



A NEW NEVADA: EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND LITERACY INTERVENTIONS IN NEVADA’S K-12 PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Executive Summary

Early Childhood Education and Literacy Intervention Programs Since 2015

“Staying the course” has become Nevada’s mantra for describing Governor Brian Sandoval’s continued support of the education initiatives launched during the 2015 Legislative Session.¹ During his January 2017 State of the State address, Sandoval renewed his financial commitment to several programs aimed at improving educational outcomes in the Silver State. The 2017-2019 biennial budget maintains—and in some cases, expands—programs that aim to ensure that “Generations to come” will have access to high quality, 21st-century jobs.²

To accomplish this objective, several of the programs in the education budget specifically target Nevada’s youngest and most vulnerable student populations. These five initiatives are: (1) preschool expansion, (2) voluntary full-day kindergarten, (3) Nevada K.I.D.S. Read (formerly Read by Grade Three),³ (4) Victory Schools, and (5) Zoom Schools.

Funding for the 2017-2019 biennium for these interventions is as follows:

Table 1. Early Childhood Education and Literacy Intervention Programs, 2017-2019 Biennium Budget

	Account in Budget	2017-2019 Budget	2015-2017 Budget	Change over Biennia (+/-)	Percent Change over Biennia
Pre-Kindergarten Full-Day Kinder.	State General Fund	\$13.8M	\$13.8M	–	–
	Distributive School Account	\$170M	\$170M	–	–
NV K.I.D.S. Read	Other State Education Programs	\$45M	\$28M	\$17M	37.8%
Victory Schools	Other State Education Programs	\$80M	\$50M	\$30M	37.5%
Zoom Schools	Other State Education Programs	\$142M	\$100M	\$42M	29.6%

This policy brief provides an update on these educational investments, as discussed in the Kenny C. Guinn Center for Policy Priorities 2015 policy brief, “Examining Nevada’s Education Priorities: Which Initiatives Are Worth the Investment?” (with Nevada Succeeds).⁴ That earlier policy brief provided an analysis of each of these initiatives and suggested that many of these proposed interventions are successful only under the specific conditions.

In the pages that follow, the Guinn Center evaluates the implementation and initial outcomes of the five early education and literacy interventions since 2015. In doing so, this policy brief will explain how these five education initiatives, for which there exists strong evidence to suggest that these initiatives – under

certain conditions – are robustly correlated with improved outcomes. To do this, we will also weigh these initiatives against a set of principles, which serves as a means-test for the efficacy of various education initiatives in our State.⁵ Based on this body of data-driven research, we strongly encourage the Nevada Legislature to continue to invest in these programs and ensure that the correct conditions are met to guarantee the strongest outcomes for our students. Long term, we believe districts can and will continue to focus and invest in these programs enabled by a weighted funding model, and aligned with their student improvement strategy. However, we believe that a set of conditions and systems must be in place prior to transition in order to ensure that students will benefit from the focused interventions.

Recommendations

Based on our analysis of these programs and their alignment to the Theory of Action Principles, we make the following recommendations to the State and school districts:

1. Hold all interventions and programs to the same level of transparency and reporting requirements that the federal grants programs currently require. Pre-K programs in Nevada are required to participate in both annual and longitudinal evaluations, comply with NDE data reporting requirements and other assessments, and maintain health and safety standards. We recommend that **all** interventions in the state are held to the same standards. Increased transparency and reporting requirements includes district- and school-level reporting on how the resources allocated are being used to fund evidence-based programs, services, and incentives that increase student achievement.⁶ This level of transparency should continue to be the expectation as Nevada moves toward weighted funding.
2. Increase transparency of data around literacy. Schools should track and report student progress and other school performance indicators to the State and the public. This includes creating and disseminating user-friendly reports to families about the progress of both their child and their child's school, holding public meetings about a school's progress, and allowing more parental involvement in decisions about a school.
3. Combine Nevada K.I.D.S. Read, Victory, and Zoom School programs into a single grant program. Because the three English Language Acquisition programs have duplicative goals, this would remove the artificial barriers between these programs and recognize that all targeted schools have a combination of both ELL and FRL students. This would also move the focus to individual student needs as opposed to creating different labels for schools.
4. Design effective, evidence-based intervention programs that reduce retention rates. The State (and districts) should provide technical assistance to principals at schools funded by English Language Acquisition funds that support selection of research based literacy programs. The Nevada Department of Education (and third party evaluators) should conduct an independent review of the selection of literacy programs.
 - a. The State and school districts need to develop a plan for 2019, when it seems likely that a high number of students in third-grade will be retained. This plan should address how schools will address the needs of these non-proficient readers, prevent further retention

for future years, and hold schools accountable when they have high retention rates.

5. Use both formative and summative assessments across K-3 to ensure growth, identify deficiencies, and monitor progress.
 - a. Require districts to test students at the beginning and end of the pre-K programs for skill development.
 - b. Implement a statewide assessment for kindergarten to measure academic outcomes at the end of kindergarten.
6. Continue the availability of high quality professional development for effective teaching and monitor professional development offerings across the state to ensure that they are aligned with district and statewide literacy plans. The professional developments for pre-k teachers, Nevada K.I.D.S. Read, and Victory are targeted toward helping teachers work with their specific student populations. The state and districts should offer a menu of menu of professional development services that schools could use to ensure teachers are equipped with the right tools to help their student populations.
7. Provide flexibility in what evidence-based interventions are allowable: NDE should provide flexibility in the type of interventions that can be provided under Nevada K.I.D.S. Read. All interventions should align to the Nevada State Literacy Plan and should be evidence-based. Each school district or charter school should maintain responsibility for providing evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of interventions included in their literacy plans.
8. Ensure that NDE and schools continue annual external program evaluations for all programs receiving dedicated state funding.
9. Expand pre-K programs and ensure pre-K students filling new classroom seats come from sub-groups that have low levels of language and reading proficiency, including ELLs, Special Education students, and low-income students eligible for Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRLs).
10. The Nevada Department of Education and the districts should devise a system for identifying which teachers may have had specific training in early intervention and/or literacy programs. We would encourage the State and school districts to develop incentive programs, such as a higher salary and bonuses, to recruit and retain highly effective (and experienced) teachers at these high-need school sites, rather than filling all vacancies at high-need schools with new teachers.
 - a. Zoom schools should leverage incentive dollars to attract and retain effective Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) certified educators.
 - b. The State, districts, and teachers' unions should offer scholarships and incentive programs to assist more teachers in pursuing the TESL endorsement on their license.
 - c. Similar steps should be considered for school leadership training, regulations, and incentives.
11. Focus on teacher recruitment and training through programs such as the Great Teaching and Leading Fund, the Teach Nevada scholarship, and the Nevada Teacher Corps. Schools should also be given greater flexibility in how they can use these funds to provide incentives to teachers.

12. NDE should create a readiness assessment to determine district readiness to keep the focus of the intervention without the set aside of categorical funding. The long-term goal is to move resourcing and decision making rights closest to the point of impact, but first the system must build the infrastructure and leadership capacity to support this transition. NDE should then use the readiness assessment information to set budgetary recommendations (including the amount and distribution method). At present, we have significant concerns with the effort to add new dollars into the Distributive School Account and recommend that all (or most) of the current categorical investments (e.g., in Zoom Schools and Victory schools) remain restricted until there exists an appropriate assessment of program efficacy, analysis of return on investment, and district readiness to maintain the focus of the program as it currently exists in the unrestricted funding context.

Given current conditions (e.g., structural barriers and technological limitations), it is not clear that school districts can effectively direct (spend) a weighted state allocation in alignment with the intended populations. Consequently, there is some concern that should dollars be shifted to the Distributive School Account – without accompanying policy and spending reforms, Zoom School and Victory School dollars would be distributed across the entire district, thus undermining the targeted focus on those select schools with high populations of ELLs and low-income students), or funds might be diverted entirely to other programs. Here we note that Nevada K.I.D.S. Read is one program with the potential to maintain its focus through a nonrestrictive allocation method.

Conclusion

Overall, preliminary evidence indicates that these targeted interventions are helping students achieve, and potentially close the achievement gap. Collectively, these programs contain important elements or characteristics of successful reform efforts around the country. Among these are: targeted and accountable resourcing, leadership, autonomy, teacher leadership, community support, and flexibility. The salient features of these literacy acquisition programs are that, within a broad set of parameters and prescribed services, they have established greater autonomy and flexibility at the school site, allowing school leadership teams to design interventions that support the specific needs of their students and empower their teachers.⁷ The recommended infusion of resources to enable Zoom School programs to implement efforts to attract and retain effective educators demonstrates the continued evolution and improvement of this program. Given the preliminary impact of this program, policy makers should stay the course and continue efforts to monitor and improve the program.

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- ² Nevada Department of Education. "Education Initiatives for the New Nevada: Governor Sandoval's Recommended Budget (2017-2019 Biennium)." State of Nevada. January 17, 2017. http://www.doe.nv.gov/uploadedFiles/nde.doe.nv.gov/content/News_Media/Press_Releases/2017docs/EducationOverview2017_SCFinal.pdf.
- ³ Nevada K.I.D.S. Read is defined as "All Nevada K-3 students are 'Keeping (their) Individual Dreams Strong.'"
- ⁴ Guinn Center and Nevada Succeeds. 2015. Examining Nevada's Education Priorities: Which Ones are Worth the Investment? <https://guinncenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Guinn-Center-Nevada-Succeeds-Education-Priorities-FINAL.pdf>
- ⁵ Guinn Center. April 2017. Principles of Education Reform. *forthcoming*
- ⁶ NDE's external outcomes evaluation report also recommended common measurement and data systems are being used to manage how districts implement and manage program indicators. (Nevada Department of Education. "External Outcomes Evaluation: Final Report." December 30, 2016.)
- ⁷ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/education/wp/2017/03/07/radical-change-for-struggling-schools-its-reliably-doable/?utm_term=.a4c691213282