

School-reform legislation re-thinks system

Parents and teachers interested in improving public education in New Mexico may want to consider supporting SB373, the purpose of which is to get decision-making and resources down to the local schools and classrooms.

Sens. Richard Romero and Mark Boitano recently introduced this bipartisan legislation. Romero, a Democrat, is Senate president pro tem and a former teacher, principal and associate superintendent. Boitano, the ranking Republican on the Senate Education Committee, has four children attending public schools. Their legislation is based on the recommendations contained in a report published earlier this year by Think New Mexico.

One of the important findings of that report is that New Mexico governs its schools based on the school board/school district model created by the Puritans in 1640 — a model originally designed to govern a single school or sometimes two.

Fast forward to New Mexico in 2001. We are using that same model to govern 28 schools in Santa Fe and 123 schools in Albuquerque with a much more urban and diverse population. In a system that vast, all that local boards and central administrative offices can do is produce cookie-cutter budgets and curricula that too often fail to meet the needs of individual schools and individual students. A better model would tailor the budget, personnel and curriculum of each school to meet the needs of its students by transferring decision-making in those areas to the principal, parents and teachers at the school site. SB373 does just that.

If we are going to demand accountability of our schools — and nearly everyone agrees that we should — then we owe it to the schools to give them control of their budgets, personnel and curriculum within standards set by the state.

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Commentary

SB373 recognizes that there are many school districts in New Mexico with high student achievement and low dropout rates such as Alamogordo, Cimarron and Cloudcroft. These communities may not need or want to change their governance system. That's why SB 373 contains a local option provision. In this way, SB 373 provides help for those communities that choose it rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all scheme from the top down.

While many of New Mexico's 89 school districts are too large to effectively meet the needs of all their students, they are also too small to utilize the major competitive advantage that the public schools enjoy: the sheer volume of students — approximately 330,000 — in the system. Consider the buying power and the economies of scale that could be productively used to benefit children.

School budgets are a zero-sum game. Every dollar that the system wastes on bureaucracy, duplication or failure to save through economies of scale is a dollar that gets sucked out of the classroom. Yet, New Mexico's public school system continues to deliver noneducational services such as transportation, food services, payroll and accounting through 89 school districts and 10 regional cooperatives. SB 373 would convert those cooperatives into five regional support centers to assist schools, as well as districts, by harvesting economies of scale and providing services more efficiently.

In addition, SB 373 seeks to reduce the 744 pages of state board regulations and the paperwork those regulations generate. It

does this through a task force composed primarily of teachers and principals. Our public schools and the professionals who run them need more flexibility and autonomy with less micromanagement.

Sens. Boitano and Romero have also introduced legislation to amend the Constitution to make the state superintendent of public instruction a cabinet secretary reporting to the governor. If the governor is to be accountable for improving the public schools, then he or she needs to be given more responsibility for their success. This legislation would also allow the people to decide whether to abolish the State Board of Education. There is too little accountability when the vast majority of citizens cannot identify their state board representatives.

Finally, the legislation would change the date of local schoolboard elections from February to the November general election. The timing of local schoolboard elections in New Mexico has its roots in early statehood when women could not vote except in local schoolboard elections. Thankfully, times have changed and now it's time to move these elections to November. That will boost voter turnout and save taxpayers the expense of 89 separately-held elections.

If we are really serious about improving our schools, then we need to reconsider the antiquated ways in which we run our schools. This bipartisan legislation does that by stressing real accountability, by providing the professionals with the flexibility and autonomy to do their jobs and by maximizing the resources that reach the classroom where teachers teach and students learn.

Fred Nathan is executive director of Think New Mexico, a bipartisan, state-wide think tank that last year helped enact a law making full-day kindergarten accessible to every child in New Mexico.