

Think New Mexico proposes smaller schools to save \$\$\$

Making New Mexico's public schools smaller will increase the state's low graduation rate and save taxpayer dollars, according to a report released by Think New Mexico, the result-oriented think tank that led successful campaigns to make full-day kindergarten accessible to every child in New Mexico and to reform the state lottery to send more money to college scholarships.

In the report, *Small Schools: Tackling the Dropout Crisis and Saving Taxpayer Dollars*, Think New Mexico urges the legislature and Governor Richardson to enact legislation that requires (1) any school receiving state capital outlay funding for construction must have a capacity of no more than 225 students per high school grade level, 120 students per middle school grade level, or 60 students per elementary school grade level; and (2) schools receiving additional state funds to serve "at-risk" students must establish smaller learning communities if they exceed these size limits and if they have not already done so.

The call for reform comes in response to new data showing that New Mexico's graduation rate ranks second from the bottom of the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Only 54.1% of New Mexico's children graduate from high school, compared to a national average of 70.6%. An average of 77 students drop out each school day across New Mexico - nearly 14,000 per year.

Numerous studies cited in the report show that smaller schools have higher education rates, higher student achievement, lower levels of student alienation and violence, and higher levels of satisfaction among students, parents, principals and teachers. Small schools also dramatically improve the performance of low-income children, which helps to narrow the persistent achievement gap.

The most affective school size, according to the research, is 600 to 900 students. Yet, in 2007, more than two-thirds of New Mexico ninth graders entered high schools

with populations higher than 1,000 students, and nearly a third entered high schools with more than 2,000 students.

Small schools are not only better for students, they also cost less to build and operate. Researchers have found that the most efficient schools are those serving 300 to 900 students. Schools larger than this experience "diseconomies of scale," inefficiencies and increased costs that result from increases in bureaucracy, security and transportation. In addition, if the operational cost of a school is calculated per graduate, rather than per student, small schools are substantially more efficient than large schools because their dropout rates are much lower.

The capital costs of small schools can also be far less per student than those of large schools if the small schools are designed to take advantage of community educational resources like gymnasiums, pools, libraries and sports fields, rather than duplicating these facilities. Several New Mexico charter schools have successfully applied this community-based model, at a savings of millions of taxpayer dollars.

Think New Mexico will be championing legislation in the 2009 legislative session to cap the size of public schools built in New Mexico and establish smaller learning communities in the state's existing large schools by 2011.

Think New Mexico is a nonpartisan, results-oriented think tank dedicated to improving the quality of life for all New Mexicans, especially low and middle-income families. Along with its education reforms, the group has successfully won passage of legislation repealing New Mexico's regressive food tax, creating a Strategic Water Reserve to protect and restore the state's rivers, and established Individual Development Accounts to help alleviate the state's persistent poverty.

More information is available on the group's web site at www.thinknewmexico.org.