

April 7, 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 proposed expansion of Zoom Schools and its potential impact on student outcomes. Based on our findings, we offer the following for consideration.

Effectiveness of Zoom Schools has not yet been determined

- State and local authorities failed to establish a rigorous scientific evaluation system for the Zoom Schools upon their opening in 2013. Current assessment efforts are neither methodologically rigorous nor uniform across the State.
- Four of the Zoom Schools lost a star in the Nevada School Performance Framework ratings. However, star ratings only account for results in grades 3-5 while the Zoom School literacy interventions were primarily aimed at grades P-3. Extended school year was provided to all students but occurred after the summative assessments.
- In Clark County, reading proficiency in grades 3-5 increased in 13 of the 14 schools, but math proficiency only increased in one school. In Washoe County, only two of the five Zoom Schools realized an increase in reading and/or math proficiency levels.

Need for Flexibility in Interventions

- All schools receiving funding for English Language Learners should have the flexibility to use funds for evidence-based practices, tailored to the needs of each student.
- The original Zoom program adopted in 2013 required Clark and Washoe to use funds for four initiatives: pre-kindergarten programs (Pre-K), full-day kindergarten, reading skills centers, and extended year/intersession. Funds could not be used for any other purpose. Other districts had more flexibility in use of funds, including professional development, and before and after-school programs.
- SB 405 and SB 430 expand the list of eligible uses of funds for elementary schools but unnecessarily limit use of funds to a specified list and require schools to implement all of the initiatives listed.
- Requiring Zoom Schools to pay for full-day kindergarten is not necessary since these schools already received State-funded full-day kindergarten prior to the Zoom program. Eliminating this requirement could free up funds for other interventions at Zoom Schools.
- For middle and high schools, SB 405 has a limited list of interventions but SB 430 provides flexibility to provide other evidence based programs designed to meet specific pupil needs [Section 1.7.(h)].
- For charter schools and other school districts, SB 430 also provides flexibility to implement other evidence-based practices for English Language Learners [Section 1.8.(b)(7)].

Need to Expand Focus on Accountability

- The performance metrics, outcome indicators, and external evaluations proposed in SB 403 and SB 430 can help provide a more accurate picture of the impact of Zoom schools and other programs for English Language learners on academic outcomes.
- Provisions in SB 405 and SB 430 that require corrective action plans for schools that do not implement all required program components place an unnecessary emphasis on compliance over outcomes.
- 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;
- 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.

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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