

**Education Is the Key to New Mexico's Success;
The Solution Is Within Reach
By Senator Pete Campos**

It is easy to become discouraged these days in New Mexico as crime is out of control, our economy is in shambles and our public education system is among the worst in the country. As difficult as it is to acknowledge these hard truths, doing so also points the way to an achievable solution.

The link between our investment in our children's education and safer, more prosperous communities is undeniable. Educated children grow up to be productive, engaged, law-abiding members of their communities, which leads to safer communities with plenty of jobs, which in turn will encourage young New Mexicans to remain in New Mexico rather than flee to surrounding states.

We know this to be true, yet instead of investing in education we seek short-term "solutions" to crime and joblessness, such as tougher prison sentences and tax breaks for businesses, which, in the cruelest of ironies, actually starve early childhood education programs and our schools of desperately needed funding.

The secret to success — both for individuals and society — isn't really a secret, it's a good education.

It is not too late to turn things around in New Mexico. We should start by developing a common vision — and a plan to achieve that vision — of what we want New Mexico to be like for generations to come. New Mexicans from all walks of life, all backgrounds and all parts of the state must be involved in developing this shared vision. We are socially, economically, demographically and geographically diverse, which creates both challenges and opportunities, and we must not ignore any segment of our society in developing our plan.

Not only will this effort create a blueprint or strategic plan for making New Mexico great, it will also prove cathartic in itself by demonstrating that we need not accept our challenges as permanent obstacles. New Mexicans' creativity is boundless.

Here are just some of the ideas I've heard from fellow New Mexicans:

* better coordinate educational services locally and regionally to maximize the efficiency of limited federal and state funding available for technology, health care, child well-being and education. We can afford neither duplication of nor gaps in service;

* ensure that community policing is the norm in New Mexico to strengthen community support of our law enforcement officers and reduce both violent and nonviolent crimes;

* emphasize vocational as well as academic education in our public education and higher education systems to ensure that courses are aligned within each student's academic career and lead to jobs in New Mexico;

* market and capitalize upon New Mexico's strengths and uniqueness in agriculture, water and natural resource management, film and video production, environmental protection, science and technology development and health care in an effort to strengthen our local economies;

* repurpose school buildings that may be closed due to declining enrollment as behavioral health crisis centers, small business incubators, adult education centers and community service centers; and

* continue to develop the Las Cruces-Santa Teresa area as a major educational and manufacturing corridor.

No community, state or country will ever be without problems or challenges, and I know that the challenges we face now seem insurmountable. The last decade has been devastating in New Mexico as people, especially younger workers, leave the state for safer and more economically rewarding lives in other states. But I am confident that we can turn things around as leaders emerge to encourage and guide us to work together, break down barriers and invest in solutions — starting with the education and well-being of our children.