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Ensuring That Schools Fail

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GUEST COLUMN:

I'm saddened both to see the current New Mexico No Child Left Behind accountability results and to hear predictions of improvements in the future.

These school ratings will not improve. They will get worse with each passing year. The NCLB law has confused its excellent intentions (improving education and reducing the ethnic achievement gap) with simplistic, misguided and essentially impossible accountability requirements that will hurt public schools, reduce academic standards, increase cheating and mislead the public.

Consider the absurdities in the current N.M. school rankings

Desert Ridge Middle School scored the highest fraction of proficient students on both math and language arts in 8th grade. But it failed Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).

Madison Middle School scored 75 percent for students proficient in language arts and 67 percent on math. But Madison failed AYP.

Jackson Middle School scored 73 percent proficient in language arts and 61 percent in math. It failed AYP.

Griegos Elementary School scored 78 percent in language arts and 92 percent in math. It failed AYP.

Osuna Elementary scored at 81 percent proficiency for math and 73 percent for language arts. It failed AYP.

On the other hand, Navajo Elementary was at the bottom end in both math and language arts with 34 percent and 27 percent proficiency, respectively. Navajo passed AYP!

Armijo Elementary had 36 percent proficiency in language arts and 56 percent in math. It passed AYP!

Eldorado and Cibola are among the best high schools in the state. They failed AYP.

Los Alamos High School was rated "exemplary" this year, based on the standards developed by the previous State Board of Education. It, too, failed AYP! And so did Los Alamos Elementary School.

I guess we need to consider restructuring those schools, or perhaps busing them to another district where they can go to better schools!

It is simple statistics and human nature that it is just as "difficult" for high-performing schools to advance by 1 or 2 percent as it is for poor performing schools to advance by 10 or 20 percent or even more. It's called an S-curve.

The AYP accountability system is based on achieving 100 percent proficiency by 2014 in all government-defined subgroups and subjects, and testing at least 95 percent of all students. The system currently tests only three grades and two subjects, and only looks at the change in percent proficient. (The previous state accountability system tested students in five subjects and seven grades and considered both growth and status.)

One hundred percent proficiency is essentially impossible in the real world, without cheating or lowering standards. Will New Mexico now lower its test standards to achieve higher fractions of proficiency? I don't think the public, the governor or the Legislature will accept that.

I wish that the media, politicians and bureaucrats would begin to make public statements about the impossibility and irresponsibility of the current AYP system.

With this system, academic achievement— as measured by AYP— cannot get better, no matter what the schools or Public Education Department do. And this is true even if there is real improvement.

More high- and low-performing schools will fail. And even schools that have currently escaped or moved off of corrective action will soon return to failure status.

The AYP requirements continue to increase every year, so it's only a matter of time until most schools fail. I hate to see honest and potentially effective efforts to improve education result in ever increasing failures.

Only honestly discussing the serious flaws in the NCLB accountability system will help us out of this mess.

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