

SUCCESS Snapshot: A new day, a new education for New Mexico

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While my family identifies as Mexican American, recently unearthed ancestry links us to Apache and Rarámuri peoples. Our presence in this region is at least seven generations deep, with roots extending beyond statehood, the Indian Wars and Manifest Destiny. I was raised in southern New Mexico and left for college when I was 17. It took leaving home to learn the history of my self and of this region from professors in Michigan and California. Uncovering the truth empowered and equipped me to come back and teach and write about my homeland.

In 1848, New Mexico became a territory of the U.S. — part of the spoils of the U.S.-Mexico War. As is typical during regime change, new schools were built in the territory, replacing those already in existence. Eight years later, the U.S. administration noticed that Hispano parents stopped sending their children to the new schools. Therefore, the issue — to make school attendance mandatory by law (compulsory) — was put to a vote.

More than 5,000 Hispano, Mexican American and Anglo men voted. At that time, Indigenous peoples and women were disenfranchised. The outcome: 99.3% voted against compulsory education.

The history of this region is complex as it relates to race, migration and power. Indigenous communities have thrived here for centuries, as is evidenced by still-standing architectural brilliance in northern Pueblos, continued ceremonial practices across the region, and vibrant languages and lifeways among multiple Native tribes and communities. In the late 16th century, Spanish colonizers made a violent entrance to this region in search of wealth, and then remained here — part of the lengthy and complicated nexus of Hispano and Mexican peoples.

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Into the 1800s, Manifest Destiny was the doctrine exercised by the U.S. to justify the genocide of Indigenous peoples across this continent and beyond. The Indian Wars were fought in the last quarter of the 19th century, with many battles fought in New Mexico. Buffalo Soldiers, or African American cavalry, were integral to the “settling of the West.” Lateral violence, a relationship created by “dividing and conquering,” carries a heavy burden for Indigenous, African American, and Mexican American peoples who were devastatingly positioned against one another to promote U.S. imperial expansion.

After becoming a U.S. territory and stage for the genocide of Native peoples, New Mexico remained in limbo until 1912. A key reason for the 64-year probationary period leading to statehood was that U.S. lawmakers viewed Native, Mexican and Hispano peoples as savage, animal-like, backward, ignorant and lazy. We were seen by U.S. settlers as labor and resource, rather than human equivalents. Our identities and traditions were ridiculed, punished and criminalized. In schools established by the U.S. government, Hispano and Mexican American children were beaten, humiliated, punished, and most unfortunately — changed. At that time, countless Native children were forcibly removed from family and taken to distant boarding schools. These “schools” also have a dark legacy of assimilation.

Some think of assimilation as a neutral process, but it is not. Assimilation is the requirement by one group that another group rejects themselves. Without understanding history, we are simply unequipped to see past these political manipulations in order to design and build a more healthy, inclusive and equitable society. Knowing what we know now, we have the rare opportunity to unite as a state and do just that — build something better for all New Mexicans under the broad umbrella of education.

The 2018 landmark legal ruling in the class action lawsuit, “Yazzie/Martinez v. State of New Mexico” essentially requires the state to repair the damage created by more than 160 years of assimilationist education. By mandating that the state address failures in educating low income, Native American, English Language Learners and students with disabilities, Judge Singleton’s ruling makes a powerful statement about history. In 1856, the territorial administration deemed the 99.3% of voters to be “sunk in ignorance” — and thus, completely rejected their vote by making school legally mandatory.

The history of education in our state parallels the history of brutality that has never healed. A culturally-relevant, critical-thinking, capacity-building education that teaches New Mexican students the value of all peoples is a fundamental step in the direction of healing and flourishing. We have the opportunity to honor the 1856 vote by working together across the state to implement the Yazzie/Martinez ruling. NMSU’s Borderlands and Ethnic Studies program, as part of the SUCCESS Partnership, is dedicated to working with stakeholders in a shared commitment to a new day and a new education for New Mexicans.

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