

Where does the funding go?

By Ed Williams Searchlight New Mexico

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New Mexico public schools get most of their budget — around 70 percent — from the state, based on a complex formula that takes into account everything from poverty rates to the number of special needs students.

But once districts get that money, they have wide leeway as to how they actually spend it.

And many, Questa Independent School District among them, are not spending as much as the state recommends on classroom instruction. Instead, they divert much of their funding into so-called “administrative costs” — superintendents’ salaries, human resources, office equipment and other expenses not directly related to student education.

Academic achievement can suffer as a result.

Think New Mexico, an independent policy think tank based in Santa Fe, analyzed spending data in all of the state’s 89 school districts and found that the best-performing ones consistently devote a greater share of their budgets to classroom instruction.

East of Clovis, on the New Mexico side of the state’s border with Texas, is the small town of Texico, which spends 79 percent of its state dollars in the classroom. Like many of New Mexico’s rural towns, Texico has a poverty rate higher than the state average (30 percent as compared with about 20 percent statewide), and a large share of students who are English language learners. Yet Texico schools are leaps and bounds ahead of Questa and New Mexico schools as a whole — boasting the state’s highest graduation rate and scoring in the top 10 districts statewide in math and reading proficiency.

“Their kids demographically should not be doing as well as they’re doing, if you believe demographics are your destiny,” said Fred Nathan, executive director of Think New Mexico. “They really do have a philosophy of, it’s about the students — let’s push as many resources as we can into the classroom to see if we can boost our scores and our graduation rates.”

The Public Education Department directs small districts like Questa to spend at least 65 percent of state funds in the classroom, a target that is not enforced and that Nathan and other education advocates claim is too low anyway.

Questa has in recent years increased its administrative spending by more than 8 percent, yet still manages to spend above the state target.

The push for more classroom spending is catching on in the legislature, though it has yet to gain as much traction as advocates would like. This past session, state Sen. Jacob Candelaria (D-Albuquerque) and state Rep. Bobby Gonzales (D-Taos) sponsored a bill that would have capped the amount that districts can spend on administrative costs. It died in the House Education Committee.

“If New Mexico were able to shift just 4 percent of its \$2.7 billion [state education budget] from administration to the classroom, it would mean an increase of over

\$100 million for proven education reforms, from K-3 Plus to prekindergarten to better pay for principals and teachers,” according to an analysis by Think New Mexico.

Yet the idea remains unpopular in many school districts, where administrators often feel they are already stretched too thin.

“If I get rid of all my administrators, who’s going to run the school, who’s going to meet all the compliance deadlines from PED?” asked Questa superintendent Michael Lovato.