

**March 26, 2015**

### **Testimony before the Senate Committee on Education**

*Prepared Statement of the Kenny Guinn Center for Policy Priorities*

#### **Introduction**

In February 2015, the Guinn Center (in collaboration with Nevada Succeeds) published a report titled, *Examining Nevada's Education Priorities: Which Initiatives are Worth the Investment?*, in which we examined the Victory Schools proposal and its potential impact on student outcomes. Based on our findings, we offer the following for consideration.

#### **Nexus Between Poverty and Student Achievement**

The Victory Schools proposal would target funding towards schools with high numbers of pupils living in poverty and performing low academically. Nevada data shows a strong nexus between poverty and student achievement. (See Guinn Center for Policy Priorities *Literacy Challenges in Nevada Schools*, March 2014.)

- At the school level, the strongest predictors of reading proficiency on the State Criterion Referenced Test (CRT) are the percentage of students eligible for Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) and the percentage of white students.
- As the percentage of FRL students increases, reading proficiency decreases.
- As the percentage of white students increases, reading proficiency increases.
- Usually, the lowest performing subgroups are Special Education students and English Language Learners (ELLs).

#### **Interventions Can Improve Student Achievement**

Any effort to improve student achievement in literacy should focus on research-based practices. Findings from a comprehensive review of studies of interventions for struggling readers identified the following best practices:

- Cooperative learning is a particularly effective classroom instruction model, where students work in teams of four to five to help each other learn academic content;
- Professional development is key to ensuring quality instruction;
- One-to-one tutoring is very effective in improving reading performance;
- Tutoring models that focus on phonics obtain much better outcomes than others;
- Teachers are more effective than paraprofessionals and volunteers as tutors; and
- Small-group, phonetic tutorials can be effective, but are not as effective as one-to-one phonetically-focused tutoring.

#### **Need for Flexibility and Accountability**

- List of interventions does not need to be restrictive.
- Schools should have the flexibility to provide research-based practices that meet the needs of particular students.
- Strong accountability provisions should be put in place and programs should be regularly evaluated. Best practices for accountability include:
  - Greater emphasis on teacher quality and effectiveness;
  - Comprehensive integration between the school budget and the goals in the School Performance Plan;
  - Technical assistance to assess and select research-based programs, develop goals, benchmarks and intervention plans, and manage program funds and accountability measures;



## Legislative Testimony

## Senate Bill 432: Victory Schools

- Oversight by an external entity [Nevada Department of Education (NDE) and external evaluators] to evaluate progress towards goals, provide technical assistance, and help the school district retool interventions; and
- Concrete interventions for schools that do not make sufficient progress.

### Decision-makers Should Explore Advantages of Consolidating Categorical Programs

- The Governor has proposed funding for three programs that seek to improve outcomes for at-risk students, with an emphasis on English Language Acquisition: Victory Schools, Zoom Schools, and Read by 3. Decision-makers should weigh the advantages of combining these programs into a single grant program given that they have duplicative goals.
- Consolidating these programs into one grant could remove the artificial barriers between these programs and recognize that all of the targeted schools have a combination of both ELL and FRL students.
- Having one program would move the focus to individual student needs as opposed to creating different labels for schools.
- In the long term, this funding should be placed in the funding formula as the funding weights for at risk students and ELLs. This can provide schools with the flexibility to implement data-driven practices tailored to student needs. In return for this flexibility, strong accountability provisions should be put in place as discussed above.

### Recommendations

1. Explore the advantages of combining Victory, Zoom, and Read by 3 programs into a comprehensive English Language Acquisition program that targets English Language Learners and students eligible for Free and Reduced price Lunch.
2. 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 and NDE/3rd party evaluators should conduct an independent review of the selection of literacy programs.
3. Ensure that the State implements a high quality formative assessment to monitor student outcomes.
4. Ensure the State designs effective, evidence-based intervention programs that reduce retention rates.
5. Ensure the availability of high quality professional development for effective teaching.
6. Review skill development annually for each targeted school and for targeted populations.
7. Require schools to track progress by student annually and report these results publicly and to the state.
8. Require districts to maintain and report out data on other factors related to improved school performance such as teacher experience, teacher turnover rates, etc.

**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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