

Open Letter to Dr. Arsenio Romero, New Mexico Secretary of Education

January 4, 2024

Dear Arsenio Romero Ph.D., NM Secretary of Education,

I am writing to you on behalf of hundreds of New Mexico teachers and school personnel. In a recent letter to District Leaders, you wrote that *“It is time for accountability: for the Public Education Department, for the school districts (including their boards and schools), charter schools, teachers’ unions and families.”* Like you, we are very concerned about the persistently low academic achievement of New Mexico’s students.

We wanted to share with you a list of the Top 8 Ways that the Public Education Department (PED) can help ensure student success. This list has been compiled as a result of input from teachers and school personnel all across the state, including Albuquerque, Las Cruces, Santa Fe, Alamogordo, Deming, Farmington, Ruidoso, and elsewhere.

Instead of doubling down on policies that have already been shown to fail in New Mexico, please listen to our voices, as the frontline workers who are responsible for educating New Mexico’s children.

1. REDUCE OUR CLASS SIZES

Many of our class sizes are too large for us to be effective. When we are stretched so thinly, we cannot meet the needs of our students. New Mexico’s class size statutes allow no more than 20 students per class for kindergarten, 22 students for grades 1-3, 24 students for grades 4-6, and 27-30 for grades 7-12.

However, these class size limits are not sufficient and many classrooms are not even meeting these standards. With large class sizes, we have less time to give individual attention to our students. We recommend the following class size limitations for the core academic classes:

- K-3rd Grades – no more than 15-18 students
- 4th-8th Grades – no more than 18-20 students
- 9th-12th Grades – no more than 22-24 students

2. END SOCIAL PROMOTION AND ALLOW TEACHERS TO HOLD BACK STUDENTS WHO ARE NOT READY TO MOVE TO THE NEXT GRADE

Some districts and schools are implementing social promotion such that all children are advanced to the next grade each year, regardless of whether the students are ready academically. Students need high expectations, not handouts. We need to be able to hold back students who are not yet ready to move to the next grade. When we cannot do this, education for all students suffers.

We have to spend so much time trying to help some students catch up that many other students are neglected. The students who are at the top of the class are largely left on their own instead of being

challenged to reach their full potential. Meanwhile, the students who come into our classes already struggling, fall further and further behind because they just needed an extra year to catch up.

Children are not machines that all function identically. It is normal and okay that some students need more time to develop and be ready to move to the next grade. We need to compassionately give these kids the time they need to mature and be ready to learn more.

Instead, these children are thrown into the deep end to continue gasping for air with increasingly complex concepts and school work. It gets worse each year so that by the time they reach high school, many students are floundering around, lost and frustrated and feeling like failures.

High school students who are failing to meet graduation requirements are allowed to use credit recovery programs such as Edgenuity. However, many of the students cheat their way through these classes without actually learning what they need to know. This is evidenced by the low proficiency scores alongside high graduation rates.

We need to let children stay back when they need extra time before moving them to the next grade. We need to ensure that graduation is not achieved without kids having learned what they need to know to thrive in the world. We call on you to end social promotion now.

3. HOLD PARENTS ACCOUNTABLE FOR ENSURING STUDENT ATTENDANCE

Chronic tardiness and absenteeism are getting in the way of children's educations. Many students are not attending school regularly enough to have a chance at success. Prior to COVID, chronic absenteeism rates were ~15-18% yearly, but for the last few years the rate has been dramatically increased. According to your own data, over 39% of students were chronically absent from school in the 2022-23 school year.

There's so much pressure on schools to achieve specific attendance rates, yet parents and children are the ones responsible for school attendance. Parents and students need to be held accountable for good attendance. No matter how many letters, phone calls, and offers of support are made, parents and students know the system and know they won't ultimately face any consequences for poor school attendance.

Local school districts need to be empowered to create innovative solutions to the problem of chronic tardiness and absenteeism. These solutions need to be applied consistently throughout each school and through the entire school year. The PED can help by forming a task force with representatives and teachers from school districts across the state.

This task force could develop a framework for methodically testing different strategies in different districts in order to find effective solutions. Data analysis of the results of these tests can help to reveal which strategies are most effective. Local school districts should then be encouraged to implement whichever methods are likely to be most effective for their individual needs.

4. BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS: HOLDING KIDS ACCOUNTABLE AND TRAINING TEACHERS

Behavior issues are rampant in New Mexico's schools. Besides acting out in class, some students are violent to the point of threatening and assaulting teachers, beating up other students, throwing chairs in classrooms, etc. Substance abuse issues are also widespread. Students who go to school to learn have their education interrupted incessantly. Student behavior problems are also causing teacher burnout and are a huge reason why many teachers are leaving the education profession.

Teachers need to be respected and students who do not show that respect should receive swift, sure discipline. Instead, teachers' hands are tied on imposing any real consequences for these behaviors. At times, that leads to the other students in our classes taking matters into their own hands to punish the students who are misbehaving. Even the students can see that there must be some real consequences imposed on students with behavior problems if those behaviors are to be stopped.

Many teachers are not trained in how to handle behavior problems or break up fights. All teachers need to be trained and empowered in how to deal with behavior problems. Furthermore, there need to be real, significant consequences for students with behavior problems in school. These consequences need to be applied consistently through the entire school year. Restorative justice practices are not effective enough. Violent students need to be expelled in order to ensure safety for the other students and the teachers.

5. MAKE IT EASIER FOR PARENTS TO BE INVOLVED AT SCHOOLS

Engaged parents are one of the most valuable tools we as educators have in ensuring the success of our students. Besides providing support for their individual children, having parents volunteer in our classrooms helps us ensure there is enough attention and care for all the students in the class. However, parent participation at schools and in classrooms has decreased noticeably over the last few years.

We need to be able to work in partnership with the parents, yet it has become increasingly difficult for parents to be present on campus and in our classrooms. We understand there are security concerns; however, there needs to be a better balance that will allow more parents to volunteer and be involved at New Mexico's schools. The PED can help be encouraging local districts to find ways to make it easier for parents to be engaged and involved in their children's schools and classrooms.

6. ENSURE THAT LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS MAINTAIN CONTROL OF EDUCATIONAL DECISIONS FOR THEIR DISTRICTS

Education functions best when it can be adapted to meet the individual needs in each community and neighborhood. Local school districts and charter schools need to have the autonomy to adapt and change when needed to best support the students. The PED focuses too much on developing top-down statewide policies that can harm education overall.

The recently-proposed rule change to force all schools to adhere to a 180-day calendar is one example of this type of overreach. Top-down approaches fail our students because each school district is unique and has its own challenges for success. Instead of focusing on developing top-down statewide policies, the PED needs to support local districts and stakeholders in having local control of all aspects of education including school schedules and calendars, testing requirements, curriculums, modes of instruction, etc. In addition to ensuring local control of all educational decisions for each school district, the PED can facilitate the sharing of information across districts so that methods being used successfully in some districts can potentially be rolled out in other districts.

7. ALLOW TEACHERS TO FOCUS ON THE ACADEMIC BASICS INSTEAD OF CONTINUALLY ADDING MORE TOPICS

Teachers are given so many areas to focus on that the core academic subjects can lose their high priority. Too many programs and politics are being added into our teaching workload. We need to be able to focus on the core subjects of reading, writing, and math to ensure that our students are prepared for their futures.

Instead of being locked into rigid curriculums and technology usage, we need to be given the leeway to teach in ways that will be most effective for our students. For instance, many primary students learn better without using screens, yet they are required to perform monthly and triennial assessments on screens. Students with learning disabilities and ESL students are required to take the same tests as other students; this is unfair and we need to be able to use developmentally-appropriate and language-appropriate assessments instead.

The PED can help us be more effective by clearing out the nonessential subjects and allowing us to focus on teaching the core academic subjects.

8. THE PED NEEDS TO TAKE OWNERSHIP FOR WORSENING EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR NM'S STUDENTS THROUGH COVID POLICIES

It is important for the PED to take ownership for its own role in worsening the outcomes for New Mexico's children. Our education system was already struggling prior to 2020. On top of that, the lengthy school closures, mask mandates, vaccine mandates, and other COVID-related policies over the last few years have further stacked the deck against success in New Mexico's schools.

Because of your COVID policies, many students fell behind and are still struggling to catch up. School closures, remote learning, and mask mandates impeded the learning of crucial skills such as reading and math. They also had serious negative effects on children's ability to learn communication and facial expressions as well as their emotional health.

Students, teachers, and school personnel were discriminated against, threatened, bullied, and harassed because of your COVID mandates. Many teachers and school personnel left the school system due to the hostile work environment created by your COVID policies. There was already a shortage of teachers,

and the mandates further worsened the situation by driving many capable, dependable teachers out of the school system.

The PED needs to take ownership for these harms and ensure this is never allowed to happen again.

We are on the front lines of education in New Mexico. There is much you can do to help us succeed. We urge you to implement the changes we are recommending for the good of New Mexico's children.

Sincerely,

Sarah Smith, on behalf of the Teachers Group of the New Mexico Freedoms Alliance

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