

Deming Headlight

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Your turn: No single solution for better education system in New Mexico

Your turn

Pete Campos For the Headlight

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With extraordinary income available for the next budget year and a lawsuit pushing us toward reform, the Legislature has been even more focused than usual on investing in public education.

Evidence from the most successful education systems in the world demonstrates the best systems have valued, high-quality educators, strong early childhood learning opportunities, supports for struggling students, and robust career and technical education. To transform New Mexico's education system, we must fully support our educators and continuously support our children.

At the heart of the school system and the legislative investment are our teachers. National research repeatedly shows teachers have more influence over a student's success than any other classroom factor. Like most states, New Mexico has a critical teacher shortage. While much of the public focus has been on adequate pay, efforts to build an adequate, high-quality education workforce must start early and support must continue through all career stages. New Mexico must promote teaching as an important, rewarding career to high school students, make a college education in teaching affordable and accessible, support new teachers struggling in the classroom, and create a working environment that tells educators and school leaders they and their growth are valued.

As passed by the House—the bill must still be considered by the Senate—the budget plan raises minimum annual salaries for level one, two and three teachers and principals by \$10,000 each to \$50,000, \$60,000 and \$70,000 and provides for an average 7 percent salary increase for all staff, an increase that grows to 10 percent for staff who work in schools that provide extended learning programs. The budget plan provides enough money for school

administrators to pay all staff at least \$15 an hour and provide targeted pay increases for hard-to-staff positions.

The budget plan also includes substantial investments in scholarships and other financial aid for students in colleges of education, student teacher stipends, scholarships and supports for educational assistants pursuing teacher credentials under the Grow Your Own program, and teacher residencies, which allow new teachers to work alongside more experienced teachers in an approach that can help new teachers succeed.

In addition, the spending bill includes tens of millions of dollars for Native American, bilingual, and other multicultural education because we know minority students do better when they see themselves, their families, and their traditions in their lessons; \$8 million for community school and family engagement initiatives; \$10 million for career and technical education; and \$14 million for early literacy, reading supports, and interventions for struggling students.

As important as what we do for school-age children is what we do for children before they enter school. We know if we want our children to succeed academically, we must support them from birth. The Legislature this year will significantly increase its investment in home visits to new families, child abuse prevention and intervention, early childcare, and early childcare workers. The budget bill includes a \$10.6 million increase for prekindergarten and \$1 million for scholarships and wage supplements for early childcare teachers, many of whom are paid just \$10.50 an hour. Outside of the budget, the Legislature is considering bills that would make it safer for mothers to surrender unwanted infants.

And, of course, support can't stop at high school graduation. Postsecondary education, whether it's career and technical advancement or a four-year degree, is expensive, particularly for those who must support themselves, and maybe even a family, at the same time they go to school. The budget bill includes \$65 million for the opportunity scholarship for full-tuition awards targeted at returning students who earned most of the credits toward their degrees before leaving and \$140 million for the lottery tuition fund to ensure lottery scholarship winners are fully covered for tuition for the next few years.

It sounds like a lot but there is no single approach that can ricochet around the room striking down all the barriers to a successful education system in New Mexico. We must look at the care and education of our children from birth through early adulthood as a system that needs a multifaceted approach.

Senator Campos, a Democrat from Las Vegas who holds a doctorate in educational leadership and a masters in guidance and counseling, has been a member of the Senate Finance Committee since 1997 and is also a member of the Legislative Finance, Revenue Stabilization and Tax Policy, and Water and Natural Resources committees. He has served as the senator from District 8 in northern New Mexico since 1991 and has served as president of Luna Community College, superintendent of the Las Vegas City Schools, and mayor of Santa Rosa.