

We're All Responsible for Educating Our Children

By Senator Pete Campos

Education is about much more than textbooks and classrooms. It's also about the multitude of unanticipated life-challenging situations that affect our lives. It even goes beyond teachers and students. It is a lifelong journey, and we need to celebrate it as such.

As a state senator and a retired but committed lifelong educator, I grapple daily with ways both to celebrate that learning and experiential journey and to make it a better one for everyone — from children just beginning it to adults who embrace it in any number of ways. I am also always looking for ways to support those who help with that journey, and while teachers are critically important and fundamental cornerstones, this journey demands commitments from many others.

Education begins with the family, the foundation upon which quality in our lives is built. If we are to improve upon our educational system, we must always keep in mind the importance of families to that system and how policymakers can help families. We must also bear in mind that families are the basic building block of communities, which are a vital part of the educational process. What we, as parents, teach our children and how we teach them will affect almost every aspect of their lives and, ultimately, all of society. Parental or guardian input is critical to shaping a better public education system.

Families and communities are the foundation of education, and the fundamental framework built upon it should start with early childhood education. New Mexico needs to improve its early childhood education system. We must have a detailed plan to develop, implement and improve our early childhood programs that includes home visitation, child health and parental or guardian education. We need to ensure that early childhood and pre-K programs are available to all New Mexico families.

After early childhood and pre-K programs, the next rung on the public education ladder is the K-12 system. As a lawmaker, I feel that this is a very important educational phase, if for no other reason than that it accounts for about half of our annual state budget. There is crucial work to be done in this area, and I believe it begins with strategic planning and effective curriculum alignment. We must thoughtfully and realistically set goals and decide on actions to achieve them, particularly through the use of available resources.

Our kindergartens must be strengthened to prepare our children for grades one through 12. Somewhere in the K-12 system, an alarming number of students drop out. Many of those students that do not make it through enter either the workforce or college unprepared for the specific demands they'll face. As former president of a small New Mexico college, I can offer countless stories of high school graduates who simply did not possess the necessary reading, writing, math and critical thinking skills required to succeed in college and beyond. It was not because those students weren't smart enough — they absolutely were — but their skill sets were not adequately developed. Strategic planning is key, particularly to keep everyone on the same page, so that a student finishing a grade in one part of the state will be prepared for the next grade in another corner of the state.

We also have to keep in mind that education is global. Our children will be competing in a global economy, but it is also important to keep in mind that there may be global education techniques we can borrow to bring our system more up to date.

We must value and respect teachers. This includes family and community members, but above all, it also means schoolteachers. We must re-instill high regard for teachers and treat them with the dignity they have earned and deserve as employees, community members and

professionals. The roles teachers play in and out of the classroom are endless, but doubtless include parents or guardians, mentors, protectors and sometimes confidants to students. Our classrooms must be interactive places where students can ask teachers why things are the way they are, and teachers can respond as well as inspire and challenge students to want to learn more. Each one of us has a teacher we revere just like a parent or guardian. Let's tell them how much they are appreciated and thank them for their selfless service to make our lives better.

The educational journey is a lifelong one. Every minute we waste by not improving our system makes that journey a bit tougher for the young mind just beginning it.