

EMPOWERMENT SCHOOLS: REFORMING NEVADA EDUCATION THROUGH EMPOWERMENT

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INTRODUCTION

The education system in the State of Nevada currently faces a budget crisis that threatens the future of our children and their achievement opportunities. Empowering the individual schools to make decisions about how to best allocate resources will give the administrators and teachers the tools needed for success.

STATEMENT OF ISSUE

The State of Nevada faces a budget crisis that threatens our public school systems and places our children at a disadvantage. Nevada ranks among the lowest in the nation in per-student spending, and with inevitable budget cuts on the horizon, our rank will not improve. More pressure exists to do more with less, given the state's current budget crisis.

In the current economic state, proponents of raising student funding will find even greater resistance than in the past. Until Nevada regains its strength and is again growing, policymakers should look to improve efficiency in education spending. There's no doubt that the students in Nevada deserve better opportunities. How will we give it to them?

BACKGROUND

Many believe that raising per-student spending will improve

education by allowing a state to attract better teachers, afford better facilities, and provide a more productive learning environment. Others support cutting per-student spending across a state, arguing that educational spending is out of control.

Evidence exists that student performance does not relate to per-student spending, but relates more to a student's home environment, demographics, and parental involvement. A large literature finds little link between student expenditure and student performance. The landmark study, known as the Coleman report published in 1966, found that variations in school quality, such as school expenditure, showed little relation to levels of student performance (Coleman 1966). Differences in students' family backgrounds, by comparison, showed a significant relation to student performance.

Later studies confirm these results. For example, Jaggia and Kelly-Hawke (1999) use standardized test results from the Massachusetts Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) to conduct an analysis of the factors influencing performance on the MEAP, using more sophisticated econometrics. Their findings, similar to the Coleman report, suggest that family background and stability of a community are the primary factors affecting performance.

STATEMENT OF INTEREST

My interest is to task Nevada's education system with spending efficiently and encourage parental involvement at school and at home. Nevada's children deserve a bright future, and strengthening our school system is the best way to do that. A strong education system will also promote economic development and growth. A weak school system may deter high-paying intangible industries and business opportunities, and their potential employees, from relocating to the state.

CURRENT INEFFICIENCIES IN NEVADA SPENDING

Nevada ranks well below the national average in per-student spending, ranking 49th in 2006 with \$7,213 in per-student spending (Gibbons 2009). But when construction costs and the associated debt service are added to expenditure, state per-student spending rises to \$9,738. Of this total, \$1,842 went directly to capital costs such as construction of new schools, maintenance of schools, equipment and training. Nevada's capital costs per student rank as the third highest in the nation. Arizona, another fast-growing state, books a capital cost of only \$1,138 per student (Gibbons 2009). Further, problems with the state debt-to-expenditure ratio point to inefficiencies.

- Nevada's debt-to-expenditure ratio ranks first in the country at 121 percent of expenditure.

- Nevada's debt per student is nearly double the national average at \$11,776 per student.

- Arizona spends \$2,600 below the national average debt per student (Gibbons 2009).

In sum, it appears that Nevada faces certain inefficiencies in education spending. I do not call for a rise in expenditure, nor do I call for

a fall in expenditure. The optimal amount of expenditure is the solution for Nevada. Bipartisan solutions to improve the efficiency of spending may enable the state to improve student performance, coupled with parent and teacher involvement and satisfaction.

POLICY OPTIONS: 65 PERCENT RULE

This policy is simple and brief, mandating that school districts allocate 65 percent of their funding toward instruction. Authors and architects of this policy argue that an allocation of 65 percent strictly to instruction will ensure that students get the needed funding. Its supporters want to enlist all 50 states and the District of Columbia in the 65 percent allocation.

A one-size-fits-all approach to spending that spans every state in the nation will not likely create the results the proponents expect. Such a policy may cause more problems than it solves. Also problems exist in defining what constitutes a classroom or instructional expense. This may differ among schools that face different needs for different students or faculty.

WEIGHTED STUDENT FUNDING

Many different approaches to education reform address efficient spending and governance. One reform model, "weighted student funding" (WSF), is gaining popular support as mounting research shows potential for improvement with this reform (Public Impact 2008). The model funds schools based on student need, and empowers administrators at the school level to decide how to allocate the funding. Weighted student funding is a decentralized, student-driven, rather than program-driven, budgeting process. It goes by several other names, including "results-based budgeting," "student-based budgeting," "backpacking," and "fair student funding." In every case, the meaning is the same: dollars rather than staffing positions follow students into schools (Snell 2009).

One approach to WSF relies on a special-needs-based allotment per student. The funding for each student is calculated by taking a base sum and adding funds determined by weights assigned to various categories of student need, so the weights are a percentage of the per-student base payment.

- “For example, if the base sum were \$5,000, a student with a specific disability might have \$1,000 dollars added, or 20 percent of the base.

- This would give the student a weight of 1.2; 1 for the base and .20 for the 20 percent added to the base because of the special need characteristic” (Public Impact 2008, p. 30).

Higher student performance from states with similar per-student spending levels and the large inefficiencies in Nevada student spending provide an opportunity for reform.

As performance measures become more stringent with higher standards, a need exists to bring students up to a common performance. Each individual student, however, starts at a different level and requires different educational experiences. Some students need more intensive instruction than others, some need mastery of a new language, and still some gifted students need extra challenges. Unique educational needs require funding at different levels and schools require funding based on the needs of the individual students.

EMPOWERMENT SCHOOL (ES)

The State of Nevada uses a pilot program known as empowerment schools (ES) launched in 2006-2007, that adopts weighted-student-funding principles. There are 17 ESs in Nevada, using the following student-based budgeting. Clark County School District (CCSD) provides a base per-student allotment for each student enrolled at an ES. An added \$400 is provided per student to cover the following.

- Smaller class size with a student-to-teacher ratio of the maximum 25:1 in core classes not otherwise governed by CCSD class-size reduction requirements.

- More time spent teaching by an added 29 minutes per teacher per day.

- Five more days of instruction per school year per teacher.

- \$150,000 discretionary dollars.

- Five percent increase in principal pay.

- Up to 2 percent incentives pay for all licensed staff when specific achievement targets are met.

Each ES partners with a private member of the community, which provides \$150,000 in funding over a three-year period. The private partnerships were established with the help of the nonprofit organization, The Public Education Foundation, which supports public schools in Nevada. The private partnerships not only provide more funding but also serve as an important link between our communities and our public schools. Analysis of the Clark County ESs provides us with a model of how to do more with less. The ESs use a unique spending formula, which allows principals to decide the most efficient ways to direct resources.

The schools receive autonomy over scheduling, governance, incentives, staffing, budgeting, and instruction. The CCSD’s union contract also allows for the removal of teachers who do not fit the empowerment model. By implementing a peer review model, a school principal may remove a teacher deemed unfit for a school’s empowerment model. This type of empowerment means parents can influence real change at the individual school level, through involvement and collaboration. Teachers and principals can implement suggestions

provided by the parents without first seeking lengthy approval from the district or state.

With autonomy comes accountability: each ES agrees to meet specific achievement targets that come from the individual school's empowerment plan and contract. "Accountability measures are implemented to ensure that performance levels at each school site are met. With its emphasis on local control of school funding, most teachers' unions are reasonably supportive of the weighted student formula model because it devolves autonomy to each school and places responsibility in the hands of each school's principal" (Snell 2009, p. 5).

EVIDENCE OF SUCCESS IN EMPOWERMENT SCHOOLS

The first group of ESs in the CCSD has shown improvements in performance in reading and math. A recent study released by the Center for Evaluation and Assessment (CEA) at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) documented improvements among the ESs in Clark County over the past three years (CEA 2010). Student performance improved, as well as parental and teacher satisfaction. The CEA studied the four original schools, Adams, Antonello, Culley and Warren Elementary Schools. The study specially selected comparison schools that did not use an empowerment model as a benchmark. The comparison schools were chosen based on similarity in factors such as enrollment, free and reduced lunch, school diversity, and special education students as the basis for the selection. Results are based on Nevada's State-Mandated Criterion Referenced Test (SCRT), parent/teacher and principal surveys, as well as interviews and focus groups. The CEA then drew conclusions based on comparison of the empowerment schools, selected comparison schools, and the CCSD as a whole or "non-study schools." The CEA found that as a group, students from ESs significantly

outperformed students from comparison schools (CS) at the following levels: third grade reading and mathematics, fourth grade reading and mathematics, and fifth grade reading and mathematics for significance-testing information.

Student performance from ES students significantly exceeded student performance from CCSD schools that were non-study schools in two situations. ES students had significantly higher SCRT scores than did non-study school students in the following areas: fourth grade reading (ESs mean = 321.1, district mean = 310.2) and fourth grade mathematics (ESs mean = 373.4, district mean = 330.9). The CEA states, "One explanation for these results might be that many ES third graders come to the schools at-risk for academic failure. These students had only been at the ESs for one-year; so they did not have enough time to catch up to their non-at-risk peers. By the fourth grade testing period, these students had two full years of exposure to ES programs, teachers, and schools. Their test scores might just be starting to show the cumulative effect of being in an ES" (CEA 2010 p. 119).

When comparing the performance of the ESs to district means, we find mixed results. Test scores are fairly flat in some areas, but dramatic improvement occurs in others. One possible explanation for the variance between schools is the different stages of implementation by administrators and differing stages of adoption by teachers. Through teacher surveys and focus groups, researchers with the CEA can determine each school's stage of implementation. The data collected from teachers suggest that Antonello school teachers were fully engaged in the reform implementation, Culley school teachers were at the early stages of reform implementation, and Warren and Adams schools were at the very early stages. Other factors affecting the variance in performance include principal leadership styles and turnover among the teaching staff.

Not all schools surpassed the district mean scores. This does not mean that the empowerment reform failed. A first step to improving education throughout the state is to close the achievement gaps that exist between the highest performing schools and the lowest performing. The following tables show that the four empowerment schools did succeed in closing achievement gaps.

**Third Grade Empowerment Schools
Student Performance in Reading
and Mathematics: 2007-2009
Three-Year Gain**

School	2007 Reading Score	2009 Reading Score	Score Gain	Percent Gain
Adams	291	319	28	9.6%
Antonello	323	321	-2	Less than -1%
Culley	283	307	24	8.5%
Warren	267	275	8	3.0%
District Mean		312		
School	2007 Reading Score	2009 Reading Score	Score Gain	Percent Gain
Adams	296	314	8	2.7%
Antonello	311	321	10	3.2%
Culley	300	325	25	8.3%
Warren	243	299	56	23.0%
District Mean		316		

Source: CEA ES study, final report. Feb. 15, 2010

Third grade reading improved by an average of 7.6 percent, while third grade math scores improved by 9.3 percent over three school years. Antonello saw a decline in reading scores by less than -1 percent, remaining fairly flat. The most dramatic change occurred in math scores at Warren, which rose by over 23 percent. Math scores at Warren still fell below the district mean, but closed over 76 percent of the achievement gap.

**Fourth Grade Empowerment Schools
Student Performance in Reading
and Mathematics: 2007-2009
Three-Year Gain**

School	2007 Reading Score	2009 Reading Score	Score Gain	Percent Gain
Adams	307	321	14	4.6%
Antonello	320	352	32	10.0%
Culley	295	314	19	6.4%
Warren	267	278	11	4.1%
District Mean		310		
School	2007 Reading Score	2009 Reading Score	Score Gain	Percent Gain
Adams	317	390	73	23.1%
Antonello	333	374	41	12.3%
Culley	320	374	54	16.9%
Warren	258	350	92	35.7%
District Mean		331		

Source: CEA ES study, final report. Feb. 15, 2010

Fourth grade reading improved by an average of 6.3 percent, while fourth grade math scores improved by an average of 22 percent. Each school saw a significant improvement at the fourth grade level and, excluding Warren, each school surpassed the district mean. Warren failed to surpass the district mean in reading scores, but experienced a dramatic improvement in math scores. Although Warren did not surpass the district mean in reading scores, it did close the achievement gap by 25 percent.

**Fifth Grade Empowerment Schools
Student Performance in Reading
and Mathematics: 2007-2009
Three-Year Gain**

School	2007 Reading Score	2009 Reading Score	Score Gain	Percent Gain
Adams	293	291	-2	Less than -1%
Antonello	315	320	5	1.5%
Culley	270	292	22	8.2%
Warren	282	274	-8	-2.8%
District Mean		294		

School	2007 Reading Score	2009 Reading Score	Score Gain	Percent Gain
Adams	337	313	-24	-7.1%
Antonello	327	334	7	2.1%
Culley	294	330	36	12.2%
Warren	278	305	27	9.7%
District Mean		319		

Source: CEA ES study, final report. Feb. 15, 2010

Fifth grade results show more variance with fifth grade reading scores, averaging a 1.7 percent improvement. Fifth grade math scores improved by an average of 4.2 percent with two schools surpassing the district mean. Fifth graders showed improvement since the empowerment reform took place.

Over the course of the study, parents and teachers were surveyed to determine their overall satisfaction with the ESs. The parents expressed an overall positive perception of the changes under the empowerment model, and rated all empowerment schools as providing a high-quality education for their child. Teachers also expressed an overall positive perception of the empowerment model and teachers at all four of the original ESs reported a good shared vision and shared governance. The findings from these surveys and focus groups indicate that parent and teacher satisfaction rose overall, which provides for a more cohesive environment encouraging parental involvement.

PROPOSAL FOR NEVADA

Fully implementing empowerment schools through statewide reform with mobility and flexibility at its foundation may help alleviate the inefficiencies and inequities in Nevada’s public schools. Funding would follow students to the school of choice and be weighted according to each student’s needs. The changes would also implement a new school-level flexibility enabling each individual school more discretion over funding.

With recent changes in legislation, the State of Nevada has now removed restrictions against linking student performance with teacher evaluations. When individual schools, teachers, and principals are held accountable for and evaluated on student performance, they ought to control the allotted resources provided to them. Giving the individual schools the autonomy and flexibility to use resources will give them the tools needed to meet the standards imposed. Empowering principals to make decisions about budgeting, expenditures, curriculum and hiring is integral to accountability (Snell 2009). In a typical Weighted Student Funding (WSF) model, a contract gives the autonomy provided by empowerment that continues as long as principals meet the standards of student performance set by the districts and state. Another aspect of WSF and empowerment schools is the option of school choice given to parents. Ideally, parents can choose the school that they feel performs the best and provides the best fit for their child. In CCSD, because of the sparse geographical locations of the 17 empowerment schools, parents receive little choice. The addition of more empowerment schools in the school district will alleviate the limited school choice faced by parents. More school choice also provides an incentive to individual schools to raise student performance to avoid losing their students to a nearby school and, thus, losing funding.

Recent budget cuts and a growing need to keep our students competitive put educational reform on the map. The ESs of CCSD provide the State of Nevada with an example of reform that shows considerable promise. Of the first four original empowerment schools, all four improved standardized test scores. Parent, teacher, and principal satisfaction also rose and a growing demand for empowerment schools has emerged. The school district added three more empowerment schools in February of 2009 for a total of 17 schools throughout the county.

The National Education Association (NEA) ranks Nevada as 23rd in the nation in average teacher salaries, and yet the state consistently ranks near the bottom for public education (NEA Rankings and Estimates 2008). Education Week gave Nevada a “D” on its state-by-state report card, one of just three states with this low mark (Education Week, State Report Cards 2009). Research shows a low correlation between per-student spending and performance, suggesting the improvements Nevadans demand can come by reforming the state’s inefficiencies and empowering the schools.

When teachers and principals can make real decisions about school funding and curriculum, an increase in parental involvement occurs. Parent-Teacher Associations are not a new concept, but under an empowerment model, the teachers and principals actually can make the changes that the parents desire. Some parents do not get involved because of the frustration of seeing little or no change after voicing their concerns. Under ESs, however, when the parents and teachers come to an agreement about curriculum or funding changes, the school actually can make these changes. This further encourages parents to get involved because they are rewarded for their involvement. More involved parents, working with teachers with more power, translate to more achievement for students.

A large literature finds that expenditure does not relate to student performance, but responds more to demographics and parental involvement. So, an effort to reduce expenditure across the state does not make sense. A better approach reduces inefficient spending, by giving individual schools the power to make financial decisions. Several of the ESs in Clark County have developed parent centers to encourage greater involvement and provide resources for the schools to reach out to the community.

ESs by design promote more efficient spending practices and greater parental involvement. The recent study released by the CEA concluded that student performance improved, and parent and teacher satisfaction rose. Greater expansion of the empowerment schools in Clark County can foster parental involvement and increase parent awareness of the shared responsibility that teachers and parents bear in student performance and overall education.

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