

Nevada Public Education News



Return on Investment – in the red

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The results of the semester exams in math in Clark County have not been released since the arrival of Superintendent Dwight Jones. From the information I have been able to garner, the pass rates on this past semester's exam for Algebra I approximates 10-15% on the multiple-choice part of the exam – not much of a return on investment.

The district, not the teachers and principals, are most responsible for this debacle. Because the superintendent, his former deputy and his 12 member Public Relations team ultimately put individual resumes ahead of the interest of students.

With the state's adoption of the common core standards, professional development for the district's middle and high school math teachers was scheduled to commence in February of last year (2012) and continue through this year. That on-going professional development would have provided teachers a more in-depth knowledge of the common core standards, addressed content, instructional and assessment strategies, and resources to support the content and strategies.

That professional development was cancelled. Why? Because the former deputy superintendent was more interested in building his resume, to get a promotion to a superintendent. It worked out for him – not the students in southern Nevada.

He cancelled the year-long plan so he could institute the "Beat the Heat" summer professional development plan. That plan had teachers come together for one week to receive professional development – but not just on the common core standards. The week's worth of professional development was split between the common core standards, diversity, school performance framework, and the growth model. Not a good start for implementing the common core.

The initial reports about the "Beat the Heat" summer program were very positive – a success story. The media, based on school district's PR Department, reported that approximately 6000 teachers participated in the program. That sounded reasonable to me since we have typically had that many or more teachers participate in professional development during the summer months.

As it turns out, the participants in this program were double, triple, and quadrupled counted. That means if a teacher attended for three days, they were counted as three people – must be the

new math. So, rather than having the 6000 participants that were reported, the number was probably closer to 1200.

And while reporting the numbers of participants was very misleading – actually downright deceitful - the story gets worse. The district spent between \$4 and \$5 million for this one week of training - *For one week!!* Now you know why the state superintendent has gone on record saying – “Use money wisely”. To put that amount into perspective, the Legislature sets aside approximately \$7 million per year for the entire state.

This example of waste of begins to explain why that unit’s budget was reportedly overspent by \$12 to \$15 million last year. According to sources, the district was able to move funds around this year to cover some of last year’s overspending. But the secondary principals have been asked to make up \$6.5 million in additional budget cuts this year the district could not cover. These school based cuts are on top of the cuts they already had to endure. Because the former deputy superintendent was prone to making a lot of screw-ups, he coined a phrase “lesson learned”. Which was his way of acknowledging a screw-up. The “lesson learned”, as I understand it, is the district won’t be doing that “Beat the Heat” thing again and the bank derisively named after him has been closed because of insolvency.

So while other states were clearly getting their teachers ready for the implementation of the common core last year, southern Nevada’s teachers were not. Instead they had the “opportunity” to explore these special projects of the district’s hierarchy such as the School Performance Framework. As I mentioned previously, the School Performance Framework (School Ranking by Stars) is in conflict with the state’s frameworks and will either be abandoned or modified greatly to be more consistent with the state model. You have to wonder about the return of investment on this endeavor. In fact, the bigger question is, why would the school district design a competing accountability program when the state was charged to design one in the first place?

The teachers also got the “opportunity” to learn more about the growth model and, of course, diversity. What they didn’t get in a timely manner was the knowledge they would need on the common core standards that would help their students succeed. There was not time to introduce some “best practices” on the new more rigorous content, instructional strategies to help make their students more successful. And, they didn’t get the resources they could have used in the classes to support the content and instructional strategies. They have teachers “springboarding” into an empty pool.

So, return on investment? The students certainly did not get a return on this district investment. They are being misplaced into classes so the schools can earn stars, they have overcrowded classrooms, and their teachers did not receive the training or materials they so desperately need to more successfully implement the common core standards.

The district, in its zeal to look good, continually places *form over substance*. The 12 member, million dollar, public relations team has redefined the term “spin”. The district has redefined “transparency”, and the only ones getting any return on the district’s investments are friends of central administrators coming from out of state who always seem to get paid more than people who happen to live here.

Without the transparency the district touts, one can only speculate about the graduation rates requested by the two newspapers, the actual percentage of students passing the multiple-choice part of the semester exams and the comparison of semester grades. The district prides itself on making decisions based on data they collect. We know they have the information. The data on these requests must be so bad that the district has made the decision not to release it because they don't want to answer questions on why teachers did not receive training.

The students will continue to feel this negative return on investment when they take the second semester exams in May and June.

While the district is out to impress the community with high profile, costly reforms, the students and the community would benefit greatly if more attention was focused on the common core standards and improved instruction that leads to higher achievement. Unfortunately, that work is not sexy or glitzy enough for the public relations minded administration.

The return on this investment, like some other recently adopted programs, seems to be written in red – monetarily and in student achievement - a negative return on investment.