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Guest Columns

NM needs to confront challenges one by one

By Sen. Pete Campos / Las Vegas Democrat

Sunday, April 22nd, 2018 at 12:02am

Often, I hear criticism that the Legislature has not done enough to solve one problem or another. Take your pick: our economy, education, crime. The list goes on.

This criticism dismisses the hard work performed year-round by volunteer, citizen legislators and ignores efforts already made. For example, this past session, the Legislature passed a crime package providing tools – and funding – for law enforcement and prosecutors to tackle the crime wave gripping our communities. Nonetheless, criticism of the process is fair in acknowledging the tremendous amount of work ahead. Because the policy changes that help spark cultural shifts tend to happen incrementally, we cannot, as a state, afford to waste so much as a day in confronting our challenges.

That is why we must begin by immediately addressing school safety. Recent school shootings, including one last December in Aztec, have highlighted how critical it is that we ensure the safety of our most precious resource: children. Waiting for federal policymakers to act is no longer an option. New Mexico must act on school safety via a special or extraordinary session within the next three months. Forming a task force to study the issue and craft meaningful legislation over the next month allows time for everyone to reach some agreement before convening a session in mid-June to pass what could be model legislation on school safety that other states can use as a blueprint.

After that, policymakers need to quickly shift their attention to two more areas: early childhood and higher education. The pattern emerging here is not an accident. The real energy belongs to our youth, and through education, we can begin to tap that energy and direct it toward the challenges of today and tomorrow. That vibrant energy has been moving out of state for too long now, and we must find ways to retain it.

The obvious starting point here is higher education because we need to keep more young people in New Mexico to contribute to its growth. There are several areas that need work: improving coordination between the higher and vocational education systems and ensuring that leadership looks beyond higher tuition and fees for answers. There are some obvious areas we can build upon – our national laboratories and military installations are huge employers. Building a system that prepares students for employment there makes sense. We can also make better use of our existing telemedicine and tele-education systems to make education more accessible.

We must also prepare future entrants into higher education with the necessary tools to flourish, and that begins with early childhood education. Almost \$300 million has recently been committed to early childhood education programs, but it is simply not enough. A good starting point on improving programs would be to form a task force with members from legislative committees, with input from the executive branch and educators, to review programs, identify reliable funding sources and propose sweeping changes to early childhood and related services.

There is no magic bullet, no simple policy fix for any of these challenges. Similar concerns – long-standing deficiencies exacerbated by sporadic and often inadequate funding – plague each of these areas. Disappointing outcomes, while measurable, have failed to be addressed. All of these areas touch the lives of all New Mexicans in one way or another, yet a lack of coordination drains limited resources far too quickly. Still, none of these concerns represents an insurmountable hurdle.

New Mexico is a citizen legislature, and it can be difficult for members to devote time outside of the session to developing solutions. However, most members should be able to devote time between now and next January to at least one of these priorities. The task is daunting, but I am reminded of the old adage: the best way to eat an elephant is one bite at a time. As policymakers, taxpayers and citizens, we must all come to the table, put a napkin in our lap and start chewing.

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