

REMARKS FOR REPRESENTATIVE RICK MIERA

NMAEA and NMTESOL 2012 CONFERENCE

HONORING OUR PAST, CREATING OUR FUTURE

OCTOBER 25TH AND 26TH

Introduction

Thank you for inviting me to speak at today's meeting.

- I want to start off this afternoon by expressing my gratitude for your service to the State of New Mexico.
- It's a difficult and often thankless job that you have, but please know that the members of the Legislature – in particular, the Legislative Education Study Committee - recognize the important work that you do.

- Not only do you give the citizens of our state the opportunity to improve their quality of life, but you also teach them the importance of education.
- They, in turn, pass these values on to their children, who also have a brighter future because of the work that you do.

TESOL

Your theme for this conference is very fitting: “Honoring our Past, Creating our Future.”

- Because there are two groups of educators present today, I want to discuss how this theme applies to each, beginning with those of you who teach English to speakers of other languages.

- New Mexico, which turned 100 this year, is often defined by its rich multilingual and multicultural traditions.
- Early on in our statehood, the two major languages spoken were English and Spanish. As part of our statehood, our constitution guarantees the educational – and linguistic – rights of Spanish speakers:
- Article 12, Section 8 of the constitution states:

“The legislature shall provide for the training of teachers in the normal schools or otherwise so that they may become proficient in both the English and Spanish languages, to qualify them to teach Spanish-speaking pupils and students in the public schools and educational institutions of

the state, and shall provide proper means and methods to facilitate the teaching of the English language and other branches of learning to such pupils and students.”

- The drafters of the New Mexico constitution also recognized the importance of inclusion and preservation of the various cultures.
- They explicitly stated in Article 12, Section 10 that:

“Children of Spanish descent in the state of New Mexico shall never be denied the right and privilege of admission and attendance in the public schools or other public educational institutions of the state, and they shall never be classed in separate schools, but shall forever

enjoy perfect equality with other children in all public schools and educational institutions of the state, and the legislature shall provide penalties for the violation of this section.”

- And equally important are the native languages spoken by members of the 19 pueblos, the Navajo, and the Mescalero Apache.
- These languages are not only a valuable part of who we are as a nation, but also a major reason *why* we are a nation still.
- I’m thinking, of course, of the Navajo code talkers who helped the United States land a victory in World

War II (one of the members of the Legislature is a former code talker, by the way).

- You've heard the old expression, "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never harm me."
- Well, who would ever have thought that language could be used as a weapon in this way?
- And, as prophesized in the New Mexico motto, "It grows as it goes," our state has seen growth and expansion, and with growth and expansion come even more cultures and languages.
- Our national labs, world-class art, and military bases have drawn talented individuals from all over the world to our state.

- These folks bring with them various languages such as German, Vietnamese, French – and even a strange language known as “Texan.”
- All of the individuals I just spoke about – those of Spanish decent, Native Americans, and those who have been attracted to our state from all over the world – may find themselves in your classrooms.
- And it is your job to teach them the English language while remaining mindful of the richness and importance of their first language - honoring their past while helping to forge a bright future for them.

- As we move forward, there are many challenges that accompany us.
- For example, in 2010 the Governor and Secretary of Public Education at the time signed onto the adoption of the Common Core State Standards.
- While there is hope that the standards will help to elevate our children to new levels of learning, many have criticized the standards for their lack of consideration of students learning to read, speak, and write in the English language.
- This year, public schools in New Mexico will begin the rollout of the new standards, first in grades K-3.

- I am hopeful that, as the new standards are put in place, the Public Education Department will remain mindful of those students for whom English is not their first language, and provide the necessary time and instructional support in order for them to benefit from the new standards.
- I also ask that the Department be mindful of these students and their circumstances when calculating school grades or evaluating teacher performance, under recently released rules from the Department.

Adult Basic Education and the GED

- Now, with regard to the education of adults, we again find a rich history.
- During World War II, one of the most dark and worrisome times in history, many youth found themselves on battlefields rather than in classrooms.
- After finishing their service, these individuals returned to the United States with many battle scars, but without a high school diploma.
- As a result, in 1942, the American Council on Education was asked to create a test that could be used as a credential for these returning soldiers and sailors so that they could carry on with their lives, whether that meant finding employment or attending college.

- The GED has been revised three times since then, and is due for another revision in 2014, which I will get to in a moment.
- On a separate, but somewhat related, subject, the United States Congress, recognizing the need for adults to have access to basic education, has passed three separate acts to help adults master requisite skills in order to achieve a livable wage:

- In 1973 Congress passed the *Comprehensive Employment and Training Act*;

- In 1982, they enacted the *Jobs Training Partnership Act*; and

➤ In 1998, we received legislation that is still in place to this day – the *Workforce Investment Act*.

- In New Mexico specifically, responsibility for adult basic education was transferred in 2003 from the State Board of Education (now the Public Education Department) to the Commission on Higher Education (which is now the Higher Education Department).
- Today you serve nearly 25,000 students across New Mexico, and you do so with limited resources.
- When compared to public education, the per-pupil allocation to adult basic education is only a fraction what public schools receive.
- The same goes for instructional materials.

- The formula in state statute for adult basic education instructional materials only takes into account 25% of enrolled students;
- That is, the public school instructional materials adoption for any given year is multiplied by 0.25 of adult basic education enrollment in order to determine the allocation.
- And then we also need to consider funding cuts over the years to adult basic education programs.
- Since 2008, general fund appropriations to adult basic education have dipped from \$6.1 million to \$5.3 million.

- Accompanying these cuts is concern that New Mexico will not meet maintenance of federal effort requirement and risks the loss of federal funds.
- That is why – as many of you here know – I introduced legislation in the last legislative session for increased funding to adult basic education.
- As I mentioned before, this investment in the citizens of New Mexico not only helps the students you currently serve, but also instills in their children the notion that education is an important part of life.

- Now, some may say that the state's budget is tight, and finding the money to support adult basic education might be difficult.
- But if you look at the return on this investment – if more than 25,000 New Mexicans, and their children, can master those basic skills necessary for the workplace – who can argue the positive benefits.
- These students will be placed in a position of moving forward to further their education or career.
- Which ultimately means economic benefits to the State of New Mexico in the form of a better qualified life for its citizens.

- There is also concern with regard to the 2014 series of the GED that I mentioned earlier. The test will:
 - be more expensive;
 - be computer-based; and
 - potentially allow students to bypass adult basic education centers.
- At the legislative level, I am also concerned about these changes.
- Perhaps the most worrisome issue is that the new test will be conducted on the computer.

- Computer-based testing provides many opportunities, such as instant feedback.
- Computer-based testing also encourages those who are not computer literate to learn how to operate a computer – a skill that is undoubtedly important in the 21st century workplace.
- However, we also need to upgrade our infrastructure in New Mexico if we want to be prepared for the 2014 release of the GED.
- Coincidentally, today is the day that “Windows 8” is released.

- This is the latest and greatest operating system from Microsoft.
- Yet, as I'm sure you are well aware, many of our computers are still running Windows XP, which is an operating system that is no longer supported by the company.
- These machines will need to be upgraded and, in some case, replaced.
- If we want the test results on the 2014 GED to be instant, we also need to ensure that testing centers have adequate access to internet connections.

- Another strain on our technology infrastructure in the state will come from the Common Core State Standards.
- In the same year that the new series of GED is announced, the Public Education Department will begin administering required assessments associated with these standards.
- These also are a computer-based exams for students in K-12l
- As a result, the classrooms in our public schools will also need to be upgraded in order to administer these tests.

- With this in mind, I encourage you to take stock of your technology needs and make sure that your legislators and program directors are made aware of those needs as we move toward 2014.
- The GED was created in order to help people get back on their feet, find work or additional education, and earn a livable wage.
- We should be mindful of this as we progress toward the release of the new GED.
- While some say the new GED will ensure that participants are college- and career-ready, others

have criticized it for privatizing something that was once a public service for those in need.

- If the new version of the test does not meet the priorities of the state, we may wish to consider alternatives, like many other states have begun to do.
- I understand that this will be a topic of discussion during the sessions this afternoon.
- Looking ahead to the 2013 legislative session, there are a few things that I would like the Legislature to consider.

- First of all, after looking at the public school funding formula, some at the Roundhouse have been proposing a cap on the age of public school students.
- Current law does not place a maximum age on students who receive funding for public education, and as a result many have been able to obtain a high school diploma or GED at schools such as Gordon Bernell Charter School in Albuquerque.
- Because I believe that everyone deserves equitable access to education, regardless of their age, I will **not** support an age cap in public schools *until* adult basic education receives an adequate amount of funding in order to serve these individuals.

- Second, I would like to see adult basic education students receive more funding for instructional materials.
- Last year, adult basic education received approximately \$200,000 from the Public Education Department to fund instructional materials.
- When distributed throughout the state, this funding amounts to just under ten dollars per student.
- I think all of you would agree that ten dollars is not enough to pay for text books.

- Nor will it be enough to provide the necessary computers and software required for 21st century learning.
- Finally, the term “General Educational Development” appears in our state statute, which is something I think needs to be changed.
- As we have seen in recent years, changes to the GED can occur at any time, and are often beyond our control at the state-level.
- By instead using the term “alternative assessment for adult learners,” New Mexico will have greater flexibility when changes are made to the GED.

- When those changes are not in the best interest of New Mexico, using a more generic term provides us the opportunity to use an alternative to the GED.

Conclusion

- Despite all of the challenges and changes I mentioned, I am confident that New Mexico's speakers of other languages and adult learners have a bright future.
- Funny, how when I – and many of you were growing up – one of those challenges may have included the

punishment that we may have received for speaking Spanish in school.

- The effect – I think many of you may agree – was a generation that then lost their first language.
- And, the next generation trying to regain and retain their primary language.
- A language that is vital to their identity and culture.
- I, along with many others, am indeed grateful that the mindset of requiring that only ONE language be spoken has changed.

- Now, the research says that those of us that know more than one language are more capable of grasping different concepts more readily....perhaps even suggesting that speaking more than one language means that we are even smarter.
- That is indeed a change in thought, no?
- On behalf of our students – whether young or older – the gratitude extends to all of you in this room (as well as to those that are unable to be here) – sincere gratitude for providing access to a positive future.
- Those who wish to learn English, regardless of who they are or where they come from, have you to thank

for the numerous opportunities they receive when they are able to communicate with other English speakers.

- And those who are seeking better employment, or more education, have you to thank for the doors you open for them.
- To conclude -- again, on behalf of the Legislative Education Study Committee, again, again, and again --I would like to express my gratitude – mil gracias -- for the work that you do for the students you serve.
- Getting back to the theme of your meeting today – you are the important link in “creating the future” for both our students and our state.