

OPINION: Charter schools offer hope and opportunity in lower-income neighborhoods

By Patrick McDonough / Santa Fe resident | Mar 25, 2024



Audrey Vrawner reads during class at the Mission Achievement and Success Charter School in southeast Albuquerque in November 2022. The charter school that requires students to wear uniforms opened in August 2012 with a campus on Yale and a student body of 100 children in sixth and seventh grades. Today, it serves more than 2,200 pre-K through 12th grade students on two campuses. Chancey Bush/Albuquerque Journal

A dear friend of mine has a standard question for his friends complaining about the state of education in New Mexico. He asks, “what are you going to do about it?”

Well, my wife Nella Domenici and I are doing something about it.

We believe this is the social justice issue of our time — the lack of educational preparedness that is systemic in underserved, and often ignored communities. We know, based on results being achieved nationally in underserved communities, and at our Excellent Schools New Mexico (ESNM) partner schools, that this can be, and therefore must be remedied.

With a bipartisan group of outstanding New Mexicans, we founded ESNM in 2016. ESNM provides start-up capital, zero percent interest loans, facility development, talent recruitment and charter authorization services to new school founders as well as existing top charter school leaders looking for growth capital.

Most of our partner schools are located in our underserved communities in the Albuquerque South Valley, south Santa Fe, or near the Navajo Nation. At scale, our partner schools will be teaching close to 9,000 students.

Freed from bureaucracy and authorized to enact their own vision for teaching math, reading, writing and other subjects, our leaders recruit and train their teachers, and supervise more in-class hours through the school year.

Early results are promising. Our students are outperforming their district peers in math and reading, in some cases substantially. While these results are encouraging, we feel the best is yet to come. We are disproving the myth that the children in these underserved communities can't achieve the same academic results as the children in our best schools.

Mississippi proved it in a short period of time. The Magnolia State went from second worst nationally to the middle of the pack in reading

scores. So, of course, New Mexico's situation can be fixed. The ESNM partner schools, in addition to other outstanding charter and magnet schools in state, are proving it, too.

Charter schools are public schools and therefore, free. New Mexico's public schools are generously funded, as compared to the national average. Money is not the problem. The problem is a lack of accountability, especially in underserved communities where parents' voices are often ignored. It is here, in these communities, that our ESNM schools really thrive and make the biggest difference.

The recipe for success is simple to describe, but enormously difficult to execute.

It all starts with our outstanding school leaders — leaders like the founder and CEO of Mission Achievement and Success Charter School (MAS), JoAnne Mitchell. She says, "I could not have grown MAS from 100 kids to over 2,000 students without the expertise of ESNM." She considers Nella a "burst of pure energy and light with a beautiful heart."

Leadership is essential for any high performing organization, whether it is a small business or a firehouse or police station. Top performing organizations will be led by outstanding leaders instilling a first-rate culture. Schools are no different, and our ESNM partner school leaders are some of the most impressive leaders I have encountered in any business setting.

This is not an indictment of all public district schools. There are many outstanding district schools in New Mexico, but typically they are clustered in more affluent areas of the state.

The real failing is in our lower-income neighborhoods. It is in these neighborhoods where outstanding charter schools can create options for frustrated parents who want their kids to enjoy the great American dream.

Competition is an essential ingredient to the American success story. Nella has never been afraid to compete. Organizations like ESNM will ensure there are high quality schools that offer opportunities for all New Mexican children, irrespective of their ZIP code.

So, to answer my friend's question, Nella, I, and many other committed New Mexicans are doing something about it.

Patrick McDonough is the chairman of Excellent Schools New Mexico and the husband of Nella Domenici, the Republican nominee for U.S. Senate in 2024.