

More Resources Needed — Now — for Education at All Levels

By Senator Pete Campos

Policymakers, community leaders and educators have spent decades debating how best to improve New Mexico's public school system. Although we have seen great results, the debate rages on and causes division. We become critical, or cynical, of one another when what we truly need is to work together

It is time to focus on solutions. School funding as a percentage of state spending, student achievement and the public's satisfaction with the state's public schools are all down. The general public applauds educators and is demanding that community leaders listen and support a plan for educators to help all our students become lifelong learners.

A renewed focus along with the necessary resources is needed now to support everything from early childhood education, nutrition and health programs to family support and income programs. Not only is a good education one of the foundations for a healthy, happy childhood and success later in life, a good education is also *dependent* upon a healthy, happy childhood. Everything is connected. Children will not learn if they are hungry, distracted or withdrawn because of problems at home or are simply not in school because they are sick. And one of the keys to our long-term fight against hunger, poverty and domestic violence in New Mexico is to ensure that our children — tomorrow's adults — are better educated.

It is not easy to spend more money on education and social programs in the best of times, but it is especially difficult when the state budget is as tight as it has been for the last four or five years and is likely to be for several more. But while not easy, it is important to do so because this is precisely the time when New Mexicans need a better education, more financial support and more robust social assistance.

While early childhood education is critical, we must also emphasize secondary and post-secondary education, recognizing the twin goals of our schools: to instill a lifelong desire to learn and appreciate life's diversity and to prepare students for the hard task of finding, keeping and excelling at jobs that pay the bills.

Specifically, we must:

- + support public health efforts so that every child starts school healthy and stays healthy throughout the child's school years;

- + support after-school and summer programs so that students stay interested in

school and make wise choices to stay in school;

- + implement new strategies for early childhood reading programs, like hiring reading coaches, and support early intervention programs for students who need assistance;

- + invest in post-secondary educational academic and training programs to encourage and prepare young New Mexicans to enter the honorable profession of teaching and continue to make teachers' compensation competitive for those who make that commitment;

- + strengthen curriculum, align education with employment trends and improve our vocational educational system to attract manufacturing;

- + ensure that technology reaches all corners of the state so that all students can access the world of research, discovery and current information;

- + evaluate the educational offerings in all our communities and work to correlate and maximize educational opportunities for all students, whether they reside in Maxwell, Deming, Tatum, Vaughn or Albuquerque;

- + increase funding for special education programs to ensure that all students have a chance to succeed;

- + boost student post-secondary support services, such as career education, guidance, counseling, life skills building and tutoring, so that students have the tools to contribute to society in an effective way and provide for their families; and

- + strengthen concurrent enrollment and dual credit programs to allow students who enter college to save money by enrolling as upperclassmen, and strengthen vocational education so that those who do not enter college can enter the work force better prepared.

The social and economic vitality and viability of our entire state depend on effective strategies that keep quality educational opportunities available in rural, suburban and urban communities so that students can decide when they leave home, how they wish to pursue their education and where they choose to live.

New Mexico has a unique opportunity during the 2012 legislative session to unite and to improve education.

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