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3 Little N.M. Schools Worth Great Big Look

Griegos Elementary School, with a student body of 366 in a poor minority neighborhood, was recently recognized nationally for high achievement in all grades and subjects. Much of the credit goes to principal Tom Graham, who knows every student's name and so "we jump on problems."

Tohatchi Elementary School, with 227 primarily economically disadvantaged English-language learners, went from having proficiency levels in the basement to among the highest in the state. Much of the credit goes to then-principal George Bickert, who says he knew who his English learners were, which students were poor, what skills they lacked, what their test scores were.

Velarde Elementary School, with 158 primarily minority students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, is considered one of the best schools in New Mexico. Much of the credit goes to involved parents who have fought efforts by the Española school district to combine it with others into one larger school.

So much for the conventional wisdom that poor minority kids will inevitably suffer from an achievement gap. And that bigger is better.

New Mexico Senators Cynthia Nava, John Arthur Smith and Sue Wilson Beffort recognize this pattern of success. Smith, D-Deming and a fiscal hawk, is vice chairman of the Legislative Finance Committee. Nava, D-Las Cruces, is chairwoman of the Senate Education Committee and Legislative Education Study Committee as well as Gadsden Schools superintendent. Wilson Beffort, R-Sandia Park, is the ranking GOP member on the Senate Finance Committee and also serves on the LFC. They are co-sponsoring SB 2, a voluntary program that does not require new appropriations or affect the current funding formula but would create financial incentives to build or retrofit smaller schools.

In light of the Griegos, Tohatchi and Velarde success stories, New Mexico's overall dismal academic performance and considering these tough budget times, incentivizing smaller schools is an initiative worth serious debate when lawmakers' first bell rings Tuesday.

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