

For immediate release
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Governor Bill Richardson appoints Veronica Garcia As New Mexico's Secretary of Education

ALBUQUERQUE - Governor Bill Richardson today named Veronica Garcia as New Mexico's first Secretary of Education.

Governor Richardson delivered the following remarks at a news conference in Albuquerque:

Thank you, Larry Adkins, for the warm welcome. I've heard so much about Desert Ridge Middle School and your leadership here. I chose to come here for this announcement today because I want all New Mexico schools to be held up to the same high standards you've established for students at this school.

New Mexico voters entrusted me, as Governor, with the tools to provide leadership in our schools. Voters want bold changes. They want help for this generation of kids. The future is now for the 320,000 children in our public-school classrooms today. Now, we accept responsibility to properly educate all our children by building a public-school system of which we can all be proud.

Today, I am placing my confidence in New Mexico's first Secretary of Education - Veronica Garcia. She represents the future of our children.

Voters spoke loud and clear when they endorsed the idea of a Secretary of Education. They want real accountability for our educational system - accountability to make sure money gets into classrooms, accountability for student learning and accountability for the highest standards for our teachers.

After the special education election, I appointed a search committee to help me find the best person to serve as Secretary of Education. I wanted the most qualified New Mexico educator for this critical position.

The top two choices from the committee were: Veronica Garcia, a former teacher who was executive director of the New Mexico Coalition of School Administrators, and Kurt Steinhaus, my education policy advisor who worked since 1999 as director of Student and Education Programs at Los Alamos National Laboratory.

I wholeheartedly agree with the search committee, which is why I chose Veronica Garcia and Kurt Steinhaus to head up the new leadership team at the Public Education Department.

Kurt Steinhaus, a Los Alamos native who was Teacher of the Year in Alamogordo, will be the Deputy Secretary for Learning and Accountability.

I have also appointed Carlotta Penny Bird, of Santo Domingo Pueblo, to serve as the new Assistant Secretary for Indian Education. I expect great things from Penny Bird. Earlier this year, I signed the Indian Education Act, which properly recognizes the needs of New Mexico's Native American students. And I appropriated 2-million dollars to pay for Indian-education initiatives. I want Penny Bird to be the advocate for Native American students.

All three have been classroom teachers. This is important because the success of our efforts to change and improve our schools depends on our ability to help our teachers succeed. Veronica, Kurt and Penny are all committed to that.

Since teacher quality is a major component of the education reform bill I signed into law this year, I am also creating a Governor's Council on Teaching - an advisory group of educators who will assist the Secretary in creating policy that sets standards for teachers. I am tapping Ellen Bernstein, a veteran teacher and union leader from Albuquerque, to chair this council.

Soon, I'll make two other key appointments -- a Deputy Secretary for Operations and an Assistant Secretary for Rural Education.

As I've said before, I got the message that that voters want state government to be careful with the money in the Permanent School Fund. And we will. Veronica Garcia and her team will be charged with making sure the money meant for school reform is used for school reform. They'll make sure the money is used in the classroom, not administration.

I'm also committed to elevating the concerns of rural New Mexico. That's why I think we need a liaison in the Department who will make sure those voices are heard.

Starting today, Veronica Garcia will get to work as my Secretary of Education. Soon, she will sit in on her first cabinet meeting, giving education a long awaited seat at the policy-making table.

I'm excited about bringing Veronica Garcia into the Richardson Administration. She has bold ideas for improving our schools. This former teacher, principal and Superintendent of the Year represents the future_of our schools. She will provide the leadership needed to implement the ambitious agenda we've laid out for New Mexico schools.

Obviously, Veronica Garcia has made a mark on education during her 30-year career. She's been a classroom teacher, school psychologist, coordinator and assistant director for special education, principal of an alternative high school for pregnant and parenting teens and director of a non-profit entity.

She was principal at Albuquerque's Rio Grande High School. She was regional superintendent at Albuquerque Public Schools before becoming associate superintendent of Santa Fe Public Schools.

But probably her most impressive - and challenging - feat was digging the Santa Fe school district out of a huge financial hole when she took over as superintendent in 2000. When she left, the district had a budget surplus and the highest accreditation in its history. As a result, she was

honored in 2002 as Superintendent of the Year, and nominated for National Superintendent of the Year.

Under Veronica Garcia's leadership, I expect to see the Public Education Department transformed from a regulatory bureaucracy to a dynamic agency that will partner with local school districts and communities, as well as with other state agencies, to do what's best for kids.

Veronica Garcia did a great job of communicating with the public as Santa Fe's superintendent. She will use those same skills in the coming months as she travels to every region of the state to get input from communities.

Her "community conversations" will serve as an opportunity for rural towns like Jal and Shiprock, as well as urban districts like Las Cruces and Albuquerque, to provide much-needed perspective as we revamp the Public Education Department. She's already trying to talk me into participating in these grassroots meetings. I told her I'll think about it.

To say Veronica Garcia has a "can-do" attitude is an understatement. She has worked in the trenches. And even now, with 30 years of experience, she's still expanding her own education. Just last month, she completed all requirements for a doctoral degree in educational leadership from the University of New Mexico.

Veronica Garcia is taking on, perhaps, the toughest job in state government. It's also the most important job, and appropriately so, because she'll be working with me to make sure the future of New Mexico, the future of our children, stays bright. Together, all of us - teachers, parents, students, communities and business leaders - will work to see that every child gets the quality education they deserve.