement ways of addressing the legal standard that requires “...culturally appropriate educational opportunities.”
 - Expand skills training programs and vocational education for those entering the workforce and those with jobs who are looking for transitional opportunities.
- Funding
 - Fund schools based on need, not performance. Identify and address any special needs or conditions associated with schools in underserved communities..
 - Ensure that funding is sufficient to hire the right number of teachers, and provide the appropriate number, size and type of educational spaces.
 - Support the Senate Joint Resolution that would create a disbursement rate of 5.8% from the Land Grant Permanent Fund (LGPF) to benefit public schools.

- o Support a 1% increase in the LGPF disbursement rate to establish universal access to early childhood education.
- o Oppose vouchers for private schools.
- o Ensure that charter schools do not undermine adequate financial support for public schools.
- o For additional information about ideas for financial reform in state government see my paper: <https://bgarrett4nm.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Fiscal-Priorities.pdf>