



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
January 27, 2011

CONTACT: Marge Teague
(505) 298-3662

In Case You Missed It

Real Accountability, Hard Work Can Fix N.M. Schools

Albuquerque, NM— The following op-ed, written by Hanna Skandera, Gov. Martinez' nominee for Public Education Secretary, was published today in the Albuquerque Journal.

Real Accountability, Hard Work Can Fix N.M. Schools

By Hanna Skandera
Albuquerque Journal
January 27, 2011

Read this online at:

http://www.abqjournal.com/opinion/guest_columns/272126112368opinionguestcolumns01-27-11.htm

To improve the quality of education for New Mexico's children, Gov. Susana Martinez has proposed a bold education reform agenda this legislative session.

Her "Kids First, New Mexico Wins" plan is comprised of four key initiatives to increase accountability, set our students up for success by ending social promotion, target our resources where they are needed the most and reward our most effective educators and leaders.

Unfortunately, Steve Mills' opinion piece in Sunday's Albuquerque Journal mischaracterized Martinez's education reform initiative to grade New Mexico's schools, basing his claims on inaccurate information and ignoring the facts.

To inject real accountability and transparency into our education system, the governor is proposing an easy-to-understand A-F school grading formula. The grades will be based 100 percent on objective, data-driven results — taking into account equal parts student performance and student progress.

For the first time, parents, teachers, school and community leaders will have a clear understanding of whether or not students are learning. Currently, New Mexico schools receive confusing, opaque

labels, like "School Not Making Adequate Yearly Progress by 1, 2 or 3 Indicators." In the future, no one will fail to understand that an "A" translates to excellence in the classroom and an "F" means we're not making the grade for our kids.

Most importantly, school grades will drive policy measures to reward success and reverse failure.

Schools earning an "A" or improving a letter grade will receive recognition funds, creating an incentive for improvement in student learning. Students in failing schools will receive the most attention. Federal law currently requires intervention in failing schools after five years. That's too long. Our plan calls for immediate intervention after two years for schools that have earned an "F." We'll target resources to improve these schools, help struggling students and give parents more options.

Research shows that stronger accountability — not just spending or class size as Mills claims — accelerates student progress. In Florida, former Gov. Jeb Bush signed into law a comprehensive K-12 reform package in 1999, including the grading of schools on an A-F scale and the end of social promotion. Today, nearly three quarters of Sunshine State elementary school students are reading at or above grade level, up from less than half a decade ago. The state's graduation rate has risen by 15 percent. And, most impressively, Florida is one of the only states recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as making real progress in closing the achievement gap.

The results are evidence that grading schools in Florida raised student achievement. Recognizing good policy, states like Indiana and Arizona, and districts like New York City, have followed suit. Now, it is time to create a robust accountability system in New Mexico, delivering on Martinez's promise to adopt proven best practices from around the nation.

However, Mills is right in asserting strong accountability alone will not achieve our goal of turning around our education system. That's why Martinez is also proposing measures to end the social promotion of students who have not mastered basic skills, like reading, and creating a teacher reward system to recognize the state's most effective educators. She has also committed to keeping more money in our classrooms, allowing us to target our resources to the direct benefit of students.

In these challenging economic times, it has never been more important to prioritize how we spend taxpayer dollars. It's time to fund the programs that improve results and stop paying for the ones that don't. Funding these reforms will take creativity, smarter spending and the willpower to eliminate waste in school bureaucracy.

We all recognize there is no silver bullet to miraculously transform our schools from worst to first in the nation. It will take hard work and a continued, unwavering commitment to reform by all stakeholders. Under Martinez's leadership, I look forward to working with parents, teachers, principals, administrators and local and state leaders to transform the quality of education we offer New Mexico's children.

###