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## EDITORIALS

### Graduation Rates Show Need for Real Reform

The good news is New Mexico finally has a reliable measurement of student graduation rates, a methodology that follows a student from freshman to senior year, an actual number it can use to track how well the state is doing by its students.

The bad news is, that number is terrible. Only about half of New Mexico's students who should have graduated in 2008 actually did.

While the national average is a weak 70 percent, Education Secretary Veronica Garcia says our four-year cohort graduation rate — 54 percent statewide — “is alarming” and “clearly unacceptable.”

She's right on both counts.

The low number should also be the impetus for school reform that goes beyond simply throwing an extra \$350 million a year at a system that isn't held accountable for failing to educate half the population. That proposal died last legislative session and will likely return in 2010.

In the past decade public-school enrollment in New Mexico has been flat. Meanwhile, funding has increased 57 percent and certified school employment has grown 10.2 percent. New Mexicans now spend more than \$2 billion a year on public schools — more than two-fifths of the state's main budget account.

The bottom line for the Class of '08 is all that cash paid for just 50 percent of Hispanic, 64 percent of Anglo, 45 percent of Native American and 52 percent of African American students to get a diploma in four years.

But the state's numbers go beyond ethnic breakdowns to call into question popular excuses for poor achievement — poverty and English-language proficiency. It turns out female (58 percent) Asian (67 percent) students who were English-language learners (55 percent) and lived in poverty (60 percent) had the best chance of walking the line in '08.

It could be that the categories of Title I and ESL attract more funding and more staffing and thus more effort toward success. Or it could be that schools with high student populations in those demographics are doing something different that is paying off. It is vital in the coming months that the state examines what works — why *does* Quemado Independent Schools have a 98 percent graduation rate? Logan Municipal Schools 89 percent? Questa 83 percent? Lake Arthur Municipal Schools 81 percent?

Santa Fe think tank Think New Mexico has argued it's because of the smaller learning communities those rural districts have by definition, something larger districts should have by design. Of the 16 N.M. public high schools that made U.S. News and World Report's list of the best in the United States, 11 had populations below Think New Mexico's recommended 900-student maximum. The remaining five were in wealthy communities.

Think New Mexico's proposal, to restrict capital funding to smaller schools that cost less to staff and operate, also failed in the '09 Legislature. It, too, will be back in the 2010 session.

Gov. Bill Richardson has said education reforms will be a priority during his remaining time in office. Garcia says “we are going to need to increase our school, parental and community efforts to make dramatic improvement. I hope the release of these statistics will be a call to take action from every corner of the state.”

New Mexico finally has, in black and white, the numbers that show just how bad the overall state of public education is. Before sending taxpayers deeper into the red to fund expensive but nondescript education reform, lawmakers should look at the bottom lines of districts that graduate most, if not all, of their students.

That's the best way to look for ways improve the dismal graduation rates, New Mexico's public education system and the state's economic future.