

Education in New Mexico: The Bad News and the Good News

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Recent reports and news stories emanating from the Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce, and the legislative-formed Education Initiatives and Accountability Task Force, make it appear that not only is New Mexico's educational system in a state of crisis but that it needs to be reinvented.

We, the Coalition for Excellence in Science and Math Education (CESE: www.cesame-nm.org), have been addressing the above questions for some time. We are a private, non-profit organization of over 450 scientists, engineers, educators, parents, and members of the business, political, and religious communities. Our goal is to help to improve education in New Mexico. CESE contributes a different perspective: we begin with questions and seek data. And then we draw conclusions from analysis of the data.

Here is what the data show: it is a fact that New Mexico students, on average, have consistently tested at the bottom end when compared to other states. But, it is also true that about 75% of the state school districts test *above* the national average, including APS. The remaining 25% test significantly below the national average and are the prime cause for New Mexico's overall low showing.

It is true that New Mexico has a real deficiency in certain areas--particularly science and math. However, according to the data, the major problems are occurring at the higher grade levels--a trend that is a national problem--not just restricted to New Mexico. It is true that New Mexico is a relatively poor state and that there is correlation between poverty level and overall academic performance. However, there are schools in New Mexico that excel academically, despite low performance expectations due to the poverty of their students.

In other words, the data show that there are, indeed, some serious problems with New Mexico's educational performance. The data also show that there is much that is being done properly in New Mexico. Furthermore, with a little homework, one can find that the current State Board of Education is addressing these problems intensely by instituting standards-based performance accountability criteria.

This is not simply a top level plan to start implementation, as the Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce suggests, but is, in fact, detailed and is already in process. Of course the goals are to raise all achievement levels to world-class standards, and well above the national average, but the first priority is to fix those schools that may be placing their students in jeopardy of falling behind for the rest of their lives -- that lower 25% that CESE has identified as being where the major problems lie in New Mexico.

The CESE study is being extended to look at the school level, and to investigate possible causes for low performance and hence, possible solutions. Correlations are being developed on student demographics (fraction minority, poverty level, English-language learners) and other factors like mobility, teacher salaries, and school size that might influence achievement levels. CESE will provide this information to the State Board of Education and State Department of Education -- at no cost to the state -- for their use in developing school-improvement plans.

CESE's ongoing study should shed light on why some of the schools are succeeding despite unfavorable student demographics. Now that we have seen and analyzed much of the data, we know that simply ascribing low performance to poverty, minority status, and language deficiencies is no longer acceptable.

The CESE observations are scientific conclusions drawn only from the actual data. They are not the result of recommendations by consultants, analogies from other states or countries that may or may not be applicable to New Mexico, brainstorming sessions, opinion gathering, or majority votes.

In our observations of the current State Board of Education, we conclude that it is doing more to effect positive change than any school board in recent history. The ten elected and five governor-appointed Board members represent both parties and almost every constituency in the state. No homogeneous, appointive governance system is likely to match the current board's diversity and talents.

Yet, the Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce and the Education Initiatives and Accountability Task Force want to totally change the governance system, making the State Board of Education appointed by the Governor with a Governor appointed chancellor of education. The only "reasons" we have heard are that this will de-politicize and streamline the process. We are not sure how this will de-politicize anything. In fact, in New Mexico, this could even make the process more politicized. It would certainly further remove the decision-makers from the accountability of the voters. We are not sure how this streamlines the process.

In our opinion, this proposed total change of governance will also totally derail the current, innovative and urgent programs being put into place by the State Board of Education -- the very same type of programs that the Chamber of Commerce and the Task Force are proposing! *Furthermore, the data show that there is essentially no correlation between the kind of governance system and state academic performance.* Why take away from current programs and already marginal school budgets to solve a problem that the data show is not really a problem?

Our observations are that the State Board of Education has just put in place what appears to be a powerful, standards-based education reform system. This is not the time to create a constitutional debate lasting two or more years. This is not the time to propose another silver bullet that will "fix" education. This is not the time to put education reform on hold and divert resources, time and energy in order to engage in another political dispute. Let all who are deeply concerned with education cooperate to meet the common goal of taking New Mexico from the bottom to the top.

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