School Board Members & Superintendents
Attached is an excellent article titled "In Public Education, Who Has the Silver Bullet?" authored by Felix Alderete, Las Vegas City Schools Board Member. Thanks to Felix for sharing his perspective about public schools and their funding!

Joe Guillen, Executive Director
New Mexico School Boards Association
jguillen@nmsba.org
(505) 983-5041 office
(505) 470-3967 cell
In Public Education, Who Has the Silver Bullet?

By Felix M. Alderete

September 23, 2013

How important is public education and how does it affect our lives? Two questions that can be easily answered by going to the local market and interacting with a store clerk; calling a service provider with a problem on a bill; or getting information over the telephone about a service. I don’t think we would dispute that public education is central to our democracy, a strong economy, and the means for a better life. For those born into poverty, public education remains the only path of escape. So, public education is important and it can profoundly affect our everyday lives.

Every presidential, gubernatorial, congressional, state legislative and even school board candidate to whom I’ve listened in the last half century, has promised to improve our public education system; each well intentioned but seemingly never having enough time or resources to bring quick response to complex and sometimes overwhelming issues. So what can be done to improve, protect and assure our public schools are providing useful quality education to students in New Mexico? I don’t pretend to have the Silver Bullet for solving our educational dilemma otherwise I’d run for governor. But I will offer some thoughts I’ve reached while serving on a school board over the last few years.

Every child needs four critical factors in their lives to succeed in school; PARENTS who are honest and realistic with their students and who are their advocates, cheer leaders, critics and mentors; TEACHERS who are honest, realistic and highly qualified to teach and who are advocates, cheer leaders, critics and mentors; LOCAL SCHOOL LEADERS who are honest, realistic and highly qualified to lead and who are advocates, cheer leaders, critics and mentors; and finally but probably the most importantly STUDENT themselves who are willing and ready to learn and willing to receive guidance even when it may be critical. Even with limited resources students will learn if the critical four factors are in place but let’s not be too philosophical because money, community support, and learning resources do matter in our competitive world and not all things or school districts are equal.

Based on 2011 information, New Mexico spends an average of $9,821 per student which is comparable to Texas, Colorado, Oklahoma, and Arizona. Only Utah spends less in our region, $7149 per student, and seems to have better student performance than New Mexico and some of the other neighboring states. A not so favorable report on public education by the Congressional Committee on Education and Workforce states federal spending on public education is three times more now than in 1970, adjusted for inflation. The congressional report held that although more is spent, student performance is no better than in 1970 and in some learning areas, it is worse. The question not asked in the congressional report is what might be different today.

Public education looks different than in 1970 because of what has taken place over the last four decades. The civil rights movement, social and cultural changes, economic shifts to service markets and globalization, and a litigious environment have certainly affected public education. No doubt there were also impacts from returning Vietnam Era Veterans who entered post secondary schools. But most
notably since the 1970s, the public education system has gone from its focus of teaching the cornerstones, math, language, science and history to having responsibility for more and more of the social, behavioral, health, moral and ethical training of children. Areas of learning that had been done primarily in the home when family was defined differently than today. So are we expecting more of public education than can be realistically achieved?

Today schools are not only centers for learning but fill in the gaps not provided elsewhere in many children’s daily experience. Schools provide meals to children who may otherwise be going hungry or safe environments where there is none outside school; they provide drug and domestic violence counseling; they individualize learning for students who require special education; they attempt to narrow the gaps of differences in language, race and life circumstances; and because some students may have no other hope for a fair chance in life, schools are expected to provide that hope. Those expectations may partially explain why public education costs are higher today than in the 70s and with increasing demands, why teachers, counselors, and school administrators are continually asked to “do more with less”.

The Congressional Committee on Education and Workforce could have looked a little further back in our history to see how the National Education Defense Act of 1958 may have affected education in the 1950s and 60s. The Act provided funding to states at all levels of education from K to college. It focused funding on improving the teaching of science, mathematics and language. Congress and the nation were focused on improving our public education system from K to college for one reason, assuring that the Soviet Union did not surpass our ability to teach and train our students. We couldn’t let the Soviets win the space race. We were in the midst of the cold war and simply stated, feared being outmatched in space by the Soviets.

In those days, we needed scientists, engineers and well educated leaders to keep America strong and to preserve our hope for a better future. Certainly there were classroom problems but the focus was on teaching and not necessarily addressing the social, behavioral and economic issues of children. Teaching then as it should be today was a calling, a vocation, not an occupation and teachers were highly esteemed for their abilities to teach. If today public education is expected to do more for children than simply provide the four learning cornerstones of education, it should be funded and organized to do so. Like the Cold War Era, we continue to face threats from America’s advisors and enemies. We should holdfast that if given the resources, public education will preserve our democracy, our economy, and quality of life by educating citizens who can meet the challenges of an imperfect and changing world.

I will leave the discussion of the National Education Defense Act of 1958 but will make a point of one important requirement of the law. It empowered states and local school districts to meet its mandate to educate. Here is that requirement from the law: “Nothing contained in this Act shall be construed to authorize any department, agency, officer or employee of the United States to exercise any direction, supervision, or control over the curriculum, program of instruction, administration, or personnel of any education institution or school system.” The law was not perfect but it certainly allowed for local management of education unlike today. School districts and institutional of higher learning are now overseen by federal and state regulators that sometimes draw more resources away from educating to
testing and reporting. Oversight is necessary however it can become counterproductive if allowed to be so bureaucratically overwhelming that more resources go to it than to classroom instruction.

I've learned that in New Mexico funding of public education is complex, not necessarily equal to each student and lacking flexibility. We now talk about school funding in terms of “above the line”, money that will go directly to school district operating budgets through the state funding formula or “below the line”, money that the Public Education Department will grant to districts for special initiatives. Transportation and Nutrition services are figured separately from operating budgets. Other funding comes from the US Forest Service and Bureau of Indian Affairs, some foundations and the federal title programs. But not all this funding is available to all school districts. So when the National Center for Education Statistics reports that New Mexico spends an average of $9,821 per student, it may not be a fair statement for your school district.

What is provided to each school district is the State Equalization Guarantee, the state general appropriation for public education and charter schools. This year it had a unit value of $3,817.55; that number is then multiplied by an index for the number of kindergarten students, at-risk students and students requiring, bilingual programs, special education programs and other specialized student programs. The $6,000 difference per student between the NCES number and the SEG are all those other funding opportunities. Unfortunately school districts in New Mexico are having a hard time making the numbers work to deliver quality education to all our state classrooms. A significant number of school districts in the state require Emergency Supplemental Funding (ESF) because they can’t operate within the State Equalization Guarantee funds. The PED is now providing a few million dollars every year to these districts on an emergency basis.

In rural New Mexico where student populations are dwindling, funding has become even more critical as families move to urban communities for better employment and students leave. Even when a school district determines that closing a school and combining it with another would be more efficient, current rules work to deter such management decisions. Schools having less than 200 students receive additional funding to meet their overhead. Closing a small school to combine it with another school would mean giving up additional money which in most cases would be greater than any savings it might realize. Those kinds of funding rules were designed to protect small neighborhood schools at a time when money was less restricted. School districts should be allowed to make sound management decisions to improve their efficiencies without creating hardships for themselves.

Studies of the New Mexico education funding formula have been conducted and may provide ways of better financing school districts. New Mexico is a large land mass with a mix of concentrated populations and small rural communities. The balance for providing sufficient funding for all schools in the state has been a challenge and primarily addressed through the State Equalization Guarantee funding formula. Maybe it's time to revisit those studies with a commitment that all New Mexico students receive a quality education and an equitable share of education funds whether they live in large cities or small rural communities. That will not be an easy task to accomplish but a critical need if our students are to be given a fair opportunity to succeed.
Let’s get back to the Silver Bullets. As I said before, I have no silver but here are some bullets nonetheless in no particular order of priority.

- Provide every school district sufficient operating funds to improve the quality and equality of education. This may mean reviewing the state funding formula, adopting a statewide dedicade gross receipts tax, and determining a fixed share of the Permanent Fund for public schools. It can also mean finding cost reduction measures and eliminating the complexity and bureaucracy of the school finance system.
- Allow governance through school boards to assure local integrity. Give public schools flexibility to develop local programs. State and federal educational agencies should be partners who facilitate school district success rather than strictly serve to oversee regulatory compliance.
- Entrust school districts to create instructional programs that meet their students’ needs and that are not top down initiatives from Santa Fe or Washington; stop dividing scarce budget dollars between “above the line” and “below the line” funding; and reduce and streamline reporting requirements to state and federal agencies.
- Given almost half of New Mexican children live in rural communities and wherever possible, consolidate the administrative operations of small school districts either by unifying districts or providing administration through the already established New Mexico Regional Education Cooperatives Association (NMREA) of which there are nine members in the state.
- Provide charter schools separate budgets from public school districts that currently incorporate them into their district budgets. Organize the administration of charter schools through the NMREA or the Public Education Department.
- Provide salaries that will retain and attract the best and brightest teachers, counselors, librarians, support staff, therapists, and school site administrators. Without motivated, committed and capable educators, students have little hope of overcoming learning challenges or achieving success. Educators are the “boots on the ground” in the battle to preserve democracy, and assure our children and generations to come the promise of opportunity.
- Establish fair and equitable evaluations for students, teachers, administrators, schools, districts, community colleges and universities; be unafraid to recognize failure and be accountable even if it means working harder to succeed; understand expectations and goals; and reward success. People and organizations never stop changing, either growing or diminishing; and continuous evaluation of our state of being and taking proactive actions make for improvement and adaptation to change.
- Assure schools are safe and healthy for students by providing sufficient and equitable capital funding for all school districts; review the methods of funding schools for construction, maintenance, transportation and security; consider a single and separate capital appropriations bill for public schools with responsibility possibly at the Public Schools Facilities Authority for assuring schools are safe and healthy.
- Regarding higher education, consolidate the six New Mexico Public University under one Board of Regents, and consolidate 10 New Mexico Community Colleges under one or two regional Board of Trustees. Coordinated governance could translate into better specialization and more
responsiveness to the needs of business and industry. Community colleges are the gateway to four year university and should be active partners with the universities and local school districts.

The likelihood a child growing up to succeed in life, having high values, being knowledgeable critical thinkers and having marketable skills and abilities is unlikely unless that child receives an education that will allow for opportunity and their upward mobility. Our kids and our public school system can only succeed when students, parents, teachers, schools, political leaders, government officials, business leaders and entire communities commit to providing quality and equitable education opportunities, and the necessary funding. So maybe that is the Silver Bullet.