OTHER VOICES

Think Small, Not Big, for SF Schools

BY FRED NATHAN

The debate about how Santa Fe Public Schools should close its $6.9 million budget deficit presents a good opportunity to start thinking differently about how we deliver education in our public schools.

So far the discussion has centered on proposals like increasing class sizes, slashing arts and physical education and consolidating several of the district's smaller neighborhood K-6 schools.

While these approaches may close the deficit, they will also certainly lower student achievement and performance, which is the true bottom line for our public schools.

Think New Mexico would like to propose a better way to close the deficit which would minimize cuts to the classroom and which would also give every child the opportunity to learn in a small school.

Let's start with smaller schools. Some have argued that because many students in Santa Fe are stuck in large schools, the school board should — "out of fairness" — close the district's small schools, many of them high-performing, and establish larger, consolidated schools in their place.

Think New Mexico's approach, which is designed to improve student achievement, would be to do exactly the opposite and instead shrink Santa Fe's larger elementary schools, like Piñon, Sweeney and Cesar Chavez. Those schools have populations of 755, 670 and 598, respectively, and the students in those schools desperately need and deserve the opportunity to learn in a small elementary school (defined as 400 students or fewer, based on a comprehensive review of the research).

Think New Mexico surveyed the current enrollments and capacities of each of the K-6 schools in Santa Fe and discovered that if we moved 1,155 students out of the seven largest K-6 schools, we could reduce their school populations to 400 students each. Fortunately, there are at least 1,151 spaces available elsewhere in the district if we use our facilities creatively.

For example, four hundred spaces are available in the former Alameda Middle School, now sitting empty, and another 400 are available at Amy Biehl, the new elementary school that Superintendent Bobbie Gutierrez and the school board have commendably pushed to open in order to relieve some of the district's overcrowding. In addition, four existing smaller schools, Atalaya, Carlos Gilbert, Kaune and Nava have the capacity to absorb 351 more students between them without exceeding 400 students.

This plan recognizes the value of smaller schools and keeps each of them open. In fact, closing and consolidating smaller schools contradicts over three decades of research, such as researcher Kathleen Cotton's 1996 meta-review of 49 studies that examined the relationship between school size and student performance. Cotton's review found that students in smaller schools are more likely to advance to the next grade level and less likely to feel alienated or disengaged from school. Perhaps most important, it found that students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds demonstrate improved academic performance in smaller schools.

We would respectfully challenge the district's estimates that closing and consolidating four small schools would save approximately $1 million. The district's projected "savings" from closing small schools are based, in part, on rosy assumptions about how much someone would be willing to pay to lease heavily-used school buildings. Meanwhile, Manderfield, which closed in 2007, continues to stand empty because no one has been willing to lease it.

These doubtful savings contrast with the very real recurring dollars that SFPS will lose if small schools are closed. New Mexico's public school funding formula contains a positive adjustment for smaller schools. This school year, the small school funding boost provided an additional $419,983 for Acequia Madre, Alvord, Kaune and Larragoite — dollars that will disappear if the district closes those schools. Consolidation of small schools therefore does not close the budget deficit, but rather exacerbates it.

Now let's look at the budget deficit. Here are five suggested areas for savings that would minimize cuts to the classroom:

- Reduce administrative costs: Superintendent Gutierrez has courageously presented several administrative cuts to the school board, including board per diem and travel, that the board should adopt because those at the top need to lead by example and share in the sacrifices. We delivered a letter to Superintendent Gutierrez on Monday recommending additional administrative cuts, like a 5 percent furlough for the 54 administrative personnel at the central office. Estimated total savings: $1.2 million.
- Lay off some double dippers: The district employs as many as 65 "double dippers," employees who retired and returned to work earning both a salary and a pension. Albuquerque Public Schools plans to save $5 million by eliminat-

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ing 176 double dippers. Estimated savings from replacing fewer than half of the double dippers in SFPS with new employees with smaller salaries and benefits: $750,000.

■ Cut contract services: In the budget category "other contract services," Santa Fe Public Schools spent $2.4 million in 2008-2009, the last year for which we know the actual budget expenditures. This was significantly higher than other, similarly sized school districts in New Mexico, including Rio Rancho, Las Cruces and Gadsden, each of which has more students and spent less than $374,905 on "other contract services" in 2008-2009. The "other contract services" attributed to general administration— the superintendent, executive administration, and community and federal relations —rather than to instruction was $925,000 in Santa Fe, higher even than Albuquerque's $285,000. Estimated savings: $2.05 million.

■ Trim overtime: Santa Fe spent significantly more than similarly-sized districts on overtime and "additional compensation" like stipends and bonuses in 2008-2009. Santa Fe's overtime costs were approximately $685,000, over five times higher than Gadsden or Las Cruces. Rio Rancho reported no overtime costs. Additional compensation totaled $2.7 million in Santa Fe in 2008-2009, or $1.5 million higher than the average of Gadsden, Rio Rancho, and Las Cruces. Estimated Savings: $2 million.

■ Lower energy costs: In 2008-2009 the Santa Fe Public Schools spent approximately $1.5 million on electricity costs. But if the district used some of its one-time capital dollars to install solar panels on its schools and facilities, or adopted other innovative energy efficiency strategies like Albuquerque and Rio Rancho, Santa Fe could significantly reduce its recurring energy costs. Estimated savings: $750,000.

We encourage Santa Fe Public Schools to turn adversity to advantage by using this budget deficit as an opportunity to save dollars while improving education by making small, high-quality schools accessible to all of Santa Fe's children.

To learn more about the advantages of smaller schools, please go to www.thinknewmexico.org.

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