

NEWS

How can New Mexico lawmakers make a difference for our state's children? Let's discuss

Searchlight New Mexico

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Lawmakers introduce hundreds of bills each session that propose to fund programs for children and families. They aim to improve the education system, prevent and punish child abuse, alter the tax code and extend medical benefits to impoverished families.

New Mexico is now officially ranked as the worst state in the country to be a child, according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Some see opportunity in being 50th. Like an addict who has reached rock bottom, there is no place to go but up.

So what can the Legislature actually do to make a difference? What is the most critical action the new governor can take to move the dial? What is the one thing that could come out of the 2019 session that would signal the promise of real change for the children of New Mexico?

Searchlight asked these questions of a variety of childhood advocates across the state. Their suggestions range from investing in better health care to fixing the troubled Children, Youth & Families Department. The one constant is education.

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James Jimenez, MPA, joined New Mexico Voices for Children in 2013 and became executive director in 2016. He also serves as an adjunct professor at the University of New Mexico's School of Public Administration. In both positions he draws from his considerable experience working in state and city government. James served as the chief of staff under Gov. Bill Richardson from 2006 to 2008, and as cabinet secretary of the New Mexico Department of Finance and Administration from 2003 to 2006. He has also served as city manager for Rio Rancho. James volunteers for several nonprofit organizations.

What's the single most important legislation the state should adopt to improve child well-being?

It will take a concerted, multifaceted effort to significantly improve child well-being because it is dependent on so many factors. But one policy with a proven, positive rate of return is high-quality early childhood care and learning. The first five years of life are critical for laying the foundation for future success, so the investments that we make in those years pay off dividends for children and society for many years — and future generations — down the road.

Another aspect of early childhood services that makes them a particularly good investment is that they are two-generation approaches — meaning they benefit both children and their parents. Home visiting, which is essentially personal coaching for new parents, has been shown to improve health, education, and economic outcomes for the whole family. Child care and pre-K, in addition to the social and learning benefits for the child, enable parents to work while their children are cared for in a safe, nurturing environment.

The economic reality for the 21st century is that few families can survive on one paycheck. That makes child care a necessity. Since high-quality child care — the kind that helps prepare children for success in school — is more expensive than tuition at UNM, it is out-of-reach financially for many families. New Mexico's child care assistance program is underfunded, and because assistance drops off before families can cover the full cost themselves, it actually creates a financial disincentive for parents to get ahead. We want our anti-poverty programs to help families work their way out of poverty, not keep them mired in it. Fortunately, we've spoken with Gov. Lujan Grisham about it and fixing this financial "cliff" effect is on her agenda.

What's the single most important administrative action the governor should take for child well-being?

There is much Gov. Lujan Grisham can do administratively to help ensure that the state's children can stay healthy and see a doctor. Medicaid — the health insurance program for low-income children, seniors, and the disabled — covers more than half of New Mexico's kids, yet there are many unnecessary hurdles to getting and staying enrolled. Simplifying the enrollment and recertification process would help keep more kids covered. In addition, the governor should implement express-lane enrollment, which allows the state to use income eligibility information it already has on file for other programs — such as Head Start or the

National School Lunch Program — to determine eligibility for Medicaid. This not only saves time, but it saves the state money by decreasing paperwork.

What's the one thing that could come out of the 2019 session that would signal the promise of real change for the children of NM?

New Mexico cannot hope to make real progress in improving child well-being without the financial means to invest in our people. In order to invest in our people for the long-term we must break the boom-or-bust cycle built on volatile oil revenue. That is going to require a commitment to raising other revenue. After 15 years of a failed economic development strategy of enacting tax cuts to create jobs, New Mexico is now too reliant on revenue from the oil and natural gas industries. While these natural resources have been very beneficial for the state, they are too volatile to be a reliable revenue source. This has trapped New Mexico in a boom-or-bust cycle. We're in a boom cycle now, but we know it won't last forever.

The tax cuts of the past have also made our tax system unfair. It's time to rectify that — to raise adequate and sustainable revenue by increasing income taxes on the highest earners and out-of-state corporations and enacting or expanding tax credits for hard-working families. To improve child well-being, we must invest in our people, and that means investing in the systems that support our families, such as public education, health care and public safety. That will signal that our policy makers have committed to real change for our children.

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Kim Straus has served as foundation manager of Brindle Foundation, a family foundation based in Santa Fe focused on early childhood development, since 2002. He served on the board of the New Mexico Children's Trust Fund and is currently a member of the J. Paul Taylor Early Childhood Task Force and the Santa Fe County Health Planning and Policy Commission. He has a B.A. from Kenyon College and a master's in education administration from Harvard University. Kim and his husband, Jack, are the fathers of a 14-year-old adopted son.

What's the single most important legislation the state should adopt to improve child well-being?

Create a Department of Early Learning and Care to consolidate the scattered state programs and funding that assist our youngest children and their families. Such a department would

herald to policymakers, business leaders, service providers, families, communities, and the public here and around the country that the state of New Mexico recognizes the earliest years as the most important ones for a child's development. We would be announcing that every New Mexico baby deserves a great start in life and that a one-stop-shop works better than a fragmented bureaucracy. Anyone who has worked in the early childhood field knows how complex that world can be. A single department, if structured thoughtfully and intelligently, provides for better service coordination, more equitable access for families, and would make it far easier for communities to receive resources based on priorities those communities have identified that benefit babies and families.

What's the single most important administrative action the governor should take for child well-being?

We now have a governor who will champion our children. As such, she should reinvigorate the New Mexico Children's Cabinet and ask Lt. Gov. Morales, another children's champion, to lead it. The Children's Cabinet would bring together all state departments and their leaders that impact the lives of children prenatal to career, including early childhood, public education, child welfare, juvenile justice, higher education and child health. In addition, a vibrant Cabinet can convene the unusual suspects inside and outside of state government: economic development, workforce development, chambers of commerce, local children's advocates and many others who seek to see New Mexico as the best place to be a child, no matter at what age. To give it greater visibility and accountability, the Cabinet should issue report cards on how we are doing to increase opportunities for children and families with specific long- and short-term goals.

What's the one thing that could come out of the 2019 session that would signal the promise of real change for the children of NM?

One percent from the Land Grant Permanent Fund for early childhood education! If the Legislature sends to the voters a constitutional amendment allowing for a 1 percent increase in the take from the Land Grant Permanent Fund — the second largest such fund in the nation — directed to early childhood education, it would create a reliable funding stream for early education so that the state does not have to rely solely on annual revenues. Such an amendment would also change the very definition of public education in New Mexico. Currently the LGPF benefits the "common schools," but by dedicating a percentage to assist our youngest children, it would acknowledge what parents and scientists already know: that babies begin learning at, and even before, birth. Such a change in the LGPF not only requires voter approval but approval in Congress, as well. However, if we are to move away from the

bottom of child well-being rankings then we need to start early and we need to act boldly. Our babies are worth it!

Lori Martinez is the executive director of Ngage New Mexico, a nonprofit based in Las Cruces. Ngage serves as the primary support organization for the SUCCESS Partnership, a prenatal-to-career education initiative that serves Doña Ana County. Lori is a licensed social worker with experience across the education spectrum from early childhood to higher education. For more information about Ngage, go to www.NgageNM.org.

What's the single most important legislation the state should adopt to improve child well-being?

We have starved our public school and higher education system, under-resourced our Children, Youth, and Families Department and failed to ensure that the children and families of New Mexico receive the food and medical assistance to which they are eligible through our Human Services Department. The state has made investments in Early Childhood, which we need to increase while ensuring coordination among the various programs. There are a number of legislative actions the state should adopt to make an immediate and tangible impact:

1. Create the Early Childhood Education Department to coordinate existing early childhood resources, maximize state and federal dollars and make the best use of the \$5.3 million in federal funds the state was just awarded from the Preschool Development Birth Through Five Initial Grant.
2. Make significant increases to high quality early childhood programs, particularly Pre-K, Early Intervention, and investments in an adequate and fairly-paid Early Childhood workforce. Expand eligibility for child care subsidy assistance and increase funds to reduce the waitlist.
3. Cooperate with Yazzie (Yazzie v. New Mexico) remedies platform proposed by statewide education advocates through the Transform Education New Mexico Coalition, to ensure every student has the opportunity to learn at a high level, in settings that are culturally and linguistically relevant.
4. Fully fund Medicaid and take advantage of the federal match. Put resources into a Medicaid buy-in feasibility study.

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What's the single most important administrative action the governor should take for child well-being?

Fully staff and resource CYFD, PED, and HSD, and implement meaningful oversight to ensure departments are adequately reaching their communities. This means providing dollars for outreach without penalizing the department by reducing its budget in other areas.

Many businesses and residents have no idea what services our Department of Workforce Solutions provides through its local Workforce Connections offices. We need to maximize our use of Workforce dollars and increase outreach into communities, either through restructuring or better coordination with local resources. If CYFD and the DWS coordinate their efforts, they can create an innovative approach that would impact two generations at once.

We have a massive behavioral health access issue in New Mexico, one of many areas that perpetuates the cyclical nature of our child well-being challenges. We need to coordinate behavioral health managed care organizations so that they don't drive mental and behavioral health providers away from the state. Create timelines and accountability under which they must operate to reimburse providers promptly. Credentialing for behavioral health providers is a nightmare, and this coupled with low reimbursement rates keeps providers that we desperately need out of our state.

What's the one thing that could come out of the 2019 session that would signal the promise of real change for the children of New Mexico?

New Mexico has a reactivity problem. We don't respond to child well-being in thoughtful, preventative ways. We wait, we react, we underfund. We must fully fund key departments that affect child well-being (PED, CYFD, HSD, Department of Health), and also turn our mindset towards prevention and cutting cycles off at the source. Prevention is frequently ignored or given scant resources because it's difficult to quantify. How do you show that you prevented a health problem, a dropout, or unemployment? And yet we know that return on investment is high in key areas, such as quality early childhood programs.

Brian Etheridge, MD, FAAP is a native of New Mexico. He is a pediatrician who has practiced in the Silver City area for more than 11 years. His professional interests include care of children with special health care needs, pediatric hospital medicine, and advocacy.

He is the immediate past president of the New Mexico Pediatric Society, and he is particularly interested in systemic changes that benefit and improve the lives of children in New Mexico.

What's the single most important legislation the state should adopt to improve child well-being?

No single piece of legislation can completely overhaul child well-being in New Mexico. However, one action that would have a profound impact on children in the state would be to expand evidence-based home visitation and early childhood care and education services statewide.

There is ample evidence that the rate of return for investments made during a child's earliest years is high and long-lasting. Short-term costs are more than offset by long-term benefits ranging from improved health outcomes, reduced need for special education and decreased social service expenditures. Interventions are most powerful when delivered in a child's first five years of life. By improving the outcomes of today's children, we improve our long-term potential as a state.

Existing models such as First Born, Nurse-Family Partnership, Early Pre-K, K-3 Plus, Imagination Library, and others should be better funded and expanded throughout the state. We cannot continue to exclude large swaths of New Mexico from the established benefits of these programs because of insufficient funding. Better funding must mean paying for a high-quality workforce, whether social workers and nurses with home visitation programs or licensed and qualified teachers in classrooms. Supporting this workforce through better research-driven continuing education is crucial. Other costs, such as a statewide expansion of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, are small in the scope of the state budget. New Mexico should also maximize every opportunity to draw down federal funding for services like home visitation.

Along with sufficient funding is the need for better coordination of services. Available resources are currently spread among numerous agencies and would be better utilized with high-level coordination. Creating a new cabinet level agency may not be the best way to achieve the necessary direction. Current funding is chiefly spread across the Human Services Department, Public Education Department, CYFD, and Department of Health, and creating another administrative layer could dilute already limited funding. The recently re-established Children's Cabinet is well positioned to oversee this work.

Considerable opportunities also exist to maximize collaboration between the managed care organizations' case management with home visitation and doing such seemingly simple things as assigning the same MCO case manager involved with a high-risk mother to also help coordinate care for her newborn baby.

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What's the single most important administrative action the governor should take for child well-being?

Gov. Lujan Grisham has already taken important action by reestablishing the Children's Cabinet. The next step should be to design an organizational structure for the Cabinet that enables tough discussions and empowers it to make changes and hold agencies accountable. The Children's Cabinet must include external members from the business community and representatives from around the state who work directly with families and children. This will ensure that solutions generated are realistic and achievable.

For example, New Mexico spends tens of millions of dollars each year on case management through Centennial Care, the Medicaid managed care program. Case management, when closely coordinated with the family, community resources and medical practitioners, can greatly improve outcomes for patients. Unfortunately, high functioning case management is the exception rather than the rule for most of the state. A high functioning Children's Cabinet with input from members on the front lines could help improve oversight and accountability in areas where enormous amounts of money are already being spent, with very mixed results.

What's the one thing that could come out of the 2019 session that would signal the promise of real change for the children of New Mexico?

I'm encouraged by legislation proposed by Sen. Jerry Ortiz y Pino and Rep. Linda Trujillo that would create a community advisory board to advise and facilitate the development of a collaborative model of pediatric specialty care between the University of New Mexico and Presbyterian.

Nearly 200,000 children in New Mexico have a chronic medical issue, and for many of these patients, care is centered in Albuquerque at both UNM and Presbyterian. Appointments for pediatric specialists, specialized diagnostic studies or therapies can require hundreds of miles of driving and frequently involve two separate health systems that do not share resources, scheduling or even medical records. This competitive and adversarial relationship

causes profound hardship for patients and families, immense strain on already overburdened practitioners, limits opportunities for synergy and is costly for the entire state.

Dr. Katherine Ortega Courtney is coauthor of the book *Anna, "Age Eight: The data-driven prevention of childhood trauma and maltreatment, providing a blueprint for cities to implement a data-driven, cross-sector and systemic strategy to prevent Adverse Childhood Experiences and promote community resilience."* She has over a decade of experience in the fields of education, child welfare and juvenile justice. Katherine is passionate about collaboration and systematic change to improve the lives of children and their families, demonstrated in her development and implementation of community forums, workshops, web-based courses and strategic planning using the collective impact framework. Katherine grew up in Española, and completed her undergraduate studies at UNM. She graduated with a MS and a PhD in experimental psychology from Texas Christian University, where she studied at the Institute of Behavioral Research. Her doctoral dissertation focused on organizational change in substance-abuse treatment. She is currently the director of collective impact initiatives at the Santa Fe Community Foundation.

What's the single most important legislation the state should adopt to improve child well-being?

It is extremely important that the Children, Youth & Families Department move toward a prevention focus, and the Legislature has the power to make this happen. When CYFD was created, lawmakers requested that there be a prevention division, later asking CYFD to implement prevention and early intervention as a departmental focus. Over the last eight years, the focus — particularly for protective services — has been primarily intervention.

What this means is waiting for children to be in danger before intervening. CYFD needs a way to connect families to services as early as possible, to prevent the need for higher levels of intervention such as placing children in foster care. We need a system that would allow tailored responses to the needs of families, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. Many of our families have underlying struggles including mental illness, substance abuse and economic and food insecurity. Ideally the system would allow flexibility for Protective Services to work with them in a less adversarial way. Foster care should be a last resort, as the outcomes for children who enter it are often very bleak.

What's the single most important administrative action the governor should take for child well-being?

One of the most important actions the governor can take for child well-being is to give the Children's Cabinet a clear and strong mission to make sure Cabinet secretaries and their departments are working together to ensure the safety and well-being of children. In doing that, the use of a strong data team is vital. It would be important to use data to identify where in the system children and families are falling through the cracks.

The mistake we repeatedly make is assuming that there is one department, person, or policy at fault when things go wrong. The reality is that the issues our families face are multifaceted and often need a coordinated effort from many different service areas to address their problems. For example, a family that is under investigation from CYFD for substance abuse issues might receive referrals to substance abuse treatment but might also be struggling with housing, education issues and medical problems. There is no one agency equipped to meet all of those needs, and so the cycle continues. Ensuring that all state departments that touch the lives of our children and families are united in their mission would help to break this cycle.

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If one in eight children suffered from an unknown but debilitating virus, America would scramble all its resources to develop and share effective preventive measures. It is baffling that we have not yet done the same for Adverse Childhood Experiences, the traumatic events known to everything from substance abuse to crime and heart disease. It is my hope that we will see this topic addressed during the legislative session. It is the single most important issue we face as a state, and I believe that if we tackle it in a real and systematic way we will see real change for the children of New Mexico.

*For more than 20 years, **Edward Tabet-Cubero** has worked nationally and internationally to promote educational equity for diverse learners — as a bilingual classroom teacher, award-winning school administrator, dual language education consultant, nonprofit administrator, university instructor, teacher trainer, and education-policy expert. Active in legislative advocacy, he has coauthored multiple bills related to*

bilingual education and teacher preparation and has served as an expert witness for the New Mexico Legislature.

What's the single most important legislation the state should adopt to improve child well-being?

This legislative session, we have the opportunity to flip the deficit narrative and reconstruct an education system built upon our unique assets as New Mexicans. In a minority-majority state with over 70 percent of students being culturally diverse and 36 percent of families speaking a language other than English, our students are especially gifted with diverse ways of approaching learning. Within the state's Bilingual Multicultural Education Act and Indian and Hispanic Education Acts, we already have a legislative framework that calls for the state to implement an education system built upon our students' diversity, but as the court recently found in *Yazzie/Martinez*, we simply have not implemented it. Our diversity is an asset to invest in rather than a problem to be mitigated.

House Bill 159, the Multicultural Education Framework, would help ensure that we fill that "knowing/doing" gap between current policy and practice by elevating the status of multicultural/multilingual education within the Public Education Department. It would accomplish this by elevating bilingual/multicultural, Indian, and Hispanic education to high level divisions within the department, which would be led by assistant secretaries with support from community-based advisory councils. This elevation of status among these existing acts would demonstrate that our state is ready to fully invest in and implement programs and services that are built on the strength of our diversity.

What's the single most important administrative action the governor should take for child well-being?

It is essential that the new governor acknowledge that local expertise can solve local problems. New Mexico possesses an ample cadre of local experts who are respected nationally and internationally that I hope the governor turns to when identifying and implementing solutions to our challenges. Many of these experts grew up in New Mexico, and are products of the very systems we need to improve. They have dedicated their entire careers to understanding and solving our issues, and are intimately aware of our distinct cultural assets and associated needs. There is an unfathomable number of vacancies across state government that has made it impossible for departments like the PED and CYFD to meet their core service functions to our local communities. Our children have no time to lose

while we educate potential out-of-state problem solvers on the differences between Carlsbad, Cañoncito, and Cochiti.

What's the one thing that could come out of the 2019 session that would signal the promise of real change for the children of New Mexico?

I would say that a complete adoption of the multiple legislative proposals being offered up by the Transform Education NM community coalition would demonstrate real change. The proposals, which were developed and vetted by hundreds of New Mexicans, are not “shooting for the moon” in an aspirational sense; they simply set the floor level of expectations for the state in its efforts to comply with its constitutional obligation to provide a uniform and sufficient education to all children. The package of legislative proposals includes a broad set of solutions in order to provide our children and their teachers the resources and supports essential for success, including everything from expanding bilingual/multicultural education and teacher training, to increasing teacher salaries and overall school funding, to providing access to community schools and social service supports to all children as a standard part of their education. You can find a full list of proposals at www.nmpovertylaw.org/education.

What's the single most important legislation the state should adopt to improve child well-being?

As an educator and researcher, my focus is on education policy. Increasing the capacity for access to quality Pre-K programs is one of the most important things the Legislature should adopt this session, with a focus on identifying vulnerable 4-year-old children first. This would be the next phase of many to ensure universal access. Pre-K provides children with access to education, developmental screenings and food. It prepares children to be kindergarten-ready; the developmental screenings allow for early intervention, and the daily meals improve the health of the child and allow families to save money for other necessities.

What's the single most important administrative action the governor should take for child well-being?

I think the governor should encourage the various child-centered agencies — Children, Youth & Families Department; Public Education Department; and Human Services Department — to work collaboratively. She should establish policies and procedures for these agencies to coordinate their efforts in order to increase the number of children positively impacted by the programs.

What's the one thing that could come out of the 2019 session that would signal the promise of real change for the children of New Mexico?

The one thing that would signal real change for the children of New Mexico would be a clear focus on improving child well-being by both the administration and the Legislature. A common vision will signal a willingness of policy makers to identify real solutions and fund initiatives that will make a difference, especially in education.

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Tamara Bates is an UBS financial advisor who began working in the financial services industry in 2014 after 15 years in philanthropy, education and social enterprise. In addition to being a published author in the field of education, Tamara has received a variety of leadership and community awards and serves on the boards of the LANL Foundation and Southwest Creations Collaborative. She has a BA in psychology from the College of Santa Fe and a MA in urban policy and child development from Tufts University. In her spare time, she teaches dance to 3- and 4-year-olds at NDI.

What's the single most important legislation the state should adopt to improve child well-being?

I would like to see the recommendations of early childhood experts implemented. The most important legislation that could come out of this session would be an integrated system for the delivery of services and funding streams for children ages 0-5, as laid out in the report "Toward a Consensus Vision for Early Childhood Development in New Mexico." The Legislature can create a policy environment that supports the capacity of the early childhood community to better align funding sources, program delivery and professional development for the various programs that serve children ages 0-5.

What's the single most important administrative action the governor should take for child well-being?

A serious intervention into CYFD. As Searchlight and others have documented, we are failing to protect our most vulnerable children. I hope the governor can give this department and its staff the tools and resources it needs to help, rather than harm, our families who need the most support.

What's the one thing that could come out of the 2019 session that would signal the promise of real change for the children of NM?

If a comprehensive response to the Yazzie v. New Mexico case is created that can be embraced and championed by the different stakeholders in policy and education, this would signal to me the promise of real change. If we can keep working towards agreement on the right funding models and the best ways to support teachers and support students' learning, there can be nowhere to go but up.