

TESTIMONY OF ALBUQUERQUE INTERFAITH
Legislative Finance Committee
April 27, 2022

Albuquerque Interfaith (AI) is an organization of 22 congregations, schools, unions, and non-profits working to create a better community. We are broad-based, non-partisan, and multi-issue. We unite, train, and organize across religious, racial, ethnic, economic, language and geographic boundaries. Our primary goal is to develop leaders who strengthen our institutions, work for the common good, and create a more just society.

For almost 30 years, AI has been committed to strong, effective public schools, with funding necessary to serve all the children and families in our community, to prepare students for democratic citizenship, and to foster the human capital for a robust 21st century economy. We have consistently stood side-by-side with Albuquerque Public School to help the district achieve these goals. At the same time, we have worked to hold APS accountable to achieve more for its students. We will not always agree, but Albuquerque Interfaith will always do our best to support APS, because our democracy depends on strong, effective, accountable public schools.

While we have not had time to study the LFC evaluators' report on the district, we do wish to make several observations to provide context and, we hope, contribute to achieving support for the education solutions that our children and families deserve.

New Mexico has just been through a natural disaster. Schools, like our children and families, will take time to heal and recover. Schools are just beginning to fully understand and evaluate what has been lost and how best to recover and go forward. Now is not the time to nickel-and-dime school budgets, forcing APS and other districts and charter schools to choose between laying off educators or cutting spending for the programs that will bring families back.

With NM experiencing unprecedented oil and gas revenues, cautiously projected to continue, we were surprised to learn that because of projected budget gaps, the Public Education Department was warning districts and charters to prepare for budget cuts and that APS was preparing for laying off and re-assigning educators. Since then AI leaders, especially from our work in Community Schools, have been meeting with district leaders, budget experts, legislators, and LFC staff to understand why these things are both true at the same time.

As legislators well know, public school budgeting is extraordinarily complex, but we believe that in a democracy, it is irresponsible for citizens to leave such an important matter to the experts. It is just as irresponsible, however, to call for simple solutions based more on ideology than facts or to advocate without doing the hard work to understand the issues involved. We are committed to continue to engage with the legislators, budget experts, and educators to achieve the solutions that will allow our public schools to thrive.

What we have learned so far:

- Salary increases have not been fully funded. The FY23 budget does not include a sufficient SEG to fully fund required and necessary salary increases for teachers and other school staff. For APS, this appears to amount to about \$10 million of a projected \$45 million budget “gap”. To pay required salary and benefit increases to teachers at one of our community schools will cost as much as 23% more next year for some teachers.
- “Lost” students mean budget shortfalls. Because SEG funding is determined based on prior year enrollment, districts and schools that have “lost” students will be especially

hard hit. APS had 4000 fewer students enrolled last year than expected, over and beyond the decrease expected due to demographic changes.

- Districts and charters need to be “held harmless” to find and support students coming out of the pandemic. Many students, especially the youngest ones, will almost certainly “come back” this year. It will not, however, happen without significant investment of time and resources and the creation of programs and strategies, all of which requires sufficient staff. If we truly “lose” these students, our economy and our community will suffer for decades.
- Schools need more resources, not fewer, to support students who have lost learning, both academic and social, that has to be recovered. This is true even if none of the “lost” students were to return. While class sizes may be smaller in some schools after the pandemic, that means that teachers and other educators have more time and capacity at a time when our students need it the most.
- The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is worse on Yazzie-Martinez students. The schools educating larger populations of such students especially need to maintain their current staff and spending and be able to add more.
- Both the state and districts have large fund balances in this time of revenue abundance that should be used now to avoid teacher and staff layoffs and reassignments that will undermine our educational recovery. The PED education reform fund that receives deposits when state programs are undersubscribed is, we’ve been told, now near \$300 million. APS has ARPA funds that are already committed to important programs and other funds that might be reprogrammed from recovery and other important uses to forestalling staff layoffs and reassignments. But, as we understand it, if that is done and the legislature doesn’t use this time of revenue abundance to further increase the SEG, , there will still be a budget “cliff” coming the next year where the district won’t have those funds to reprogram.
- Some of the programs to achieve student success, designed based on tried-and-true strategies and confirmed by research, haven’t been rolled out in a way that districts can effectively take advantage of them.
- Better results by our districts and schools aren’t guaranteed by more resources, but nor are they possible with fewer.
- In some ways, the budget process between the Legislature and many districts and charters seems like a struggling marriage without the prospect of divorce. There is plenty of responsibility for past inadequacies, but unless we figure out how to move forward together, in cooperation, the children (and our schools and families) will be the ones to suffer. Regardless of whether the district or the legislature is responsible, it is wrong for our children and schools to pay the price. They, our families, our economy, and our democracy can’t afford it.
- Finally and most importantly:
Districts and schools and the legislature can’t achieve educational success for our children without organized parents and communities. Community Schools is a baseline strategy that has the potential to find and attract “lost” students, support student achievement, and work hand in hand with administrators and educators to build districts and schools that are effective and accountable to our community. We must invest enough in Community Schools so that each school has someone whose job it is to build and implement the Community School strategy.

Governor, lawmakers need to hold NM schools financially harmless

Our campuses need time to recover from pandemic, find 'lost' students

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ON BEHALF OF ALBUQUERQUE INTERFAITH

New Mexico — and the world — have just been through a natural disaster. Our children, families and schools are recovering slowly, but recovery will take time. Schools are just beginning to understand and evaluate what was lost during the pandemic, and are moving into recovery mode. Now is not the time to nickel-and-dime school budgets, forcing districts and charter schools to choose between laying off educators or cutting spending for the programs that will bring families back.

Albuquerque Interfaith's 22 member churches, synagogue, schools and nonprofit organizations call on the Legislature and Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham to fully fund the salary increases approved for teachers and other educators. We also call on them to allow two more transition years for schools and districts to find the students and families who left during the disaster. The pandemic hit overnight, but it is unfair to families and educators struggling

with its impact to expect recovery to happen instantly and without extraordinary resources.

Fortunately for New Mexico, we are blessed with the financial resources to fully support our children, families and schools through this recovery. The state's reserves are near 40% of the budget and West Texas Intermediate oil is at \$100 a barrel and likely to stay high, even if a recession hits. Now is not the time to stuff money under the state's financial mattresses. To use federal emergency funding alone to address funding gaps only kicks the can down the road and prolongs what the Yazzie-Martinez lawsuit declared historic underfunding of our schools in the first place.

Since public schools are funded based on the previous year's attendance, this budgetary double-whammy is forcing schools to plan layoffs just when we need more teachers, educational assistants, social workers, counselors and other staff to encourage families to reenroll and reengage with schools.

As an example of the most recent state budget's stinginess toward our schools, in the coming school year, APS will be short \$10 million from underfunded salary increases and roughly \$35 million from some 4,000 "lost" students. Many, if not most, will return in the next two years. All those kindergartners kept home will go to first grade. Yet,

APS won't have the caring, loving educators those children need and deserve if our legislators and the governor don't act now.

Albuquerque Interfaith organizations and leaders know intimately the struggles facing families, students, educators and school leaders on the front lines of this recovery, especially those in our most marginalized communities. Throughout this natural disaster, our public schools held up in their role as critical institutions connecting with families, getting emergency aid out, addressing hunger issues, helping families avoid evictions, and more. We need them now more than ever. Community school coordinators, principals, counselors, teachers, EAs and other staff are the "first responders" our families rely on now.

In the coming economy, human capital will be more critical than it has ever been before. Our state's leaders can help us prepare for the transition, and it starts with investing in our recovery from this disaster. We call on our governor and Legislature to hold our public schools harmless from devastating cuts in the coming year so our schools can continue to play their vital role in helping our communities recover from the collective trauma and prepare for our future economy.