



Educators Speak Out!

Voices of Educators on NEA-New Mexico's Legislative Priorities

Educator Wages

Testimony of Anita Jaramillo, Educational Assistant Bernalillo Elementary School

I am an Educational Assistant. I have been an EA for 18 years. As educational assistants, we are the glue that keeps a school running. We are with the kids – sometimes more than the teachers. We develop relationships with every kid in the school and we know them. We take on the tough behavioral issues. It is the EAs who work one-to-one with kids when they have a special challenge. I want to talk to you about our wages and the cost of our health insurance.

Even with my 18 years of experience, I earn less than \$17,000 per year. This works out to an hourly rate of \$14.94 – and I am considered at the top for EAs in the district. I could literally go to McDonalds and make the same rate it took me 18 years as an EA to reach. I do not get my health insurance through the district because I qualify for Medicaid. I have an important job but the government considers me to be in poverty. If I did take the insurance from the district, my take home pay would be approximately \$300 for two weeks. The way I make ends meet is by sticking to a budget, by having access to Medicaid, and having SNAP benefits for food. My job does not put food on the table for me, it is my government benefits that do. I am not alone. Many EAs and other non-licensed staff like food service and custodians need Medicaid and SNAP too.

Even though we don't have much money, we give. And my kids feel it and I am proud of that. My passion for my work has never left. But now, as I think about paying for college for my daughter, my anxiety has increased and I worry that I need a second job or to even consider doing a different job. But what keeps me here is my love for the kids and my passion for helping them learn. I don't want to work at a bank or something like that. I want to be with the kids and that is priceless to me.

I feel like the people in power – the people who are responsible for not funding my job – have never really faced struggle or what it is like to come to work every day fully committed to kids and only being able to advance my wage by a few cents an hour. I wish that the people who could fix this would see how important my work is. You could ask any of the kids at my school about “Ms. Anita” and they will tell you.

It feels like powerful people talk about caring about kids and schools but they don't really make it a priority. Well, we are in a crisis now and it must be a priority. That's why I'm asking you to support the NEA New Mexico legislative demands.



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Healthcare

Testimony of Melanie Martinez, Fourth Grade Educator Bernalillo Elementary School

My name is Melanie Martinez and I teach fourth grade at Bernalillo Elementary School. I have been a teacher for 22 years. I would like to talk to you about the impact that the cost of health insurance and health care has on educators like me.

I love being a teacher. Of course I love it when I see students learn a new skill but what I really love are the lasting relationships I build with students and the bond we have. I have been a teacher long enough now that there are students I taught who invite me to their high school graduations. Teaching fourth grade is so rewarding. This is the year when my students go from being children to little human beings. They learn organization, how to socialize, how to be kind to others, how to stand up for their friends – they come into their own at this age and they take ownership over the choices they make. And I get to be right there with them and help them make these important steps.

I get my health insurance through the district in Bernalillo. I need coverage for myself and for my son and daughter. It costs me \$412 every two weeks to have this coverage. And that amount keeps going up: in 2017, I was paying \$286 every two weeks. And that insurance only covers a portion of the cost of health care. My daughter tore her ACL and needed surgery four years ago. I was responsible for over \$5,000 out of my own pocket. I am still paying off that debt today. When I pick up my prescriptions every month, I pay \$80 or \$90. I sometimes ask: “Why do I even have insurance?” My take home pay after all of the deductions is \$1,600 every two weeks. I have to tutor on the side after school and sell jewelry out of my home in order to make ends meet and I’m about to start a third job. Without this extra income there would be no way I could pay my bills with just my teaching salary. It is so discouraging that my teacher salary still can’t cover my bills. I have a Master’s Degree and have developed myself as a professional. I am passionate about this job. My daughter is a level one teacher in Las Cruces. She makes even less than I do and she is always asking to borrow money. I am begging her to go back to school to get into a different career path. Until there is major change in the way we compensate and support people in this profession, I can’t recommend this career to any young person. That is incredibly sad.

You have the power to invest our state’s resources to fix this problem. Please support the NEA New Mexico legislative agenda. Thank you for listening. These are testimonials that I constantly hear. I have been involved with NEA NM for 20 years and I am still voicing, advocating, begging, negotiating, for more pay and affordable health care for educators. I am close to retirement, when are we going to be heard? What is it going to take for you to make changes for educators in NM? Please increase our pay and do not raise our health insurance.



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Planning Time and Adequate Staffing

Testimony of Julie Uhl, Kindergarten Teacher Santa Domingo Elementary

Because we had no specials teachers (PE, ART, Music), teachers have not had any planning time for the whole first semester. We need consistent planning time to have materials ready for our students. When you have larger class sizes combined with little planning time, it creates a very difficult situation where teachers have to work late into their family time every day. This creates fatigue that impacts how teachers are able to work effectively with students during the day. Large class sizes and little to no planning time create the conditions that push young teachers out of the profession, and we lose them forever. Our school primarily serves Native students and this staffing and planning time issue is an issue of equity for these students—many of whom are not grade level proficient. The staffing issues are not new, and not due to the pandemic. In the past, we have had years where Kindergarten teachers turned over 3 or 4 times in a classroom in a year. This is incredibly disruptive to student learning.

Testimony of Denise Lopez Jaramillo, Counselor Española Middle School

Many core subject teachers resigned throughout the district and now elective/specials teachers are being transferred into the core subject positions. Core teachers quit, because of the demands made worse by the pandemic, substituting during their planning time for multiple classes and lack of support. They are working all hours to cover vacant positions that no one wants to fill. Staff are told, “If you have a conscience, you will work before and after school in addition to covering other classes during the day” which they are doing anyway. Leadership is not supportive. The teachers that have stayed are being punished with larger class sizes, no planning time and being forced to teach subjects they aren’t qualified to teach. Teachers are so afraid of getting sick, that they don’t come back. Level III teachers are leaving for better paying jobs. “I feel like I have wasted my life to be treated like this,” stated one teacher as they walked out. An English Language (EL) teacher gave up her endorsement to teach second language students due to an overload in students, no planning time and the testing mandates. Our bilingual program is just about testing these kids with little instruction, no training, no professional development, no support. “The Martinez/Yazzie lawsuit gave us so much hope that things would change/improve, but they haven’t changed, they are worse.” Due to the pandemic, students have lost basic connection with adults, and it is very difficult to get them to follow safe practices and school safety rules. Substance abuse is a huge problem. The students most in need are not getting any additional services; there are no additional services. We struggle to find agencies to refer and support our students, and we are trying to set up school based health centers. As a counselor, I have never seen the types of behavior that I am seeing this year. Tuesday (1/4/22), I had 4 combined classes in the gym, because of a lack of teachers and subs. Something needs to be done. This veteran counselor was crying on Tuesday when I spoke with her and crying again this morning.



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Community Schools

Testimony of Henry Jasso, Computer Lab Instructor University Hills Elementary

Community schools are important in so many ways. I've seen first hand how community schools work to meet the needs of educators and students. This is something unique to community schools because so many times the mindset of a school is to solely focus on the students but when you also address the needs of the educators, staff, and student families it makes the experience all the more valuable. The vision of New Mexico should be to strive to have as many community schools as possible. As we witness the needs of our students, families, and educators constantly changing we need community schools to be there for all of us.

Over the past semester I've been a member of a small team from Las Cruces that has been working with our local community schools through an NEA Fellowship. Our team surveyed all community school coordinators, teachers, staff, parents and community partners concerning the needs each of them have. Results from our survey provided us with information on how some needs remain consistent throughout the district but others indicated very specific needs. We then held four dialectic sessions with staff from each site, community school coordinators, community partners, and families to discuss and brainstorm ideas on how to meet the needs based on the surveys. Putting ideas into motion to address these needs are currently happening through our community school coordinators. With the help of a community school coordinator, schools are able to specifically identify and work to find solutions to what our schools are challenged with today. It becomes very evident that the role of community school coordinators is extremely important to how community schools work and function. Community school coordinators are the ones taking on the task to reach out to both sides of a school environment to seek help and resources to assist teachers and students to both be successful. I would ask the State of New Mexico to recognize the importance of community schools and community school coordinators and how much they do for us. As our survey showed us, needs change all the time and are different from location to location. The current challenges in the classroom, health and safety concerns, and economic crises are being felt by families and educators alike. Community schools and community school coordinators help meet the needs of our schools as a whole, so students come prepared to learn and teachers have the confidence needed to teach.



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Testimony of Susana Ríos, Ph.D., Instructional Specialist National Board Certified Teacher

In New Mexico, our unique demographics poses many challenges in education especially for those underserved and underrepresented groups. Las Cruces Public Schools student population is diverse, multicultural, and in need of extensive support. My direct experience with community schools this semester helped me realize the ample opportunities to improve the educational outcomes for all students and to better the lives of their families. I found the community schools model as an effective method to address unjust practices and racial justice in public education.

Community schools are important because they rely on a formula that includes the community to help them thrive and be sustainable. The community schools' model involves all stakeholders to meet the needs of students and families. Service providers, administrators, classified and certified staff, and community organizations and service programs orchestrate efforts to provide customized continuous support to students, parents, and guardians in a timely manner.

The community schools' model strengthens relationships between all stakeholders to responsibly address education justice issues and actively work to counteract them. To attain such a goal, community schools need funding for varied reasons. Our school district will benefit from expanding the community schools' model across all elementary schools and phasing the expansion out for the secondary and high school models. Also, funding is needed to hire community schools' coordinators and bilingual parents' liaisons, provide differentiated professional development opportunities for school leaders on community schools, acquire culturally and responsive curriculum that represents all students, and hire administrators that support the cause of community schools and are knowledgeable on operational outcomes to sustain the model effectively.

If we want to move New Mexico from the stage it is at the moment in educational ranks, we must do something different.

Community schools are one potential solution to the problem.

¡Together si se puede!



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Class Size and Adequate Staffing

Testimony of Jacki Parenti, DD Preschool Teacher Ruidoso

I love being an educator! Getting to work with our youngest students and help them learn, grow, and develop skills that will assist them for the rest of their lives is so rewarding. We have faced some big challenges in the last few years and being an educator has just gotten more and more challenging. Last year was tough with us lacking the consistency that our students need, but we were able to handle the emotional/behavioral challenges of our students effectively while still meeting their academic needs because we had small class sizes with our 2 cohorts.

Our students thrive when they are in appropriate learning environments that are not overcrowded. Waivers that allow class size guidelines to be ignored or that include all school staff in the ratio do NOT support best practices for our students.

On an average day, there may be 7 staff members absent and only 1 substitute for the school. Our classes become even more overloaded when there is not a sub for teachers that are absent because of COVID or other medical concerns. Students are dispersed in the other classrooms. The principal cancels specials like music, art, and PE because these teachers cover classes. (Which in turn means that the classroom teacher does not get prep time) Kindergarten instructional assistants cover absent teacher positions, so now these classes are overloaded. Our principal and vice principal have both subbed in classrooms multiple times this year. We need to have adequate staff in all of our schools to support appropriate class sizes.

As a preschool teacher my students often come to me lacking even the most basic communication skills. My assistant and I get to know our students and their families to not only support students' needs at school, but to help their families meet their basic needs to support their growth at home. This becomes a daunting task when our class is overloaded with students. Our students deserve the best possible education and that isn't possible with overcrowded classrooms. This is why I support NEA NM's Legislative Priorities specifically to restore funding for sufficient highly qualified teachers and support staff and to prohibit blanket class size waivers and class size averaging loopholes.



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Early Childhood Education

Testimony of Samantha Dengel, Preschool Teacher

This is my 5th year teaching preschool in NM. I have encountered some challenges here that I never expected. My first year in NM I taught DD 3 year old Preschool. That was a half day program and at the time we had small class sizes. Although all of my students had IEPs I was able to see huge progress with every student. Although, there was always a struggle to get supplies or specific preschool specific materials because of lack of funding.

I now teach in a NM PreK 4 year old classroom. This is a full time 5 day a week program with much larger class sizes. In past years our classes were capped at 16 students. This year my class has ranged from 18-22 students. That is a lot of 4 year olds in a classroom with their skill/need levels ranging from nonverbal and/or not yet toilet trained to high functioning and just about academically ready for kindergarten. I am supposed to have an assistant in my classroom full time and we work well together and have a great system, but she gets pulled from my room to support other classrooms in the school, and we don't usually have any support for our lunch breaks. I personally feel suffocated by the disregard for ratios and overwhelmed by the amount of training and paperwork required. We have so many preschool students and usually have a list of students waiting to get into the program. It is incredibly challenging to support the individual needs of 20 preschool students while dealing with behavioral/emotional issues that many of my students are exhibiting. In addition to all of this I am the only certified Teacher in the NM PreK program at my school this year. The other class has an assistant and a substitute. I am responsible for evaluations, data entry, and IEPs for all of the students in this class as well as my own students. The load is overwhelming without the resources and support we need. This is why I support NEA NM's legislative goals and encourage long term increased Early Childhood funding to support our youngest learners having a strong start in our public schools and stopping class size waiver!