

Quay County Sun

Viewpoint

Texico example worth following for state schools

Activists, local education bureaucrats and teacher unions have been fully on board with the mantra that we just don't spend enough taxpayer dollars on K-12 education in New Mexico.

This is in spite of that fact that when it comes to per-student spending, New Mexico tends to be closer to the middle of the pack — in stark comparison to our achievement rankings and graduation rates that are consistently closer to bottom of the barrel.

And it goes far beyond debate. Unable to convince legislators to increase our \$2.7 billion education budget, some school officials and advocates have turned to the judicial system. A state District judge in Santa Fe has yet to rule after a recent trial in which plaintiffs argued public school funding in New Mexico is so low it violates the state Constitution.

One of the plaintiffs' witnesses was Santa Fe Schools Superintendent/former Public Education Secretary Veronica Garcia, who testified "the size of the pie is the issue."

So is the size of the pieces.

Enter Think New Mexico, a widely respected bipartisan think tank, and its groundbreaking new report on how we spend our education dollars and how we could spend them more effectively.

Bottom line: We spend far too much money on administrative costs and way too little on classroom instruction. How little? Just 57 cents of every dollar New Mexico spends on K-12 schools goes to instruction. The rest goes to a variety of expenses ranging from administrative travel to take-home cars to public relations, and lobbyists and other expenses that don't directly impact students.

"New Mexico has limited resources, and we must make sure that the dollars we are currently appropriating for education are spent as effectively as possible," Think New Mexico's report says.

This isn't a new argument. Gov. Susana Martinez and some lawmakers have long argued our education system spends too much on administration and too little on classrooms.

But Think New Mexico is to some extent above the everyday political fray.

The organization's study found that some districts do, indeed, channel more to classrooms and less to bureaucrats. If Albuquerque Public Schools was as efficient in that regard as Hobbs, it would mean an additional \$29 million for APS classrooms.

The report cites tiny Texico Public Schools in eastern New Mexico for its low administrative costs, 95 percent graduation rate, and the fact it ranked seventh in the state for reading proficiency and ninth for math proficiency — despite a median family income in the district that's more than \$10,000 a year below the state average.

Yes, it is true that the size of the pie matters. But as Texico and others prove, it matters as much or more how that pie is parceled out.

Think New Mexico is planning to push for legislation requiring districts to spend a minimum amount on classrooms, with a sliding scale taking district size into account.

As Think New Mexico's executive director Fred Nathan points out, if New Mexico could shift just 4 percent of its education budget from administration to the classroom, it would make more than 100 million additional dollars available for proven education reforms — from K-3 Plus to pre-kindergarten to better pay for teachers and principals.

If New Mexico lawmakers can muster the political will to make this happen, the state's taxpayers, and more importantly its kids, will be much better off.