



Meeting the Challenges
and Realizing the Future
for Nevada Students

2017

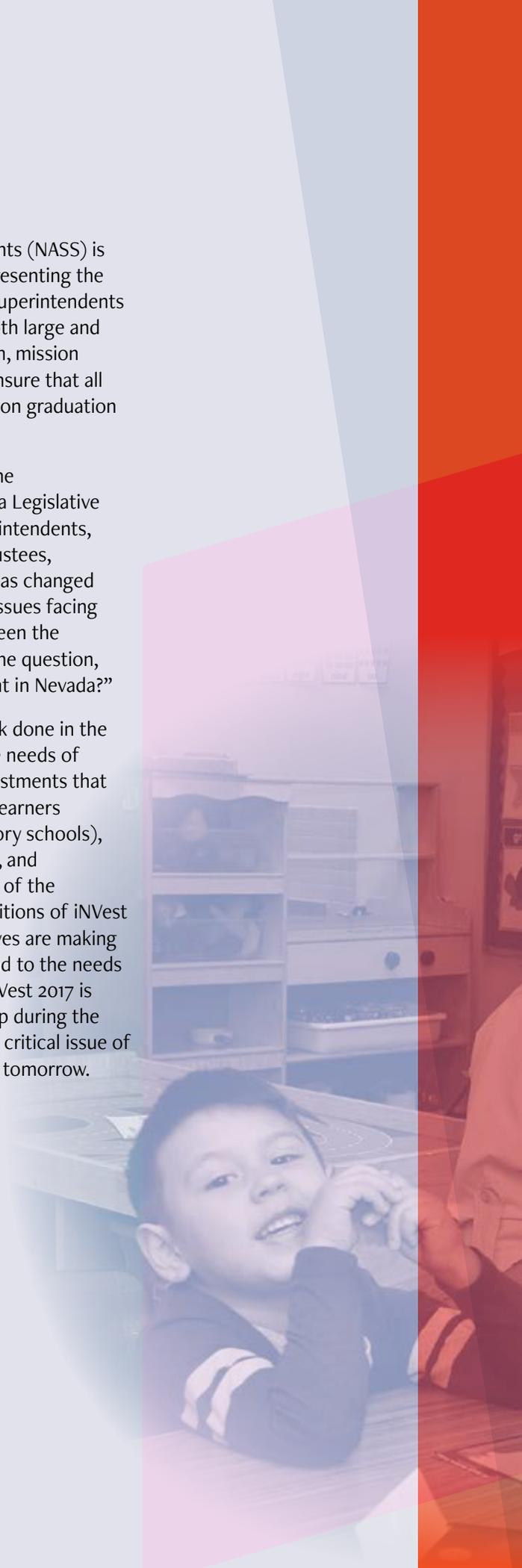


What is NASS?

The Nevada Association of School Superintendents (NASS) is comprised of the 17 school superintendents representing the 17 geographic school districts in the State. The superintendents meet monthly to discuss common issues that both large and small districts face. They are united in their vision, mission and values that drive the daily work they do to ensure that all Nevada students are college and career ready upon graduation from a Nevada high school.

iNVEST is the product of the collective work of the superintendents. Beginning with the 2003 Nevada Legislative session and continuing to the present, the superintendents, supported by the 17 elected boards of school trustees, have produced iNVEST. Although the document has changed somewhat over the years to reflect the current issues facing K-12 educators in the State, the document has been the cornerstone of the superintendents' answer to the question, "What is needed to improve student achievement in Nevada?"

The superintendents are appreciative of the work done in the past by the Nevada Legislature to respond to the needs of the changing face of the Nevada classroom. Investments that support full-day kindergarten, English language learners (Zoom schools), students living in poverty (Victory schools), hiring incentives to improve the teacher pipeline, and professional development for teachers are some of the initiatives that have been outlined in previous editions of iNVEST that are now yielding results. While these initiatives are making a difference, much remains to be done to respond to the needs of the students in Nevada schools. Therefore, iNVEST 2017 is being presented once again to provide a roadmap during the 2017 legislative session as legislators address the critical issue of preparing the students of today for the world of tomorrow.





Introduction

Imagine a school where students learn in open spaces without walls or boundaries. Now imagine that space filled with industrial robots, injection molding devices, and computer numeric control (CNC) machines that students use to learn modern manufacturing techniques which will lead to certifications, engineering degrees and more. Welcome to today's Nevada K-12 education system.

Nevada's schools are transforming into subsets of the modern workplace. Thanks to investments provided by the Nevada Legislature through various reforms in 2013 and 2015, schools are becoming places that allow students to explore new innovations and ignite a passion for learning. Investments in new schools, building renovations, and technology are providing students with the tools they need to explore their potential and prepare for the next steps in their education journey.

This work has just begun. In order to complete this transformation and provide a high-performing education system that supports the world-class amenities available in our state, the Nevada Legislature must provide stable and healthy funding sources for the K-12 system.



PRIORITIES

Provide Adequate Basic Support

In order to build tomorrow's education system, today's K-12 schools require adequate basic support. Nevada's funding formula, known as the Nevada Plan created in 1967, must be revised if we are to meet the needs of our English language learners, students living in poverty and students with special learning challenges. However, it cannot be done at the expense of meeting the basic educational needs of all students.

In each edition of iNVEST since 2003, one tenant has remained the same, "fund the base." A strong fiscal base that provides adequate funding for all students is the initial step necessary to make Nevada's K-12 system strong. In 2006, the Legislature commissioned an economic study, the Augenblick report, to look at the Nevada Plan and to determine if the funding was adequate. The results of the study clearly indicated that the funding was inadequate. But the recommendations from the study were not implemented because the price tag was too high.

Goal: Restore funding to pre-recession levels and then develop a plan to provide adequate allocations through the Distributive School Account (DSA) to bring base per pupil funding to the national average.

In 2012, an equity study was commissioned to determine if the Nevada Plan provided an equitable distribution of education funding. The study, conducted by the American Institutes for Research, concluded that the Plan had inequities in it because it did not recognize that it takes more money to educate certain populations of students in our schools. These populations include the learning disabled, English language learners and students living in poverty. As a result, SB500 was passed by the 2013 Nevada Legislature. This bill created the Task Force

on K-12 Public Education Funding and the arduous task of determining "weights" for certain student populations began. Throughout the work of the Task Force, members and interested parties agreed that any "weights" which create additional per-pupil funding must come from new money and not from the reshuffling of current funds. Failing to do so simply means that some students are "winners" and others "losers" in the funding formula. Therefore, funding the base remains at the core of the superintendents' answer to the question, "What is needed to improve student achievement in Nevada?"

Goal: Provide funding dedicated to English language learners, students living in poverty, Gifted and Talented Education (GATE), and special education through a per-pupil allocation based on a weighted formula. In order to truly modernize the Nevada Plan, increase funding to achieve the weights outlined in the study conducted by the Task Force on K-12 Public Education Funding.

Complete Conversion to Weighted Funding Formula

The process to revise the Nevada Plan began in 2011 with a vision to make new a formula that represented a very different state population in 1967 than the one that exists today. In 2017, this now age-old problem is getting closer to resolution. Six years and three sessions later, the weighted formula is slowly becoming a reality. Work began this past interim by converting funds allocated for special education students into a weighted formula that, while not perfect, is a good start toward a new mechanism. It is now time to recognize the needs of other students in the same way, including students living in poverty, English language learners and gifted and talented students.

Preserve Current Funding Sources

The Nevada Legislature is tasked with the responsibility of funding the K-12 education system. While most funding is provided by local taxes, state legislation passed over the years limits some of those resources from supporting a growing student population.

As Nevada continues efforts to diversify our economy, we must also consider the infrastructure needs of providing quality schools. We often hear about businesses wanting to relocate to Nevada that are reluctant to do so over concerns about our public schools. The many incentives, including tax abatements, offered to new and existing businesses, erode the fiscal base that supports schools. Funding collected in the name of education must be preserved to support schools in order to improve student achievement.

Starting July 1, 2005, Nevada instituted a cap of 3 percent on property tax bills for owner-occupied residential property and a cap of up to 8 percent on the increases in property tax bills of most other property owners (commonly referred to as the partial abatement caps). The 3 percent/8 percent partial abatement caps were implemented at a time when property values were skyrocketing (i.e., 2005). The caps were intended to prevent property owners from realizing unprecedented 30 percent or more annual increases in property taxes. They worked, and property taxes increased at half the rate of property values during the “boom” period. No one contemplated property values would subsequently decline by 40 percent statewide and that property taxes would essentially reset at the low point reported in fiscal year 2013. Today, the “boom” and the “bust” have nearly balanced each other out; however, where property values have reported a relatively average annual growth rate of 3.4 percent, property tax collections grew by only 0.2 percent in fiscal year (FY) 2017 and property tax abatements are again escalating.

In FY 2016, the abatements effectively reduced available funds to public services, including schools, across the state by \$700 million.¹ Consistent with the Nevada Plan, the state is required to make up a share of this shortfall by allocating additional general fund dollars to schools mitigating this loss. The immediate challenge for schools throughout Nevada is that an unexpected drop in property tax collections in FY 2017 (between legislative sessions) is going to create a larger-than-expected funding gap for the state and local schools.

Goal: Fix the property tax formula to ensure stable funding for school districts.

Establish a Rainy Day Fund

An educational stabilization fund is at the heart of ensuring that critical educational programs can be maintained during tough economic times. The “boom” and “bust” economy of Nevada has created a need for such a fund. During economic downturns, districts have been forced to cut successful programs, often when they are showing gains in student achievement. During the good times, the extra money designated for education has reverted to the General Fund and is spent on other programs in the State. Since 1979, over \$700 million has been reverted to the State General Fund.² The impact of economic downturns has been felt in both the rural and urban districts and a stabilization fund would ensure that students continue to receive the education they deserve, despite the economy of the State.

Goal: Require that “reversion” funds remain in an education rainy day fund until such time as they accumulate to 10 percent of the annual DSA revenues.

1. Applied Analysis
2. Applied Analysis

Improve and Expand School Facilities

The modernization of Nevada's K-12 system cannot be fully realized without providing adequate school facilities. School districts have critical needs in providing for the upkeep of existing schools, upgrading campuses to meet today's demands and building new schools to accommodate all students in the best academic setting.

Both Senate Bills 119 and 207 from the 2015 Nevada legislative session dramatically improved access to school construction funding for some school districts without raising taxes. By extending the rollover bond authority for districts to leverage existing property tax revenue, billions of dollars in capital projects have now been funded. In Clark County, a \$4.1 billion building program has been approved which includes 35 new schools, additional classrooms and improvements in a multitude of older campuses. Washoe County School District estimates the rollover bond will generate \$315 million in revenue over the next 10 years which will assist with repairing and restoring many of their aging facilities while preserving operating funds for classroom learning. The additional 10 years of bonding authority will also provide needed repair and modernization for schools in Humboldt, Lyon and Carson City school districts.

While the bond rollover funds in Washoe County will be prioritized to address the most critical school repair needs, they are simply not enough to address the overcrowding issues currently forcing the district to move schools to year-round and double-session schedules. Likewise, the bond rollover does not address capital needs in several of the rural districts due to the fact that 11 of the 17 counties are at or within pennies of the property tax cap of \$3.64, leaving no available funding for schools.

The passage of Senate Bill 411 in 2015 allowed districts to create a community-based committee for the purpose of drafting a ballot question to address school construction needs for the 2016 general election. Both Washoe and Douglas counties placed questions on the ballot in November 2016 with different results. Washoe County voted to permanently raise the sales and use tax by 0.54 percent for the acquisition, construction, repair and renovation of school facilities. However, Douglas County voters denied a 0.25 percent increase in the sales and use tax for a 10-year period that would have supported school construction.

Nevada's school districts continue to face a serious challenge: choosing between repairing aging schools and building new campuses for the expected population growth. It is a decision no superintendent wants to face. Both needs are important. Aging schools have trouble providing the learning environment students need to be college and career ready and overcrowded schools compromise the smaller class size and specialized learning environments many of our most vulnerable students need to succeed.

Goal: Implement additional funding mechanisms or avenues that are dedicated exclusively to school facilities based on individual county needs.





Increase the Teacher Pipeline

With fewer people enrolling in undergraduate teacher preparation programs,³ districts across the country are struggling to fill teacher vacancies. Nevada must be competitive in order to recruit effective teachers. The incentives provided by Senate Bill 511 and permitted under Senate Bill 432 have been effective in assisting some school districts in filling positions created through growth in student enrollment or attrition. Clark County has used these incentives to lower the vacancy rate by two-thirds in one year.

Goal: Continue and expand recruitment incentives and fund the base to provide competitive salaries and benefits. In order to maintain the momentum in ensuring quality teachers in every classroom, incentives need to be authorized early in the legislative session to coincide with teacher recruitment timelines. These are essential strategies to meeting Nevada's need for qualified education personnel.



Support Professional Development

High-quality education begins with highly effective teachers and administrators. New academic standards, student achievement data and best practices all require teachers and school administrators to be continually trained. As schools expand or retool programs to meet the needs of current and emerging industries, professional development is essential to successful implementation of these programs. Just as in the private sector, teachers and administrators must be afforded the opportunity to learn new skills.

Extending the teacher work year is essential to providing the time for educators to be trained while preserving class time for students. Allowing schools to determine how the extra time can be scheduled and the training conducted is also an important condition that allows flexibility and innovation. Some districts have their own training programs while others rely heavily on the Regional Professional Development Programs. Whatever the delivery methodology and schedule, supporting professional development is important to meeting the challenge of improving student achievement.

Goal: Support a longer school year for administrators, teachers and staff to participate in training that will improve their professional practice. For the next biennium, add the equivalent of two workdays to each school year.

Progress on 2015 Education Reforms

Zoom Schools

In 2013, the Nevada Legislature passed Senate Bill 504, creating the program for Zoom schools and allocating funds dedicated to English language learners (ELL) for the first time in Nevada's history. This initial investment was doubled in 2015 when State legislators recognized the success of the program in assisting students in gaining academic language and improving their literacy skills. Zoom schools have expanded preschool programs, established reading centers; and extended the school year for English language learners throughout the state. In Clark County, the Zoom Reading Centers serviced 1,094 students during the 2015-2016 school year. Seventy-three percent exited the Zoom Reading Centers based on the Developmental Reading Assessment. The program has expanded significantly since its inception, serving 31 elementary schools, six middle schools and one high school in Clark County, and 20 elementary schools and four middle schools in Washoe County during the 2016-2017 school year. In rural Nevada, funds have been used to expand preschool programs for English learners. Douglas County School District added a new pre-K program that emphasizes early language acquisition and supports dual language acquisition among 3- to 4-year-olds to prepare them for kindergarten. Likewise, Carson City School District expanded the number of preschool programs to accommodate ELL students who had been on waiting lists.

Victory Schools

Victory schools were created to serve the needs of students living in poverty. Immediately following passage of Senate Bill 432, schools conducted community needs assessments, submitted implementation plans, received State approval, and began to engage in the work to improve student achievement. The program was designed to allow schools to address the unique needs of their communities and they offer a variety of different services such as incentivizing teachers to work in high-poverty schools, providing professional development for teachers, hiring additional staff to reduce class sizes, purchasing research-based instructional materials, coordinating wrap-around services for students and extending learning through summer and after-school programs.

In Elko County, the Owyhee Combined School focused their Victory funds on creating a Reading Skills Center staffed by three full-time instructional aides and providing professional development literacy for teachers. At West Wendover Elementary School, Victory funds enabled the school to offer tutoring and focus on parent engagement by providing transportation for parents to/from school events. The Elko County School District also hired a full-time Communities in Schools liaison to provide wrap-around services to students in need.





Read by Grade Three

Senate Bill 391 provided districts competitive grant funds to improve intensive literacy instruction for reading-deficient students in grades K-3. The bill also requires mandatory retention of students who are not proficient by the end of third-grade but allows for good cause exemptions in certain cases. Retention provisions are not effective until the end of the 2019-2020 school year, so that students have an opportunity to benefit from new statewide and district education programs, such as full-day kindergarten.

In the first year, elementary schools designated a learning strategist to serve as the site-based leader to ensure effective literacy instruction for all students. During the 2016-2017 school year, learning strategists are training and assisting classroom teachers in creating and implementing intensive instruction plans for all K-3 students who are at-risk for having a deficiency in reading.

The emphasis around early literacy and family engagement should be celebrated. However, like any new legislation, there are challenges that come with implementation. With the incredibly high stakes for children associated with mandatory retention, determining the proper test and “cut score” will be paramount. There is likely value in having statewide tests, but the proper time needs to be given to allow districts to acquire, train and administer a potential new assessment. And the competitive grant process leaves some schools underfunded or without any additional resources to comply with this significant new set of requirements.

Pay for Performance

Existing law (NRS 391.168) requires the board of trustees of each school district to establish a program of performance pay and enhanced compensation for the recruitment and retention of teachers and administrators employed by the school district. Additionally, Assembly Bill 483 adopted during the 2015 Nevada legislative session, required districts to set aside existing general funds for high-performing teachers and licensed administrators.

While conceptually it may seem that pay for performance would help to motivate teachers and administrators, this hasn't been the case at the school level. Districts agree that the research around performance pay is mixed at best and, in the experience of Nevada schools, this program has caused significant challenges.

With a new teacher evaluation system in its infancy, the reliability of using that system to identify “highly effective” teachers is tenuous and often leads to an unhealthy climate within schools while inadvertently excluding some of the best teachers. Additionally, forcing districts to use general funds results in reducing the funds available for base pay while only providing enhanced compensation for a select few. This only perpetuates the existing teacher shortage by making starting salaries less competitive in the market.

Districts should be allowed to develop their own career lattices and compensation plans that meet their unique needs and this one-size-fits-all approach to an unfunded mandate should be repealed.



Nevada Ready 21

Technology is essential to providing a personalized learning experience for students. The Nevada Ready 21 initiative supports one-to-one computing so that every student in a class or school has a device to use for interactive classroom and homework activities.

The goal of the Nevada Ready 21 initiative is for every student to have access to two essential educational opportunities:

1. Skilled educators who value connected, personalized, student-centered learning, and
2. Continuous access to a personal, portable device that is connected wirelessly to the Internet.

Over the past several years, Carson City School District has rolled out a one-to-one computing program that now serves students in elementary and middle school. In line with their five-year strategic plan, Empower Carson City, the District began the program by providing middle school students access to one-to-one mobile technology. At the same time students were equipped with their own netbook, teachers received professional development needed to fully utilize this technology for interactive classroom and homework activities.

Safe and Respectful Learning Environments

Student safety and happiness is of paramount importance to school districts. Over the past decade, schools have implemented numerous measures to guard the safety of students, including disaster preparation drills, crisis management procedures-, and bullying reporting and investigation protocols. Upon the passage of new requirements for reporting and investigating bullying in 2015, school districts began implementing the new law in every classroom immediately. Within four months of the passage of Senate Bill 504, teachers and administrators participated in professional development designed to provide support for students being bullied. Principals now conduct daily investigations of reported incidents, as appropriate, and communication to parents has been critical to keeping all parties informed of a child's safety and well-being. School districts are partnering with the new Department of Safe and Respectful Learning Environment in the hope that additional time and resources spent protecting children will reduce the rate of bullying in schools.

The addition of social workers to 73 schools in Clark County has provided access to services for thousands of students that weren't available to them prior to 2015. And the results prove that the return on investment is significant. The initiative at Jerome Mack Middle School has been wildly successful in reducing suspensions – from 260 in the 2015-2016 school year to only nine for the first half of 2016-2017. But the true success lies in the fact that students are now referring other students to campus-based social workers when they feel the need for support.



Conclusion

Nevada school districts continue to improve the K-12 learning experience and student achievement in every classroom. However, meeting the challenges and realizing the future for students requires stable and healthy funding sources for the K-12 system. The superintendents of Nevada's school districts request the support of the Nevada Legislature in order to provide a high-performing education system that supports the world-class amenities available in our state.



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