

The 2020 Legislative Session Gets Graded by a Teacher

By Mary Parr-Sanchez, President of NEA-New Mexico

As the legislative session ended a few weeks ago, our State Senators and Representatives returned to their districts. Weary from a 30-day avalanche of bills, lobbyists, constituents, media, and long hours, our unsalaried elected officials took on the task of touting their wins, explaining their valiant attempts, and decrying their losses. As the dust settles on this session and the Governor signs the bills into law, let's evaluate the outcomes for education.

This Legislative session produced some wins for students and educators in New Mexico. The biggest win is the funding allocated for the Early Childhood Education trust fund. We must commit to growing this fund indefinitely to provide education and services for New Mexico's youngest children. Child development experts know that the greatest growth in children occurs from birth to five years, because 90 percent of the brain is developed by five years of age. Proper nutrition, healthcare, home visiting and appropriate interventions for children in the early years of life is something that citizens in New Mexico, working with state government, can do something about! The outcomes for children in this age group are limitless if we commit to investing and improving services every year. Every bad indicator afflicting children in the state can be reversed if we have the political will to do it. If we commit to high quality early intervention and education programs, outcomes for children, including increased reading and math scores, will improve exponentially. High marks for this legislation.

The \$50 million in additional funding allocated for at-risk students provides a much-needed resource for this underserved population. Increased funding paired with accountability for school districts and individual schools will ensure resources are targeted to kids needing them the most. In addition, increased funding for Community Schools will help bring resources into a cohort of schools that have high need. Community Schools promote the voice of the entire school community in decision making at the school, and research shows that this is how real transformation occurs. More students having access to free school lunch will reduce food insecurity and continue to build a strong foundation for learning and finally, Increased state investment in higher education with college tuition offsets will lead to a better educated population. The legislature did their homework this session in moving these bills forward. Great Work!

Educators are grateful for the four percent raise after eight years of almost none. Combined with last year's six percent, educator pay is moving up. This is good news, but the increase most likely won't be enough to prevent educators from their continued flight from the classroom. In 2020, we are 2,100 fewer teachers than in 2014 with no substantial decrease in the number of students. In over 650 classrooms across the state, there is no certified teacher, but instead a revolving door of substitute teachers. It's often the students who are most in need of stability in their lives and learning who are stuck in this cycle of constant transition from one substitute teacher to the next. The reduction of over 2,000 teachers has meant higher class sizes, less individualized student attention, and more discipline issues in the classroom, including increasing violence toward educators. More work must be done to recruit and retain quality educators.

Legislation was passed that will serve as a partial fix to the lack of substitutes available in schools across New Mexico: a big win for students and educators this session. Substitute teachers will be freed from having to pay into the teacher retirement system. Retired teachers will be allowed to return to work

sooner as well. Both measures should help with the tremendous need for substitutes in schools. Great Job!

The legislature also gets high marks for changes to the Public Employee Bargaining Act (PEBA). The changes can be summed up as follows: labor board restructuring, freedom to choose a Union without intimidation (access to unit member information), dues deduction reform (necessary in a post-Janus world) and protecting employees' rights to fair representation (including building and email rights). Streamlining the structure of our labor boards and eliminating some of the local labor boards that have not been staffed or functioning well, will save taxpayer money that would otherwise be poured into court costs. The NM Public Employee bargaining act is now more in line with federal labor law.

Looked at from outside of our schools, some might think the State has truly prioritized education, and in many ways they have. Looking into the eyes of our children every day, NEA-NM says that we can do even better for all our students. This teacher grades this 30-day Legislative session a B.

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