

League of Women Voters of Greater Las Cruces
Education Study Committee

Meeting about Las Cruces Public School District (LCPS)

Superintendent Stan Rounds
Associate Superintendent Steven Sánchez, Ph.D.
Division of Learning, Teaching and Research

December 14, 2010, 2-3:15 p.m., LCPS Administration Building

In preparation for the meeting, committee members submitted questions to the chair that were organized into broad categories, curriculum, adequate yearly progress reports, teachers, and general questions about the school system. (See Attachment 1).

Curriculum: After introductions, the meeting opened with a conversation about curriculum. The state establishes the curriculum for each level of education. On a rotating basis, particular areas become the focus for review and revision for a given year, for example in the past K-Grade 5 the focus was Language Arts. This year, the focus of interest is Social Studies, and only one publishing company provides Social Studies textbooks. The teachers have the flexibility of expanding on a given curriculum topic. The state list of approved curriculum materials is available on the web site of the NM Public Education Department (PED) as well as the prescribed state curriculum. The school districts have to stay within the prescribed NM statutory mandates, but do have the ability to supplement state approved curriculum materials. Superintendent Rounds commented that since California and Texas account for such a large percentage of textbook sales, they have an inordinate amount of influence on the content of the textbooks put out by major publishers.

The State of New Mexico is one of 21 states that adopted the Common Core Curriculum Standards developed by the National Governor's Association and State Education Chiefs. These standards are applied to K-12 in English Language Arts (includes reading and writing standards for literacy in history/social studies, science and technical subjects) and mathematics. Teachers, parents, education experts and community leaders, including business, participated in the review and development of these standards. The mission statement for this initiative is shown below:

"The Common Core State Standards provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn, so teachers and parents know what they need to do to help them. The standards are designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers. With American students fully prepared for the future, our communities will be best positioned to compete successfully in the global economy." [Source: Common Core State Standards Initiative, web site, www.corestandards.org, Project announced June 1, 2009 and is ongoing.]

In No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and now The Race to the Top program initiated by President Obama, the process of testing and testing often produces failure, in the opinions of Superintendent Rounds and Dr. Sánchez. In both plans there is no way to measure student growth over time. A better way to determine growth is to follow the student's progress along a

developmental curve. Such curves have been established for different levels of development. These curves show three levels of development, accelerated, even and decelerated. [More on this issue is discussed in the next topic.]

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP):

Definition: "All K-12 grade schools are required to demonstrate AYP in the areas of reading/language arts, mathematics, and either graduation rates, for high schools and districts, or attendance rates for elementary and middle/junior high schools." ..."The NCLB Act requires that states use standardized assessments in order to measure AYP. These assessments allow State Education Agencies to develop target starting goals for AYP. After those are developed, states must increase student achievement in gradual increments in order for 100 percent of the students to become proficient on state assessments by the 2013-14 school year."

[Source: Resources on AYP. Education Commission of the States. Retrieved from <http://en.wikipedia.org/>.]

Superintendent Rounds stated when it comes to achieving academic progress, "The real question is: how do you set the foundational skills for kids so that they can succeed as adults in college and the workforce? Key markers are the reading and language skills by the end of the 3rd grade. A non-reader in high school is going to fail in acquiring these skills. One area of research is clear: retention tends not to do much to raise the level of academic achievement. Retention for purposes of social and emotional development may help in those areas. As a group, students who are economically disadvantaged do the most poorly academically."

School districts are mandated through federal and state statutes to participate in Race to the Top and the testing and criteria requirements. In NM, the Public Education Department (PED) relies on private testing companies to develop the tests that meet the requirements. LCSP uses Pearson Assessment and Information group assessment products at a cost of \$250,000 to \$300,000 per year. Teachers "are involved in norming the tests", according to Superintendent Rounds.

In addition to the annual mandates tests, the LCSP also does "interim" tests three times a year. These are criterion referenced tests to discover a child's progress in acquiring specific skills that are seen as benchmarks to adequate progress. The feedback on results for teacher to use in development of individual student learning plans is immediate. These tests are known as "measures of academic progress" and the results are known as MAP data.

Criterion-Referenced Tests (CRTs): These tests, mandated by the New Mexico Public Education Department, are used to determine whether each student has achieved specific skills or concepts and to find out how much students know before instruction begins and after it has finished.

In education, CRTs usually are used to determine whether a student has learned the material taught in a specific grade or course. An algebra CRT would include questions based on what was supposed to be taught in algebra classes. It would not include geometry questions or more advanced algebra than was in the curriculum.

By contrast, **norm-referenced tests** rank each student with respect to the achievement of others in broad areas of knowledge and are used to differentiate between high and low achievers.

Criterion-Referenced Tests allow its users to make score interpretations in relation to a functional performance level, as distinguished from those interpretations that are made in relation to the performance of others.

[Source: Las Cruces Public School web site, www.lcps.k12.nm.us, Glossary]

Excluded from the testing are developmentally and economically disadvantaged students and English language learners. The validity of any test is often questioned and test results may be affected by how the student feels on the day the test is administered. The state annual yearly progress (AYP) test results are not available in a timely manner. The testing is done in April and results are not available until August. None of the tests used in No Child Left Behind or now the Race to the Top evaluate students over time. Developmental and poverty issues create barriers to achieving AYP. LCPS is improving, but some schools are still failing. The tests are not an indicator of the quality of the teachers. While teacher quality is very important, many factors impact the learning success of students.

Other assessment tests are available and would better serve the district in determining student achievement.

- NAEP – National Assessment of Educational Progress was suggested as a better measurement of student academic progress.

Definition: The largest nationally representative and continuing assessment of what America's students know and can do in various subject areas. Assessments are conducted periodically in mathematics, reading, science, writing, the arts, civics, economics, geography and U.S. history.

Since NAEP assessments are administered uniformly using the same sets of test booklets across the nation, NAEP results serve as a common metric for all states and selected urban districts. The assessment stays essentially the same from year to year, with only carefully documented changes. This permits NAEP to provide a clear picture of student academic progress over time.

[Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, National Center for Education Statistics, web site, 12/19/2010.]

- MAP – Measures of Academic Progress. Superintendent Rounds and Dr. Sánchez felt very positive about this test and felt it demonstrated academic growth of the student that was useful. It is given three times a year and can be matched to previous years so that students' progress can be followed on a developmental scale. Also, it allows the teacher to change the curriculum to fit the students' needs.

Definition: Using computerized adaptive assessments provides educators with the detailed information they need to build curriculum and meet their students' needs, one child at a time.

[Source: Northwest Evaluation Association web site, MAP, 12/19/2010]

Teachers: Recently, the importance of the teacher is being stressed in discussion about school reform. Dr. Sánchez, who oversees the student teachers program in the district, felt the teacher was the important component in school reform.

- Learning to read test results and understanding the technology available to help teachers understand the data that allows the teacher to adjust curriculum to the needs of the students must be added to the curriculum for preparing individuals to become teachers.
- Professional development after bachelor degree is achieved is another important area. How to accomplish this after the teachers are in the classroom is a major challenge. LCPS has added professional development in the teacher's contract. There is no perfect way achieve it. Every school has "professional development" teachers who teach the other teachers how to teach. Professional learning communities (PLCs) have been established at the local schools. PLC meetings are embedded in the teacher contract day. Small groups of teachers, known as D3 Teams, get together to learn about data driven decision-making. With the assistance of the professional development teachers they learn 1) how to read test results and 2) determine what the results are telling the teacher about student instructional needs. How do teachers know students are learning, what do teachers do when students are not learning and other issues are discussed during this time. Sometimes there is planning time during the day that is used for professional development, but it needs to be scheduled and perhaps a substitute teacher brought in to relieve the teacher to attend the meeting. In addition, there are four extra days built into the teacher contract that are to be used specifically for teacher development activities. Every year, each teacher has a formal professional development plan that he/she is expected to follow.
- There was general agreement that teacher performance should not be based on the results of student testing. The valid evaluation occurs when the principal spends time in the classroom. In a busy schedule it is hard for the principal to carve out this kind of evaluation time. More difficult, however, is having compelling conversations (talking about the hard stuff) with the teachers. The school district will incur between \$10,000 and \$30,000 in legal costs to terminate a teacher. Any terminations should be done before year three when the teacher achieves permanent status and tenure. Superintendent Rounds believes that by giving improvement incentives to the entire teaching staff, the group lifts the weak teachers and improves their performance.
- Student teachers – the student teacher process as described by Drs. Reyes and Rodriguez was confirmed. There is one semester of observing or internship and the second semester is devoted to actually teaching the students. There is close cooperation between the district and NMSU College of Education during this period.

School System Questions: As meeting time was running out, only one question was asked from this section of questions. What is the impact of charter schools on the school district? Superintendent Rounds reviewed the process for authorization of charter schools which can happen through the state or by the school district. LCSP monitors the budgets and policies of two of the charter schools in the district, the Las Montanas High School and Academia Dolores Huerta Middle School. Alma d' arte Charter High School and the J. Paul Taylor Academy are both authorized by the state and so LCPS has no official relationship to them. The J. Paul Taylor Academy operates within the NM State Correctional System.

- Las Montanas High School - technology based school authorized through Las Cruces Public School District. Its focus may change because it is dealing with the hardest students to keep in class.

- Academia Dolores Huerta Middle School - a dual language school is authorized through the Las Cruces Public School District.
- Alma d'arte Charter High School - an arts based school authorized through NM State
- J. Paul Taylor Academy is authorized by the state in September 2010.

The newly formed charter school, K-8 hopes to share the Alma d' arte Building. The focus is on project-based learning, conducted in teams. It will have a dual language approach, and seek greater involvement by parents and the community. [Source: Las Cruces Bulletin, December 17, 2010, p. A1 and A27]]

State law is “muddy” about charters. These schools authorize own curriculum, determine class size, and principal does not have to be certified. Schools can be selective about students they accept. LCPS provides transportation and approves their budget. The cost of operating the first year for charter schools is double the cost per pupil from that in public schools. Charters also operate differently when it comes to capital outlay—they are able to lease buildings. Public schools and charter schools need to communicate and cooperate. Public schools must be sustainable over time, and should not be harmed by the existence of charter schools.

In this same category, we asked what changes would make the school system better.

- Superintendent Rounds would like to have the regulations and statutes changed so that the local school districts would have more flexibility in making decisions about teachers (e.g., termination).
- Better articulation (communication) between the college of education and schools districts to ensure that teachers have the skill set (e.g., technology knowledge, data analysis and reading beyond the elementary level) needed to function in the current classroom environment.
- Money. The school districts are funded by the state. In 1983, public education was 53.6% of the General Fund state budget; now it is 41.5%, which equates to a half-billion dollars less. LCPS cost per student is \$7,236. This figure does not include any of the capital outlay funds or money for federal programs, so it is fairly representative of what is spent on instruction for the average student. In the Superintendent's opinion, New Mexico schools are about \$500 million short of the funds they really needs.
- Deregulate statutes so that local districts can determine class size, how much to pay teachers, etc. The local districts have no decision-making authority in what matters.



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Tuesday, December 14, 2010, 2-3 p.m., LCPS Administration Bldg.

Questions

Curriculum:

- What curriculum is used in the school system?
- Who decides it (e.g., state, district)?
- How much flexibility does the school district have to change it.
- Does the LCPS use the Common Core Standards promoted by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers?
- Where does No Child Left Behind or now The Race to the Top fit into the curriculum?

Discuss the LCPS schools and their Annual Yearly Progress (AYP).

- Are LCPS schools meeting the AYP goals?
- What kinds of testing are done as a measurement? Name of private company and cost?
- Is AYP a good or poor measure of achievement.
- How are special education requirements met (Disabilities Education Act)

Teachers are the “new” focus for success - everyone has had a favorite teacher.

- Describe the process that teachers-in-training experience in LCPS classrooms?
- How are student teachers evaluated and are they notified that they are not meeting performance standards for becoming a teacher.
- How our permanent teachers evaluated?
- What are your thoughts on permanent teachers retaining a job based on student test scores?
- Do you favor merit based pay for teachers? Is merit pay an option in the LCPS system?

School System

- How does the Dept. of Public Education affect LCPS?
- In your overview of LCPS system, what are its strengths and weaknesses?
- What are its challenges?
- What reforms would you recommend for LCPS?
- What role does the federal government play in a state school system.
- What are your views on a longer school day, year round school, and summer school.
- How do Charter Schools fit into LCPS? Are they good or bad (and why) for the overall state of education in the local school system?

Other:

- What are the things that community members can do to support good educational outcomes for the students?
- What changes affecting the school system do you expect to see from a Martinez administration?
- What support, if any, are the schools getting from local businesses, and what knowledge/competence do local businesses expect from high school graduates?
- What, in the Superintendent's opinion, are things that can be done fairly readily (e.g., within the next year or so, without a great deal of cost) to reduce the drop out rate?