

## **Court to New Mexico: Give your schools more money**

### **NM educators hopeful, cautious after court decision chastizes state**

By Robert Nott, [rnott@sfnewmexican.com](mailto:rnott@sfnewmexican.com)

*The Taos News*, 7/26/2018

For Lillian Torrez, the future began Friday evening (July 20).

The Taos Municipal Schools superintendent said District Judge Sarah Singleton's landmark ruling that state leaders must find a way to "remedy" New Mexico's public schools by April has given her and her colleagues a renewed sense of hope.

She acknowledged it may take some time to cure the ills in New Mexico's schools. Maybe 10 years. Maybe even 20.

But Singleton's decision, made public late Friday, will create undeniable momentum to finally – and fully – fix a system that many see as broken, Torrez said.

"This is the most important, significant breakthrough for New Mexico's public education system," she said. "It should open the minds of both the Legislature and the public to realize maybe school districts do need more funding.

"We're 50th now," she added, referring to national studies that year after year place the state at or near the bottom of public education metrics. "But with this decision, we can go to the top."

Torrez was one of many school superintendents, educators and administrators from around the state who saw Singleton's ruling Friday as cause to rejoice. The case resulted from a lawsuit filed against the state in 2014 on behalf of a group of students, parents and school districts.

As it played out in court last summer, arguments centered on whether the state was providing enough resources to ensure that its students – many of whom are impoverished, special-needs or Englishlanguage learners – have a shot at success.

It's still unclear if the state will contest the decision. Singleton, of the 1st Judicial District, gave both sides 28 days to appeal.

Although the judge did not lay out any specific measures that state leaders must take to address the problem, such as investing additional millions of dollars into school budgets, for example, many school administrators expressed a sense of hope that a new governor and the Legislature will work together to come up with a solution by April.

"It's great news for New Mexico," said Richard Perea, superintendent of Santa Rosa Consolidated Schools. "It's nice to know that there is going to have to be a decision coming

from the legislative and executive branches of the state; they are going to have to start brainstorming about how they are going to work this out.”

Stan Rounds, executive director of the New Mexico Coalition of Educational Leaders and a former superintendent in Las Cruces, agreed.

“For our new governor, it means that this is the first order of business,” he said.

Others expressed more caution about the ruling, saying it’s still unclear what the new governor, either U.S. Rep. Steve Pearce, a Republican from Hobbs, or U.S. Rep. Michelle Lujan Grisham, a Democrat from Albuquerque, will have in mind in terms of addressing the issue.

“I agree with the judge’s decision and am definitely in support of it,” said Travis Dempsey, superintendent of the Gadsden Independent School District. “But I don’t know what this means in the here and now because we’re going to be in a transition, administratively, soon.

“Our next governor is going to have to be the one who handles the problem, and the judge didn’t make a specific recommendation (to address the problem). I don’t see anything in the decision that says, ‘Here’s the expectation.’ It just sounds like we need a new plan, and that could be a challenge.”

Aztec Superintendent Kirk Carpenter said any plans or decisions need to take into account the changing nature of public education. His district, the site of a December 2017 school shooting that took the lives of two students, isn’t the only one that could use not just more support for teachers and students but behavioral and mental health counselors and security guards, among other resources.

“When we make this argument about funding education sufficiently, all those other things schools are having to do today have to come into play,” he said.

But Superintendent Dennis Roch of Logan, who also serves as a member of the House of Representatives, said no one should expect Singleton’s ruling will solve problems overnight.

Referring to a 2007-08 American Institute for Research report on New Mexico public school funding, which said the state would need to increase public school support by at least 14.5 percent to meet constitutional standards for what is deemed “sufficient,” Roch said Singleton’s decision still doesn’t explain quite what that key term means.

“We’ve got to be cautious about seeing this as a windfall that may come in and save everything,” he said. “I’m perhaps a little disappointed because the things that we were identifying 10 years ago when that study came out as resources we needed – longer school time for at-risk students – are actually being provided more now than they were 10 years ago.”

But he, too, thought the timing of the decision was apt, given the upcoming change of leadership in the Roundhouse.

“My guess is whoever is going to be elected governor will want their fingerprints on how education is funded and figuring out where the money comes from,” said Roch, who is leaving the Legislature at the end of the year.

Tom Sullivan, who recently retired as superintendent of the Moriarty-Edgewood school district, sees the timing in a different light.

While praising Singleton's decision as positive, he said: "It's ironic that the squeezing and the bleeding of school districts conducted through one administration is going to require the next administration to clean up the mess."

---

*'This is the most important, significant breakthrough for New Mexico's public education system.'* Lillian Torrez, Taos Municipal Schools superintendent



**Taos Superintendant Lillian Torrez**  
**Katharine Egli/File photo**

---

Copyright (c)2018 The Taos News 7/26/2018