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EDITORIALS

Downsized Schools May Be a Real Super Value

The concept of economies of scale — that bigger is better, more efficient, more cost-effective — may work in businesses where you want fries with that, but not necessarily in the business of education, where you want high school graduates.

That's the argument presented by Think New Mexico, which is asking the '09 Legislature to stop paying for construction of mega schools in favor of smaller ones that deliver higher graduation rates.

"The single best thing we can do is stop building these jumbo-sized high schools, which breed alienation and dropouts," says Fred Nathan, executive director of the Santa Fe-based think tank.

What's especially intriguing about his group's 28-page report is that unlike most education reforms, it doesn't recommend throwing more money at the state's dismal 54 percent four-year graduation rate. (The group says an average of 77 students drop out *every day* in New Mexico — 14,000 a year.)

Instead, it has taken national data showing schools with fewer than 900 students provide safer environments, greater extracurricular opportunities and higher graduation rates. Those small schools cost taxpayers less to build and maintain, according to the report.

Think New Mexico wants the Legislature to limit state matching money for construction to high schools designed for no more than 225 students per grade, middle schools with no more than 120 students per grade, and elementaries with no more than 60 students per grade. Existing large schools that get money for "at-risk" students would have to establish smaller learning communities to emulate the model.

Designing for that population "sweet spot" would be a huge change for the state's largest district. In Albuquerque Public Schools, the current building template is around double that amount; a community must have at least 1,500 student for a new high school. Elementaries are designed for 650 students.

The two newest APS high schools also had \$100 million price tags. Nathan says skipping the "bells and whistles" of performing arts centers, libraries, pools, sports fields and gymnasiums in favor of community partnerships, along with scaling back and/or eliminating the need for security, busing and an extra layer of administration, cuts capital as well as operating costs.

The booming charter school movement does it that way, and most of those schools have waiting lists.

And it appears Think New Mexico isn't the only group in the Land of Enchantment enamored with the potential of small schools. A check of the state Public Education Department Web site reveals a 2007 U.S. News and World Report ranking of "America's Best High Schools" that lists 16 in New Mexico. Twelve of those "best high schools" have student bodies under 900.

The four with higher enrollment are in the wealthiest parts of the state. Nathan acknowledges poverty is the biggest contributing factor in dropout rates but says that's a much tougher problem to address.

Around 42 percent of the state's non-capital budget goes into education, so far with less than impressive results. If downsizing schools can deliver higher graduation rates at lower costs of construction and operation, giving taxpayers the most bang for their education buck, it's hard to understand why anyone would argue against it, especially given New Mexico's shameful academic statistics and the tanking economy.

The smaller-school initiative deserves serious study when the Legislature goes back to school Jan. 20.