



OpEd: The Complexity of Public School Systems

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The League of Women Voters believes that education is the foundation for a strong and viable democracy. All students should be respected and safe in learning environments that value diverse cultures. In July 2018 District Court Judge Sarah Singleton issued a decision and order in the Martinez/Yazzie lawsuit, finding that New Mexico had failed to comply with its constitutional mandate to provide a sufficient education for children. As part of its response, the New Mexico Public Education Department recently released the *Discussion Draft of an Action Plan* with an invitation to the public to provide comment by June 17, 2022. draft.action@state.nm.us

Data included in the PED Action Plan are disturbing. Approximately 73% of the state's entire student population are reported as being economically disadvantaged. In 2019, 25% of Native American students tested proficient in reading and 12% in math. The percentage of English Learners on track toward achieving English proficiency within five years decreased from 40% in 2018 to 29% in 2019. The four-year high school graduation rate for students with disabilities was 66.4% in 2020.

The PED document describes numerous funding and non-monetary supports, programs and resources for teachers and for students who are economically disadvantaged, Native American, English learners, have diverse abilities, or are preschoolers. Community schools are an evidence-based strategy for increasing student success. The PED also reports that it has developed a financial reporting system, known as Open Books, allowing the public to view school budgets to learn how money is being spent (<https://openbooks.ped.nm.gov>).

What is difficult for the reader of the plan is to discern how all of the pieces fit together to address the serious challenges faced by New Mexico public schools and students. For example, long before the publication of the PED plan, the Native American community provided a document of its own. We urge the PED to move rapidly to enhance its communication with Native communities. Similarly, parents of students in the Las Cruces Public Schools (LCPS) will find in Open Books general information about school district revenues and expenditures, but little information about the extent to which funding goes directly into student learning resources. LCPS budget is on their website but is not particularly user friendly.

The PED has also created a *Culturally and Linguistically Responsive (CLR) Guidance Handbook* to support local school districts in designing project-based and engaging learning experiences and resources for teachers, staff, and students. CLR involves learning methods intended to empower all students intellectually, socially, and emotionally by using cultural and truthful historical references.

Many security experts and educators point to evidence that building relationships with students and strengthening their social and emotional skills are critical to safety as well as academic success. Warning signs can be spotted by school personnel that can provide supports and resources for a struggling student. Reducing class size can make relationship building more attainable as well.

Providing a high-quality safe education within a complex system is challenging and takes teamwork among the PED and other state agencies; among school districts, parents, families, students, and community partners. It also requires transparency on the part of the various participants. We should all begin by studying the *PED Plan* and set a goal to be actively engaged in improving the education of New Mexicans.

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