

**Education Loss as a Result of the COVID-19 Pandemic  
and What We Can Do Moving Forward  
By Senator Pete Campos**

New Mexico has once again been ranked 49th in the nation for education quality. As the COVID-19 pandemic has continued to push students out of classrooms and onto computer screens, the learning capacity and quality in schools have only decreased. Recent assessments have shown that students' reading scores have declined between three and six percentage points, and their math scores have declined between eight and 12 percentage points. Prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, students in New Mexico were about four months behind their peers based on standardized learning benchmarks. Now that the effects of remote learning in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic are being revealed, this deficiency has increased, showing that students are now up to six months behind their learning progress benchmarks.

At-risk student populations are especially vulnerable to these education shortfalls. Native American, Black, Hispanic, low-income and younger students have shown significantly lower achievement gains during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given that New Mexico has a large proportion of both students of color and students from low-income families, uncovering solutions to education loss needs to be a top priority for our state. Quality education is the foundation of success for the upcoming generation, and it is our responsibility as residents of this state to ensure that our students have access to an education that will set them up for bright futures.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, New Mexico received a waiver from the United States Department of Education that allowed schools to opt out of standardized testing requirements. While this measure was intended to reduce strain on educators and students, it left decision makers without the data needed to analyze student progress and the effectiveness of school interventions. If we want to close the achievement gap, it is crucial that we have measurable results for student success in addition to concrete mechanisms for holding schools accountable. School districts across the state are in desperate need of resources and a strategy for tracking student progress, as well as identifying, implementing and monitoring evidence-based interventions to address lost instructional time.

New Mexico is in a unique position with ample funding to support the programs that have been effective at ameliorating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, including extra instructional time, tutoring options and innovative teaching methods. This funding has been made available to school districts to address unfinished learning, but it has gone largely underutilized. In 2020, for example, New Mexico public schools were given \$1.5 billion to respond to the challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic. While some school districts opted to devote large sums toward unfinished learning solutions, other school districts elected to spend only the bare minimum required. Further, approximately one-half of New Mexico school districts chose not to participate in an extended school year or extended learning programs, and 14 of the 89 school districts did not provide any plan to address unfinished learning. These variances can easily increase the learning inequities that are already present in our schools. Rather than allowing these vast differences in funding and program implementation to persist, we should be pushing for schools to implement extended learning time programs (ELTPs) to allow students that have fallen behind to catch up, and schools should be strongly encouraged to use more of the funds available to them to address unfinished learning. Moreover, at the state level, we must give serious consideration to providing teachers with seven percent salary raises. It is critical that we explore ways of attracting youth toward careers in education, where they can go on to influence future generations of New Mexicans.

The roadblocks that the COVID-19 pandemic has posed will impact how we educate our students long into the future, but the negative effects of lost learning can be mitigated if we act now to address these concerns. Thankfully, New Mexico is in an excellent position to foundationally change the way that schools are educating our state's children. By using these unprecedented levels of funding and gathering the data to inform effective solutions, we can close the achievement gap and give students the resources that they need to learn to their fullest potential.