
THE SANTA FE
NEW MEXICAN

Friday, August 27, 2004

William W. Waters,
Editorial Page Editor

Robert Dean,
Managing Editor

202 E. Marcy St. • Santa Fe, N.M. 87501

School bells ringing on full-day kindergarten

While the state of our state's public education remains wretched, New Mexicans have new hope for eventual improvement as the school year begins:

Full-day kindergarten, for the first time, will be offered in all our state's schools.

Approved by the Legislature in 2000, the full-day schedule was phased in over five years to ease the budgetary strain. In the Santa Fe district, Acequia Madre, Atalaya, E.J. Martinez, El Dorado and Wood-Gormley elementary schools become the last to join the full-day fold.

Kindergarten should include the many phases of early learning; good citizenship, courtesy, sharing and tolerance also should take hold, preparing youngsters for the crucial basic training of the primary grades.

Yet during years of half-day sessions in some of our state's districts, teachers could offer little more than milk-and-cookie time for our state's 5-year-olds. In many of the smaller districts, money was raised locally for full-day classes. But those serving the great majority of New Mexico families were financially too thin to do it.

That's where Think New Mexico came in. A bipartisan, results-oriented think-tank thought up by Fred Nathan, who'd served Tom Udall as deputy attorney general, it attracted a strong, influential and diverse board of directors:

Edward Archuleta of 1000 Friends of New Mexico; former Attorney General Paul Bardacke; David Buchholtz, attorney and promoter of commerce and industry; former Gov. Garrey Carruthers; administrative executive Elizabeth Gutierrez; LaDonna Harris, founder of Americans for Indian Opportunity; strategic planner Rebecca Koch; Ambassador Frank Ortiz; Roberta Cooper Ramo, first female president of the American Bar Association, and former congressman/Interior Secretary Stewart Udall.

With folks like that collaring legislators and then-Gov. Gary Johnson, a kindergarten bill was squeezed through a 30-day session of the Legislature and gained the governor's signature.

In the next six to eight years, some results of this stronger start to education might be seen, since the full-day phase-in began with schools where student achievement tended to be lower. Full results might not be seen for 12 years, when all our state's 11th-graders will have had the benefit of full-day kindergarten.

But already, there are hints of progress: While our state's high-school juniors performed abysmally on achievement tests, third-graders last year showed improvement over third-graders the year before.

Might that be a result of full-day kindergarten kicking in? It's probably too soon to tell. But we're convinced that Think New Mexico, its many supporters from business, industry, labor and the public sector, and the legislative leaders who saw the idea as a chance to make a difference in coming generations, took a great step forward with it.

Future generations will thank them — and so should today's New Mexicans.