

Teaching Task Force Far Removed From Classroom Reality

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Regarding the Journal report on the governor's "New Mexico Effective Teaching Task Force," I was encouraged when our new governor established a task force to study effective teaching in New Mexico. As a retired public school teacher, I was glad to see such attention focused on finding ways to improve educational opportunities for our students.

While aware of many problems with past efforts, I was hoping for the best. Then I read the governor's press release.

Members of this task force include politicians, superintendents, principals, administrators and a union president. Only one member, an elementary school teacher, is working with students every day in a classroom. Even though middle schools and high schools present entirely different issues, there are no teacher representatives for those levels.

The college-trained, experienced, educational professionals, who are actually interacting with students daily, are excluded from any meaningful role. This task force is a textbook illustration of the major problem with recent education reforms.

Reform is done "to" teachers rather than "with" teachers. Reform is "imposed" from above, rather than "developed" by collaboration. Teachers are treated as ancillary to the process, instead of major players.

Once again, teachers have been denied any meaningful role in reform.

Appointing people who were teachers, who supervise teachers, who interact with teachers – but are no longer in the classroom – is the wrong way to improve teacher effectiveness. Every day a person is not in the classroom is one more day that he or she is separated from firsthand experience and knowledge of teaching and learning.

There is no substitute for giving teachers a meaningful and respected voice in every discussion and the power to have an effect on all decisions.

No reform effort can succeed without teachers. Governors, education secretaries, politicians, superintendents and principals can develop policies and demand accountability, but very little will be achieved until teachers in the classroom are given a substantial role in the process. Exclusion sends a clear message of disrespect and devaluation. When that happens, no one is inspired to do his or her best. Reform must begin with teachers.

This task force is a slap in the face to every hardworking teacher in New Mexico. It practically guarantees an outcome that will be ineffective, impractical, counterproductive and unworkable if not actually detrimental to improving teaching and learning.

Everyone praises teachers, yet teachers have been locked out of the process and only one teacher in our state is deemed worthy of inclusion.

One half of all new teachers leave the profession during their first five years. One half of the remaining new teachers leave during their next five years.

The National Center for Education Statistics discovered three main reasons teachers leave the profession: 1) Constant battles with administration over micromanagement and lack of autonomy; 2) Unreasonable demands and staggering workloads; and 3) Poor working conditions, including salaries.

It does little good to study what makes teachers effective if current policies are driving the best and brightest out of the profession. This task force, as currently constituted, is ill-suited to address these issues.

The lone teacher on this task force has a huge responsibility. Even though outnumbered 14 to one, she must be strong, focused and determined.

She must speak out when things are proposed that won't work in the classroom, won't inspire teachers to do their best and don't address teacher retention. Every teacher in our state is counting on her to bring her skills, talents and daily classroom experience forcefully into every discussion.

If those in power in New Mexico don't respect teachers enough to invite meaningful participation on a task force whose goal is to improve teacher effectiveness, how is it possible for them to respect teachers enough to let them teach their children? Isn't it time we started asking teachers what they need to be more effective and actually listening to them when they tell us?