

B i t e s i z e

 The Public Education Department is asking for almost \$2.7 billion from the state general fund to support public schools in FY19, essentially the same amount schools received this year. However, department officials said they developed the budget request when the state was expecting little growth in revenues in FY19 and might revise the numbers now that the revenue picture has improved.

 The Los Alamos Public School Board has entered into a nearly \$470,000 a year, five-year contract with a private company to provide night-time custodial services at the middle and high school. The contract includes an additional \$55,000 for start-up costs. Those costs will be spread out over the five years of the contract unless the contract ends early. In which case, the school district must pay the start up costs in full.

 The Public Education Commission has voted to recommend the state discontinue the charter for New Mexico Connections Academy, a virtual school serving about 1,400 students in grades four through 12. The school has missed numerous performance measures and commissioners were particularly concerned about the school's failure to reach 95 percent student participation in standardized tests.



i n f o r m E D

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Senator Mimi Stewart, Chair / Representative Andres Romero, Vice Chair / Rachel S. Gudgel, Director / December 2017

From the Chairwoman

Pinching Pennies

Until they stripped it from the House-Senate compromise on the tax reform bill, congressmen seriously considered eliminating a fiscally inconsequential provision of tax law that allows educators who spend their own money on school supplies to deduct \$250 from their incomes.

Seriously.

The deduction reduces taxable income, not the tax owed, and adds up to about \$40 a year for teachers who surveys show spend \$500 to \$600 a year on classroom supplies, often to help low-income students. The House wanted it out; the Senate wanted to raise it. The compromise leaves it unchanged.

In or out, the fact the deduction was up for grabs when other loopholes were left intact is just one more symbol of how the United States undervalues its teachers and its public education.

While the countries with the most successful education systems recruit their top students to be teachers, provide them with a demanding education, value their skills and reward them accordingly, and promote collaboration and innovation by paying for ample hours outside the classroom, the United States begrudges our teachers a \$40 discount on hundreds of dollars of unreimbursed professional expenses.

According to the nonprofit Economic Policy Institute, teachers' real pay has dropped since 1996 while most college graduates have seen an increase. Women in teaching now get paid 14 percent less than women graduates in other fields, while the wage gap for men is 25 percent. Not only are teachers expected to provide a quality education, including paying for supplies that should be covered with public funds, they are expected to do it at bargain-basement prices.

Numerous studies have shown that teachers are the most important factor in the classroom contributing to student success. We lament the failures of our schools but we do very little to support the people who can make the biggest difference.

Senator Mimi Stewart

Virtual Charter Schools Fall Short on Scores

The more than 2,000 New Mexico children who attend virtual charter schools are less likely to test as proficient in standard assessments even though they are also less likely to be at risk of failure, a joint LESL and Legislative Finance Committee evaluation shows.

The review of performance and management of the state's virtual charter schools, scheduled to be presented to the committee at 8:35 a.m. December 19, concludes the schools struggle with academic performance and fiscal responsibility and might not always comply with state law.

The report says students in fourth through eighth grade at the New Mexico Virtual Academy in Farmington and New Mexico Connections Academy in Santa Fe experience fewer days of learning than students in other schools and underperform students in brick-and-mortar schools on math and reading proficiency tests.

While 20 percent of third-through-12th-grade students statewide tested as proficient in math in 2017, the highest proficiency rate in the virtual charter schools was 11 percent. At Pecos Connections

Academy, the state's third virtual charter school in Carlsbad, just 8 percent of the students were proficient in math.

On reading, proficiency for students in third through 12th grade at the virtual charter schools were up to 14 points behind the state average of 29 percent.

However, Pecos Connections Academy outperformed the state on the iStation reading assessment used for kindergarten through second grade, with 88 percent proficient compared with the state average of 61 percent.

Low-income students at virtual charter schools also demonstrate lower rates of proficiency than low-income students statewide. Statewide, 31 percent of low-income students were proficient in reading in 2017 and 15 percent in math. At New Mexico Connections Academy and the Virtual Academy, the reading proficiency rates for low-income students were both below 24 percent and the rates for math were both below 10 percent.

In addition, the state public school funding formula treats virtual charter schools similarly to

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State Considers Adult-Focused Diploma Program

The nonprofit behind an adult learning curriculum and testing service that leads to a high school diploma instead of a general education certificate is seeking New Mexico approval for their program.

A representative from Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems appeared before the committee in November to promote the National External Diploma Program, a nearly 40-year-old service that provides an online, self-paced program for earning

a high school diploma and an occupational or specialized skill.

The NEDP assesses three content areas and seven functional life skills aligned with Common Core college- and career-readiness standards. New Mexico is one of 45 states that have adopted the Common Core.

To make NEDP more appropriate to adults, students demonstrate competency by applying their skills to simulated academic, workplace and life scenarios.

Each performance task is evaluated by a NEDP-certified assessor and then verified by a portfolio reviewer using standardized criteria. The assessors and reviewers must complete 18 hours of training on the components of the NEDP and the assessment criteria.

About 3,000 students a year take the assessment.

The diploma program is in use in New York, California, five other states and the District of Columbia and recognized in the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and by the federal Office of Career, Technical and Adult Education as an alternative path to a high school diploma.

The New Mexico Public Education Department has approved the General Educational Development – GED – and High School Equivalency Test – HiSET – as high school equivalency exams.

All but one state accepts the GED. About 20 accept the Hi-SET, and about a dozen accept the TASC – Test Assessing Secondary Completion.

California is the only state that accepts those three and the NEDP.

Virtual Schools Overfunded, Underperform

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brick-and-mortar schools even though they spend about a third as much on instructional staff per student and about a quarter as much on building operations and maintenance.

In FY17, the three virtual charter schools sent \$7.5 million, about half of the schools' \$15 million in total funding, to two out-of-state, for-profit companies for curriculum and other services under sole-source contracts.

Further, even though state law prohibits the involvement of for-profit companies in managing public schools, defined as the hiring, firing, and directing of staff, Pecos Connections Academy's contract with the for-profit Connections Education gives the company the responsibility over hiring and dismissal decisions. Pecos Connections staff said the company is not involved in staff management.

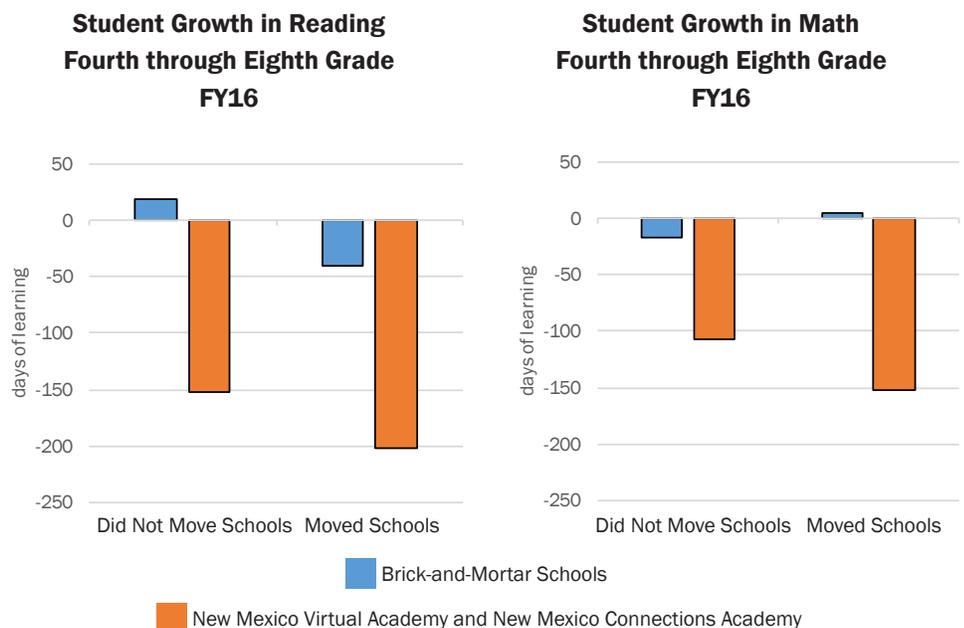
The schools also approved invoices and created financial reports with few details – hindering transparency into their financial management – and mishandled purchases and other financial transactions in ways that might have been in violation of the State Procure-

ment Code, the evaluators found.

The evaluation also notes that school districts have a financial incentive to charter virtual schools because virtual schools can enroll students from anywhere in the state and charter schools must pay the district a 2 percent administrative fee, allowing the district to receive revenue from students living outside the district.

Virtual Charter Students Lose Learning Days

According to staff calculations, the average fourth through eighth grade virtual charter school student at New Mexico Virtual Academy and New Mexico Connections Academy experienced the equivalent of between 91 and 161 fewer days of learning than the average brick-and-mortar school student from FY15 to FY16. Virtual charter school students that changed schools between FY15 and FY16 experienced the equivalent of about 50 fewer days of learning than virtual charter school students that did not change schools.



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