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Off the Leash



Off and running

JIM SCARANTINO

04.24.08 - Hello to Heath's readers. I am excited about this opportunity to make a biweekly

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State's new economy will require increased literacy

Posted 4/23/2008 12:53:00 PM

New Mexico, led by Gov. [Bill Richardson](#), has done a lot in the last few years to try to improve the state's economic situation by creating new jobs in high-tech and film industries.

There has been some success, most notably in the film industry. New Mexico has managed to attract major Hollywood companies to the Albuquerque area. In addition, the state has created a renewable energy transmission authority with the goal of developing new energy technology in the state and selling excess power it generates to other states. And the state is trying to construct the world's first purpose-built commercial spaceport and transform the Las Cruces area into the worldwide center of the commercial space industry.

While New Mexico is finding some success in expanding economic opportunities, a new report suggests that the state must focus on the most basic skill - literacy - if many of its residents are going to benefit.

[The report](#) from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and the Economic Policy Institute found that the gap between the richest 20 percent of New Mexicans and the poorest 20 percent has grown in recent years. The richest earned eight times more than the poorest in the mid-2000s - up from earning 6.3 times as much in the late 1990s. The gap between the richest 20 percent the middle 20 percent also grew - from 2.3 times as much in the late 1990s to 2.8 times as much in the middle of this decade.

New Mexico's gap between the richest and the poorest is now the sixth largest in the nation, according to the report.

A high rate of illiteracy

An article published last week by the [New Mexico Independent](#) suggests that one cause is the state's high rate of illiteracy, which means that many New Mexicans aren't able to take advantage of the opportunities created by the state's shift to what the article calls a "knowledge-based economy."

New Mexico's economy has, for decades, been largely dependent on the oil and gas industry, but Richardson has led the charge to diversify the economy and focus on future technologies, realizing the nation will likely reduce its dependence on oil in the next few decades.

State Rep. **JOSEPH CERVANTES** Democrat • District 52
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Who will win the First Congressional District Democratic primary?

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if we have the political will to use it. Otherwise we will be trapped by our dependence on foreign oil.

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Left @ Albuquerque



Choice in Pennsylvania

CARTER BUNDY

04.16.08 - Though

Pennsylvania's political map colors may have

changed, its religion hasn't. That brings up the one thing that has separated Pennsylvania Democrats from other states' voters I've seen: abortion.

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Citizen Politics

Campaign antics distract from the real issues

JIM KADLECEK

04.15.08 - We need to face

our problems squarely and deal with them. Obfuscation of those issues to gain some perceived campaign advantage doesn't raise the bar - it lowers it.

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But some 46 percent of adult New Mexicans are "functionally illiterate," Heather Heunermund, executive director of the [New Mexico Coalition for Literacy](#), told the New Mexico Independent. That includes the 20 percent of the state's adults who are the most illiterate, those who have difficulty "locating simple information in a news article or applying basic math to determine the total on a sales receipt," according to the coalition's Web site. Another 26 percent have some of those basic skills but lack the skills required to perform 64 percent of today's jobs.

That means almost half of New Mexicans lack the literacy skills to qualify for the jobs of the 21st Century. As New Mexico focuses on transitioning to a 21st Century economy, those residents are in danger of being left behind.

The state has made some efforts to combat that problem. It has increased funding for adult literacy by 50 percent in the last five years. And it is creating programs to train a workforce to staff some of the high-tech industries it's trying to attract.

For example, the Legislature and governor have funded a new aerospace engineering program at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces with the goal of making the area more attractive to the commercial space industry. In addition, local governments that raise their gross receipts tax to help fund construction of [Spaceport America](#) will spend a quarter of the new money they collect to create magnet programs in area high schools that will focus on topics related to the space industry.

The rich are getting richer, but the poor aren't

But the new report reveals that, in New Mexico, the income of the richest fifth of New Mexicans is increasing significantly, while that of the middle class is increasing only slightly. The income of the poorest fifth of New Mexicans isn't increasing at all.

Creating a new, high-tech economy so college graduates can find high-paying jobs that will allow them to stay New Mexico only benefits those who can go to college. Improving high-school education in high-tech industries only benefits those who have the literacy, math and science skills to compete in such programs.

If New Mexico really wants to help its poor improve their situations, it must help equip them with the tools to compete in grade school so they have the opportunity to attend college. At the core of all learning is literacy.

The economic development must occur first. A state with a tight budget can't invest much in new educational programs unless it develops industries that generate more revenue to pay for the programs. But the state must ensure that it invests significant resources in literacy as it finds success in these new industries.

Funding alone won't solve this problem. This is about changing a culture in New Mexico that includes many people who don't know the value of education. That will take a concerted, multifaceted effort that has to include partnerships between government, non-profits, churches and other groups to blanket the state in the creation and promotion of opportunities to increase literacy.

It's a big task, but if the state doesn't tackle it, the rich will continue to get richer - and benefit from the state's new economy - while the poor will be left behind.

A version of this article was published today on the [Diary of a Mad Voter](#) blog published by the Denver Post's [Politics West](#) and the independent Web site [NewWest.net](#).

Labels: [Diary of a Mad Voter columns](#), [Economy](#), [Education](#), [Growth and development](#), [Spaceport America](#), [State government](#)

Posted by Heath Haussamen. E-mail him at heath@haussamen.com.

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