

Improving New Mexico's Educator Dossier System:

Recommendations from Teach Plus Policy Fellows



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INTRODUCTION

We're a group of New Mexico Policy Fellows with 57 years experience in the classroom. As educators, we have participated in licensure advancement using the dossier system and have identified a need for improvement both within the system itself and with licensure advancement in general. Wanting to know more about the dossier process beyond our personal experiences, we conducted research with dossier reviewers and submitters to understand their different perspectives. Specifically, we were interested in how the dossier system affects New Mexico's ability to retain high-quality educators and what we can do to improve it.

Our research encompassed a focus group with former and current dossier reviewers and a survey of dossier submitters from across the state. In this brief, we present our findings and recommendations for the New Mexico Public Education Department to improve New Mexico's teacher advancement system so we can retain effective educators, ensure they have viable ways to increase their salaries, and provide meaningful professional-learning opportunities to improve their classroom practice.

Findings

Reviewer Focus Group:

1. Reviewers report issues with the functionality of the dossier submission portal.
2. Reviewers want more opportunities for training and calibration, to improve the process and make it more consistent.
3. The most common mistakes on dossiers include teachers not following specific guidelines or templates, especially around providing concrete evidence or specifying appropriate resources.

Educator Survey:

1. Teachers who submitted a dossier reported having issues with the submission portal, such as technical challenges and lack of response.
2. Most teachers reported that the dossier process was ineffective and almost half of the respondents said it was very *ineffective* at identifying effective classroom teaching.⁶

Recommendations

1. Improve the functionality of the dossier submission portal, including extending the time before a dossier is reassigned to another reviewer and ensuring submitters receive responsive support when they encounter challenges.
2. Ensure that dossier reviewers have access to ongoing training, collaboration, and mentorship opportunities.
3. Create a clear, transparent, and accessible support system for teachers, including access to dossier-writing guidelines in a central location.
4. In the long term, provide alternative ways to show teacher efficacy in order to advance in licensure levels. A possible alternative pathway could be micro-credentialing, which is choice-driven, bite-sized professional learning over time that helps teachers improve their practice.

BACKGROUND

Since 2003, educators throughout New Mexico have submitted dossiers to advance in licensure from Level I to Level II and Level II to Level III. Like a portfolio, a dossier is a professional document that spotlights an educator's beliefs about teaching and outlines evidence of classroom skills and abilities. When the documents are uploaded to the state's website, teachers pay \$320. They must pass all strands—instruction, student learning, and professional learning—in order to advance to the next level and, thus, be eligible for a boost on the salary scale. According to the state's Public Education Department's [Requirements & Guidelines for the Preparation of the New Mexico Professional Development Dossier \(PDD\) for Teachers](#)¹ the system allows educators to “tell a set of stories from your practice, stories that are illustrated and validated by concrete evidence from your work with your students and others in your classroom. The PDD is not a test with the right answer. Instead it allows you to construct a picture of your teaching.” Dossiers incapsulate classroom data and an educator's evaluation of that evidence. “No one part of the PDD serves to fully represent a teacher's work, but the entire PDD is intended to provide evidence to determine when a teacher is qualified to advance to a higher level of licensure,” as stated on the Region 9 Education Cooperative [website](#).²

Those new to the profession have three to five years to move from Level I to II. If a dossier, which is reviewed by at least two retired or current educators, does not meet expectations as outlined in NMPED's [“Criteria for Success”](#)¹, first-level educators stand to lose their license to teach. To help, some school districts and charters provide dossier support to teachers. In addition, the Public Education Department, via Region 9, offers [dossier regional coaches](#).³

METHODOLOGY

FOCUS GROUP: We used email and social media platforms to invite former and current dossier reviewers to attend a focus group on October 20, 2021, conducted via Zoom, so that we could learn more about the reviewers' experiences related to the process, system, and effectiveness of the Professional Development Dossier. Ten dossier reviewers participated in the one-hour focus group. Afterward, they were encouraged to complete a Google form with [the questions](#) so that they could elaborate and address ones that were not asked due to the large group size and time constraints. Six completed the form.

DOSSIER SURVEY: In November 2021, Teach Plus New Mexico launched a survey to learn more about the experience of completing a dossier from educators around the state, including the overall process, system, and effectiveness of the Professional Development Dossier. The survey was promoted on social media platforms and via the Teach Plus New Mexico teacher network. 148 educators completed the survey. The two largest groups were those who have taught from 6 to 10 years (34 percent) and those who have been in the classroom from 11 to 15 years (about 32 percent).⁴ Approximately 77 percent stated they passed their dossier on the first try.⁵

FINDINGS

Reviewer Focus Group Findings

1. Reviewers report issues with the functionality of the NMPED dossier submission portal.

Reviewers in our focus group pointed to common issues with the functionality of the portal such as frequent back-ups, logjams, and wrong results. According to one reviewer: *"It's frustrating as we know that teachers have put a lot into their work."* Reviewers also pointed out that there is sometimes not enough time for them to adequately analyze dossiers. They have 48 hours to read a submission before it disappears from their queue. Several reviewers indicated that struggles on their end inevitably lead to struggles for submitters, too.

2. Reviewers want more opportunities for training and calibration, to improve the process and make it more consistent.

Our focus group participants indicated that, while professional learning exists, it is not consistent nor is it easily accessible for everyone who is reading dossiers. When it comes to training, dossier reviewers were clear that they want it to be targeted and ongoing, so that norms and standards are clear, feedback is free of biases, and evaluations are calibrated to make the system more uniform. The reviewers noted that if they were to work together to advance their knowledge around analyzing dossiers, their engagement in the process and ability to provide consistent, meaningful feedback to teachers would improve.

3. The most common mistakes on dossiers include teachers not following specific guidelines or templates, especially around providing concrete evidence or specifying appropriate resources.

"They don't read through the guidelines," wrote one focus group participant. Although the NMPED website lists the guidelines, focus group participants indicated that many teachers are not complying with these. Another reviewer stated: *"They do not give enough details in the dossier to support the explanation of their teaching."* Reviewers expect that teachers submit clear, concise, and data-driven dossiers in which resources and evidence are clearly cited and explained.

Educator Survey Findings

1. Teachers who submitted a dossier reported having issues with the submission portal such as technical challenges and lack of response.

In addition to dossier reviewers, one in four of the educators who responded to the survey also identified the portal as an issue. One teacher commented: *"Honestly, the hardest part for me was the black hole of 'no information' once I had submitted my dossier into the online portal. After more than a month of seeing the constant status of 'Pending' on all strands, I had no idea if my information had been lost in the ether*

or if it was in someone's queue." Some teachers stated they tried to contact NMPED via phone and email, but did not receive a response. After spending months crafting their dossier, these educators felt frustrated that just at the point when they thought they had completed the next step in their licensure journey and were eager to receive their results, they were met with road blocks.

2. Most teachers reported that the dossier process was ineffective and almost half of respondents said it was very ineffective at identifying effective classroom teaching.⁶

Two-thirds of our respondents indicated they did not believe the dossier process was an appropriate strategy to accurately evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching.⁶ *"This process is awful, expensive, time-consuming and, most notably, NOT at all meaningful in determining whether someone is a good teacher."* Wrote another respondent: *"It is a lot of work and requires a great deal of time to complete the dossier. I submitted it and received my results extremely fast. I felt like it wasn't even reviewed."* A third commented, *"The dossier simply provided me with more work. I did not learn anything about myself or my teaching through the process. I followed directions and 'jumped through silly hoops'."* And another: *"I passed my national boards the same year I failed my dossier. I don't think the dossier reflects accomplished teaching."* These respondents wanted to show their expertise in a way that helped them evolve as educators and, in doing so, equip their students with improved skills to reach their potential.

While most teachers had a negative experience with the dossier, about one third of our survey respondents were pleased with the dossier writing, submission, and feedback processes. *"Writing the dossier was a good experience in terms of focusing and reflecting on certain areas of my practice,"* one teacher wrote. *"It also helped clarify, for me, the expectations of an educator in a variety of modalities, and I was able to use what I was already doing to show that I met or exceeded expectations."*

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Improve the functionality of the dossier submission portal, including extending the time before a dossier is reassigned to another reviewer and ensuring submitters receive responsive support when they encounter challenges.

While NMPED should gather further data to identify specific issues with the portal, it can also begin to quickly remedy educators' concerns related to submission, reviewing, and receiving dossier results and making the system more user-friendly. This includes extending the time during which a reviewer has access to a dossier and providing responsive technology assistance to teachers who are submitting their dossier. We recommend that the NMPED create a staff position dedicated to overseeing the portal for both reviewers and educators to reach out to the point-of-contact with questions, issues, and concerns.

2. Ensure that dossier reviewers have access to ongoing training, collaboration, and mentorship opportunities.

NMPED should make an annual calendar of training opportunities available to all reviewers, including in-person professional-learning events if possible. *“We need to be able to calibrate/meet together in person so that ideas/methods/biases can be discussed with feedback from other reviewers and experts,”* wrote a focus group participant. NMPED should regularly evaluate the training sessions for effectiveness to ensure quality and that the reviewers' needs are being met. We encourage NMPED to elevate the job of dossier reviewers so that they feel supported, especially during the spring submission process.

3. Create a clear, transparent, and accessible support system for teachers, including access to dossier-writing guidelines in a central location.

Currently, educators who are crafting their dossiers have to consult two documents on the NMPED website to ensure they are following all the required elements: [Requirements & Guidelines for the Preparation of the New Mexico Professional Development Dossier \(PDD\) for Teachers](#)¹ and [Supplemental Dossier Guidelines](#).⁷ We recommend that the information in these two documents be consolidated into one, thus streamlining the process. The documents should be tracked online to determine the number of times they are accessed. The amount of views can be a data point to help ensure educators are accessing the report. As outlined by the findings, many teachers do not comply with the guidelines so these need to be presented in a way that ensures educators are accessing and using the information.

4. In the long term, provide alternative ways to show teacher efficacy in order to advance in licensure levels. A possible alternative pathway could be micro-credentialing, which is choice-driven, bite-sized professional learning over time that helps teachers improve their practice.

While some survey respondents indicated that their experiences with the dossier system were adequate, many did not, calling it outdated and in need of a facelift. *“We already have a teacher shortage in NM and the dossier is creating an even bigger shortage,”* a teacher wrote in the survey. One of the dossier reviewers also suggested change should be on the horizon. *“I am frustrated that teachers do not have a choice,”* stated one focus group participant. *“For some people, writing isn't their strength.”* Said another dossier reader: *“We've had the same process since the inception. How can we make it better for teachers?”* One of these alternatives could be micro-credentialing. It allows educators to grow their professional learning on their own terms, fosters choice and flexibility, and revolves around performance-based expectations and growth over time. Teach Plus New Mexico believes that the NMPED's pilot “Cultivating a Classroom of Respect” micro-credentialing course⁸ that opened in January for interested teachers to test is a wonderful first step. The course, which takes about six weeks and must be completed on the Canvas platform by March 2022, will be followed by a survey in which participants are invited to provide feedback. We hope this opportunity leads to an alternative pathway to the dossier in the future.

CONCLUSION

Dossier reviewers and educators who submit them made it clear that the dossier system works for some but not for every educator in our state. They report that it is confusing, cumbersome, and time-consuming. Based on feedback from dossier reviewers and submitters, it is time for NMPED to take a closer look at improving the system so that it becomes key to encouraging, supporting, and developing educators. In doing so, reviewers will be able to provide consistent feedback that supports best practices in the classroom and teachers will know that the system helps them to grow as professionals. If this happens, teachers and students in New Mexico benefit.

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ENDNOTES

- 1** New Mexico Education Department, Educator Quality Division. (date unknown.) *Requirements & Guidelines for the Preparation of the New Mexico Professional Development Dossier (PDD) for Teachers*. Retrieved from <https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/2.-Dossier-Guidelines.pdf>
- 2** Region 9 Education Cooperative. (2022). Retrieved from <https://www.rec9nm.org/Educator-Quality>
- 3** PED Flyer-Coaches. (date unknown). Retrieved from https://tb2cdn.schoolwebmasters.com/acnt_67464/site_67465/Documents/Dossier-Coaches-Flyer.pdf
- 4** NM Feedback on Dossier Survey. (November 2021.) 148 educators completed the survey, with the two largest groups being those who have taught for 6 to 10 years (about 40 percent) and those who have been in the classroom for 11 to 15 years (about 33 percent) Note: Six survey respondents did not note their longevity in teaching. (*Question 9*).
- 5** NM Feedback on Dossier Survey. (November 2021.) Approximately 77 percent stated they passed their dossier the first time (*Question 1*).

6 NM Feedback on Dossier Survey. (November 2021.) 47 percent of educators who took the dossier survey believe the process is very *ineffective* (Question 5).

7 New Mexico Public Education Department, Educator Quality Division. (date unknown.) *Supplemental Dossier Guidelines*. Retrieved from <https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/3.-Supplemental-Dossier-Guidelines.pdf>

8 New Mexico Public Education Department, Educator Growth and Development Bureau. (2021.) "Cultivating a Classroom of Respect: A Fresh Look at Classroom Management." For more information, contact: Emily.Foose@regionix.org <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1x7NaYScWrqYgBmp8sGtLE6EBzvAxFf6qRe1FFq8cpAA/edit?usp=sharing>

October 20, 2021, Dossier Focus Group Questions:

1. Are you a former or current dossier reader for NMPED?
2. If you answered "former," what months/years were you a dossier reviewer?
3. What did/do you like MOST about your work as a dossier reviewer?
4. What did/do you like LEAST about your work as a dossier reviewer?
5. What are some things you look for in a proficient dossier?
6. What is the most common mistake dossier applicants make?
7. What are 1-3 things you would change about the dossier system in New Mexico?
8. What challenges might reviewers face if they were required to provide feedback on failed dossiers?
9. How can NMPED better prepare you for this role?
10. What do you think educators, especially those moving from Level 1 to Level 2, need to feel confident in their early careers as they move levels?
11. Use this space to provide any additional thoughts, wonderings or advice about the dossier system.

NM Feedback on Dossier Survey (November 2021)

1. Did you pass all strands of your dossier the first time you submitted your report?
2. Were you given feedback related to your dossier including why you passed/failed?
3. Did you have access to a dossier coach when working on your dossier?
4. Did you have any issues with the online portal when submitting or reviewing your dossier?
5. How effective do you believe the dossier is at evaluating your effectiveness as a teacher?
6. What else would you like us to know about your experience in writing, submitting, and reviewing results from your dossier?
7. Name (for internal purposes-anonymous survey)
8. Title (for internal purposes-anonymous survey)
9. Number of years teaching