

Ruszkowski faces myriad challenges as head of PED

By Ken Whiton / Albuquerque resident

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Chris Ruszkowski's ascension to the position of acting head of the New Mexico Public Education Department has received notable attention in the Albuquerque Journal.

Ruszkowski was welcomed with an editorial, "A teacher is at head of the Public Education Dept. Class," pointing out that, unlike his predecessor, he was a classroom teacher for three years. An op-ed from a former student in Florida, "Ruszkowski is a game-(c)hanger," heaped praise on "Mr. R," a teacher she fondly remembers from his two years in Florida. However, not everyone praised him. A letter to the editor, which the Journal titled, "PED needs more than a clone," expresses doubts about his qualifications and implies that education in New Mexico needs to take a new direction.

I agree with all of these comments and will now add some of my own.

I hope Ruszkowski's three years in a classroom give him some understanding of the complexities of teaching.

As a former teacher myself, it's always gratifying to have a student remember me as having made a positive contribution to her/his educational experience and life.

Yes, Ruszkowski must take us in a new direction. Morale is at an all-time low, teachers are leaving classrooms in droves and there are hundreds of vacancies at the beginning of a new school year.

Instead of telling us "Schools are being run for adults and not for children," let's remember that the adults in our schools are the very people who care the most about children, otherwise they wouldn't be there. Those adults, the teachers, are also important because our teachers' work environment is our children's learning environment, and the way we treat teachers is the way we are treating our children.

Even with reductions in the amount of time spent on standardized examinations, students are still being forced to take too many high-stakes tests which really make no contribution to their education and, in fact, steal precious instructional time.

Ruszkowski's former student wrote of how he "taught us to think critically by both embracing and challenging the traditional middle school social studies curriculum."

These important critical thinking skills cannot be taught by teachers who are not allowed to "think critically by both embracing and challenging" edicts laid down by those in authority, even acting Secretary Ruszkowski himself. Classifying all criticism of PED policies as "politically motivated," "by defenders of the status quo," "naysayers," "special-interest groups," etc., must end.

Teachers and schools are still subject to an inaccurate, statistically indefensible regime tying teacher evaluations to student test scores. In fact, the statistician who designed PED's teacher evaluation and school grading systems has now co-authored a research paper which clearly points out the multiple flaws in the very evaluation system he developed. For a detailed, yet easily readable analysis of that research paper, go to this website: cese.org and search for that organization's current issue of their publication, "The Beacon."

Another important issue is the adoption of the “Next Generation Science Standards.” In 2013, the Math and Science Advisory Council unanimously passed a motion to support PED adoption of the NGSS “as written without any modifications.” One and a half years later an NGSS Teacher Focus Group thoroughly examined the standards and said it “strongly supports adoption.” The former secretary never told us why, after four years and two unanimous recommendations, the standards were still not adopted. One hopes political ideology is not getting in the way of adopting standards which affirm evolution and the scientific reality of climate change.

In a time when science, technology, engineering and mathematics – STEM – are increasingly important, and in a state with a stupendous amount of scientific knowledge and ability, the standards must be adopted immediately. I look forward to Ruskowski’s soonest action possible in adoption of these standards. And if not, please tell us why.

I’m wishing Ruskowski the best. Our children’s future depends on his leadership.