

## **A lack of accountability, not cash, is what ails the Clark County School District**

Robert Fellner

October 19, 2019

Nevada's education woes reflect a lack of accountability, not insufficient funding.

Nevada is projected to spend \$10,197 per student this school year, which reflects a near tripling in inflation-adjusted, per-pupil education spending since 1960.

Sadly, this dramatic increase in spending has not translated into improved results. Nevada schools consistently rank among the worst in the nation, with only 28 percent of eighth-grade students performing at grade level in both reading and math.

Some blame this continued failure on insufficient funding and argue that things won't get better unless Nevadans agree to pay substantially higher taxes.

But there is little evidence to support the claim that higher taxes and more spending will lead to better results. In fact, a recent study commissioned by the Legislature found that the amount Nevada currently spends — including both state and local expenditures — is already sufficient “to ensure all students can meet all state standards and requirements.”

Rather than seeking to burden Nevadans with a massive tax hike that is unlikely to boost performance, reformers should instead focus their efforts on addressing the root cause of the problem: the system's complete lack of accountability.

Take, for example, the so-called evaluation systems used by the Clark County School District.

More than 100 district schools have for years received failing grades from the state, including at least one school where an incomprehensible 99 percent of students are below grade level in math.

Yet in a twist that would make Orwell proud, school officials claim that the district hasn't had a single ineffective principal or administrator anywhere for at least the past four years (No bad principals in Clark County, evaluators say).

A similarly useless evaluation system is in place for teachers, which saw only 25 of the nearly 20,000 teachers evaluated, or 0.1 percent, rated as ineffective for the 2017-18 school year.

Such meaningless rubber stamps deprive parents of the information needed to help ensure their child receives the best education possible.

Unfortunately, this is what happens when education is provided through the political process: The priorities of adults are elevated over the needs of students.

The Nevada State Education Association, for example, opposes including any measure of student learning in teacher evaluations and has pledged to make the existing system even weaker. While

giving all employees a passing grade clearly helps the adults of the system, almost no one would seriously argue that such a policy reflects the best interests of students.

Government schools such as those in the Clark County School District can deprioritize the interests of the students they ostensibly exist to serve because of their tax-funded monopoly status, which shields them from the market-based mechanisms of choice and competition that would normally penalize such behavior.

In a market-based system, the fear of losing students incentivizes schools to improve performance through rigorous, meaningful evaluations of teachers and school leaders.

Perhaps the best example of this mechanism can be seen in the slums of India, where some of the world's poorest people choose to pay 5 to 15 percent of their yearly income to send their children to private school, rather than attending public school for free.

As documented by James Tooley in his seminal work, "The Beautiful Tree: A Personal Journey Into How the World's Poorest People are Educating Themselves," private school operators are entirely dependent on the quality of their teachers and thus must ensure they are performing up to expectations.

Contrast this with the incentives facing our local school district, which can use failing schools as evidence of the need for more funding, while simultaneously claiming that every employee at that school is an effective teacher, administrator and school leader.

The monopoly system also harms truly effective teachers and school leaders, who are denied the higher salaries they would otherwise be able to command in a market-based system, while encouraging waste and bloat on nonessential staff.

As scholars Phil Magness and Chris Surprenant observed in their recent essay for the peer-reviewed *Journal of Markets and Morality*, competition "plays an important role in keeping costs down, requiring schools to, for example, eliminate all nonessential administrators and nonteaching staff."

The experts contrast this with the 700 percent growth in administration and other non-teaching staff at public schools nationwide, a rate seven times greater than student enrollment, at a cost of \$23.4 billion over 17 years.

This explains why, despite receiving less funding, market-like education systems outperformed government schools in 33 of the 35 studies ever conducted on the topic, according to an analysis from the Cato Institute.

With spending at \$10,197 per student, the real problem facing Nevada's public schools stems from a lack of accountability, not insufficient funding.

Legislators can help promote accountability by restoring and expanding Nevada's Opportunity Scholarship Program. The program is supported by 68 percent of Nevadans and was helping more than 2,000 low-income, mostly minority children before Assembly Speaker Jason Frierson and his fellow Democrats decided to gut it during the last legislative session.

Much like the farcical evaluation systems in place at the Clark County School District, that policy decision also reflects politicians catering to needs of the adults in the system, rather than the children.