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Serious change (courage) needed in New Mexico

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From time to time, as I travel around my district and to other areas of the state, I hear criticism that the Legislature has not done enough to solve one problem or another. Take your pick: our economy, capital outlay, education, crime. The list goes on.

This criticism dismisses the hard work performed year-round by volunteer, citizen legislators to develop workable solutions to our many challenges, and it ignores efforts and advances already made. For example, this past session, the Legislature passed a crime package that provides tools — and funding — for law enforcement and prosecutors to be able to tackle the crime wave gripping so many of 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 head on.

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. Forming a task force now 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 quickly pass what could be model legislation on school safety that other states struggling with the same issue can use as a blueprint.

After school safety, 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 develop and retain it.

The obvious starting point here is higher education because we need to keep more of our young people in New Mexico to contribute to its growth. There are a number of areas that need work, such as updating the Community College Act, improving coordination between the higher education and vocational education systems and ensuring that the leadership at our institutions looks beyond higher tuition and fees for all the answers. There are some obvious areas we can build upon — our national laboratories and military installations are huge employers in the state. 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 all education more accessible to people in rural areas.

We must also prepare future entrants into our higher education system with the necessary tools to flourish, and that naturally begins with early childhood education. While we have committed almost \$300 million in recent years to early childhood education programs, it is simply not enough. A good starting point on improving our approach to early childhood programs would be to form a task force with members from the Legislative Finance Committee and the Legislative Education Study Committee, and with input from the executive branch as well as educators, to review programs, identify reliable funding sources and propose sweeping changes to early childhood and related services.

Another necessary policy requiring overhaul is capital outlay reform. A review of our current system versus systems in other states will likely reveal more effective practices and could even include some relatively low-hanging fruit that we can quickly decide on once the 2019 session begins. We also have to consider a two-pronged approach to more meaningful capital outlay reform. On one end, we must coordinate our infrastructure process to maximize the efficiency of taxpayer dollars and extractive industry revenue. On the other end, we must do a better job of educating those seeking capital outlay funding about how we will vet plans and designs so that we stop pursuing wasteful and unused plans and redesigns.

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 some 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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