



# Integrated Implementation of Nevada Literacy & Intervention Programs

## Executive Summary

The Nevada Legislature and Governor Brian Sandoval took bold steps during the 2015 Legislative session to make targeted investments to improve student achievement. Three of the major programs approved include Read by 3 (\$27 million), Zoom Schools (\$100 million), and Victory Schools (\$50 million). Each of these programs has a different emphasis: Read by 3 aims to ensure that all students read proficiently by grade 3; Zoom Schools target English Language Learners (ELLs); and Victory Schools focus on students living in poverty. However, these programs also share overlapping goals and will serve similar populations.

## Guiding Principles

To maximize the impact on student achievement, the Guinn Center for Policy Priorities recommends that policies implemented by the Nevada Department of Education (NDE), State Board of Education, and governing boards of school districts and charter schools follow five guiding principles:

1. Emphasize integrated implementation: The three programs should be viewed as integrated components of a comprehensive intervention strategy that utilizes all of the funding sources available at each school.
2. Align goals and metrics to the State Improvement Plan and the Nevada State Literacy Plan: These plans have been approved by the State Board of Education and should be used to ensure that all of Nevada's schools are working towards the same statewide policy goals.
3. Provide flexibility in use of funds: Policies and regulations approved by NDE and the State Board of Education should provide flexibility to school districts and charter schools in the use of funds to meet the unique needs of each school and to achieve program goals.
4. Minimize duplication of effort: Needs assessments and plans should be integrated into existing efforts. Uniform interim and summative assessments should be used to evaluate progress under all three programs.
5. Emphasize accountability across all levels: Accountability is integral to success at all levels, including schools, local governing boards, and the State.

## Recommendations

Using these guiding principles, this policy brief provides specific recommendations for policies being developed to implement these three initiatives. Key decisions for each program include determining:

- Read by 3: (1) how to integrate and align literacy plans into existing efforts; (2) how to standardize early literacy assessments; (3) how to prioritize funding for learning strategist positions; (4) how to define learning strategist duties and provide them with professional development; (5) how to create statewide outcome measures; and (6) how to implement third grade retention policies.
- Zoom Schools: (1) how to integrate funds into existing planning processes; (2) how to maximize flexibility of funds; (3) how to use funds for recruitment and retention of teachers; and (4) how to determine performance outcomes and provide support to help schools meet these outcomes.

- Victory Schools: (1) how to integrate needs assessments and plans into existing efforts; (2) how to coordinate administration of Victory Schools with Zoom Schools and Read by 3; (3) how to maximize flexibility of funds; (4) how to use funds for recruitment and retention of teachers; and (5) how to define measurable objectives, evaluate performance, and impose sanctions.

#### Implementation Challenges Ahead

There are several key challenges that school districts, charter schools, and NDE will face as implementation of these initiatives moves forward.

1. Short implementation timeline: School districts and charter schools face very short implementation timelines which makes it difficult to conduct in-depth needs assessments, critically evaluate why some past investments have not been successful, and design quality programs. It is also challenging to make investments that will be sustainable since funding for Zoom and Victory schools may not continue at the same level in future years.
2. Capacity to implement changes: Existing staff at school districts and charter schools have varying levels of capacity to implement transformative change. It will also likely be challenging for school districts and charter schools to implement plans in a timely manner due to inadequate staffing pipelines and limited availability of contract services.
3. Learning strategist impact on General Fund: There is limited Read by 3 grant funding available to fund the required learning strategist position at each elementary school. Because Federal funds cannot be used for this position due to supplanting restrictions, there could be a significant impact on the General Fund of school districts and charter schools.
4. State capacity for oversight: NDE has not previously provided oversight that emphasizes outcomes over compliance. The Department will need to build this capacity to ensure programs are implemented successfully.

#### How will the public know if these programs are successful?

Accountability is a central theme of these initiatives, with an independent evaluation required for each program. However, actually determining whether these programs have been successful will be challenging. First, the evaluation will only measure the impact of the first school year of these programs because results are needed by February 2017 when the next Legislative session begins. Some schools may not be able to implement initiatives at the beginning of the school year, so the results may not reflect the impact of a full year of interventions. In addition, many interventions will take several years to show an impact and this timeline does not allow schools to show longitudinal results.

Second, the independent evaluations will be challenging due to the lack of baseline data. Because of testing problems, 2015 Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) data is not available for reading and mathematics. However, baseline data is available for assessments of English language proficiency (WIDA assessments). Interim assessments can be used to assess gains in reading and math throughout the year but it is difficult to compare these results to prior years because the same assessments have not been used consistently from year to year. Interim assessment results will need to be compared to schools with similar demographics that did not receive funding in order to determine whether the interventions made a positive difference.

Ultimately, student achievement data from one year will be helpful to understand the impact of these initiatives, but longitudinal data tracking student performance on the SBAC will be more indicative of long term academic gains.