

## **Time Is Ripe for Real Education Reform in New Mexico** **By Senator Pete Campos**

New Mexico's future rests on the strength of its schools, and our schools can be made much stronger by supporting a cohesive system that offers students a lifetime of challenges, achievements and successes.

Schools train future workers, inspire future civic leaders and enrich our communities' cultural, entertainment and athletic scenes. Our state and local economies will not grow, and the next generation of New Mexicans will not raise their families here, if our schools are inadequate. Our state is changing, and our educational system must change with it. We are no longer a quaint little state that's insulated from the rest of the world. Our population will top three million by 2035, and while a greater proportion of us will live in and around Bernalillo County, those of us who do not will remain connected through whatever has replaced our current technology. How we live, work and play will change dramatically over the next quarter of a century, and our schools, from pre-kindergarten through post-graduate, will play a key role in preparing our growing population for those changes.

New Mexico's political and educational leadership must step up now to create an educational system that helps meet those needs.

It's time to really reform our schools by integrating our pre-kindergarten through post-graduate school systems into a well-knit system supported by a New Mexico education coordinating council. We cannot afford to continue to treat our schools, colleges and universities as distinct pieces of a puzzle; we must view them as a system, just as students and their future employers do. In Colorado, such a council is working to facilitate discussions and coordination on a range of issues, including early childhood education, reducing the number of dropouts and improving transitions between high school and college — all of which are critically important issues for New Mexico.

An education coordinating council should be broad-based and should represent each level of education in New Mexico and a cross-section of employers. It should not replace the current governance structure of local school boards and boards of regents, but it should work to foster a climate of communication and cooperation among our schools, colleges and universities that will help ensure that New Mexico students are prepared as well as they can be to take their place in the work force.

Our schools should:

- \* teach students how to learn deeply, not just regurgitate information;
- \* produce graduates who excel at the next grade level and who eventually enjoy success in their chosen fields of employment;
- \* instill the desire and the ability to thrive in a heterogeneous world;
- \* inspire students to fully engage in the political and civic arenas, including as volunteers; and
- \* track students' progress through the ranks of education and in the work force to ensure that what is being taught is actually being applied.

We are facing a monumental economic and fiscal challenge at the state, national and world levels. We must recognize that it is our desire to learn, our thirst for knowledge and our quest to find not just success but to find *better ways* to achieve success that give us hope and reason to believe that this challenge will pass: we will overcome it, and we will be stronger because of it. This is an opportunity to examine how our educational system can best serve our students.

Ensuring that our educational system really is a *system* — and not just a series of seemingly connected parts — is an excellent first step toward that goal.