

K-12 Spending in New Mexico: More Money, Few Results

By Paul J. Gessing
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With New Mexico's budget \$400 million in the red and Governor Martinez having recognized that at least some cuts to K-12 education are necessary, various interest groups have rushed to defend their own spending priorities from cuts." Dr. Jose Armas of the Latino/Hispano Education Improvement Task Force recently wrote in the *Albuquerque Journal*:

Let's dispel the myth that we're throwing money at education. New Mexico has been steadily cutting education budgets for decades.

My friend Republican Gov. Dave Cargo told me that his education budget was nearly 55 percent of state spending. Another friend, Democratic Gov. Jerry Apodaca, says his was over 50 percent. That was in the 1970s. Today's budget has dwindled to 45 percent. And the current proposed cuts threatens to chop education funding to 42 percent.¹

Another advocate for increased education spending, Albuquerque Federation of Teachers president Ellen Bernstein, has argued for higher taxes as a means of avoiding cuts to education which she said "can't take any more cuts."²

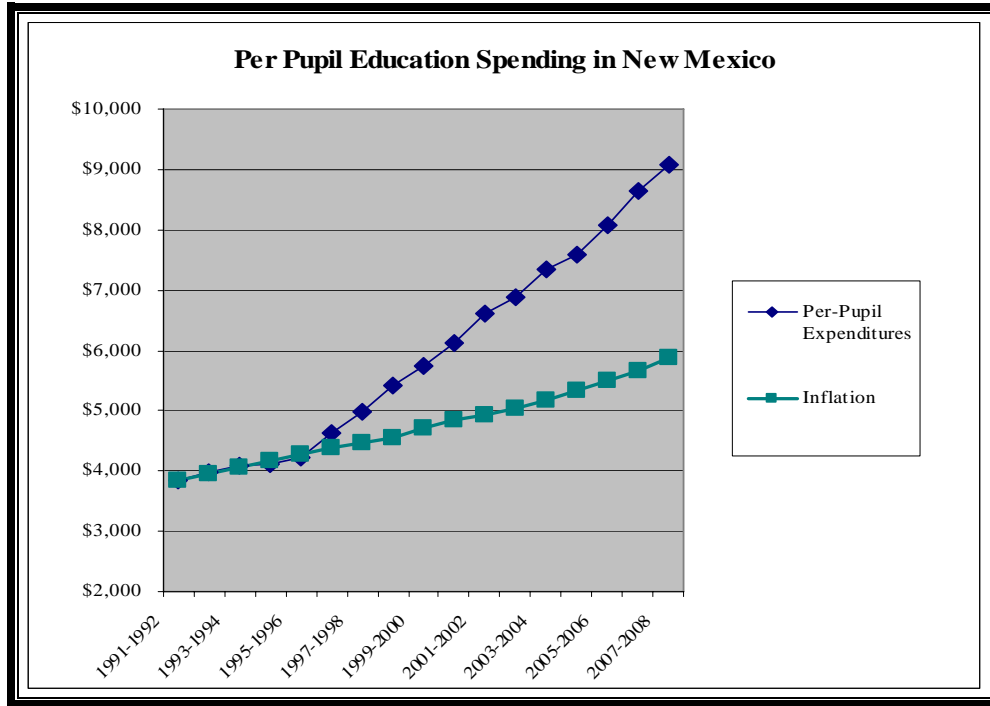
The truth is that spending on K-12 education in New Mexico has grown rapidly on a *per-pupil* basis in the last few decades.

As the following chart which uses data from the United States Census "Public Education Finances" from 1991-1992 to 2007-2008 (the most recent data available), it is clear that New Mexicans have continued to pour more money into education over the years. Comparing this data to inflation shows that since 1992, K-12 spending has grown 54 percent faster than the rate of inflation *on a per-pupil basis*.

¹ Dr. Jose Armas, "School Reform More than Pays for Itself," *Albuquerque Journal*, January 30, 2011, http://www.abqjournal.com/opinion/guest_columns/3023134opinion01-30-11.htm

² KOAT Channel 7, "Union President Offers Budget Solutions," January 12, 2011, <http://www.koat.com/news/26469555/detail.html>.

Chart 1.



If New Mexico’s students were performing at a high level or if education performance were somehow correlated to spending, we at the Rio Grande Foundation might be sympathetic with pleas not to “cut” K-12 spending. Unfortunately, that is simply not the case.

Results have not improved. According to the “Diplomas Count 2010” study, since 1997, while graduation rates have risen slightly nationwide, New Mexico’s graduation rate has actually gone down.³

Table 1.

A Long-Term View Of Graduation		
From 1997 to 2007, the national graduation rate increased by 3.1 percentage points, less than one-third of a point per year on average. Graduation rates increased, at least marginally, in a solid majority of states. However, rates fell noticeably in 11 states.		
Year-by-year trends	New Mexico	U.S. Average
2007	54.9	68.8%
2006	56.0	69.2
2005	54.1	70.6
2004	60.1	70.0
2003	58.4	69.7
2002	62.4	69.3
2001	61.4	68.0
2000	60.7	66.8
1999	58.1	66.0
1998	55.9	65.6
1997	56.3	65.7
10-Year Change	-1.4	+3.1

³ Editorial Projects in Education, “Graduation by the Numbers: A special supplement to Diploma’s Count 2010,” August 2010.

The data from *Diplomas Count* is just one measuring stick of New Mexico's ongoing educational failure. Without belaboring the point, reform is needed and more money has shown itself not to be the solution.

Recent cuts to K-12 have been minor relative to the rapid run-up that started during the late 1990s. Of course, New Mexico's K-12 system has been and continues to be among the very worst in the nation on a variety of national tests and in terms of graduation rates.

Conclusion

All signs point to innovative reforms and not increased spending as the best means of improving educational outputs in New Mexico. Among these ideas are:

- more transparency in how educational data is gathered and disseminated, including teacher performance data;
- an end to "social promotion";
- emphasis on early childhood reading;
- increased school choice in the form of liberalized use of charter schools, education tax credits for private schools, and "virtual schooling."

Education, which accounts for 45 percent of state spending, can and should be part of efforts to close the state's \$400 million budget deficit. Boosting education performance is not an issue of dollars and cents, but a matter of giving New Mexico's students the tools they need to thrive in the 21st century work place.

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