

Member Profile: New Mexico Senator Bill Soules

Chair, CSG West Education and Workforce Development Committee

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Years ago, as an educator and school board member, Bill Soules remembers lobbying state legislators and realizing how little they really understood about public education. If he ever got to the state legislature, he thought, he could make a real difference. Now, as Chair of the New Mexico Senate Education Committee and a member of the bicameral interim Legislative Education Study Committee, Senator Soules is working to do just that.

One of Senator Soules' biggest concerns is the shortage of qualified teachers in New Mexico and throughout the country. He worries that New Mexico has not invested in public education, making teaching a less attractive profession and making it harder to compete with other states for teachers. "For too long we've been trying to do education by what's cheap and what's easy instead of what's most important and what's going to do the best for the long-term future," says Senator Soules.

Senator Soules' argument is supported by a lawsuit brought against the state by two advocacy organizations on behalf of several students and their families, alleging the state has not fulfilled its constitutional obligation to provide a sufficient education to all public school students. The lawsuit, however, will likely end up in the state's Supreme Court, meaning a resolution is years away.

Meanwhile, Senator Soules has introduced legislation aimed at ensuring sufficient public education funding several times, without success. He has pre-filed a new sufficiency bill for the 2018 legislative session.

1



In Brief: Senator Soules

- ✓ 29 years in public education;
- ✓ Lives in Las Cruces, New Mexico;
- ✓ First elected to the legislature in 2012;
- ✓ Chair, New Mexico Senate Education Committee;
- ✓ Former school board member and winner, New Mexico Outstanding School Board Member of the Year;
- ✓ Former president, New Mexico School Boards Association;
- ✓ 2014 graduate, Western Legislative Academy.

Senator Soules retired from teaching two years ago because he felt that his frequent absences from school due to legislative obligations were not fair to his students. But he misses interacting with kids, and regularly visits his old high school and other schools to try to encourage civic engagement among students and help them understand “what government is really like.” He also invites them to contact him with questions and ideas. “First off, I put my phone number on the board. I tell them, ‘Take out your phones. Put it in there. You’re welcome to call me anytime.’” He says some of his best ideas for legislation come from students. He also invites students to shadow him at the capitol.

Education is not Senator Soules’ only interest. He is also proud of his efforts to increase funding for services for people with developmental disabilities. And although New Mexico’s economy depends heavily on fossil fuel production, Senator Soules is excited about his state’s potential to be a renewable energy leader.

As a legislator now entering his sixth year, Senator Soules has some advice for newer legislators based on his own experience. As an educator, if he knew about an issue, he wanted to

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teach other legislators all about it. But he found this was sometimes counterproductive. He advises: “Listen more and talk less. If I can’t say what I need to in two minutes or less, I need to think about it more.” Sometimes legislators “just go on and on, and they lose their audience, and

they become ineffective as a result.” When other legislators present bills, says Senator Soules, “I need to make sure I ask questions of them and let them answer, not go on and on where they don’t even know where the question is.”

Senator Soules loved being a teacher. As for being a legislator, “Every emotion you can imagine is part of it. It’s great joy, it’s great fun, it’s exciting, it’s interesting, it’s boring, it’s frustrating, it’s exhausting, it’s tiring, it’s maddening, it’s confusing. But it is also important.” He says, “You actually get to be a part of changing history. That’s a powerful thing, and I take it very seriously—that the future is going to be different because I’m there, and I need to keep that in mind all the time.”

As for the teacher shortage in New Mexico, Senator Soules is planning to help address the problem in a very personal way: he hopes to go back to teaching part-time in the next school year.