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## 'Dropout factories'

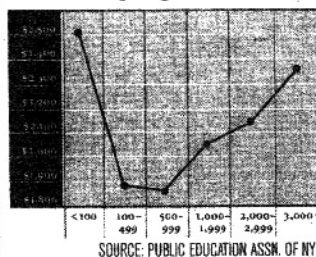
A New Mexico think tank says oversized schools contribute to poor graduation rates and is calling for a legislative mandate for smaller elementary, middle and high schools

BY THOMAS MUNRO | SPECIAL TO THE NM&W

New Mexico's large, "factory"-style public schools are often better at producing dropouts than they are at producing graduates.

That's the first message coming from Think New Mexico's latest legislative campaign. The second is that the best medicine for this problem "other than solving poverty," as Executive Director Fred Nathan says, is reducing the size of schools. The think tank

Annual Operational Cost Per Student By High School Size



says evidence shows smaller schools are stronger communities, which foster better test scores, better retention and less violence.

According to Think New Mexico's report, "Small Schools: Tackling the Dropout Crisis While Saving Taxpayer Dollars," Education Week magazine reported a 54.1 percent graduation rate for the state in 2005, second worst in the country and far below the 70.6 percent U.S. average.

"It's increasingly urgent to address this unacceptably high dropout rate," Nathan says.

One reason for urgency is  
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## DROPOUT: Higher Education Department says 67 percent of new jobs require at least some college

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the tightening of the economy, which will make the battle for new employers even fiercer. The state Higher Education Department says 67 percent of new jobs require at least some college.

The think tank says one key to improving graduation rates is shrinking the schools, which it says grew all out of proportion in the 20th century, following a factory model that promised higher quality at lower cost through mass production. Nathan says the factory school outlook was wrong on both counts: it actually reduced quality and increased costs.

Evidence for these positions is mounting, partly because charter school experiments are greatly increasing the number of small schools in urban environments. Lisa Grover, executive director of the New Mexico Coalition for Charter Schools, says experience is showing that size matters.

"The charter model is not only about small classroom sizes," she says. "There really is something about smaller schools. The average-size charter school around

the country is 190 kids, and the schools really become small communities."

Those communities, Grover says, foster relationships between faculty, with administrators and with students.

"What we have in a lot of our more successful charter schools is, kids don't fall through the cracks," she says.

Think New Mexico says evidence shows smaller schools not only have better graduation rates, but that the benefit is even more dramatic for at-risk students. It also presents studies that show lower rates of violence at smaller schools.

Opponents of smaller schools say a smaller student body necessarily limits both electives and extracurricular options. Think New Mexico counters that only a small percentage of students take advantage of electives likely to be excluded and that a smaller student body can actually increase participation in competitive extracurriculars like sports.

Dan Salzwedel, former longtime executive director of the New Mexico Activities Association, is a supporter of smaller

schools who calls the idea that shrinking schools hurts athletics "an absurd premise."

Smaller schools give each student a better chance to make the football squad or the debate team or the chorus, which Salzwedel says is a good thing.

"Shouldn't every child learn how to compete in a competitive society?" he asks.

The toughest hurdle in the way of moving to small schools would appear to be paying for, say, two schools instead of one, but Nathan says evidence shows that smaller schools are less expensive to operate because they generally run leaner, need fewer administrators, less transportation and no security beyond the teachers themselves. As for capital costs, Nathan says charter schools have shown that these can be minimized by using public libraries, parks and pools rather than building them. While the new high school in Rio Rancho cost on the order of \$50,000 per student to build, he says charter schools cost \$15,000 per student on average.

Will taxpayers accept less "complete"

schools? Nathan points to the example of Artesia, which could have funded a big high school but instead opted to incorporate the use of existing facilities and saved money in the process. Mesa del Sol, literally in the business of attracting residents, has designed a system of small schools, which will share a gym to save capital costs.

The think tank's specific proposal calls for new high schools to be limited to no more than 225 students per grade, new middle schools to 120 students per grade and new elementary schools to 60 students per grade. Existing oversized schools receiving at-risk funding would be required to use part of it to split into "learning communities": schools-within-a-school that simulate some of the benefit of stand-alone small schools.

Think NM has representatives of all political stripes on its board, and Nathan says the small schools initiative has received support from activists and legislators at both ends of the political spectrum.

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