

A Push for Teacher Accountability Meets Resistance in New Mexico



ROSWELL, N.M. — On a recent night in this southeastern New Mexico town, Hanna Skandera, the state’s education secretary-designate, told a crowd gathered in a school auditorium about her encounter with a veteran teacher.

“She looked at me, and she goes, ‘You are not as awful as they say,’ ” Ms. Skandera recalled, as laughter rippled through the audience.

For Ms. Skandera, a 40-year-old transplant from California, it was a rare moment of levity in a tumultuous tenure, during which she has sought to overhaul New Mexico’s troubled education system and clashed with teachers, unions and lawmakers in the process.

Ms. Skandera, appointed in 2011 by the state’s Republican governor, Susana Martinez,

has crisscrossed New Mexico for the past several weeks, rolling out an aggressive [teacher evaluation system](#) devised to improve student achievement in a state that has long ranked near the bottom of most educational metrics.

But the plan has drawn deep resentment from many here, who say it leans too heavily on standardized tests. Last month, teachers wore black clothing and held rallies across the state to denounce Ms. Skandera's data-driven approach. Lawsuits have been filed to block the evaluations but have not advanced in the courts.

Ms. Skandera's time in New Mexico has proved so controversial that for three years, Democratic lawmakers have refused to hold a confirmation vote on her appointment, a reminder, if only symbolic, that she is not fully supported.

"I can do my job regardless of that confirmation," she said cheerfully in an interview. "For too long, we have lost sight of what really is possible for our kids in our state. And it is time to set aside all these adult issues, which are pretty disappointing at times."

A former track athlete in college who held education policy posts under Gov. Jeb Bush in Florida and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in California, Ms. Skandera has not shied from a fight.

After the Democratic-controlled Statehouse rejected legislation she backed that would have created the evaluation system she wanted, Ms. Skandera decided to use her authority to install it this year.

Quick to cite statistics supporting her position, she insists that increasing teacher accountability is the surest way to help New Mexico's struggling students.

As with other evaluation methods put in place around the country, which have often drawn the ire of teachers, New Mexico uses mainly standardized tests and classroom observations to measure a teacher's effectiveness.

Ms. Skandera's critics argue that far too much weight is given to the standardized

component, which counts for up to 50 percent of a teacher's rating. It forces teachers to devote considerable time preparing students for tests, educators have argued, treating them as the most important measure of a child's progress.

"This is a train wreck," said Stephanie Ly, the president of the American Federation of Teachers New Mexico, which filed two unsuccessful lawsuits to block the evaluations. "It's set up for our students and teachers to fail."

Ms. Skandera said she was mindful of the concerns. But she said the state was obligated to use the evaluations as part of a [waiver](#) on requirements in the No Child Left Behind law that the Obama administration granted.

"We'll get a rich picture of student achievement over time," she said, noting that a student's growth would be measured over three years.

Educators, however, contend that Ms. Skandera has shunned other valid ways to judge teachers.

Kathy Korte, a member of the Albuquerque school board, said Ms. Skandera had refused to consider giving more weight to classroom observations. She also rejected the idea of starting the evaluations gradually, Ms. Korte said, even though districts were already burdened with carrying out new Common Core standards for math and English.

"To have the door shut in my face constantly is arrogant," Ms. Korte said, "and it shows a great disrespect to those working in the classroom."

Ms. Korte recently sent an email to constituents, urging parents to opt out of certain standardized tests. But Albuquerque's school board rejected a more sweeping proposal to send a formal letter telling parents they could opt out.

At times, the criticism has become personal. Last month, the superintendent of Albuquerque Public Schools, Winston Brooks, was suspended for three days after posting comments on Twitter likening Ms. Skandera to farm animals.

“I can either focus on my comfort,” Ms. Skandera said, “or we can say, ‘Wait a minute. Did we set out to give it our very, very best to deliver on a promise we are not delivering to our kids right now?’ ”

As she travels the state, one of her selling points has been [reading and math scores](#) that the National Assessment of Educational Progress recently released.

Students in fourth and eighth grades in Tennessee and Washington, D.C., which started using evaluation systems that emphasize standardized tests, showed marked improvement since 2011. Students in those grades in New Mexico registered no significant progress and ranked near the bottom.

Ms. Skandera’s opponents, however, pointed out that some states with rigorous teacher evaluations showed little improvement.

Some critics give her credit, at least, for not running from teachers’ concerns and acknowledge that she has been effusive in calling for change.

“I bet you a million bucks, we’d be friends in another life,” Ms. Korte said. “She’s passionate, and she wants to see education improve, as do all of us.”

Ricky Williams, the superintendent of Hagerman Municipal Schools near Roswell, praised Ms. Skandera’s visits to school districts to explain the evaluations, saying they had been helpful.

“The secretary, from my point of view has been very open to having conversations about it,” he said.

Many rank-and-file teachers, though, still view Ms. Skandera skeptically. She has never been a full-time teacher, and educators here echo what is a common criticism of such administrators: that she cannot fully comprehend the challenges they face, especially in a state troubled by deep poverty and other social problems.

“When you have people who are out of touch with what’s happening in the classroom, you get a lot of miscommunication and anger,” said Pamela Cort, who teaches French at Las Cruces High School.

At the meeting in Roswell, Sara Montgomery, a music instructor, told the crowd that while she was dazzled by Ms. Skandera’s presentation, it missed something critical.

“I haven’t heard one thing that addresses the most important part,” Ms. Montgomery said. “Which is what is going on around our schools that prevents the teachers from being able to get information to the kids.”

With a nod, Ms. Skandera reverted to her expertise.

“They come from a home life that’s rough,” she said. “They may not have eaten breakfast. Poverty. We can actually look at the history of a how a student is performing. And it can inform a lot about the future.”