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ONE DOLLAR

## EDUCATION

# When bigger isn't better

*Think tank to push legislation  
limiting enrollment in  
new public schools*

By **Anne Constable**  
The New Mexican

Building smaller schools will help lower New Mexico's dropout rate and raise academic achievement, according to a Santa Fe-based think tank.

Think New Mexico will be championing legislation in the 2009 session of the Legislature to limit enrollment in all new high schools in the state to no more than 900 students. Existing schools that exceed that size and receive funds to serve at-risk students would be required to establish "smaller learning communities" by 2011.

The group cites new data showing the state's graduation rate ranks second from the bottom nationally. Only 54.1 percent of freshmen students finish high school and graduate compared to a national average of 70.6 percent.

The ranking was first published in June in

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*Education Week* and reflects the number of freshmen who earn a diploma at the end of four years. Previously, New Mexico calculated the rate based on the percentage of seniors who graduate, which overestimates the actual graduation rate.

In a 32-page report to be issued Wednesday, the think tank presents extensive research supporting the idea that smaller schools strengthen relationships between students, their classmates and teachers; counter feelings of alienation and isolation many feel in huge schools; and can have a profound effect on achievement, particularly of low-income students.

Graduation rates climb because "if students are more engaged, they're more likely to stick around," said Fred Nathan, executive director of Think New Mexico. "Kids, it turns out, are different than widgets."

Smaller schools are also safer and cheaper to build, the report says.

Think New Mexico is a nonpartisan think tank with a strong track record. Since it was founded in 1999, it helped pass legislation to implement full-day kindergarten in the state's schools, repeal the tax on food, create a strategic water reserve, reform the state lottery to reduce operating costs and establish state-supported Individual Development Accounts, interest-bearing bank savings accounts set up for low-income families.

The newest proposal looks like another winner to some educators. "I think they have the kids in mind," said John Harnisch, former assistant principal and smaller learning communities project director at Santa Fe High School.

Harnisch was in charge of a pilot project at Santa Fe High in 2004, in which about one-quarter of incoming freshmen — 100 students — were assigned to smaller learning communities. Initial testing showed they were below average in math and reading. In fact, some parents took their higher performing kids out of the program, Harnisch said. But by the end of the year, the students in the smaller learning communities scored "way above" the average of the freshman class.

OVER 

# Enrollment: State's graduation rate at 54.1%; national average is 70.6%

The program, funded by a federal grant, is still sputtering along, Harnisch said, but scheduling conflicts and lack of buy-in from some in the school community have been holding it back at both Santa Fe and Capital high schools.

The programs, he said, "are not as functional as they could be. It's just so hard to get everybody on board. People want to go back to the way we used to do things." But, he said, the new superintendent, Bobbie Gutierrez, is working hard to solve the problems.

Think New Mexico's proposal is a "really good idea," said Anne



**Fred Nathan**

Salzmann, head learner at Monte del Sol Charter School, which has 370 students in grades seven to 12. Because of the school's size, she said, "it is harder to have an us-

versus-them mentality. It's harder for kids to get lost."

Monte del Sol gets 10 applicants for every position and has a 92 percent graduation rate, Salzmann said. "When I think about why we are as successful as we are, it's not because we have better teachers," she said. "It's because we know our students. I can't tell you how much time we spend calling parents. We (administrators) listen to our own attendance line. I really believe that is a large part of our success. A lot of it is about the relationship between students and adults."

In addition to limiting the size of high schools to 225 students per grade, Think New Mexico is also proposing to cap enrollment at middle schools at 120 students per grade and at elementary schools at 60 students per grade.

Many of Santa Fe's elementary and middle schools — including Capshaw, DeVargas, Ortiz, Ramirez-Thomas, Agua Fria, Piñon, César Chávez, El Dorado, Kearny and Sweeney — exceed the proposed limits. But in 2010, when a new elementary school opens for 624 students in Rancho Viejo and a rezoning plan goes into effect, the result will be closer to Think New Mexico's idea of about 420 students per elementary school.

The district is also weighing the idea of creating a career technical education center that would draw students from the two comprehensive high schools and reduce their populations as well.

Like the rest of the country, New Mexico embraced school consolidation in the past. Between 1939 and 1968, the report says, the number of schools in the state declined more than 42 percent from 1,143 to 659 while the school population grew by 117 percent.

The movement accelerated post-Sputnik amid fears that rural schools couldn't adequately teach science. In 2007, more than two-thirds of New Mexico ninth-graders entered high schools with enrollments of 1,000 or more, including Santa Fe High (about 1,470) and Capital High (1,024).

But studies conducted from the late 1970s to the early 1990s began to show a correlation between school size and dropout rates. Think New Mexico studied the class of 2007 and found that schools in the state with 500-1,000 students had the lowest dropout rate — 31.7 percent.

Cost is a major factor that states consider when building new schools. Large schools are often perceived to be a cheaper because of economies of scale.

But Think New Mexico found that when schools get too big, they actually cost more to run because of the need for security (gun-toting guards, etc.), more transportation and new layers of bureaucracy.

A study by the Public Education Association of New York in December 1992, which is included in the report, found that the operational cost per student was lowest in schools with 500-999 students but started climbing when enrollment increased. Once the school reached an enrollment of 3,000 or more, the cost per student had increased from under \$1,900 to more than \$2,300.

The cost of building multiple small schools might be higher than building a large school, Think New Mexico concedes, but only if the small schools attempt to duplicate the facilities of larger schools. It cites the example of Albuquerque's Amy Biehl Charter School, where capital costs totaled less than

\$17,000 per student, compared to \$40,000 per student for construction of two Albuquerque public schools, each with an enrollment of 2,500.

The Amy Biehl school saved money by making use of community resources and foregoing a gym, library, swimming pool, theater and other amenities. The same goes for Santa Fe's Monte del Sol, where construction cost \$19,400 per student, according to the report. Students use the facilities at Genoveva Chavez Community Center and playing fields at the Municipal Recreation Complex.

Even if it costs less to run one plant versus three or four, Harnisch said, that "avoids the major issue, which is what's going on with kids' learning."

If adopted, Nathan said, "this proposal would make public schools look a lot more like charter schools."

Santa Fe Public Schools Superintendent Gutierrez said building smaller schools and smaller learning communities is a "wonderful idea," and she hopes the Legislature will be "open to it." But there are additional costs, she pointed out. For example, it takes more teachers to run smaller learning communities. She said the school district is looking at hiring an additional seven teachers for the two high school smaller learning programs. She also pointed out that the state Public School Facilities Authority supports partnerships between the schools and the community to share parks, gyms and other amenities.

Think New Mexico's report discusses some of the arguments against small schools but found little in the research to support the idea that large schools provide significantly more specialized course offerings. In a 1996 survey of studies on school size and student performance, Kathleen Cotton — formerly a researcher at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory in Portland, Ore. — found, for example, that on average, a 100 percent increase in enrollment only yielded a 17 percent increase in the variety of courses. And the allegedly richer curriculum tends to be made up of additional introductory courses in noncore areas.

Larger schools can field bigger, arguably more competitive sports teams, marching bands and theatrical performances. But smaller schools, advocates say, give more students the advantages of participating in extracurricular activities.

Small schools in New Mexico appear to be excelling. Of the 16 schools in New Mexico recognized among "America's Best" by *U.S. News and World Report* magazine in 2007, 12 had enrollments under 900. And Velarde Elementary School, with an enrollment of 156, 95 percent of whom are Hispanic, made adequate yearly progress this year and was recognized as a Blue Ribbon school by the U.S. Department of Education.

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