

NEW MEXICO SENATE DEMOCRATS

For immediate release

Contact: Arnold Vigil, (505) 986-4263

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DAY TWO: SKANDERA CONFIRMATION

Teachers' Testimony Mostly Against Hanna Skandera's Confirmation at Five-Hour Saturday Hearing, In Which Committee Chair Revealed She Was Accosted by Governor's Legal Staff

An overwhelming number of teachers showed up to the Capitol on their day off to speak against the nomination of Hanna Skandera as the cabinet secretary of the state Public Education Department. The large turnout for the confirmation hearing on Saturday morning forced a last minute move to the Senate Chamber floor.

The riveting testimony from teachers, the majority of whom spoke to what they felt was Skandera's questionable qualifications and what they felt was her inability to relate to what they go through with students on a day-to-basis, appeared to highlight the dramatic meeting, that is, until Senate Committee Chair Senator Linda Lopez dropped the bombshell that she was "accosted and confronted" outside of her office Friday evening by members of Governor Susana Martinez's legal staff.

Senator Lopez (Bernalillo, District 11) told those still present in the chamber after public commentary had ended that when she was leaving her office around 6:30 p.m. on Friday, two of the governor's legal staffers appeared and demanded copies of material that Skandera critic Michael Corwin had provided during the confirmation hearing earlier on Friday. Corwin, a vocal critic of the Martinez Administration, was allowed to present a list of investigative materials on Saturday that he's compiled about the questionable actions that Skandera has taken during her two years at the unconfirmed helm of the PED.

"Last evening, after everyone was gone to the basketball game, Hillary Noskin came and wanted a copy of (Corwin's) letter," Senator Lopez said. "Then Jessica Hernandez joined her and they confronted me for about 15 minutes. I knew that I was being recorded. They kept saying, 'Are you refusing? Are you refusing?' The information that (Corwin) is to be presenting has been public for a year on Corwin's website (www.independentsourcepac.com). I don't stand up to bullying very well. I didn't with the last administration under Governor Richardson and I certainly won't with this one. To insinuate that I was holding back information, I really don't appreciate that.

“I get the ploy. I understand what you were trying to do,” Senator Lopez said, directing her comments at Noskin, who was sitting toward the front of the chamber on Saturday, directly in front of the Rules Committee members.

An unofficial tally of the public commentary taken at Friday’s two hour hearing, and Saturday’s five-hour plus meeting saw 51 teachers and self-described educators oppose Skandera’s nomination, 13 teachers and educators favored her nomination, 13 people who described themselves as being in business favored her, while 13 persons who described themselves as parents or citizens voiced their affirmation, while seven parents or citizens spoke against. Final input from the public: 58 against Skandera’s appointment, 34 against.

In addition, a poll conducted on Friday and Saturday by KOAT-TV on Friday and Saturday posed the question to its viewers and internet users: Do you approve of the job Hanna Skandera has done as education secretary? Results of the poll as of Saturday evening: 67 percent (686 votes) voted no to 33 percent (333) favoring her performance.

Perhaps one of the most telling public statements came from Ph.D candidate Doug Manning who said he had experience as an educator in Florida while the same reforms that Skandera is proposing in New Mexico had already been implemented during her tenure there in the education department under former governor Jeb Bush.

“We’re going down the same road as Florida -- the A through F system is broken. It’s an arbitrary label,” Manning told the committee through a hand-held microphone, while standing amongst the crowded middle rows of the senator’s chairs in the chamber. “Merit pay is not the way to go. In Florida the educators’ morale is broken.

“Our children are becoming test-taking robots and they are lacking the critical thinking skills (because of the standardized tests).”

Another teacher who described herself as a level III bilingual kindergarten teacher and also a PED appointee on the New Mexico Teach Council, which was established as an advisory entity to Skandera on teacher evaluations, also voiced her opposition to the appointment.

“It is my honest opinion as an experienced teacher that we need a new leader of the Public Education Department that has a foundation of the impact of policies, both unintended and intended, that do damage to our classroom teachers and communities,” said Sonya Romero from Albuquerque. “As a community of educators, we do feel horrible to have to be here to acknowledge the lack of qualifications, but Governor Martinez put her in knowing she was unconstitutionally qualified.”

Taos Pueblo native Kathy Mondragon said she showed up to voice her opposition of the appointment because she understands that Pueblo leaders have endorsed the appointment. “I don’t want anyone to speak for me that does not have my experience.”

Senator Lopez recessed the hearing around 4 p.m. on Saturday after the committee heard a brief testimony from Corwin, in which he cited the questionable hiring of the wife of Keith Gardner, the governor's chief of staff. Corwin said that the qualifications for the high ranking position were changed to permit the political hire and automatically excluded more qualified people. Senator Michael Moores (R, Bernalillo, District 21) questioned whether Corwin was under investigation by the FBI for releasing personal emails from the governor's staff, but Corwin told the committee that he wasn't a target.

Committee members will be allowed to question Corwin, who also questioned Skandera's frequent out-of-state travel being paid for by special interest groups, at an upcoming Senate Rules Committee hearing to be announced.