



# Read all about it!

From legislators to education officials to volunteers, we all can help improve NM's abysmal literacy rates

In the past 20 years, New Mexico's woeful literacy rates have not improved.

And so 3 out of every 4 New Mexico third graders still cannot read at grade level. Fast forward 10 years and as those third graders grow up, understand that nearly 1 out of every 3 New Mexico adults reads at the level of a 5- to 7-year-old.

That's kindergarten to second grade. Only Louisiana has a worse literacy rate. And we wonder why our state struggles with attracting high-paying jobs, with poverty and crime, poor health, homelessness and substance abuse. Low literacy rates are a root cause of many of the problems that plague New Mexico.

And these shockingly depressing numbers are in spite of the monumental increase in the amount of money we spend on K-12 education. According to the Legislative Education Study Committee report from earlier this year, recurring general fund appropriations for public schools went from \$2.3 billion in fiscal 2012 to \$2.73 billion in fiscal 2016 to \$3.2 billion in fiscal 2020 to \$3.4 billion in fiscal 2021. New Mexico lawmakers and taxpayers have steadily, and quite deliberately and literally, put their money where their mouths are when it comes to asking for better education results.

Yet the state's literacy rate has remained stagnant.

This year the Albuquerque Journal, in conjunction with KOAT television and KKOB radio, launched "The Literacy Project," a yearlong initiative to spotlight New Mexico's literacy challenges and provide insight, solutions and a database of available resources to improve outcomes for both our state's children and adults.

Clearly money alone is not one of those solutions.

Back in 2014, Sen. John Arthur Smith, D-Deming, was vice-chairman of the Legislative Finance Committee. A lifelong advocate for education, Smith nonetheless said, "What I have a difficult time with is we are 20th in spending and we're still at the bottom in achievement. We have been giving (school districts) more money and you haven't shown improvement, so why should we give you more now?"

Like our abysmal reading levels, that argument rings true seven years later.

In the weeks that have passed since The Literacy Project kicked off, all manner of informed suggestions have come in from career educators, reading specialists, tutors and literacy advocates. Their experience from the trenches is New Mexico needs to work on ensuring sufficient teacher training — including how to teach reading — as well as the increased time and resources teachers need to make an impact. In Saturday's Journal, retired Albuquerque Public School teacher Joel C. Miller, who also worked in Los

Angeles, said in California he faced many of the same challenges but "felt support from administrators and fellow teachers who saw opportunities to collaborate and build without constraint or reprisal." Educators also shared that chronic absenteeism remains a huge hurdle, because it's hard to teach someone who isn't in class. And many emphasize there is no better way to get a child, or adult, hooked on reading than to read something that interests them aloud to them, and to have them read it aloud to you.

Moving forward, we need our school districts to truly prioritize reading proficiency by third grade with outside-the-box creative solutions. We need the state Legislature to come up with a way to address chronic absenteeism that finds the balance between punitive and permissive that actually gets kids in class. We applaud Gov.

Michelle Lujan Grisham's Opportunity Scholarships at community colleges and her restored full tuition coverage under the Lottery Success Scholarship. But lawmakers need to make sure this funding is continued, and students who face financial challenges need more wraparound services and support.

Speaking of outside-the-box thinking, Albuquerque Reads, a collaboration between the Greater Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce and Albuquerque Public Schools, has made a huge impact on children's literacy rates. It provides tutoring to kindergartners and first graders. And it works — in a matter of months the number of students reading at/near grade level at its schools jumped

from 24% to 42%.

Or consider the Rio Rancho Rotary Club's Dick Hillier Tutoring Program that pays teachers a stipend to tutor their own underperforming students outside school hours. Standardized tests show marked improvement in those students.

But such literacy programs need more schools and organizations willing to adopt these templates. And in the interim, there is much we can each do to help.

- Model behavior and let your children/loved ones see you reading regularly at home.

- Read to them or have them read to you anything around the house — labels, greeting cards, recipes, the comics, newspaper stories, magazines, books.

- Whether you or someone you know need(s) help reading or you want to offer your help, a full list of literacy programs around the state is at [ABQJournal.com/literacy](http://ABQJournal.com/literacy).

Those of us who can read well know the truth behind the phrase that the gift of literacy is one that keeps on giving. As we wait for our government and education leaders to look beyond budget requests, we can each find a way to give a little, too.

## THE LITERACY PROJECT

