

A Good Education: The Obvious, but Neglected, Solution for a Better New Mexico
By Senator Pete Campos

Look into the eyes of the next youngster you see, whether it's an eight-year-old learning to read, a pre-teen wondering how to fit in or an 18-year-old trying to decide between work, college or both. Look deep into their eyes and ask yourself: What have I done to help this young person succeed?

As politicians, policymakers and bureaucrats gather in Santa Fe to plot the best way forward, too much time and energy are spent plotting how to regain or retain a political advantage. We need to work more on improving the education our children receive.

The lack of attention paid to improving the educational opportunities for our children is understandable, given the attention paid to the pitched rhetoric and easier-to-digest proposals to prohibit employee unions from collecting fair-share dues from nonmembers, to keep third graders who cannot read from advancing to the fourth grade and to prohibit a person who is in the country illegally from having a driver's license.

Those are all important issues, and each will be debated this session. But the success of New Mexico does not rest on the fate of any or even all of those proposals. There is no single measure that will cause our state's anemic economy to spring to life, our high violent-crime rate to drop or the young professionals who have left New Mexico to return.

What will make New Mexico successful is good schools. Schools that give children hope to land a job and business owners hope to be able to recruit good employees who are ready to work. Schools that help produce citizens who eschew substance abuse and crime, who thrive as creative, analytical thinkers and who give back to their communities. Schools that help fulfill every parent's wish that their children will enjoy greater opportunity and success than they had.

What can we do to improve the education our children receive and to make a difference, both immediate and long-term, in their lives? Several things:

* We can remember that learning, like growing, is a process unique to each child. As convenient as it is to label eight-year-olds as "third graders" and 10-year-olds as "fifth graders," this works against many of our young learners. Instead of penalizing a child for learning at his or her own pace, let's create schools that allow each child to blossom in his or her own time.

* We can recognize that an education does not begin in kindergarten and end in

college. We must commit financial resources to early childhood education, adult basic education and job training and retraining programs.

* We can treat teachers as the educated professionals they are. Let's allow teachers to assess students as only they can — through the trained eyes of professionals working closely with each child — rather than hand this monumental responsibility to others.

* We can speak the truth that tax breaks are a short-term tactic to lure businesses from other states but not a long-term strategy to increase the productivity, and ultimately the wages, of our workers. We can recognize that short-sighted tax policies hurt economic development by depriving our schools of the tax dollars needed to educate our children and produce the workers and consumers that drive our economy. Our small businesses will not thrive, and we cannot attract new businesses, without a well-educated, productive work force.

Let's emphasize the value of human interaction in learning and recognize that today's students are tomorrow's citizens in need of a rich education that instills in them a desire to be lifelong learners. Let's set aside acrimonious debate and work toward our common goal of improving the education that our children receive — the real solution to poverty and lack of economic opportunity.

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