

State court supports call to reform New Mexico school system

Written by By Cody Begaye Sun Correspondent
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Ruling found state is not meeting requirements for sufficient education

The State of New Mexico expects an overhaul of the state's public education system to bring it into compliance with the constitution and other state laws after the ruling in *Yazzie/Martinez v. State of New Mexico*

that said the state must take steps by April 15 to ensure state schools have the proper resources to prepare students for college and careers.

The announcement was made on a Jan. 10 teleconference call that included plaintiffs from the case, their respective counsel, and several superintendents from New Mexico schools.

Gail Evans, lead counsel for the Yazzie plaintiffs for the New Mexico Center on Law and Poverty, said during the call that the judge's ruling couldn't be any clearer and shows that New Mexico has failed its students.

"The state has made choices year after year to continue to not provide programs and services and teachers to students who need them," Evans said.

She said that it is appalling that the state has knowingly made these decisions.

Mike Hyatt, superintendent for Gallup-McKinley County Schools and case plaintiff, participated in the call to voice his response to the ruling.

"I see more clearly the specific ways the state has underfunded education," he said. "These students have been left behind for too long and it's time to make changes."

Hyatt said that it is more startling how obvious it is now that the state's current formula did not recognize at-risk students, who are the most vulnerable to falling behind in school, even more

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so in McKinley County, one of the most impoverished counties in the country.

“We need to hold legislators accountable to make sure students receive the support and services they need,” Hyatt said. “We will work with them to turn around our education system to meet the needs of students.”

Evans asked the participants what ramifications these decisions have had on the state’s students. She answered that children in the state can’t read at their given grade level; they’re more likely to drop out and not graduate and not go to college.

“The state knows this but doesn’t provide the necessary resources even for basic needs like textbooks and transportation or hire enough teachers,” Evans said, adding that surrounding states having higher teacher pay is an incentive for potential instructors to avoid New Mexico.

Now the state is obligated to provide a satisfactory education to its students, figure out the costs, and then fund it, Evans said. The estimate given during the call was over \$1 billion, which is simply to provide a basic education for the state’s children, she said.

Wilhelmina Yazzie, the lead plaintiff in the case, said during the call that she wants the same thing for her children that any parent would want: for them to succeed and pursue their dreams.

“The Diné view children as sacred,” she said. “They are the future of the state and nation.”

She added that standing up for something you believe in isn’t easy, especially for a minority, but she is doing this for her children and the students in New Mexico who are at a disadvantage.

“It is time for the state to do something for children and transform the education system,” Yazzie said. “It’s time for our state to do the right thing [for our children].”

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Meanwhile, Veronica Garcia, superintendent of Santa Fe Public Schools and another case plaintiff, was also on the call and said that the law is on the students' side in the case.

"We have an opportunity now to make a difference for generations to come," she said.

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