

Why New Mexico students need more time in school

Written by By Dr. Arsenio Romero PED Secretary
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There is a lot I've been seeing in the news lately about a new rule that is being proposed by the New Mexico Public Education Department that would establish the standard minimum school year is 180 days for all schools. I want to be clear about something, this is an update of an existing rule that established the 180-day minimum standard for schools with five days per week calendars in 2011-2012.

This rule was not strictly enforced in recent years due to the pandemic, so some schools have dropped their instructional days below 180. In addition, this rule now applies to districts that operate on a calendar of four days per week. This will be a big change for them, and we appreciate that change is difficult. However, our students deserve better.

Some of the arguments against the proposed change are that it is not supported by research and that increased instructional time alone does not guarantee improved student outcomes. Factors such as regular attendance, student engagement, smaller class sizes, rigorous learning opportunities, highly qualified teachers, high quality instructional materials and parental and community involvement have more direct impact on student achievement.

Much of that is true. At PED, we are doing all we can to help students reach the achievement levels we know that they are capable of. We are investing in addressing chronic absenteeism, further implementing Structured Literacy which has proven results, and providing additional support and high-quality instructional materials in math.

One common complaint I hear from educators as I travel around New Mexico is that they do not

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have enough time to do all that they need to. That they often attend professional development training and other work meetings when they are not getting paid for their time and work. This proposed rule change will address that by ensuring there are enough days in the school year.

While there are multiple important factors for student academic success, there is ample evidence to demonstrate that providing students with sufficient opportunities to engage with the curriculum is an important factor on its own. In other words, students need days in school to improve academic achievement.

A recent RAND study looked at the impact of four-day school weeks in comparison to five-day school weeks. Researchers from UNM's Institute for Social Research are among the authors. They studied four-day school weeks in New Mexico, Idaho, Oklahoma, Colorado, Missouri, and South Dakota. The study found:

The big trade-off, RAND found, was in student achievement. Math and English test scores didn't fall when schools switched to a four-day week. But they didn't grow as fast as they did in similar districts in the same states that kept a five-day schedule. That meant students in the four-day districts fell behind a little more every year.

After eight years, that lag in improvement was roughly equivalent to the achievement losses that schools saw during the pandemic.

"A lot of the benefits that districts think they'll enjoy, we couldn't really find in the quantitative evidence," Christopher Doss, a policy researcher at RAND and former high school teacher who helped lead the study, said.

New Mexico ranks poorly in reading and math proficiency, with only 38% of students in New Mexico testing as proficient in reading and 24% proficient in math. That is unacceptable. □ We all need to be accountable to our students and to do everything we can to give them opportunities to succeed. We all need to focus on what is best for the students of New Mexico and embrace a culture of accountability and achievement.

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The governor and legislature have invested record levels of funding for schools. It is now time to ensure that the Public Education Department sets high expectations for schools to see the results of those investments and that we are all accountable for those results.

Change can be difficult, and what is familiar is comfortable. But, we cannot accept continued low proficiency rates as just the way things are in New Mexico. We must take bold measures to change educational outcomes for students in New Mexico.

By Dr. Arsenio Romero
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