

THE DEMING HEADLIGHT

Desert Sage: Education: Small is beautiful

For the Headlight

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As a teenager, it never occurred to me that there were schools where classmates didn't know each other, or even more that the principal and assistant principal didn't know all the students by name. I had 70 classmates, all known personally to me, as well as to the teachers and administrators of the high school. Today in New Mexico, more than two-thirds of high school students are in schools with more than a thousand students where such personal contact is simply not possible.

In that small school there were teachers and staff who greatly helped. I could have as easily been a dropout like my father but a vision was imparted, personally, that I could do it. Could that have happened in the so-called "factory" high schools which dominate the scene today, including Deming? All I can tell you is that the personal mentoring relationship I received was a very positive factor in my education.

New Mexico, which usually ranks close to the bottom on any indicator of success, is true to form on this. Only Nevada has a higher rate of dropouts than we do. Only slightly more than half of New Mexico's kids graduate from High school (55 percent). In a world in which technological skills have replaced manual labor for even low level jobs, this means half of the next generation are trapped in a cycle of menial employment if they are lucky, or more likely unemployment and welfare as a way of life, mitigated only by opportunities with the local drug sector. Since this usually leads to prison, what future will half of the kids here have, and what family life will they provide their children?

There is no single answer. A sense of values would be crucial to this, but there seems little chance our community will grasp this and act upon it. The next best thing would be a school system that could help to break the cycle. The best system adjustment which could help this would be smaller schools. Think New Mexico, a think tank in our state, found that the graduation rate for smaller high schools was 24 percent higher than in the "factory" high

schools in New Mexico.

In view of this, three state senators introduced a bill during the last legislative session, which without imposing new regulation or penalties, simply would reward school districts for promoting smaller schools. The senators, including Republican Sue Wilson, Gadsden School Superintendent (in her day job), Cynthia Nava and our own John Arthur Smith, understood that smaller high schools produce a better academic and social result and are actually cheaper to operate, with lower administrative and security costs. The bill, as with most legislation in New Mexico, didn't make it into law, but it is certainly worth trying it again.

In Deming, the district has merged and combined schools to make schools bigger, such as Torres and Red Mountain. The high school is a poster child of the size of school which is impersonal and unfeeling, despite the effort of individual staff. The proposal to create a high school in Columbus which would be an ideal size and would help make Deming High School somewhat less of a "factory" school has not been supported by the school district, despite the clear proof of the studies regarding the value and cost effectiveness of smaller schools. To this add the money saved by discontinuing the current extensive parade of school buses every day from Columbus to Deming and back.

It is not too late. There is an active movement supporting the creation of a new high school in Columbus, which would be a clear educational improvement for all concerned and would have a lot of spin-off benefits for the Columbus community. It

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would help Deming High School to be a more manageable size. it has the support of thinking legislators. Educational studies show it improves student outcomes. The only downside is that it makes for a smaller empire for school administrators. We will see what turns out to be the more important of these factors in our community.

Win Mott is Desert Sage. He lives in Columbus, New Mexico and his column appears in the Deming Headlight on Thursday.



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