

From: Webster, Melinda
Sent time: Friday, October 21, 2011 9:40:56 PM
To: Cari Miller (Cari@excelined.org) <Cari@excelined.org>
Subject: RE: The New Mexican: Skandera seeks help with school reforms

Thanks so much for keeping me in the loop!

From: Cari Miller (Cari@excelined.org) [mailto:Cari@excelined.org]
Sent: Fri 10/21/2011 8:32 AM
To: Webster, Melinda
Subject: FW: The New Mexican: Skandera seeks help with school reforms

FYI~

From: Nadia Hagberg (Nadia@excelined.org)
Sent: Friday, October 21, 2011 8:31 AM
To: Mandy Clark (mandy@excelined.org); Jaryn Emhof (jaryn@excelined.org)
Cc: Patricia Levesque (patricia@excelined.org); Deirdre Finn (dfinn@excelined.org); Matthew Ladner (ladner55@gmail.com); Christy Hovanetz (christyh@excelined.org); Erin Price (Erin@excelined.org); Alexis Franz (Alexis@excelined.org); Mary Laura Bragg (MaryLaura@excelined.org); Cari Miller (Cari@excelined.org)
Subject: The New Mexican: Skandera seeks help with school reforms

Skandera seeks help with school reforms

Education secretary-designate says legislators need to 'put kids first'

Robert Nott | The New Mexican

Posted: Thursday, October 20, 2011 - 10/21/11 Comments

Hanna Skandera, who has run into controversies since her designation this year as state education secretary, is reaching out to superintendents and educational leaders around New Mexico in the hope they'll help reshape her social-promotion bill before next year's legislative session.

In a letter sent out last week to the New Mexico Coalition of School Administrators, Skandera also touched on other elements of the educational reform plan she is pushing in tandem with Gov. Susana Martinez. These include the new A-F grading system for schools, a move to reduce the number of reports school districts must annually file with the state Public Education Department and a revamp of the evaluation system for teachers.

On Thursday, Skandera spoke with The New Mexican about several of these issues, reflected upon her first 10 months in office and emphasized the need for state legislators to work together to "put kids first."

"People always look for the silver bullet in education," she said, "But I don't believe in one. Our challenge is not to ask, 'What is a good thing to do for education?' but 'What is a great thing to do for education?' ... and be persistent."

Since joining Martinez's administration in January, Skandera — who served as deputy commissioner of education under Florida Gov. Jeb Bush from 2005-07 — has lobbied both for a simple school grading system and to put an end to the practice of social promotion, in which third-graders who cannot read at a proficient level are passed into the fourth grade.

The New Mexico Legislature didn't confirm Skandera as secretary. She has come under fire from some state superintendents and other critics for a questionable state audit of both public and charter schools and for overruling the Public Education Commission's denial of three state charters earlier this year.

The Independent Source PAC, a liberal political-action group, also publicly criticized her for hiring Patricia Matthews — a lawyer for a legal firm that represents charter schools — as the new director of the Options for Parents department, which oversees charter schools and other alternative-learning venues.

State lawmakers passed the A-F grading bill in February, but the social-promotion bill stalled both in the regular session and a special session in September.

Skandera said she hopes educators within the New Mexico Coalition of School Administrators will contribute to rewriting the social-promotion bill so it can win favor next January. She reiterated that the plan — which she would like to rename the reading intervention bill — has built-in intervention practices in place to ensure students are reading up to their grade level so they don't have to be held back.

The department is still working out the specifics of the A-F system, Skandera said, but she did reveal some points. Her team is putting together three years of data that go beyond proficiency and growth, and include Standard Based Assessment results (which only includes grades 3 through 8 and the 11th grade).

The department also is creating a value-added model building what she calls a level playing field when it comes to accounting for student mobility, the impact of poverty, English-language learners and special-education students within each school.

In addition, schools may receive merit points if they demonstrate strong parental involvement, extracurricular activities, offer Advanced Placement classes and encourage students to take the SAT college-admission test.

According to the most recent Adequate Yearly Progress reports, 87 percent of New Mexico's schools are not making the grade.

"Eighty-seven percent of our schools will not be failing under the [new] school grading system," she said.

While acknowledging that many elements of the grading plan have yet to be worked out, preliminary baseline data suggest that some schools that appear to be doing well may not receive good grades, she said, while others people consider failing may do better than expected.

Speaking of two schools in one district that have been researched, for instance, she said the one that made Adequate Yearly Progress would receive a D. The one that did not will likely receive an A.

"The grading system will engage parents and communities," she said. "You hear that your school got a C and you'll work to get it a B. It also allows us to differentiate. How can we focus our resources on a school that is failing? This gives us an opportunity to intervene."

One element of the A-F plan allows parents to transfer their children from a D or F school to a higher-rated facility. Skandera could not say how this could play out

if half a district's schools are rated D or F.

But she repeatedly emphasized the idea of moving those students into a "virtual learning" environment — which could include home — where they could set their own educational path by taking courses at a pace that allows them to keep up. These virtual learning options would offer more choice in course work, too, she said.

Though the state's Higher Education Department does include an Innovative Digital Education and Learning (IDEAL) program, Skandera said there may be other options to pursue for this initiative. The state just submitted a grant to the Jaquelin Hume Foundation to raise funds for a study on digital-learning resources to determine what the state has to offer and what it needs to expand this plan.

She said her dream would be to see an individualized, virtual-learning program set up.

Skandera said the department expects to release baseline school grades first to district superintendents and then to the public by the end of the calendar year. These grades will officially go into effect next summer.

While some superintendents have said they find Skandera willing to listen and cooperate, others have suggested that she has not welcomed their input, so the letter to the association represents an effort on her part to work with state educators.

Asked what she has learned on the job so far, Skandera said, "New Mexico is an unbelievably relational state, and there is a beauty in that. Relationships are key here; more than in other states. I also believe that parents and educators believe there is a sense of opportunity here to live in the richness of this state's culture and succeed."

As for the Legislature not confirming her appointment, she said, "I don't care. That doesn't mean it's not important to me ... but I came here to do a job. I can do it now and I will continue to do it."

Contact Robert Nott at 986-3021 or rnott@sfnewmexican.com