



Examining Nevada's Education Priorities: Which Initiatives are Worth the Investment?



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About the Kenny C. Guinn Center for Policy Priorities

The Kenny C. Guinn Center for Policy Priorities (Guinn Center) is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) bipartisan, think-do tank focused on independent, data-driven, relevant, and well-reasoned analysis of critical policy issues facing Nevada and the Intermountain West region. The Guinn Center engages policy-makers, experts, and the public with innovative, independent research, ideas, and analysis to advance policy solutions, inform the public debate, and expand public engagement. The Guinn Center does not take institutional positions on policy issues.

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About Nevada Succeeds

Nevada Succeeds is a bipartisan education policy organization founded by concerned members of Nevada's business community. We seek to bring effective, evidence based education practices to Nevada's P-20 Education System by engaging education professionals, policy makers, and the public to understand the needs of our State and to advance the policy solutions that will improve literacy outcomes for all students by improving the quality of teachers, leaders, and systems in Nevada.

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Executive Summary

During the *State of the State* address delivered on January 15, 2015, Governor Brian Sandoval advocated making targeted investments that would help move Nevada into the 21st century. Central to his vision were almost two dozen K-12 education initiatives which he argued would improve student outcomes and help modernize the State’s currently antiquated education system. This policy brief provides an analysis of each of these initiatives and suggests that many of these proposed interventions are successful only under the correct conditions. As such, careful attention must be paid to such conditions for these proposals to produce positive results.

In the pages that follow, the Kenny Guinn Center for Policy Priorities and Nevada Succeeds evaluate all proposed interventions and identify those education initiatives for which there exists strong evidence to suggest that these initiatives are robustly correlated with improved outcomes. Based on this body of data-driven research, we prioritize consideration of these proposed education interventions.

The scope of this paper seeks to address the question, “How do we help legislators prioritize investments by demonstrating which programs are supported by data-driven evidence suggesting a positive relationship between the intervention and improved educational outcomes?” The intent of this policy brief is to provide Legislators with an independent summary of the body of data-driven research linking the proposed intervention to improved educational outcomes.

Based on the evidence, we prioritize consideration of the proposal and offer recommendations to inform the debate. For programs ranked “High Priority,” we propose that the research indicates investments made in these programs are more likely to realize the biggest bang for the buck in terms of improving Nevada’s educational system. For “Low priority” items, we do not mean to suggest they are not important; we simply intend to convey that investing in these programs, while worthwhile, may not significantly improve the State’s educational system. Additionally, we prioritize programs relative to each other, not against the default of doing nothing and continuing with the status quo.

We do not consider here the question of whether the funding levels are adequate and sufficient, or whether the State needs to raise additional revenues to fund K-12 education. While we acknowledge Legislators must consider revenue streams when weighing priorities, we believe that decision makers will be better equipped to evaluate the set of options once provided with an independent analysis of which programs are robustly associated with improved educational outcomes.

Table 1: Identification and Prioritization of the Governor’s Education Programs

K-12 Education Program	Additional Cost (biennium)	Priority	Recommendations
Expansion of Pre-K (Early Childhood)	\$10.3M	High	-Leverage Federal funds and target funding for full-day programs for low-income students -Invest in high quality professional development for teachers and continue annual external evaluations
New Funding Formula (to be phased in)	\$25M	High	-Adopt a weighted funding formula for school districts and charter schools, with base goal and weights for sub-groups -Create an accountability model with oversight

K-12 Education Program	Additional Cost (biennium)	Priority	Recommendations
Language Acquisition Interventions: Read by 3, Zoom Schools, and Victory Schools	\$177.5M	High	-Ensure each intervention has an accountability plan that can be evaluated
Career and Technical Education (CTE)	\$8M	High	-Provide high quality professional development for CTE teachers -Conduct a statewide strategic plan of CTE
College and Career Readiness Programs	\$8M	High	-Expand STEM offerings -Prioritize offerings at schools with high numbers of FRL students -Survey students who have completed programs to evaluate its overall effectiveness
Great Teaching & Leading Fund	\$16.3M	High	-Adopt standards for professional development -Require rigorous evaluations of all professional development and training programs -Fund through grants according to State Board priorities; can include teacher pipeline and recruitment and retention programs as well as PD
Rollover Bonds for School Construction	NA	High	-Legislators should consider additional financing options
Universal Full-Day Kindergarten	\$74.4M	Medium	-Majority of schools offer kindergarten -But high priority for full-day English Language Learners and Free and Reduced Lunch students
Technology Funding (Ready 21 Plan)	\$48.8M	Medium	-Launch a scaled down version of the program -Continue to monitor and evaluate Nevada school districts that have implemented this pilot program
Bullying Prevention/ Mental Health Services	\$36M	Medium	-Launch a scaled down version of the program -Allow school districts to use grant funds to hire various types of mental health professionals
Jobs for Nevada's Graduates	\$4M	Medium	-Continue to evaluate student outcomes -Link funding to performance goals
Public Charter Recruitment Fund	\$20M	Medium	-Identify schools in low-income areas where there is the greatest need for high quality choice
Opportunity Tax Credit Scholarship	\$10M	Low	-Establish a Task Force to develop a plan for the design and implementation of the scholarship/tax credit program -Analyze the supply of private school seats
Breakfast at Schools	\$2M	Low	-Fund with existing State and Federal monies
Gifted & Talented Education	\$10M	Low	-Determine a weight in the new funding formula for gifted students
Appointed School District Boards	NA	Low	-Create a Task Force to assess fiscal impacts
Formation of School Districts	NA	Low	-Create a Task Force to assess fiscal impacts -Consider option as part of funding formula discussions

K-12 Education Program	Additional Cost (biennium)	Priority	Recommendations
Achievement School District	NA	Low	-Continue to evaluate the models in other states before implementing in Nevada

In this policy brief, we provide an independent assessment of the potential of the Governor’s proposed priorities to actually improve student outcomes, and to accelerate the modernization of the K-12 education system. We believe the appropriate role of the state is to allocate funds to programs that serve and benefit Nevada’s school-age children, establish standards of quality and performance, and demand accountability (NRS Title 34).

Nevada is a diverse state and each school district and charter school has its own set of challenges. The State should establish standards of quality and performance, but then allow school districts and charter schools the flexibility to direct and allocate resources, based on best practices, to the programs that best serve their students.

Legislators must consider that these proposed interventions are inextricably linked with each other and funding decisions should not be treated as isolated decisions. For example, a decision to fund pre-K expansion will not improve student outcomes unless there is a simultaneous decision to ensure that there are high quality, effective teachers and principals in the schools.

We recommend the following:

- Establish standards for assessing and delivering quality professional development training. Effective teaching is a critical determinant in realizing positive returns on many of the initiatives supported by the Governor. Improved student outcomes begin with quality teaching in the classroom.
- Prioritize English Language Acquisition interventions so that all students can read on grade level.
- Adopt a weighted funding formula during the 2015 Legislative Session for school districts and charter schools, with a base funding goal and weights for English Learners, at-risk students, and Special Education students.
- For all programs, the state must demand greater accountability from the stakeholders and link financing to performance goals. For example, for the weighted funding formula, the Legislature should create an accountability model with oversight. For many other programs, the Legislature must ensure that education officials develop and implement a rigorous accountability plan.

We conclude by emphasizing the importance of strengthening the accountability mechanisms in place at the school, district, and state levels. Through our research, we have discovered that, by and large, existing accountability mechanisms lack rigor, are inconsistently applied, and are inadequately monitored. Unless accountability mechanisms are included in legislation and are linked to funding, investments in these programs are unlikely to produce significant gains. This, we argue, is not a responsible allocation of public funds. In order to inform the public debate, the Guinn Center for Policy Priorities and Nevada Succeeds will be publishing a follow-on report titled, *“How do we get from A-Z: Recommendations for Strengthening Accountability and Performance,”* which will outline accountability measures and performance metrics.