

LOCAL COLUMN

OPINION: America's schools have flatlined for 50 years, but they can be revived



James Prendamano

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The truth has been in front of us for years. We continue to spend more money on education, yet the average 17-year-old reads and does math at almost the same level as their counterparts from decades ago, according to the Nation's Report Card. About 1 in 5 American adults struggles with basic literacy. Fewer than 1 in 3 eighth graders in the United States perform at or above the proficient level in reading. In some school systems, absences exceed 30% of instructional days for thousands of students. Far too many students report low engagement, which means they do not feel fully connected to what is happening in class.

Even in New Mexico, according to the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO), state support for higher education in New Mexico rose about 15% between 2019 and 2024. During those same years, the University of New Mexico's Bureau of Business and Economic Research recorded a double-digit rise of about 18% in cost of living. Colleges did not gain ground. They lost it. This is not unique to New Mexico. It is a snapshot of a nationwide pattern.

These are signs of a nation-wide system that was created for a different era. The world now moves faster. Artificial intelligence is reshaping two-thirds of all jobs. Analysts warn that certain entry-level white-collar roles may decline sharply by 2030. Many classrooms continue to treat AI as something to avoid instead of something students should learn to use with confidence. I know how it feels to sit in a classroom and fall behind. I grew up on Staten Island and spent many days hoping the teacher would skip my name because I felt lost. That quiet panic stayed with me for years. I eventually discovered practical skills that created options, income and confidence, although school had not taught them to me.

Teachers are not the problem. They continue to do heroic work inside a structure that very few people have updated. The responsibility belongs to all of us. Parents, communities, employers and people like me who now have the means to help.

This year I decided to stop waiting and start building.

I launched a free online academy that begins with the questions every person needs to answer before moving forward with purpose. What drives you. What you value. What you want to build. How to turn those ideas into daily action. From that foundation, the academy teaches the life skills that so many young people deserve to learn. Financial literacy, AI fluency, negotiation, leadership, communication, market analysis and ways to turn ideas into income.


The first full curriculum I created takes learners through a field I know well, which is real estate investing and brokerage. I chose it because the work teaches universal principles. Recognize opportunity. Measure risk. Build trust. Use knowledge to create value. These skills translate to almost any industry. My hope is that others will take this model and create free pathways into medicine, technology, trades, the arts and many other needed fields.


The lessons are simple and direct. Most were filmed on an iPhone after our main camera failed. The academy includes hundreds of worksheets and a custom AI tutor that is available around the clock. It speaks only the language of the curriculum. Parents tell me their teenagers debate with the AI more than with them. I take that as progress.

I did not create this academy to replace public schools. I created it to help students discover what they can do. Public education remains one of the strongest forces for opportunity in the United States. It needs new energy. Students want learning that feels real. They want skills they can use to build a life.

We do not need another national panel or another lengthy report. We need teachers who test new units, parents who request electives in financial literacy and AI, entrepreneurs who share free courses and students who help shape the next stage of learning.

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New Mexico lost 248 doctors over five years.

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The world will not slow down so everyone can catch up. Students should not wait decades or borrow heavy debt to learn skills that work in the real economy.

I reached a point where watching felt irresponsible. I chose to build something and invite others to build more. Every educator, parent, coder and student is welcome to use it, question it, improve it or go far beyond it.

We can give every learner an education that helps them see their future and move toward it with confidence.

James Prendamano is the creator and host of The James Prendamano Academy and CEO and founder of PreReal Investments Inc. and PreReal Prendamano Real Estate.

UNITED STATES LITERACY JAMES PRENDAMANO EDUCATION ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE OPINION

Lobos can't hit shots, squander solid defensive effort in road loss at Boise State

UNM's road losing streak to the Broncos is now up to eight

Rams, Hawks set for championship showdown

Undefeated Rio Rancho will face district rival Volcano Vista in Rio Rancho tournament final after both teams cruise through semifinals

New Mexico high school girls basketball teams ranked (Dec. 30)

Rankings get a bit of a shake up despite little action over the holiday break

New Mexico high school boys basketball teams ranked (Dec. 30)

Small, but significant movement highlights this week's prep hoops' rankings

Former deputy accused of rape in Doña Ana County

Suspect was a deputy for a year, quit months before alleged rape

New Mexico quarterback Cole Welliver to enter portal

LB Mercury Swaim, RB Deshaun Buchanan set to return in 2026

Lobos looking to lasso Cowgirls in MW showdown

Wyoming and MW scoring leader Malene Pedersen visit the Pit for a Wednesday matinee

Santa Fe animal shelter receives \$100K anonymous donation

Nonprofit has raised almost \$850,000 for 2025 campaign as of Tuesday

Teen killed in Clovis shooting

Police say 15-year-old died after a friend accidentally discharged gun while group was playing with firearms

Las Cruces teen held without bond in murder case

Charges stem from shooting at house party in November

OPINION: Wildfire prevention costs less than suppression

Hope Christian boys coach earns 900th career win

Coach Jim Murphy has 918 overall victories, including 18 with the Hope girls, in his distinguished career

New Mexico sees record ACA enrollment following state's move to offset subsidy losses

Premiums are still expected to rise by an average of 35.7% next year due to higher medical, prescription costs

Las Cruces minimum wage tops \$13

State's minimum wage remains \$12

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