Time to end social promotion in New Mexico schools

PAUL GESSING | SEPTEMBER 12, 2011

A few years ago, we at the Rio Grande Foundation brought the "Florida Model" for K-12 education reform to New Mexico. The reforms enacted by then-Gov. Jeb Bush in Florida led to dramatic improvements in reading performance among Florida students.

Gov. Martinez has been pushing for some of the Florida-style reforms including the A-F school grading system which passed the Legislature earlier this year and is in the midst of being implemented. Bi-partisan legislation that would have prohibited social promotion (the passing of students from grade to grade regardless of their grasp of the material) of third graders was held up in the waning hours of the session by Majority Leader Michael Sanchez.

Why has the elimination of social promotion for third graders had a positive impact in education results? The idea behind it is that until third grade, students are learning to read. After that, they are reading to learn. So, a seventh grader who can't read is more highly-likely to drop out because their inability to read makes them unable to understand everything from their science book to the word problems on a math test.

A great, real-world example of this is the story of Michael Oher in the book and movie "The Blind Side." Oher, now an outstanding left-tackle in the NFL, was passed along in the Memphis Public Schools despite not attending class and being homeless. While I'm not asserting that ending social promotion would solve all of our societal and educational problems, the fact is that ending social promotion can function as a warning bell for parents, teachers, and students alike who may be alerted to the fact that some children are having problems learning.

Whether the response to that warning is heeded or not is ultimately up to parents, teachers, and students, but it is better than nothing.

So, ending social promotion is a no-brainer, right? From listening to the concerns of New Mexico legislators who are dedicated to preserving our state's 49th ranking in K-12 education, one might think that Gov. Martinez's plan to end social promotion was part of a harsh right-wing agenda to keep kids trapped in third grade.

Nothing could be further from the truth and it is not just conservative Republicans (and the Rio Grande Foundation) that support ending social promotion. How about that noted right-winger, former President Clinton? In the introduction to a Department of Education report on the issue, he said "I have fought for excellence, competition, and accountability in our nation's public schools, with more parental involvement, greater choice, better teaching, and an end to social promotion." And then there is the American Federation of Teachers which said in a union-published report, "Passing on Failure: District Promotion Policies and Practices:"

The practice of social promotion contributes to the very problems that can make it seem necessary. Promotion,

in the absence of satisfactory academic performance, perpetuates academic failure by teaching students that effort and achievement are not important and that objective standards can not and will not be enforced. It forces classroom teachers to deal with an impossibly wide range of student knowledge, background, and readiness. And it denies students both the classroom and remedial resources that could help them reverse the pattern of academic failure.

The special legislation provides a great opportunity for the Legislature to move our state one big step closer to educational success. Certainly, redistricting must be the first priority, but it is hard to see that turning around New Mexico's dire education results can be anything but a top priority for legislators.

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