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Academic Achievement and School Resources in Nevada

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Academic Achievement and School Resources in Nevada*

Introduction

For several decades there has been a growing concern in the United States over the student achievement in our public schools. In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education issued a report, A Nation at Risk, http://www.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/index.html, that called for educational reform. As student achievement scores declined, even with increased investment in education, the business community, policy makers, and educators rallied to address a vital issue for our future: how to improve student achievement and ensure that the 21st century workforce has the knowledge and skills to compete in a global economy.

The policy focus shifted from the educational system’s inputs to its outputs and outcomes. Thus, states began to adopt accountability plans built around performance standards and output measurements, such as student achievement on standardized tests, percentage of students enrolled in AP courses, taking AP exams and SATs, as well as attendance records, drop-out statistics, and high school graduation rates.

In 2001, The Unites States Congress passed The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), http://www.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml?src=pb. The purpose of this comprehensive reform legislation, according to the U.S. Department of Education, http://www.ed.gov/index.jhtml, was to change the culture of American schools by: (1) closing the achievement gap, (2) offering more flexibility to schools in how they use federal dollars to meet the needs of students, (3) giving parents of students attending low-performing schools choices in where their children attend school or tutoring support for their children, and (4) teaching students according to research-based evidence of what works. Each state is now required to develop a plan for implementing NCLB. Among the elements of the state plan are:
- An accountability system that expects all student subgroups, schools, and districts to reach proficiency in core academic areas based on specified assessments by 2013-2014
- A set of academic standards for core academic areas that are the same for all students, schools, and districts
- Methods for determining whether student subgroups, schools, and districts have made adequate yearly progress
- A system for reporting the annual progress toward proficiency to parents and the community through an accountability report card
- Rewards and sanctions for schools/districts

There has been much criticism of NCLB revolving around the questions of how student achievement is measured, how adequate yearly progress is defined, and how realistic the end goals are. However, NCLB has also sparked focus, debate, and research on those variables that positively impact student achievement. The No Child Left Behind Act has reinvigorated the school focus on attending to those things that matter most in the learning experiences of all children within a school.

This chapter offers a current perspective on national reform results, followed by an overview of the Silver State’s efforts to build an accountability system for public education. The report outlines Nevada’s educational reform initiatives along with demographic information about the state’s education system, summarizes the status of student achievement in Nevada, and addresses progress in closing the achievement gap. Finally, it discusses the resource needs and state funding of K-12 education, delineates policy options, and offers recommendations for the Nevada public education system.

**Current Perspective on National Reform Efforts**

The **Center on Education Policy** (2005), [http://www.cep-dc.org/](http://www.cep-dc.org/), has recently released a report documenting the positive outcomes that education reform has produced over the last twenty years. The report singled out 24 primary indicators pointing to success in public education. The CEP findings related to course-taking and student achievement are presented below. The student achievement
information is based on standardized achievement data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), http://www.ed.gov/programs/naep/index.html, a federal effort of the National Center for Education Statistics,http://nces.ed.gov/, to track the performance of U.S. students in the core academic areas of schooling.

School Participation and Course-Taking

- More children are attending full-day kindergarten: 1983 – 32.3%, 2001 – 60.3%.
- Americans are becoming more educated: 1985 – 74% high school completers, 2002 – 84%.
- High school students are taking more challenging curriculum: 1982 – 14% completing core academic curriculum, 2000 – 57%.
- More students with disabilities are being educated in regular classrooms: 1985-1986 – 26% of students with disabilities educated in regular classrooms, 2003-2004 – 50% of students with disabilities educated in regular classrooms.

Student Achievement

The numbers marked with an asterisk (*) in the list below indicate where earlier scores were significantly different from 2001. The SAT data is based on a scale of 200-800.

- Younger students are showing gains in reading achievement: Age 9 in 1984 – avg. score 211*, 2004 – avg. score 219.
• For middle and high school trends are less encouraging: Flat for middle school, somewhat lower for high school.
• Achievement has improved slightly or stayed the same in several other academic subjects: writing, science, U.S. history, and geography.
• Some achievement gaps are narrowing: White students are improving but African-American and Hispanic students have gained at a somewhat faster rate. However, this narrowing of the gap does not hold for 9 year old Hispanics in math where the gap has been fluctuating, or for 13 year old Hispanics where the gap has persisted.
• SAT scores have gone up, even though many more students are taking the test: avg. SAT math scores in 1984 – 497, 2004 – 518; avg. SAT verbal scores in 1984 – 504, 2004 – 508).
• ACT scores have remained stable, even as the number of test-takers has increased: number of students taking test in 1994 – 1.0 million; in 2004 – 1.2 million.

While the last twenty years of reform have shown promise, there is still much to be done, education researchers point out, especially when it comes to closing the achievement gap among students. We need to raise proficiency in math and science to internationally competitive levels, focus on the continued achievement of high school students in academically challenging subjects, and provide stimulating and enriched educational environments for young children at-risk.

**Historical Overview and Context for K-12 Education in Nevada**

**State Reform Efforts**

A recent *WestEd* report on Nevada student achievement (2005), [http://www.wested.org/cs/we/view/pj/164](http://www.wested.org/cs/we/view/pj/164), outlined the state’s response to the reform movement, beginning with the passage of accountability legislation in 1989. Following this legislative initiative, Nevada developed a comprehensive school reform package. In 1997, the Nevada legislature passed the **Nevada Education Reform Act** (NERA) which delineated several key objectives for the state’s K-12 education system. The
focus was on establishing statewide standards in core academic areas, benchmarks for performance, and required assessments of student performance. During the 2003 legislative session Nevada modified its accountability program to align with the new federal mandates of NCLB, [http://www.leg.state.nv.us/lcb/fiscal/LeBeape/](http://www.leg.state.nv.us/lcb/fiscal/LeBeape/), which included:

- Changes in the **state reporting process** including designations for schools meeting or not meeting annual achievement goals, a technical assistance process to assist schools in meeting their school improvement goals, and sanctions for schools that fail to meet achievement goals over time and school choice for students that attend those schools
- A shift in assessment focus to emphasize **standards-based** rather than norm referenced **assessments**
- Requirement of **school improvement plans** which must be revised annually and supply assessment and accountability information to identify student needs, including disparities in the performance among subgroups of students and the delineation of research-based instructional practices that will be used to address student needs

Consistent with the new accountability legislation, the **Nevada Department of Education (NDE)**, [http://www.doe.nv.gov/](http://www.doe.nv.gov/), has supported several related reform objectives designed to improve student achievement.

**Systematic Planning**

In accordance with the new accountability legislation, the NDE launched a planning effort that involved multiple stakeholders in the development of a State Improvement Plan which included recommendations for immediate and long term actions, some of which are described below. The NDE also developed a school level planning process, the **Student Achievement Gap Elimination (SAGE)**, [http://www.wested.org/online_pubs/NevadaReport.pdf](http://www.wested.org/online_pubs/NevadaReport.pdf), program, designed to facilitate the planning process of low-performing schools.

**Research-Based Intervention Strategies**
Nevada supports several research-based initiatives: (a) early childhood literacy programs, (b) class size reduction, and (c) full-day kindergarten for at-risk students.

**Teacher Quality Initiatives**

Four Regional Professional Development Programs (RPDPs), [http://rpdp.ccsd.net/](http://rpdp.ccsd.net/), were originally funded in 1999 to offer professional development for classroom teachers and to assist their students in meeting state standards in core academic areas. The RPDPs provide oversight for the governor’s early literacy program and assist schools with the SAGE planning process. Nevada also has established incentives to recruit and retain teachers. The NDE made available grants for districts to fund web-based, online recruitment and application procedures.

- Nevada currently provides a $2,000 signing bonus for new teachers and pays a 1/5 retirement credit annually for educators working in hard-to-staff schools or teaching in subject shortage areas such as math, science, or programs for English language learners.
- In addition, National Board Certified Teachers can have part of their application expenses reimbursed and receive a 5% annual salary increase once certified.

However, the effectiveness of these incentive programs depends on an appropriate funding level. In some instances, where impact was underestimated, the incentives have resulted in unfunded or underfunded mandates for which districts had to assume the costs.

**Technology Infrastructure**

- Nevada has allocated approximately $40+ million for technology infrastructure including having a networkable computer in every classroom, linking all computers to the internet, providing student links to high-quality, standards-based educational materials, and providing technical support to schools.
The legislature allocated an additional $9.95 million for the 2004-05 school year to upgrade hardware, provide maintenance support, and improve technical support.

**Incentive for Youth to Pursue Postsecondary Education**


- The program awards scholarships of up to $10,000 to eligible students who attend college in Nevada.
- Currently, high school students must maintain a 3.0 GPA and pass the high school proficiency exam. Funding for this program comes from the state’s tobacco settlement money.

**State Demographics**

These reform efforts serve 17 school districts, 558 schools, 385,401 students, and 20,234 full-time equivalent teachers (Common Core of Data, 2002-03). Nevada’s configuration of county coterminous school districts is unique in that Clark County School District (Las Vegas) is the largest districts with 70% of the children in the state’s public school system. Washoe County School District (Reno) is the next largest with 16% of the students. The remaining 15 rural districts contain 14% of the students. Eight of those 15 districts combined serve less than 2% of the state’s total student population. Current Nevada demographics pose formidable challenges for Nevada educators:

**Explosive Enrollment Growth**

- Nevada’s enrollment grew 188% between 1970 and 2000. Student population growth was approximately four times the national average at 5-7% annually.
- Clark County’s enrollment alone increased from 166,788 in 1995-1996 to 280,834 in 2004-2005, making it the 5th largest school district in the country.

**Increased Student Diversity**
• Nevada’s student population is now majority minority with 49% Caucasian and 51% ethnoracial minorities. Hispanic students are the fastest growing subgroup of students at 32% of the total school population in the state.
• The greatest growth of Hispanic students has been in Clark County where they have increased by 75% in the last five years. Sixty-five different languages are spoken by Nevada students, with 92% of English language learners’ first language being Spanish (See Figure 1).

**Students Living in Poverty**


• 39% of Nevada children live in low-income families and 11% live in poverty. Younger children are more likely to live in low-income or poverty families. Children from ethnoracial minorities are more likely to live in low-income families (59% blacks; 60% Hispanics).
• In Nevada, 91% of children in low income or poverty families have parents who work either full (68%) or part-time (23%). Nearly 60% of Nevada jobs, largely service jobs, pay less than a living wage for a family of three.
• Nye and Mineral Counties have the largest percent of children in poverty. Storey has the least. The two largest counties, Clark and Washoe, rank 11th and 6th respectively for percentage of children living in poverty (see Figure 2 & 3).

**Finding and Retaining Quality Teachers**

Explosive student growth requires more teachers, and in this age of accountability, this also means hiring “high quality” teachers.

• Nevada schools have had to increase their teaching force by 20% over the last six years. Clark County alone hires between 1,500 and 2,000 new teachers a year.
• Nevada higher education institutions prepare about 1/3 of the needed teachers. The rest are hired from outside the state and more recently outside the country.
Nevada’s average teacher salary for 2003-04 was $43,211, which ranked the state 22nd in the nation; the beginning teacher salary was $27,942 which ranked the state 36th. 

Attracting and retaining teachers in Nevada likely will become an even greater challenge as potential hires find that salaries are not competitive and that affordable housing, in some areas of the state, is limited.

School Facility Demands

Because of exploding growth Nevada has had to deal with unprecedented school construction.

- Clark County School District opens a new elementary school approximately every 38 days. It has the largest new school construction program in the country.

The Nevada funding formula does not provide state monies for school facilities, which means districts must raise funds from local bonds. Under a special legislative act, the CCSD was permitted to freeze the tax rate for general obligation bonds to meet current school construction needs. However, the special legislation expires in 2008. This leaves the ability of the CCSD to continue to meet the facility needs of its growing student population in question. The fact that the funds for school building facilities must come from local sources imposes a special burden on rural counties, which have limited bonding capacity. Small, poor rural districts may be unable to replace obsolete buildings or refurbish existing facilities to meet safety standards.

Student Achievement in Nevada

Given Nevada’s reform efforts and its many challenges, how are Nevada children performing? Two sources of student achievement data are used for this analysis – norm-referenced tests from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and criterion reference tests (CRTs) based on the Nevada State Standards for core academic areas (see Appendix for further explanations). The following summary addresses student performance on NAEP
reading/math and on Nevada CRTs for reading, math and the high school proficiency exam.

Nevada NAEP Results

Reading (2005)

- Comparing Nevada to the 50 states and other jurisdictions participating in NAEP, **fourth grade** students’ average scaled scores on reading were higher than corresponding scores in one jurisdiction and lower than scores in 42 jurisdictions. Fifty-two percent of Nevada students performed at or above a basic performance level.
- The percentage of Nevada students who performed at or above the NAEP proficient level for **fourth grade** reading was 21%, compared to the U.S. average of 30%. This was not significantly different from 2003, 2000, or 1998. Thus, there was no change in 4th grade reading proficiency.
- The percentage of **fourth grade** students Nevada educators moved out of performing below a basic reading level has not significantly changed since 1998. Forty-eight percent of Nevada students do not meet basic standards. The national average was 38% (see Graph 1).
- **Eighth grade** students’ average scaled scores on reading were higher in Nevada than in three jurisdictions and lower than those in 41 jurisdictions participating in NAEP. Sixty-three percent of Nevada students performed at or above a basic level.
- The percentage of Nevada students who performed at or above the NAEP proficient level for **eighth grade** reading was 22% compared to the U.S. average of 29%. These results were not significantly different from 2003 or 1998, but they register a slight improvement over 2000. There was essentially no change in eighth grade reading proficiency.
- The percentage of **eighth grade** students that Nevada educators moved out of performing below a basic reading level has significantly decreased since 1998. Thirty-seven percent of Nevada students do not meet basic standards. The national average is 29% (see Graph 2).
Mathematics (2005)

- In comparison with the 50 states and other jurisdictions participating in NAEP, **fourth grade** Nevada students’ average scaled scores on mathematics were higher than those in four jurisdictions and lower than those in 40 jurisdictions. Seventy-two percent of students performed at or above a basic level of performance.

- The percentage of Nevada students who performed at or above the NAEP proficient level for **fourth grade** mathematics was 26% compared with the U.S. average of 30%. This was not significantly different from 2003, but was a significant increase over 2000 or 1998. Thus, **fourth grade** math proficiency improved over 2000 but has been stable since.

- The percentage of **fourth grade** students that Nevada educators moved out of performing below a basic reading level had changed significantly from 2000 but has stabilized since. Twenty-eight percent of Nevada students performed below a basic level. The national average is 21% (see Graph 3).

- **Eighth grade** students’ average scaled scores on mathematics were higher in Nevada than in 5 jurisdictions and lower than those in 39 jurisdictions. Sixty percent of students performed at or above a basic level.

- The percentage of Nevada students who performed at or above the NAEP proficient level for **eighth grade** mathematics was 21% compared with the U.S. average of 29%. This was not significantly different from 2003 or 2000. Thus, there was no significant change in eighth grade math proficiency.

- The percentage of **eighth grade** students that Nevada educators moved out of performing below a basic math level has not changed significantly since 2000. Forty percent of Nevada students performed below basic. The national average is 32% (see Graph 4).

Nevada CRT Results

In examining the proficiency levels of students on the criterion reference tests which address Nevada’s academic standards,
students performed similarly to the NAEP. From 2002 to 2004, the percentage of students attaining proficiency for reading and math on the CRTs actually decreased. However, the percentage of students passing the high school proficiency exam for both tenth and eleventh graders has increased over that same time period.

- The percentage of students attaining proficiency for reading in 2004 for **grade three** was 44.3%, **grade five** was 43.1%, and for **grade eight** was 49.4% (see Graph 5).
- The percentage of students attaining proficiency for math in 2004 for **grade three** was 44.3%, **grade five** was 49.2%, and for **grade eight** was 47.7% (see Graph 5).
- The percentage of students passing the high school proficiency exam in reading for 2004 for **grade ten** was 69.8% and for **grade eleven** was 64.75% (see graph 6).
- The percentage of students passing the high school proficiency exam in math for 2004 for **grade ten** was 48.1% and for **grade eleven** was 44.9% (see graph 6).

**Summary of Student Achievement for Nevada**

Overall, Nevada’s student achievement performance is near or at the bottom when students are compared on norm-referenced tests with students in other states. There has been improvement in **fourth grade** mathematics scores on standardized tests over time. All other areas of performance have essentially remained stable.

Given the increase in the percentages of students in poverty as well as students who are English language learners, one could interpret the stability of scores on standardized tests over time as a positive indicator. This is due to the fact that the variables of poverty and English language learning status can have a significant effect upon student achievement scores. On criterion reference tests that are based on Nevada’s academic standards, only 40-50% of the students are proficient in reading and mathematics. The conclusion one must draws from these findings is that the Silver State has a major task ahead if all of Nevada’s children are to attain proficiency in reading and mathematics.
Closing the Achievement Gap

The federal reform act requires states to disaggregate test scores by subgroups of students. This is to ensure that all children are provided with the educational opportunity to meet rigorous academic standards. The goal is to reduce the differences in achievement among subgroups of students – whites and non-whites, native English speakers and English language learners, and poverty and non-poverty students.

In the nation as a whole, the scores among subgroups have narrowed over the last several years. However, Nevada still lags behind the national efforts in this area. The task is complicated by the fact that the Nevada funding formula does not recognize the differentiated needs of students except for special education students. Both research and practice have demonstrated that children with differing needs require a different configuration of resources to meet achievement standards. Most states recognize this fact and provide adjustments to their state funding formulas to provide school districts with additional resources to meet the curricular and programmatic needs of these students. The analysis below highlights Nevada’s achievement gap. (For a more detailed analysis of 2005 NAEP disaggregated tests scores see Graphs 7-18 in the appendix).

Poverty

- For **fourth grade** reading, 34% of non-poverty children were below the basic level of performance. The percentage of poverty children who scored below basic was 66%.
- For **eighth grade** reading, 29% of non-poverty children were below the basic level of performance. The percentage of poverty children who scored below basic was 51%.
- For **fourth grade mathematics**, 17% of non-poverty children were below the basic level of performance. The percentage of poverty children who scored below basic was 43%.
- For **eighth grade mathematics**, 32% of non-poverty children were below the basic level of performance. The percentage of poverty children who scored below basic was 56%.
Race/Ethnicity

- For **fourth grade** reading, 35% of white students were below the basic level of performance. The percentage of Asian students reading below basic was 44% (27% U.S. avg.). The percentage of black students was 65% (58% U.S. avg.). The percentage of Hispanic students below basic was 63% (54% U.S. avg.).
- For **eighth grade** reading, 27% of white students were below the basic level of performance. The percentage of Asian students below basic was 28% (20% U.S. avg.), black students – 51% (48% U.S. avg.), Hispanic students – 50% (44% U.S. avg.).
- For **fourth grade** math, 15% of white students were below the basic level of performance. The percentage of Asian students below basic was 12% (10% U.S. avg.), black students – 48% (40% U.S. avg.), and the percentage of Hispanic students below basic was 42% (32% U.S. avg.).
- For **eighth grade** math, 27% of white students were below the basic level of performance. The percentage of Asian students below basic was 27% (19% U.S. avg.), black students – 66% (58% U.S. avg.), and Hispanic students – 56% (48% U.S. avg.).

Gender

- For **fourth grade** reading, 53% of male and 43% of female students read below the basic level.
- For **eighth grade** reading, 42% of male and 31% of female students were below the basic level.
- For **fourth grade** mathematics, 28% of male and 29% of female students were below the basic level of performance.
- For **eighth grade** mathematics, 42% of male and 31% of female students were below the basic level of performance.

Summary of the Achievement Gap in Nevada

In examining the subgroups of Nevada’s student population, female students are performing better than males, except for fourth grade math. There is a substantial achievement gap between poverty and
non-poverty students in both reading and mathematics. The largest achievement gap, however, is for blacks and Hispanics. Compounding the situation is the fact that a disproportionate number of black and Hispanic students come from low income or poverty families. Some 50-60% of these students are performing below proficiency (except for fourth grade math). This alarming statistic deserves close scrutiny by parents, educators, and policy makers.

**Student Achievement and Resources for Education**

Studies that have examined the linkage between student achievement and monies expended for education have been controversial and equivocal. Early research suggested that the correlation between achievement and per pupil expenditures was weak. E.A Hanushek published meta-analyses of existing studies conducted in the last two decades and found the relationship between spending and student achievement to be neither strong nor consistent, given the current way education is funded. More recent research, however, suggests that money does make a difference, depending on which outcome variables researchers choose to focus. For example, researchers find a significant correlation between school spending and students’ later adult earnings. Research shows that increased spending focused on providing quality instruction to students yields greater achievement returns. Current research has demonstrated that

- Increased spending on teacher quality, professional development for staff, reduced class size and school size, increased teacher salaries, and improved facilities can have a positive impact on the educational investment for student outcomes.

In light of the data reported in this chapter, we can hypothesize that Nevada’s investment in grades one through three class size reduction and professional development focused on state standards may have paid off in better fourth grade scores and narrowing achievement gaps.
The issue for policymakers is this: Where should we invest our limited resources to achieve maximum student outcomes? Promising research is being done in this area that may provide useful guidance for policymakers in the future.

**Nevada Funding for K-12 Education**

The current funding allocation system for Nevada education was established in 1967. Special education funding was added in 1973. Since then, only minor adjustments have been made to the funding formula referred to as the *Nevada Plan*.

- The Nevada Plan has been regarded as a very equitable formula, ranking 2nd among the states on equity for 2002, the most recent year for which data is available.

However, this ranking is based on two premises. The first is horizontal equity which means that people in similar circumstances are treated similarly. The second premise is fiscal neutrality, which means that a state funds districts in inverse relationship to the wealth of the district. The ranking does not address the issue of vertical equity or how a state attends to the differentiated needs of its students.

Another concept in public school funding is that of *adequacy*. Adequacy is determined, in part, by the degree to which a state provides students with the necessary resources to meet the academic standards set by the state.

- Nevada ranks 49th among the states on adequacy for 2000, the most recent year for which data is available.

The state has an elegantly designed funding system that takes into account Nevada’s rural needs, the differentiated costs of delivering education and district size. The problem is that the funding formula has not been evaluated or updated in the context of the state’s dramatic demographic changes or its mandated accountability program. It should be noted that
• Nevada is one of only three states that has not had a court challenge to its state funding system.

It would be unfortunate to lose that distinction merely due to the benign neglect of the funding formula. Key Nevada legislators have recognized this issue, initiating in the 2005 legislative session a comprehensive study of the Nevada public school funding system. The purpose of the study is to evaluate the current system relative to equity and adequacy and to make recommendations for updating the formula. As this study commences, let us look at the current status of school finance in Nevada relative to (1) capacity, (2) effort, (3) equity, (4) adequacy, and (5) district choice.

Capacity

• Nevada’s fiscal capacity or ability to support education puts it in the medium ability states with a rank of 17th as measured by per capita personal income. Thus, Nevada is about average in its ability to be able to fund education.

Effort

• Among the 50 states, Nevada is among the bottom five states in effort for K-12 education when effort is expressed in terms of (a) state and local revenues as a proportion of per capita income or (b) average per pupil expenditures for current operations. Thus, while Nevada has the capacity, it does not put forth average effort to fund K-12 education.
• Nevada’s per pupil expenditure for 2003-04 was $6,177. Put in context, the state provides funding that is $1,069 less than the average per pupil expenditure for the Western states and $2,630 less than the average per pupil expenditure for the US. Nevada is ranked 44th in net current expenditures for operations (see Table 1).

Equity

As stated earlier, Nevada’s funding formula is horizontally equitable in that it treats individuals/districts in like circumstances similarly. However, Nevada does not provide vertical equity funds for English
language learners or at-risk children. In view of the changing demographics in the state and the impact these variables can have on student achievement outcomes, undue fiscal strain is placed on districts trying to meet the academic needs of these students. This is particularly true for large urban districts such as Clark County.

**Adequacy**

Nevada has multiple problems relative to the funding for K-12 education. A sufficient level of funds is required to (1) ensure that all subgroups of students have equal educational opportunity to achieve state standards (the large achievement gap for black and Hispanic students helps to underscore the importance of this issue); (2) provide market competitive teacher salaries to attract and retain high quality teachers (the state’s ranking in beginning teachers’ salaries highlights the urgency of this issue); and (3) cover state educational requirements so that districts are not forced to eliminate or modify programs that positively impact student achievement in order to cover unfunded or underfunded mandates.

**District Choice**

The issue of local district choice is a complex one. District choice occurs when local school boards have the option to levy a local tax to supplement state funding. The problem with local district choice is that it affects the overall equity of the state funding system. However, it is a viable alternative to districts facing severe constraints as a result of underfunded or unfunded mandates. Choice allows districts to address the unique needs and aspirations of a community for its children. Ceilings can be placed on the level of additional resources a district may levy to help mitigate the impact on equity. Ten states currently allow an equalized second tier local supplement as part of their state funding system.

**Summary of K-12 Funding**

Nevada’s rapid growth and changing demographics call for a re-evaluation of the state’s funding formula. The Nevada legislature has taken the initiative by commissioning a study to evaluate and make recommendation to update the funding allocation system. The
challenge will be to balance the school finance goals of equity, adequacy, and local district choice in developing a modern funding system that gives every child in the state an equal educational opportunity to achieve proficiency on the state’s core academic standards. On the positive side, Nevada has the fiscal capacity to allocate additional dollars to education if it chooses. The issues will be taxpayer resolve to support such efforts and accountability safeguards to ensure that new dollars will have a positive effect on the student achievement of Nevada’s children.

Policy Implications and Recommendations for the Future

The previous discussion has several policy implications. Three key challenge facing Nevada are (1) how to close the achievement gap for children of poverty and minorities; (2) how to ensure a sufficient supply of high quality teachers; and (3) how to revise and update the state’s funding system to ensure vertical equity and adequacy. Here are specific recommendations that may help the Silver State to meet its challenges.

Closing the Achievement Gap

- Invest in full-day kindergarten and increase access to quality infant/toddler daycare and preschool programs.
- Expand professional development for teachers on research-based instructional strategies for disadvantaged youth, particularly strategies for working with English language learners.
- Expand instructional technology support for classroom teachers.
- Support strategic high school initiatives.
- Explore teacher pay systems that are related to performance as well as experience and education.

Attracting High Quality Teachers

- Explore the conditions for and likely impact of instituting a minimum beginning teacher’s salaries.
- Consider fully funding incentive programs that attract teachers to hard-to-staff schools and subject shortage areas.
- Review state teacher licensure requirements to ensure that non-traditional candidates with the knowledge and skills to teach are afforded an efficient certification process.
- Review teacher salaries to ensure they are market competitive, particularly for drawing teachers to teach in high need urban areas.

**Revising and Updating the Funding Allocation System**

- Recognize the diverse needs of large urban districts as well as the needs of small rural districts.
- Provide a funding formula adjustment for at-risk youth. (Currently 11 states fund within the formula and 14 states provide compensatory education categorical aid for a total of 25 states that provide funding for at-risk youth).
- Provide a funding formula adjustment for English language learners. (Currently 16 states fund within the formula and 19 states provide categorical aid for a total of 35 states that provide funding for English language learners.)
- Provide a funding formula adjustment for gifted and talented students. (Currently 11 states fund within the formula and 27 states provide categorical aid for a total of 38 states that provide funding for gifted and talented students.)
- Fund class size reduction as a weight for K-3 students within the formula.
- Provide a trigger mechanism for inflation adjustments for fixed non-instructional costs.
- Secure a commitment from legislators to avoid passing unfunded or underfunded mandates that can compromise instructional programs.
- Study possibility of funding directly to schools with a fixed percentage allocation for central office administration.
- Explore developing a two-tier funding system that allows some local leeway for communities to augment state resources.

**Conclusion**

The challenges for Nevada relative to student achievement are formidable and inextricably related to issues of adequate funding levels to enable schools/districts to provide an array of programs
that meet the needs of all children. While throwing money at a problem is never a thoughtful solution, strategic decision-making on funding those things that research demonstrates impact student outcomes is worthy of consideration.

Nevada is at a critical juncture in charting the quality of its educational future. The challenge is to insure that parents and patron have sufficient understanding of policy alternatives and their implications for the future. The decisions we make in the next several years will impact the quality of our citizens’ lives and determine the economic future of our state.

**Data Sources and Suggested Reading**

**Testing and Funding References**


For an explanation of Nevada CRTs see website: [http://www.doe.nv.gov/statetesting/critreftests.html](http://www.doe.nv.gov/statetesting/critreftests.html)

For an explanation of Nevada’s High School Proficiency Exam see website: [http://www.doe.nv.gov/statetesting/hsprofexam.html](http://www.doe.nv.gov/statetesting/hsprofexam.html)

For an explanation of state funding mechanisms see the National Conference of State Legislatures’ Education Finance Database at: [http://www.ncsl.org/programs/educ/ed_finance/index.cfm](http://www.ncsl.org/programs/educ/ed_finance/index.cfm)

**References**


National Center for Children in Poverty website: [http://www.nccp.org](http://www.nccp.org)


Nevada Department of Education accountability website: [http://www.doe.nv.gov/accountability.html](http://www.doe.nv.gov/accountability.html)

No Child Left Behind website: [http://www.ed.gov/nclb](http://www.ed.gov/nclb)


**Community Resources**

**National Resources**

**The What Works Clearinghouse.** Established by the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute for Education Sciences to provide educators, policymakers, and the public with a central, independent, source of scientific evidence of what works in education. [http://www.w-w-c.org/](http://www.w-w-c.org/)

**The Promising Practices Network.** Highlights programs and practices that credible research indicates are effective in improving outcomes for children, youth, and families. [http://www.promisingpractices.net/](http://www.promisingpractices.net/)

**State Resources**

Although The Nevada Reading Excellence Act has officially ended, this website remains in place so that Nevada educators and parents can continue to benefit. The website has two priorities: (1) capturing what has been learned and produced as a result of funding, and (2) leaving a legacy of the work. The site is interested in featuring practitioner voices. [http://www.nevadarea.org/index.html](http://www.nevadarea.org/index.html)

The Millennium Scholarship offers financial assistance for college-bound Nevadans who undertake a rigorous prescribed course of study in high school years. These scholarships afford Nevadans the opportunity to attend in-state colleges as well as help to keep many
of the state’s highest achieving students in Nevada. [http://nevadatreasurer.gov/millennium/](http://nevadatreasurer.gov/millennium/)

The Nevada Department of Education has important Links for students, parents, teachers and administrators on a variety of issues related to K-12 education. [http://www.doe.nv.gov/](http://www.doe.nv.gov/)

The Nevada PTA strives to lead, train, and encourage parents, teachers and community to advocate for the education, health and welfare of all children and families. Headquartered in Las Vegas, they can be reached at 800-782-7201. [http://www.nevadapta.org/](http://www.nevadapta.org/)

Nevada School Districts websites are listed below. Districts offer unique programs and benefits of interest to parents, students, and the community.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School District</th>
<th>Website</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lincoln County School District</td>
<td><a href="http://www.lincoln.k12.nv.us">http://www.lincoln.k12.nv.us</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Churchill County School District</td>
<td><a href="http://www.churchill.k12.nv.us">http://www.churchill.k12.nv.us</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyon County School District</td>
<td><a href="http://www.lyon.k12.nv.us">http://www.lyon.k12.nv.us</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clark County School District</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ccsd.net">http://www.ccsd.net</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mineral County School District</td>
<td><a href="http://gohawthorne.com">http://gohawthorne.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Douglas County School District</td>
<td><a href="http://www.dcsd.k12.nv.us">http://www.dcsd.k12.nv.us</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nye County School District</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ezsdk.com">http://www.ezsdk.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elko County School District</td>
<td><a href="http://www.elko.k12.nv.us">http://www.elko.k12.nv.us</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pershing County School District</td>
<td><a href="http://www.pershing.k12.nv.us">http://www.pershing.k12.nv.us</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esmeralda County School District</td>
<td><a href="http://esmeralda.k12.nv.us">http://esmeralda.k12.nv.us</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storey County School District</td>
<td><a href="http://www.storey.k12.nv.us">http://www.storey.k12.nv.us</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eureka County School District</td>
<td><a href="http://www.eureka.k12.nv.us">http://www.eureka.k12.nv.us</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washoe County School District</td>
<td><a href="http://www.washoe.k12.nv.us">http://www.washoe.k12.nv.us</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humboldt County School District</td>
<td><a href="http://www.humboldt.k12.nv.us">http://www.humboldt.k12.nv.us</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Pine County School District</td>
<td><a href="http://www.whitepine.k12.nv.us">http://www.whitepine.k12.nv.us</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lander County School District</td>
<td><a href="http://www.lander.k12.nv.us">http://www.lander.k12.nv.us</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The Center for Academic Enrichment and Outreach.** Since 1978, The Center has assisted with graduating more than 11,000 Clark County students from high school and college. The center provides low-income and at-risk students in the community the
opportunity to enjoy academic and educational experiences that would otherwise not be available. [http://www.unlv.edu/studentserv/caeo/](http://www.unlv.edu/studentserv/caeo/)

See chapter four on *Dropout and Graduation Rates* by Sandra D. Owens-Kane for additional community resources.

_This report was prepared by Dr. Teresa S. Jordan, Professor, Department of Educational Leadership, College of Education, UNLV. You may contact the author by writing to the Department of Educational Leadership, University of Nevada Las Vegas, 4505 Maryland Parkway, Box 453002, Las Vegas, NV 89154-3002. Telephone: 702-895-2724. Email: tess@unlv.nevada.edu._

_I wish to thank my research assistant, William M. Young, for his help with retrieving a variety of data and community sources for this report and Dr. Robert McCord, Director of the UNLV Center for Education Policy Studies for his critical review. I wish to give special thanks to Dmitri Shalin for editorial assistance and to the 2005 EDL LEAD doctoral cohort for their critical input._

**Supplementary Materials**

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Current Expenditures</th>
<th>Fiscal Ability</th>
<th>Effort</th>
<th>ATS</th>
<th>PTR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>$5,595 (50)</td>
<td>$27,193 (39)</td>
<td>$43</td>
<td>$41,843 (28)</td>
<td>20.2 (49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>$7,860 (33)</td>
<td>$33,389 (13)</td>
<td>$48</td>
<td>$56,444 (3)</td>
<td>19.9 (47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>$8,651 (26)</td>
<td>$34,542 (8)</td>
<td>$41</td>
<td>$43,319 (22)</td>
<td>15.6 (41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idaho</td>
<td>$6,779 (45)</td>
<td>$25,354 (47)</td>
<td>$46</td>
<td>$41,080 (30)</td>
<td>16.6 (44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nevada</td>
<td>$6,177 (49)</td>
<td>$31,947 (18)</td>
<td>$34</td>
<td>$42,254 (26)</td>
<td>20.6 (51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. Mexico</td>
<td>$8,772 (24)</td>
<td>$24,903 (48)</td>
<td>$63</td>
<td>$38,067 (44)</td>
<td>13.5 (31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>$8,575 (28)</td>
<td>$29,175 (30)</td>
<td>$44</td>
<td>$49,169 (14)</td>
<td>17.8 (45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CURRENT EXP</td>
<td>ABILITY</td>
<td>EFFORT</td>
<td>ATS</td>
<td>PTR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Utah</strong></td>
<td>$5,556 (51)</td>
<td>$25,645 (46)</td>
<td>$50</td>
<td>$38,976 (39)</td>
<td>20.6 (50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>West.Reg</strong></td>
<td>$7246</td>
<td>$34,504</td>
<td>$50</td>
<td>$45,724</td>
<td>$46,752</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NV +/- West</strong></td>
<td>($1,069)</td>
<td>$7,750</td>
<td>($3,470)</td>
<td>$46,752</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>U.S.</strong></td>
<td>$8,807</td>
<td>$34,138</td>
<td>$48</td>
<td>($4.498)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NV +/- US %</strong></td>
<td>($2630)</td>
<td>($2,191)</td>
<td>($2,191)</td>
<td>($2,191)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

( ) = State’s Ranking. Rankings are for 50 states + District of Columbia N=51 
CURRENT EXP=Per Pupil Expenditures per ADA for Current Operations 
ABILITY=Per Capita Personal Income 
EFFORT= Dollars Per $1000 Per Capita Personal Income for K-12 Education 
ATS=Average Teacher Salary 
PTR=Pupil Teacher Ratio 
*Most recent year available from NCES with cross-state comparable data

**Figures**

**Figure 1. Nevada Public School Students by Ethnicity, 2004-05 (NDE)**

![Bar chart showing ethnic distribution of Nevada public school students]

- **American Indian/Alaskan**: 1.7%
- **Asian Pacific Islander**: 7.0%
- **African American**: 10.9%
- **Hispanic**: 31.4%
- **White**: 48.8%
Graphs

NAEP Student Achievement Levels*

Graph 1

Graph 2

Graph 3

Graph 4
Nevada Criterion Reference Tests*

Graph 5

Nevada Grades 3, 5 and 8 Average Percent Students Proficient in Mathematics and Reading

Graph 6
**Nevada Grades 10 and 11 Average Percent Students Proficient in Mathematics and Reading**

- Mathematics
- Reading

*data taken from Nevada Department of Education Website: [http://www.doe.nv.gov/accountability.html](http://www.doe.nv.gov/accountability.html)*

**NAEP Student Achievement Levels Disaggregated by Poverty**

Graph 7

**Student Achievement Levels on NAEP Grade 4 Reading: Students in Poverty 2005**

- FFPL Eligible: 66% Below Basic, 24% Basic, 11% Proficient, 1% Advanced
- Not Eligible: 34% Below Basic, 30% Basic, 30% Proficient, 6% Advanced
- NV Average: 48% Below Basic, 21% Basic, 24% Proficient, 7% Advanced
- US Average: 38% Below Basic, 33% Basic, 23% Proficient, 7% Advanced

Graph 8

**Student Achievement Levels on NAEP Grade 8 Reading: Students in Poverty 2005**

- FFPL Eligible: 51% Below Basic, 32% Basic, 20% Proficient, 1% Advanced
- Not Eligible: 29% Below Basic, 4% Basic, 25% Proficient, 2% Advanced
- NV Average: 37% Below Basic, 41% Basic, 18% Proficient, 1% Advanced
- US Average: 25% Below Basic, 42% Basic, 23% Proficient, 2% Advanced

Graph 9

Graph 10
NAEP Student Achievement Disaggregated by Race/Ethnicity*

Graph 11

Student Achievement Levels on NAEP Grade 4 Mathematics: Students in Poverty 2005

Graph 12

Student Achievement Levels on NAEP Grade 8 Mathematics: Students in Poverty 2005

Graph 13

NAEP Student Achievement Levels for Grade 4 Reading by Ethnicity: 2005

Graph 14

NAEP Student Achievement Levels for Grade 8 Reading by Ethnicity: 2005

*Graphs adapted from NAEP website at: [http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard](http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard)
*Graphs adapted from NAEP website at: http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard

**NAEP Student Achievement Levels Disaggregated by Gender**

**Graph 15**

**Graph 16**

**Graph 17**

**Graph 18**
*Graphs adapted from NAEP website at: [http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard](http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard)

*This report stems from the Justice & Democracy forum on the Leading Social Indicators in Nevada that took place on November 5, 2004, at the William S. Boyd School of Law. The report, the first of its kind for the Silver State, has been a collaborative effort of the University of Nevada faculty, Clark County professionals, and state of Nevada officials. The Social Health of Nevada report was made possible in part by a Planning Initiative Award that the Center for Democratic Culture received from the UNLV President's office for its project "Civic Culture Initiative for the City of Las Vegas." Individual chapters are brought on line as they become available. For further inquiries, please contact authors responsible for individual reports or email CDC Director, Dr. Dmitri Shalin [shalin@unlv.nevada.edu](mailto:shalin@unlv.nevada.edu).