

Small schools bill gathers support from disparate groups

BY MEGAN KAMERICK | NMW SENIOR REPORTER

An effort to promote smaller schools in New Mexico is picking up steam in the Legislature and has support from an ideologically diverse group.

Senate Bill 2 would amend the Public School Capital Outlay Act to give school districts an extra 10 percent state funding match from the Public School Capital Outlay Fund if they build high schools with enrollments of 400 to 900 students, or elementary and middle schools with enrollments of 200 to 400 students. Districts also could benefit from the incentive if they renovate large schools into smaller schools within schools.

The bill was cosponsored by Senators Sue Wilson Beffort, R-Sandia Park, the ranking Republican on the Senate Finance Committee; John Arthur Smith, D-Deming and chairman of the Senate Finance Committee; and Cynthia Nava, D-Las Cruces, chair of the Senate Education Committee, which passed an amended version of the bill. It's now in the Senate Finance Committee.

Supporters include the free market policy advocate Rio Grande Foundation, the New Mexico Conference of Catholic Bishops, the National Education Association-New Mexico, the New Mexico Activities Association and ENLACE (Engaging Latino Families in Education).

Think New Mexico, the nonprofit think tank in Santa Fe, unsuccessfully pushed similar legislation in 2009. It passed the Senate, but not the House. It has changed some things in the bill, including making it an optional incentive rather than mandatory policy to build smaller schools.

Think NM issued a report on smaller schools in 2008, citing reams of research that indicate smaller schools tend to have better outcomes and fewer disciplinary problems and are more cost-efficient in the long run. It cites studies that found the most efficient schools are those serving 300 to 900 students and that "diseconomies of scale" kick in above 900 students because of increased costs in bureaucracy, security and transportation (see chart).

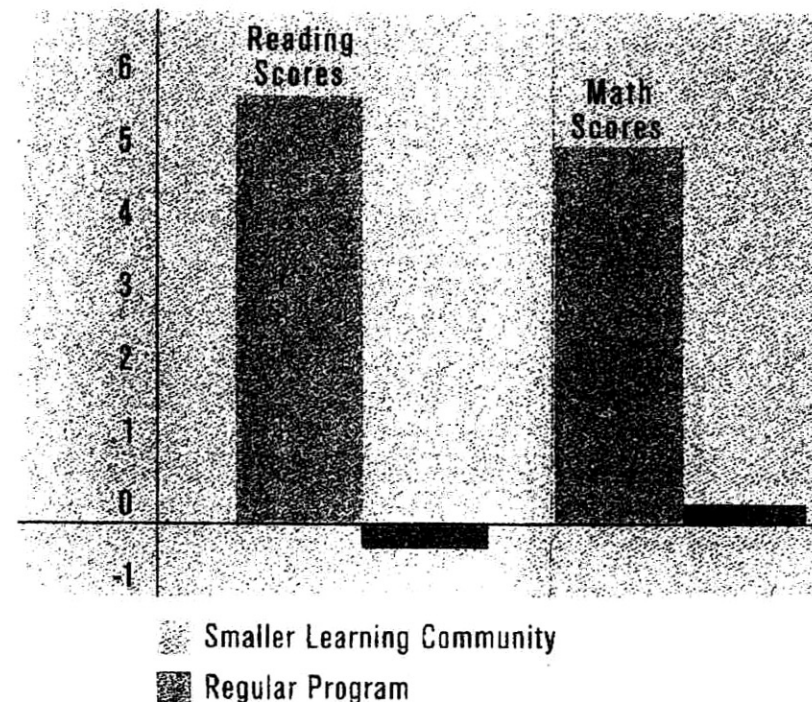
As of 2007, more than two-thirds of New Mexico ninth graders entered high schools with populations larger than 1,000, according to Think NM. Depending

Earnings and unemployment by educational degree

	Percent Unemployed	Average Annual Salary in N.M.
Doctoral Degree	1.4%	\$56,000
Master's Degree	1.8%	\$36,000
Bachelor's Degree	2.2%	\$30,000
Associate's Degree	3.0%	\$24,000
Some College, No Degree	3.8%	\$18,600
High School Graduate	4.4%	\$17,000
Less Than High School	7.1%	\$12,000

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Education Pays," April 2008; U.S. Census Bureau, "5 % Public Use Microdata Samples," 2000

Difference between fall and spring test scores of Santa Fe High freshmen



Source: Measures of Academic Progress (MAPS) test scores for Santa Fe High School freshmen, 2004 - 2005

on how graduation rates are measured, the state is graduating from 55 to 66 percent of students, said Fred Nathan, Think NM's executive director.

"We're going to need jobs in New Mexico in the next decade, and two-thirds will require a college degree," Nathan said.

"So we'll need every one of those kids to graduate from college just to meet the demand for workers with college degrees. We need to graduate a much larger percentage of kids than we do now."

Nathan said the national research on dropouts indicates the primary reasons are that kids feel unsafe and they feel alienated.

The push for smaller schools got a dramatic boost after the 1999 shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., which has an enrollment of 1,965 students, according to Think NM's report. Many pointed to the shooters' sense of alienation as one of the key ingredients in that tragedy.

Taking out mandatory language in the current bill made it more palatable to Albuquerque Public Schools, said Joe Escobedo, a lobbyist for APS.

"We're already implementing some of the things that they're talking about, but it's just the whole idea of when we begin to build schools again, what is the most cost-effective way to do it," he said. "That's what we have some concerns about."

APS initiated smaller freshmen academies within larger high schools in 2000, according to the Think NM report.

A 2005 evaluation of the academies found higher attendance and lower dropout rates than in standard ninth grade programs, and more students advanced to the 10th grade.

Tom Graham, principal of Griegos Elementary in Albuquerque, said his school's smaller size has been a key reason why it has performed so well academically.

"The whole school is able to get to know everybody," he said. "So teachers know the children better, the mechanics of the school work easier, such as bus pick-up, school assemblies, tutoring, detention and recess."

The amended version of the proposed bill also added cost-saving measures, such as requiring districts to look for sites for new schools near facilities they can share, like a city-run athletic facility or a community college library.

Paul Gessing, executive director of the Rio Grande Foundation, said this is just one part of the reform that is needed to improve education, but it's an important one.

"I think it's time to move beyond these major institutions," he said. "It's kind of a big factory model that you centralize everything and put it all together, and kids kind of get lost in the mix."

They lose sight of themselves as individuals, Gessing added.

ENLACE, which works statewide to increase access and success for all students, sees this as one way to close the achievement gap, said Diana Montoya-Boyer, community relations manager.

"From our standpoint, it's also a civil rights bill," she said. "We see larger schools also happen to be the schools with higher rates of free and reduced lunch, and higher rates of minority students, so it's as though particular communities are being pushed into what Think New Mexico calls 'dropout factories.'"

An analysis of the bill by the Legislative Education Study Committee gave it a mixed review, noting that Hanna Skandera, secretary-designate of the Public Education Department, has argued that cost-effectiveness is possible in small schools because of higher graduation rates.

But it also cites research noting there must be an organizational culture that fosters academic achievement.

The Legislative Finance Committee analysis raises the possibility that the public school capital outlay fund will be diminished more quickly under the legislation. But Nathan said the LFC analysis does not take the cost-saving aspects of the amended bill into account, such as the shift from a 25 percent incentive to 10 percent.

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