

Testimony before the
House Education and Workforce Committee
Hanna Skandera, Secretary-designate
New Mexico Public Education Department
September 14, 2011

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, thank you for having me here to testify today. My name is Hanna Skandera and I am the Secretary-designate for the New Mexico Public Education Department. I also serve as the vice-chair of Chiefs for Change – a dynamic group of state chiefs driving reform. The achievement of our students, the quality of our teachers, and the measures we use to hold schools accountable are at the forefront of New Mexico’s education reform efforts.

New Mexico’s demographics are distinctive: 57% of the State's K – 12 students are Hispanic, 29% are White, 11% are Native American, 3% are Black, and 1% are Asian or of other backgrounds. New Mexico is ranked 36th in overall population size, has the fifth largest land mass in the U.S. (121,665 square miles), and ranks 45th in the nation in population density. Further, with only 6.3 people per square mile, New Mexico faces unique challenges in educating students in rural areas. New Mexico has been a majority-minority state since its inception with 22 distinct Indian tribes, pueblos, and nations.

Since taking office, Governor Martinez has advanced a bold education reform agenda: *Kid’s First, New Mexico Wins*. The need for reform in New Mexico is now:

- Only 53% of New Mexico third graders read proficiently;
- 33% of our students who score proficient or higher on the 11th grade English Language Arts assessment need remediation in college;
- Under AYP, 87% of our schools are failing; and
- 99.98% of our teachers “meet competency” under an evaluation system that fails to reward excellence and link teacher evaluations to student outcomes.

Our challenge is great, but I know New Mexico students can reach high levels of achievement. Further, our cultural and geographic diversity is one of our greatest strengths, and we must find a way to leverage that great resource.

Under the *Kids First, New Mexico Wins* reform agenda, New Mexico has identified 5 strategic levers for change. Each lever allows for New Mexico to advance bold reform, while holding a high bar.

Lever 1: A Smarter Return on New Mexico’s Investment

We know that money alone cannot fix education. Rather than maintain the status quo, New Mexico is proactively shifting the way we allocate funding to districts and schools. Through our annual budget review process, we are partnering with districts to look in detail at where their funds are being allocated and to ensure that expenditures are aligned with proven instructional strategies.

As states intervene in low performing schools, implement teacher effectiveness systems, and increase effective options for parents, providing additional flexibility on the

use of existing federal funds will spur innovation and better meet the needs of students and schools. I encourage Congress to consider maintaining high expectations in terms of outcomes, while providing flexibility when those expectations are met.

Lever 2: Real Accountability, Real Results

Under the current AYP system, 87% of New Mexico schools are failing. I know that this is not the case. We have some schools in New Mexico that are helping students to achieve and grow in a robust way annually and currently we have no way to recognize those accomplishments. On the other hand, I know we have schools that struggle to help children reach a basic level of achievement, and with such a large number of schools “failing”, it is hard to accurately and effectively differentiate interventions and resources to those that need them most.

Earlier this year, New Mexico passed a new school accountability system, the A-F School Grading Act. This new, differentiated accountability system will allow us to recognize both proficiency and growth. For the first time, we will know with confidence which schools are our A schools and be able to use them as models for our schools that struggle.

A grade for an elementary and middle school will be based on proficiency, growth, as well as additional proven academic indicators. We will also utilize a value-add model in our calculation to ensure we are holding schools accountable for those areas they are truly responsible for versus the ones they are not, such as a student’s race or socio-economic status.

For high schools, school grades will be based on proficiency, growth, graduation rate, and college and career readiness indicators such as AP coursework, PSAT and ACT scores.

While the current system includes critical components for any accountability system – disaggregated data, standards and assessments, interventions for low performing schools – the arbitrary bar and lack of flexibility has made it difficult for states to advance bold accountability agendas that serve their schools and students well. Moving forward, New Mexico encourages Congress to pursue an accountability framework that requires states to have a high bar and expectations for all schools, but coupled with flexibility to allow states and districts to determine achievement targets for schools and differentiate interventions to meet the unique and specific needs of low achieving schools.

Lever 3: Ready for Success

Regardless of background, all students can achieve at high levels. Our Ready for Success initiative is related directly to preparing all students for success in college or career. New Mexico has already taken several important steps towards realizing this goal.

First, we are working to transition to rigorous, college and career ready standards. Adopting the Common Core was an important first step to ensure that our students are competitive in New Mexico and across the nation. As we transition to these new and rigorous standards, we are committed to engaging our teachers, school leaders and parents to ensure successful implementation. I firmly believe that the decision to adopt the Common Core is solely that of a state. While NCLB took an important step in requiring states to implement rigorous standards for all students in a state, the role of the federal government should end there.

Second, we have placed a command focus on reading. A 2011 report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Double Jeopardy*, found that students who are not proficient readers by the end of third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school. Screening and intervention in the earliest grades will make our students better prepared to compete in the 21st Century economy. Additionally, ending the all too common practice of social promotion will provide our most at-risk students with the opportunity they deserve to achieve at high levels.

As Congress reauthorizes ESEA, I encourage you maintain the expectation that all students can reach college and career expectations and have ample opportunity to do so.

Lever 4: Rewarding Effective Educators and Leaders

While there is no silver bullet in education, research has clearly shown that one of the most important school-related factors influencing a child's academic achievement is the quality of his or her teacher. A recent study by Eric Hanushek found that if we give the most at-risk students the most effective teachers, we could close the achievement gap. Conversely, the data show that if a student is placed in a classroom with a low performing teacher, the student will struggle to make up learning gains lost.

The current teacher evaluation and recognition process in New Mexico places emphasis on years of experience and credentials obtained. In a recent 2010 sample of twenty-five percent of New Mexico's teachers, 99.998 percent of these teachers received a rating of "meets competency" on their evaluations (versus "does not meet competency"). Yet we are not seeing proportional success in terms of New Mexico student achievement. This suggests a lack of alignment between the system that measures teacher performance and the system that measures student learning outcomes.

We are working to develop and implement a new teacher and school leader evaluation system that includes multiple measures such as student achievement as measured by a value-add model, objective and uniform observations, and additional measures that will be selected by districts. Any new system must better enable districts to address and improve school personnel policies concerning professional development, promotion, compensation, performance pay, and tenure. Further, the evaluation system must identify teachers and school leaders who are most effective at helping students succeed, provide targeted assistance and professional development opportunities for teachers and school leaders, inform the match between teacher assignments and student and school needs and inform incentives for effective teachers and school leaders.

I encourage Congress to replace the current expectations under NCLB in regards to credentials with those that prioritize outcomes for students.

Lever 5: Effective Options for Parents

Governor Martinez remains committed to offering parents multiple educational opportunities for their children. However, these options must be effective.

New Mexico is working to amend our existing process for new and renewal charter school applications to ensure that only quality charter schools are approved or renewed. An effective charter school has the potential to meet the educational needs for students in rural and urban areas who have limited choice now. In addition to increasing the number and location of effective charter schools throughout New Mexico, we are also pursuing effective virtual options.

Particularly in our rural districts, providing robust virtual schooling options is a priority. Often, these districts are unable to offer public school choice, advanced math and science classes, or AP coursework. Virtual schools can address these issues. I encourage Congress to consider flexibility for states in the use of federal dollars to pursue robust virtual school offerings for students in under-served areas.

As Congress pursues reauthorization of ESEA, I encourage you to consider several important ideas:

- First, states know best what their districts and schools need in terms of flexibility and interventions. Allowing states to implement accountability systems that reward effective schools and intervene in a significant manner with the lowest achieving schools will increase the number of high performing schools across this nation.
- Second, many states are pursuing teacher effectiveness models that are based significantly on student outcomes versus those that are based on credentials and years of experience. This is hard work, and states need support from Congress to

accomplish it effectively. This does not mean we need to be told what to do, but, rather, to be supported as we pursue these changes.

- Third, prioritize the use of existing federal funds on proven programs and strategies. New money will not increase the number of proficient readers in New Mexico, or any state. Instead, provide flexibility to states to direct resources to support proven programs at the school and classroom level.
- Fourth, rural states face unique challenges. New Mexico has districts with as few as 43 students. The interventions and supports that may be effective in Albuquerque are very different than those that will be effective in Mosquero. As you work to reauthorize ESEA, I challenge you to think critically and strategically about how these schools' needs can be met.
- Fifth, academic standards are the business of states. Simply stated, all states should be required to implement rigorous standards for all students in a state, but the role of the federal government ends there.

As you prepare to reauthorize ESEA, I encourage you to visit the Chiefs for Change website and look closely at the ESEA reauthorization principals outlined. Thank you again for the opportunity to share my ideas on the federal role in school accountability and how Congress can maintain high expectations while expanding flexibility.