

Oil And Gas Revenue Fuels Education

In a small town in the middle of the Gila Wilderness, a class of rambunctious 4- and 5-year-old pre-K students released 32 healthy butterflies just before the end of the school year. It was the culmination of several weeks of observation and learning about the butterfly life cycle. It was also a lesson in patience, breathtaking growth, and transformation — fitting both for the year we had and for the transition to kindergarten the little ones were experiencing.

This experience was possible — perhaps surprisingly, given how often such an occurrence is not the case — not out of my own pocket but with the support of administration and out of our school’s operational budget. A budget that largely depends on oil and gas. A budget that is at risk as oil and gas production is limited in New Mexico.

In 2020, the state’s oil and gas industry contributed \$1.4 billion to New Mexico Education. Schools in Catron County, though on the opposite side of the state from “oil country,” are dependent on the revenue generated from the oil and gas industry as well. In fact, our county alone received \$1.241 million in education funding from oil and gas in 2020, and those dollars made everything from entire positions to interactive learning projects — like our butterfly release — possible. The funds also proved invaluable in a year where additional technology, custodial hours and multiplied resources were necessary. To imagine what challenges not having those funds this year would have presented is daunting. Further, to imagine the impacts of not having immersive and cross-content learning experiences due to an unnecessary budget depletion is devastating.

The National Assessment of Education Progress, or “The Nation’s Report Card,” as it is more commonly known, is an assessment that provides comparative data for schools across the nation, and results reported in 2019 show that New Mexico only outperformed Alabama and Puerto Rico in math and literacy student achievement. Our students and families deserve better. Teachers require more resources — we know this, and yet we still rank only 42nd in per-pupil spending.

Frankly, to limit the revenue of oil and gas would be a monumental loss in a system that already is not providing what our students and families need in order to be competitive in a modern economy. Education and economy exist in a cycle where each supports the other. In New Mexico, this is a cycle that both educationally and economically cannot survive the limitation of such a vital industry.

New Mexico can and absolutely should support economic growth and diversity, but this does not have to be done at the cost of limiting our state’s most successful private industry, one that makes so much possible for New Mexicans. As the demand for energy grows, there is no better place for that energy to be produced than here, in our own state, where environmental protections are some of the strongest in the world and where we can continue to benefit from the essential revenue it creates. Rather than limiting opportunity, this teacher hopes for an abundance, not only so I can continue to provide rich learning experiences, but also for the children in my classroom, so that they feel they can stay in New Mexico, that they have the chance to thrive as adults in the state they call home.

There is plenty of room for oil and gas to continue to provide jobs and revenue while new and diversified economic opportunity is explored and expanded. These ideas are not mutually exclusive, but rather, by the educational and economic cycle, dependent upon each other.