Bite-Size

A look at North Central New Mexico teacher shortages found teachers who grew up in the area are more likely to stay in the job and recommend local colleges work with local schools to recruit and prepare a home-grown workforce. The study of the regional workforce by the Los Alamos National Laboratory Foundation and Learning Alliance New Mexico found 57 percent of surveyed teachers who grew up in the area have taught for six or more years, compared with 39 percent of nonlocal teachers.

Funded student enrollment for the 2020-2021 school year has dropped to its lowest level in 15 years. The preliminary figure for “membership,” an average of enrollment figures from December and February from the prior school year, is 321,411 for this school year, down 1,690 students from the membership for the 2019-2020 school year. With both enrollment figures collected before school buildings closed, the decline does not reflect pandemic-related enrollment changes.

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Informed

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Representative Christine Trujillo, Chair / Senator Mimi Stewart, Vice Chair / Rachel S. Gudgel, Director / September 2020

Missing the Mark

Standardized tests, a disputed and incomplete measure of student achievement and a demonstrably poor predictor of college success, were a widely used tool for assessing teachers for many years, in New Mexico and throughout the country. But you won’t find nary a mention of test scores in the new New Mexico teachers evaluation system, Elevate New Mexico. Our state, like almost half of all states, has decided test scores tell us little about the quality of teachers or the impact they have on their students. While 37 states used test scores in their teacher evaluation systems in 2015, that figure dropped to 26 by 2019.

The use of test scores to predict future student performance and, through that, determine whether a teacher “added value” was perhaps the most contentious element of NMTeach, the state’s now defunct teacher evaluation system. Teachers complained too many factors affecting student performance are outside their control. Indeed, most research indicates half of a student’s performance is dependent on factors outside the classroom. Further, the policy expert who developed New Mexico’s teacher assessment tool, an expert witness in the Martinez/Yazzie school sufficiency lawsuit, said the tool was wrong at least 15 percent of the time.

While test scores generally reflect student academic learning, they are less capable of reflecting a student’s social-emotional learning or critical thinking skills. Other factors – on-time graduation, special education interventions, absenteeism, and others – are better measures of student success. And tests say nothing about the quality of teacher engagement or ability to build strong relationships that make children excited to learn. Yet the state used test scores for years, allowing them to label teachers as good or bad and affecting pay and professional development.

The state will be “test driving” Elevate New Mexico over the next year to see if its use of professional development plans, administrator observations, and family and student surveys does a better job of measuring teacher quality. The new system might need to be tweaked, but its heavy reliance on reviewing what teachers actually DO in the classroom, how they plan lessons and classroom space and interact with students, along with its requirement that administrators provide teachers with feedback and tools for improvement, should result in a system that works better for teachers and our children.

NM Diversity, Poverty Complicate Reform

Improving New Mexico’s schools is “extraordinarily complex” because a diverse student population mostly from low-income families is spread over a large geographic area, and reform is hindered by a failure to properly fund the higher cost of educating students facing poverty and other barriers and a long history of local control, a national education think-tank concludes.

In Improving Education the New Mexico Way: An Evidence-Based Approach, the Learning Policy Institute concludes New Mexico needs to design a system that puts marginalized students – what the report calls the “norm” in New Mexico – “at the center and builds the state and local capacity to meet their diverse needs.”

The study, scheduled for a hearing at 1 p.m. on September 23, says New Mexico differs from other states because of its geographic, cultural, and linguistic diversity – “its most valued attribute” – and persistent widespread poverty – “its most troubling.”

The study says New Mexico’s failure to improve its schools, despite 50 years of effort, is the result of inadequate resources and failure to implement policies effectively.

New Mexico was making progress before the pandemic- and oil-bust-related economic decline with better teacher pay and other efforts to retain a high-quality workforce; investments in extended learning time; expanded services for low-income, English-learner, and mobile students; a community school initiative; and a more supportive accountability system, the report says.

However, that progress is now threatened, with the most vulnerable children most at risk.

Nevertheless, New Mexico has the resources to make certain improvements now and should plan a strong system in anticipation of stronger revenue in the future, it says.

For the long-term, New Mexico should focus on developing the five elements common to successful systems in other states and nations: “(1) meaningful learning goals, supported by (2) knowledgeable and skillful educators, (3) integrated student supports, and (4) high-quality early learning opportunities, all made possible with (5) adequate and equitably distributed school funding.”

In addition, the report finds, continued on back
Per-Pupil Spending Data Shows Size Matters

A snapshot of per-pupil spending suggests average costs are highest in the state’s smallest school districts, but its a state-authorized charter school that is spending the most per student, LESC analysis indicates.

NM Needs to Focus on Marginalized

In materials prepared by staff and writing training for teachers who plan to stay in their communities.

The study also recommends expanded use of community schools, which include integrated supports for students and their families and have been shown to improve student performance when implemented properly.

The report emphasizes the need to continue to increase the funding formula differential for students at risk of failure but suggests the state create an additional factor for schools in communities with high concentrations of traditionally underserved students.

Most Districts Can Reopen Elementaries

More than 800 schools in 67 school districts are eligible to begin part-time in-person classes for prekindergarten through fifth grade, Department of Health data from September 15 indicates.

Under the allowed hybrid learning plan, schools can hold staggered classes in school buildings; however, 24 districts have announced they will stay with full-time remote learning until after winter break.

Counties must have less than an average of eight positive daily cases per 100 thousand people and a test positivity rate of less than 5 percent to be rated green. In addition, the Public Education Department must approve each reentry plan, which must include cleaning supplies and procedures and a rapid response plan for responding to cases.

If a county is no longer rated green, PED has said it will work with local school agencies to keep schools open, employing partial closures and quarantines.

The Health Department’s Covid-19 map is updated every two weeks.