



Democrats offer nothing for education reform

Neal Hooks

April 23, 2015

A recent guest column in the Sun-News by Betty Patterson, NEA-NM president, underscores the problem with education in New Mexico: Democrats are good at criticizing Republican ideas but offer no meaningful solutions.

Ms. Patterson starts her argument, ironically, with an attack on "Right-to-Work" (RTW) legislation. She believes somehow it would lessen teachers' "collective voices" on education issues; and that it would lead to more poverty, creating more obstacles in the classroom for the poor. Both are misguided. I chronicled reasons why RTW would be prosperous for our state in a recent Sun-News article. Surprisingly, Ms. Patterson ends with this threat, "If next year's session is also distracted by such legislation, we will rise again." Maybe Betty and the NEA should "rise-up" and focus on solutions to education.

Ms. Patterson then criticizes merit pay for teachers. She believes competition is harmful amongst teachers, and that this also hurts students "in many ways." She doesn't bother to tell us how, but I would argue that competition brings accountability, which is the biggest problem our public schools face today. Bad teachers are hard to fire; while near-100 percent of teachers received exemplary ratings in the past. This lack of accountability has led to lower quality education that has metastasized throughout our schools.

The Center for American Progress, a left-leaning research and educational institute, believes that if we could fire the worst 5-8 percent of public school teachers and replace them with just average teachers, we would see significant academic improvement in our public schools. In their 2010 report, "Devil in the Details," they chronicle the difficulty of firing bad teachers. This is a direct result of union control in our school system that our NEA president refuses to acknowledge.

Ms. Patterson then affirms her support for so-called social promotion policy. However, the Albuquerque Journal reports that 74 percent of New Mexicans want this policy repealed. And, according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a student's ability to read at grade-level by the third grade is the No. 1 indicator whether or not that student will complete high school. This is because students learn to read through third grade, then read to learn thereafter.

Ms. Patterson then goes on to criticize Secretary Skandera's current evaluation system. I am the first to admit the system is not perfect. However, I find the intense opposition somewhat hypocritical. While the left complains about Republicans' refusal to compromise with Obamacare through simple tweaks instead of repeal; Democrats refuse to consider working with our secretary to tweak and improve the evaluation system. This leads me to believe that those in control are happy with the failing status-quo and are not focused on the students.

Lastly, I find it sad that the only solution Ms. Patterson offers is an unspecific request for more money; defining it as a "constitutional obligation." Besides the fact that our state lacks the funds to grant her wish, her own organization recently reported that New Mexico is ranked No. 20 nationwide in per-pupil spending. And the Rio Grande Foundation reports between 1992 and 2009, New Mexico's student population rose by 7 percent while the number of teachers went up by 30 percent, and administrators rose 47 percent. Money is not the solution.

The Cato Institute recently reported that 2015 looks like the "Year of Educational Choice." More and more states are considering vouchers and tax credits for poor and middle class children to attend private schools of their choice. Choice and competition among teachers and schools would increase accountability, and thereby improve our public school system. Maybe it's time for us to consider these solutions.