

Doing it right the first time

It's interesting to note that state Sen. Vernon Asbill, a Republican from Carlsbad who sponsored the A-F school grading bill, wants the state Public Education Department to go slow in implementing the new standards. The message is clear: Get it right, even if doing so takes a bit more time.

He is also clear that new rules won't work without the state putting its money where the regulations are, telling a hearing on the proposed changes this week that, "The A-F grading bill models the Florida model that has shown some success. Part of the success of the Florida model was that Florida invested money into this program, hiring more than 7,000 reading teachers and reading coaches. And we in the state of New Mexico have cut the education budget significantly and have cut counselors and reading coaches and so forth. I think for the success of this model, we're going to have to make sure we are sufficiently funding education." (That comment, by the way, comes just a few days before a New Mexico Voices for Children Report that shows a 5 percent funding cut for public schools this year.)

While we think the A-F model — for its simplicity alone — improves upon the gobbledygook of the Adequate Yearly Progress measures used in the federal No Child Left Behind law, we also agree that it's essential to build a solid framework by which schools will be graded. At the Monday hearing, reporter Robert Nott wrote that speakers described the rules as confusing, complex and ambiguous — and that's hardly comforting.

Left particularly ambiguous is what happens to schools that make a D or F. The rules call for school boards to prioritize resources to D or F schools until they make a C for two years in a row. Just what those resources will be — supposedly proven curricula or programs — is still a mystery. Who decides what is proven? Who profits when districts have to buy new books or teaching materials? Are local communities satisfied with letting state bureaucrats choose curricula for their schools? What happens to the schools that are no longer a priority?

All of these questions need to be answered before the standards are set.

Even more murky is what will happen to the schools that, for whatever reason, do not improve. All over the country, companies that sell online courses are trying to muscle in to take over neighborhood public schools. We agree that schools that fail children need to improve, but we would hate to see a solution that plunks children in front of a computer for much of the day and that closes neighborhood schools in favor of paying out-of-state vendors. Further, there's still no verdict on whether virtual schools beat real schools, just as some charter schools are good and others are lousy. The "solutions" being peddled, in other words, might not improve the situation one whit.

Never forget that education reform is as much big business as it is about children. Test-makers profit. Booksellers profit. Consultants profit. Vendors of online schooling profit. Regular classroom teachers, not so much; and so far, we have yet to see much gain for children, who have seen so many of their school days disrupted by too much testing and not enough teaching.

We welcome the A-F standards. However, rather than think New Mexico superintendents are laggards who don't want reform, we think it might be wise to listen to their concerns. As the top educators closest to the students, they have seen one reform after another come and go. They have sage advice to those who would listen. Asbill has heard them and is cautioning Secretary-designate Hanna Skandera to listen as well and go "slow and steady." We think that is good advice.