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Testimony before the Senate Committee on Finance and Assembly Committee on Ways and Means, Subcommittees on K-12/Higher Education/CIPS

Prepared Statement of Kenny Guinn Center for Policy Priorities

Expansion of Pre-K Should be a High Priority

- The Governor recommends providing \$10 million in new State funds for pre-Kindergarten (pre-K) over the biennium as a match to \$20 million in Federal funds recently awarded to Nevada through the *Race to the Top in Early Childhood* grant.
- The Guinn Center coauthored a report with Nevada Succeeds in February 2015 titled: ***Examining Nevada's Education Priorities: Which Initiatives are Worth the Investment?*** This report reviews empirical research to prioritize the Governor's education funding proposals. It ranks expansion of pre-K as a high priority.

Benefits of Pre-K

A large body of empirical research shows that *high quality* pre-K has positive results.

- When pre-K can successfully close the achievement gap before kindergarten, students are more likely to have greater future academic success, higher lifetime earnings, more developed cognitive skills, and even better health outcomes (Heckman et al, 2014).
- Every dollar spent on early childhood education returns 10 cents annually over the life of a child (Heckman et al, 2011).
- The landmark Perry Preschool Study (2005) followed 120 individuals from pre-K to the age of 40. Adults that participated in the preschool program had higher earnings, were more likely to hold a job, had committed fewer crimes, and were more likely to have graduated from high school than adults who did not participate in the program.
- Evidence suggests that pre-K interventions have the greatest impact on Special Education students, English Language Learners (ELLs), and African-American students (Perry Preschool Study, 2005).
- A recent study found that two pre-K programs in North Carolina that were able to successfully exit students from Special Education in pre-K maintained their gains through third grade. These gains were very similar across all subgroups and led to *significant cost savings* for the state (Muschkin et al, 2015).

Essential Elements of Quality Pre-K

- Some studies show that the benefits of pre-K fade by the time students reach third grade if not sooner (HHS, 2010 & Lyons, 2013).
- High quality instruction is necessary to ensure benefits endure. The biggest predictor of the ability to sustain the advantages of pre-K interventions over the long-term is the quality of teaching in grades 1-3 (Davis et al, 2009).
- It is important to couple pre-K programs with initiatives to hire and develop high quality classroom teachers. Studies suggest that pre-K programs have been most successful when teachers are licensed and paid similarly to their K-12 counterparts (Frede et al, 2007). Hiring qualified pre-K teachers has been challenging in Nevada due to teacher shortages.
- Job-embedded, sustained professional development can improve classroom instruction and significantly improve student achievement (Biancarosa, 2010 & Saunders, 2009).

Importance of Evaluation

- Nevada conducts an annual evaluation of its existing Early Childhood Education program, which has shown positive results.
- Rigorous evaluations are necessary to ensure that students are meeting expected outcomes. All pre-K interventions should have a third party external evaluator conduct a program evaluation and assessment.
- In the short term, students should be able to pass a Kindergarten Readiness Assessment to ensure they begin Kindergarten on grade-level.
- In the long run, pre-K should help students stay on grade level throughout their academic careers.

Recommendations

1. Fund the *Race to the Top in Early Childhood* State matching requirement to ensure receipt of Federal funds.
2. Invest in high quality professional development for teachers and leaders in pre-K.
3. Require districts to test students at the beginning and end of the pre-K programs for skill development.
4. Ensure that NDE and school districts continue annual external program evaluations.
5. 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), as well as from rural areas.
6. 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.

Recommended Performance Benchmarks

1. Higher numbers of students enrolled in high quality pre-K programs
2. For those students in pre-K programs, an increase in the percentage of students who can pass the required Kindergarten entry readiness assessment
3. An increase in the percentage of students reading on grade level in third grade
4. An increase in the percentage of quality instructional personnel
5. A decrease in the achievement gap among language poor subgroups (ELLs, FRLs, and Special Education students)

See full report: *Examining Nevada's Education Priorities: Which Initiatives are Worth the Investment?*
<http://guinncenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Guinn-Center-Nevada-Succeeds-Education-Priorities-FINAL.pdf>

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