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Beyond Small Change: Reforming Nevada's Approach to Education Reform

BY SONYA DOUGLASS HORSFORD, Ed.D.

Abstract

When it comes to education, Nevada's reputation as a low-performing state in no way reflects a shortage of reforms. The politics of high-stakes accountability characteristic of federal education policy since the 1980s has resulted in much reform, but "small change" in terms of funding and improved outcomes in the Silver State. This brief examines the history of Nevada education reform and why Nevada must reform its approach to improving schools by turning its attention from unfunded mandates to adequate and equitable investments in education. It concludes with a discussion of how Nevada policymakers and educational leaders can move beyond small change to transform the educational trajectory of a state that is uniquely positioned for educational and economic success.

Education Reform in the U.S.: The Politics of Achievement and Accountability

Across the U.S., both the actual problems and perceived failures of public schools have helped to forge a decades-long era of high-stakes accountability in education. A nationwide discourse on high school dropout rates, achievement gaps, and declining international rankings have fueled a national obsession with raising test scores and holding schools accountable for poor performance (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Ravitch, 2010). This shift toward increased standardization, high-stakes testing, and a politics of educational

accountability, which began thirty years ago after the release of the Reagan Administration's *A Nation at Risk* (1983) report, has occurred not only at the federal level (Cross, 2010), but also through the work of governors, state legislators, and private foundations. Despite historically opposing federal mandates concerning education, organizations such as the National Governors Association, National Association of State Boards of Education, and Council of Chief State School Officers have since advocated for and endorsed the development of state-level accountability metrics and practices (Horsford & Sampson, 2012).

According to Brookings Scholar Diane Ravitch (2011), today's reform movement has been

supported largely by, “an odd combination of Wall Street financiers, conservative Republican governors, major foundations, and the Obama Administration,” and has focused primarily on teacher pay-for-performance, alternative routes to teacher and administrator licensure, school turnaround models, and eliminating *last in, first out* (LIFO) provisions in teacher contracts (Brill, 2011; Horsford & Sampson, 2012; Ravitch, 2011). In Nevada, these same reforms were introduced during the 2011 legislative session as the answer to turning around what had become Nevada’s seeming race to the bottom.

Education Reform in Nevada: A Race to the Top or Running in Place?

In fact, the 2011 education reform package found its origins in the work of the Nevada Education Reform Blue Ribbon Task Force – an education stakeholder committee charged with developing the state’s *Race to the Top* application and “facilitat[ing] public and private discussion and consensus for overall reform of public education for Nevada’s children” – a first in the state’s history.

Established March 15, 2010 through Executive Order by then Governor Jim Gibbons, the task force marked an important milestone for the state. While Nevada’s *Race to the Top* application was not funded, the task force’s leadership did manage to introduce a reform package that included: teacher and administrator evaluation systems tied to student achievement; changes in teacher tenure; a hybrid state board of education made up of elected and appointed members; and the appointment by the governor of a state superintendent of public instruction (a position currently filled by an interim superintendent).

It was not, however, the first time the state underwent sweeping education reforms or focused disproportionately on high-stakes testing and unfunded mandates to improve

its schools. From the Nevada Education Reform Act of 1997 to the recent release of the Nevada School Performance Framework, much of the Silver State’s strategies for better schools have been informed by a national politics of standards-based reform and accountability¹.

It has been twenty years since the Nevada Legislature passed legislation (NRS 385.347) requiring all Nevada school districts to report their schools’ performance statewide. Revised in 1995 and again in 1997, the law became part of Senate Bill 482, commonly known as the Nevada Education Reform Act (NERA) of 1997. NERA created a public school evaluation system, as well as the Council to Establish Academic Standards for Public Schools, the Commission on Educational Technology, and a Legislative Committee on Education responsible for reviewing statewide accountability, fiscal, and related education program concerns.

Although these policies were intended to improve Nevada’s educational outcomes, more than fifteen years later, KIDS COUNT ranked Nevada last in the country in education overall. Still early to determine whether or not the reforms of 2011 will result in better educational outcomes; the politicization of the state superintendent position and lack of a clear statewide plan for improving Nevada schools’ performance under the new state board governance structure are disconcerting. Strong education leadership and data-based decision-making at the state level will be key to improving educational opportunities and outcomes for Nevada students, guided not by ideology or politics, but by research and best practices.

¹ This movement began in earnest with the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*, signed by President Bill Clinton in 1994, which paved the way for the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, Obama Administration’s *Race to the Top* grant competition, and the state-led standardization initiative known as *Common Core State Standards*, which Nevada adopted in 2010, and is sponsored by the National Governors Association (NGA) and Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO).

If Nevada continues to become distracted by the latest education “reform” (e.g., charterization, empowerment schools, opportunity scholarships, parent trigger laws) over the weightier issues of expanding early learning opportunities, reducing class sizes, recruiting and retaining strong teachers and leaders, and providing culturally responsive education for Nevada’s diverse student population; it will not only lose the metaphorical race to the top, but continue to run in place while our children and state are left behind.

This is why we must *reform* Nevada’s approach to education reform. We can begin by acknowledging that, like everything else in American life, money does matter.

The Cost of Accountability: Money Does Matter

Accountability systems are important to improving educational outcomes. They gauge school and district performance and satisfy the public’s appetite for how schools are faring. What these systems should measure and by whom is up for debate, but until we align state funds with the academic outcomes we hope to achieve, these accountability systems will only continue to show us what we already know – Nevada does a poor job of educating all children well.

What we don’t seem to know (or choose to ignore) is the relationship between school funding, educational opportunity, and

outcomes. Nevada’s failure to invest in schools adequately and equitably remains its largest impediment to better results. In a study of state school finance systems and their distribution of funding, Nevada ranked 39 out of 51, and is notorious for having one of the lowest per pupil funding levels in the country. (Wyoming was ranked first and Tennessee last, which is why they are included in the comparison table below). Despite having a coverage rank of 15, which measures the proportion of children who attend public schools and whose schooling is covered by state funding, Nevada has the most regressive school funding distribution in the country. (See Table 1)

It is also the only state in the country to have received F’s on both effort and distribution, meaning Nevada does not spend enough on education, nor does it distribute those limited funds according to student population or need. While a greater and fairer distribution of funding alone will not automatically improve educational outcomes; it would not hurt. Decades of unfunded mandates have not worked, and Nevada must acknowledge the reality that, “The staples of our economy—gaming, tourism, and construction—are no longer sufficient to provide for our children’s future” (Nevada Education Reform Blue Ribbon Task Force, 2010, p. 3). Without economic growth and new sources of revenue, Nevada will not be able to prepare its diversifying student population for a highly competitive, knowledge-based, global economy.

Table 1: Nevada’s Funding Distribution, Effort, Level, and Coverage

State	Funding Level Rank	Funding Distribution Grade	Effort Grade	Coverage Rank
Wyoming	1	C	A	1
Nevada	39	F	F	15
Tennessee	51	C	F	45

Source: Baker, B., Sciarra D., Farrie, D. (2012, June). *Is School Funding Fair? A National Report Card, 2nd ed.*

Small Change in the 2013 Nevada Legislature

As the saying goes, “you get what you pay for,” and education (whether public or private) proves no exception. Comparative school funding data reveal correlations between how much states invest in education and their relative performance on educational and economic indicators. While policymakers are rightly concerned about returns on investment from education dollars; a disproportionate focus on narrowly measured returns (i.e., test scores, graduation rates) and little to no attention on strategic investment (i.e., early learning, ELL education, school funding levels and distribution) contributes to not only a statewide education problem, but economic and overall quality of life issues for Nevada citizens. (See Nevada Vision Stakeholder Group’s *Envisioning Nevada’s Future*, 2010)

In November 2014, there will be two separate funding measures on the ballot. Voters will have the chance to decide whether Nevada should increase state revenues through a margins tax or a “mining tax” that would change the constitutional cap on net proceeds of minerals – dollars that would likely be allocated to education. This may be the only way the poor academic outcomes and gross educational disparities associated with Nevada’s antiquated school finance system will be addressed – a persistent problem that the 2013 Nevada Legislature did little to remedy.

To their credit, state policymakers did demonstrate bipartisan agreement on the need to fund educational opportunities for our youngest and most vulnerable students. The allocation of \$30 million for the expansion of full-day kindergarten and \$50 million for English Language Learners (a first in Nevada history), demonstrated slight progress. Yet these funds were “small change” in relation to years of reported and growing state need associated with educating Nevada’s youngest citizens and future workforce. (See Augenblick, Palaich and

Associates’ *Estimating the Cost of Adequate Education in Nevada, 2006* and *Study of New Method of Funding for Public Schools in Nevada*, 2012)

Early Learning and Full-Day Kindergarten

In light of the Obama Administration’s proposal to expand early learning opportunities to the tune of \$75 billion over 10 years for *Preschool for All* and \$750 million in preschool development grants; Nevada’s move to appropriate \$30 million to expand full-day kindergarten was a good one. It would be difficult to prove the state is serious about early learning absent a commitment to state-funded full-day kindergarten (approved for the first time in the history of the Nevada Legislature in 2005 in the amount of \$22 million), which in Nevada has shown positive results on student achievement.² Why not invest in what works?

In my policy brief on school readiness (*Ready for School, Ready for Life: The Increasing Significance of Early Childhood Education and School Readiness in Nevada*), I highlight the progress made in Nevada around the benefits of early learning and the need to develop a “statewide governance structure that guides and fosters interagency collaboration; engages a broad range of stakeholders and aligns federal, state, local, and private resources” (p. 5). This is even more important given the U.S. Department of Education’s focus on early learning and that President Obama proposes “working with states to make high-quality preschool available to every child in America. . . and make sure that none of our children start the race of life already behind.”

By expanding full-day kindergarten and removing disincentives to districts to offer full-day over half-day (there is no difference in funding for full- and half-day programs), Nevada will increase student achievement, be

² See Nevada Legislative Counsel Bureau’s (2012, September) *Research Brief on Full-Day Kindergarten*.

better able to compete for federal funds, leverage state early learning dollars, and offer more children a head start to educational success.

English Language Learners

The appropriation of \$50 million for Nevada’s English Language Learners (which at 31 percent, represent the highest density of students whose home language is not English of any other state in the country) marked a huge step for education in the Silver State. Not only did it remove Nevada (for now) from the list of eight states that do not fund ELL students at a higher rate than non-ELL students, it was a long overdue acknowledgment of the linguistic diversity represented among Nevada’s schoolchildren and that improving ELL outcomes require state support.

In March of 2012, findings from The Lincy Institute’s, *Nevada’s English Language Learner Population: A Review of Enrollment, Outcomes, and Opportunities* report emphasized the need for “a vision for ELL education in Nevada that is grounded in theory about second language acquisition and evidence-based practices in districts, schools, and classrooms” (p. 20). This vision must be supported by a statewide plan and funded, which is why additional recommendations included: (1) commissioning a costing out study that focuses specifically on the resource needs of Nevada’s ELLs, and (2) developing a weighted student funding formula that allocates additional funding to ELL students based on their English language development level and clearly defined education goals and needs (pp. 20-21).

While state dollars dedicated to ELL education is progress – a first in Nevada history – when compared to a recommended \$132 to \$206 million annually in the 2006 adequacy study³ or \$145 million annually

³ Conducted by Augenblick, Palaich and Associates. (2006). *Estimating the cost of an adequate education in Nevada*. See references for full citation.

based on the weights recommended in American Institute’s for Research (2012) *Study of a New Funding Method for Nevada Public Schools*, the equity study commissioned by the Nevada Legislature; \$50 million is “small change” and incapable of creating the transformational change required for the race ahead.

The Race Ahead: From Education Reform to Transformation

Nevada’s underinvestment in education and fragmented approach to education reform has had its consequences. Underinvestment results in unacceptable educational outcomes; and reinforces the belief that Nevada does not value education. Given the fact that underfunded school systems and ill-prepared schoolchildren undermine the economic growth and competitiveness of states (as well as economic and social mobility for their residents), Nevada can no longer afford to ignore the consequences of refusing to do more. It does so at the risk of not merely running in place, but losing a race that it is uniquely positioned to win.

While the 2013 Nevada Legislature’s bipartisan support for funding full-day kindergarten and ELL education is heartening, it is still small change. The race ahead will require a long-term, transformational vision of educational equity and excellence, and leadership that is not afraid to declare that class size matters, money matters, and that education funds must be distributed according to student need.

Now that the 2013 session is behind us, the real work begins. In anticipation of the 2015 legislative session, there are several priorities the Legislative Commission on Education could focus on to strategically build the capacity of its K-12 education system and Nevada’s ability to compete for and leverage federal and private dollars to improve its educational performance. Here are four:

Key Education Priorities/Action Items for 2015 Nevada Legislature

1. ***Modernize Nevada's school funding system.*** According to the 2012 equity study, "Nevada is not in line with most states on need-based funding" (p. 105). The time is now for Nevada to get in line and implement the study's recommendation to embed pupil-weighted adjustments for low-income and ELL students. As established in the school finance research literature, such students cost more to educate and must be accounted for to ensure equity in the state's funding system.
2. ***Commission a costing out study for Nevada's ELLs.*** Once the school funding formula is adjusted to fund the additional costs associated with ELL education, it is critical that policymakers know exactly where additional dollars would be spent most effectively. Findings of a costing out study that focuses specifically on the resource needs of Nevada's ELL students will provide policymakers and state educational leaders the evidence needed to be strategic in resource allocation. It is also an opportunity for Nevada to sprint ahead of other high growth ELL states as the first to conduct this type of study.
3. ***Build statewide capacity for early learning and full-day kindergarten.*** Given the anticipated investment of federal funding in early learning, Nevada must ensure its early childhood and K-12 education systems are aligned and prepared to compete for and leverage these early learning dollars. Policymakers will need to decide where an Office of Early Learning should be located (the Nevada Department of Education makes the most sense since the bulk of early learning dollars will come from the U.S. Department of Education, but there are other options), and who will lead this

charge. When it comes to school readiness, not only do Nevada's infants and toddlers need to be ready for school, Nevada's systems must be ready to provide high quality early learning and opportunities with positive results that are sustained in and beyond full-day kindergarten.

4. ***Monitor selection of State Superintendent of Public Instruction.*** Many, if not all of these recommendations for educational transformation in Nevada require bold, visionary leadership. If Nevada policymakers and taxpayers truly want to see Nevada succeed in the race ahead, it is imperative the next State Superintendent of Public Instruction demonstrates a commitment to the value and transformative possibilities of public education. This includes an appreciation for the contributions and perspectives of not only policymakers and business leaders, but even more importantly, the parents and practitioners of Nevada, who happen to have the most to gain or lose when it comes to improving education in the state.

Nevada is a young, diverse, and dynamic state - home to the largest school district in the Mountain West and one of the most well known metropolises in the world. Our increasing ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, and linguistic diversity reflect assets to be leveraged in the new economy and why it is uniquely positioned for educational and economic success.

With intentional and strategic leadership that moves beyond small change and toward the transformation of education opportunities and outcomes for all children, Nevada can become a leader in the race ahead. As we often say in Nevada, we have nowhere to go, but up.

So let's get going.

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