

Nevada Public Education News



Talking Points ~

School district personnel have a new “talking points” memo – It states: ***“Please open any remarks in front of internal or external audiences with these points. They work in most any circumstance. Right at the top of your remarks, stop and say: before we launch into (topic) I’d like to take a moment and brief you about the recent departure of Dwight Jones and how we are moving forward as a leadership team and community.”***

Apparently, even as the new superintendent was leaving, he and the people he brought in and temporarily leaving behind want to ensure nobody finds out the mess he’s leaving and how he’s doing it right in the middle of a Legislative session.

So let’s take a look at some of these accomplishments (reforms): According to the Clark County Association of School Administrators (CCASA) he created, not filled vacancies, with over 40 new administrative positions. The list and date of board approval of the positions will be attached at the end of this article. So, while classrooms were overfilled, every time someone sneezed at the central office, it seemed like they were hiring someone to bring them Kleenex.

The creating of new positions has slowed since the administrators’ association started to complain publicly that the new administration was hiring “friends” from out of state at higher rates than educators who lived in Nevada. Since that was reported in the RJ, it caused a pause in that practice.

This was occurring at a time when he continually berated the teachers’ union about griping about class size, lack of supplies and for not allowing cuts in pay. Now you know why teachers are unhappy.

But the district was able to hire his “buddies” and friends of buddies. He has a couple of special assistants – one being paid \$250,000 per year who was responsible for the district’s failed school performance framework. A great deal of time, money and training went into this system which seemed to be built to hide the truth about school performance. A story in the RJ showed the skepticism of that system from a national perspective. We looked stupid. Now, he will continue to earn over \$20,000.00 per month – doing what???

With all these hires, consultants and his former supervisors working in the district providing administrative training, not to mention his wife working in the Turnaround Schools Zone, we

were well on the way to becoming a mini-Chicago.

And now we have some governance issues as well. An individual trustee does not have the authority to go out into the schools and give district employees direction – the trustees know this! But, people who have helped raise money for the superintendent via foundations or fund raising have inserted themselves into the district and used that relationship with the superintendent to push their own agendas at the school and district level. The school trustees must put a stop to that practice immediately. Having moneyed access for the privileged is unfair and is a recipe for disaster. You might remember the superintendent got caught misleading the trustees about these very people when first hired.

I was in a meeting with Superintendent Rulffes a few years back, when these people tried to tie personal access from their fund raising or foundations, Rulffes told them straight out that if those were conditions for receiving the money, they could leave. It doesn't feel like this superintendent heeded that kind of good sense. The board should make it clear that this moneyed access stops today!

But the new superintendent did create a 12-person, million dollar, public relations department to create an illusion of positive things happening. That Chief was, no doubt, involved in creating the talking points now being distributed.

When the superintendent first arrived, he contracted, among others, an \$850,000.00 study of the district – almost a million dollars - the Gibson Report. You'd think after spending so much trying to make the previous administrations look bad, he would have acted on some recommendations. One of "their" more prominent findings was that district personnel worked in independent silos - the left hand did not know what the right hand was doing. I thought it was an exaggeration, but working more closely with other departments did not seem wrong. But, under Dwight, he tried to perfect that system - the silos grew larger and geographically further apart.

As examples, the district bought a new "researched based" math program last year. The district's own math people were never asked to review the program before it was initially purchased. When brought to the superintendent's attention, he responded by saying if the curriculum people don't like it, they can leave. There are all kinds of issues with this program – that will be a separate story by itself.

The district also purchased a testing program, again not bothering to check with its' own people who work in the content area being tested. Yep, more problems! Now, high schools are no longer "required" to use it. How do we spell wasting resources? Yep, looks like silos too!

The new, improved standards based report card that was introduced with a lot of fanfare last year was quietly dropped after first semester this year. A great deal of time, training and money was wasted there too – focus being taken away from classroom instruction.

You might remember in his first year how much was made in the media of cutting the levels of bureaucracy, well that did not last long. The position(s) eliminated below the deputy superintendent were brought back in September – I guess they forgot to notify the media. In

addition, the district has gone from seven academic managers (used to be called assistant sups) to twenty. And people wonder why the teachers union complained.

Seeing the waste in district spending and how our schools seemed to be shortchanged in funding, many employees did not publicly support the bond issue thinking that money would be wasted too. The bond failed – students will suffer.

So, while all the doublespeak was bothersome, misleading, and deceitful, the “topper” was when students were deliberately misplaced into programs or classes where they would clearly not succeed because they did not possess the foundational skills. For me, this was setting students up to fail in classes like math, learn to hate math, and never be able to do well because they did not acquire the skills necessary to be successful.

The superintendent liked to talk about increasing standards – rigor. Students would be placed into honors type classes so the schools could earn “stars”. Remember, stars were awarded for enrollment, not student performance. When misplaced students failed those “more rigorous” classes, the students would be shipped to credit retrieval programs. Those programs were about granting credit, not getting a good education. The retrieval programs were not based on the common core standards so these students were receiving an inferior education. This practice allowed the superintendent to then tout “graduation” rate increases, the students end up paying the price. Rigor? Not for these kids. – Just more doublespeak.

Since the new superintendent continually touted “transparency”, we found it meant only if it means it made his administration look good. When asked for the semester exam results, semester grades, and graduation rates of the Turnaround Schools by the media, the District response was that the law did not command releasing that information.

The district poured money into “turnaround” schools. Each high school received about three-quarters of a million dollars to hire out of state consulting firms. Nice contracts if you have nice contacts. What this administration has failed to realize is that tax money is tax money. It’s not free just because it comes from the federal government – the money still comes out of our pockets.

Now we know why, since teachers and administrators were getting pulled from their jobs to attend training on his failed school performance framework initiative, growth model, and diversity, little things like training teachers on what they teach, how they teach it and how to assess it were overshadowed resulting in less than 10% of the high school students taking algebra I passing the semester exam. Again, students pay the price.

And then there’s the claim that we are the fastest improving district in the nation. Wow, talk about doublespeak.

My guess is these “talking points” might differ from the District’s talking points. So under his leadership, growth in central administration exploded, his friends got sizeable contracts at higher rates. Bigger silos were built further apart than ever before, teachers have endured pay cuts and other employees pay freezes, the bond failed, the implementation of the new standards were

delayed, locals with moneyed access think they run the district, students are failing and being pushed into high school drop-out like factory credit retrieval programs, and most employees don't trust central administration or the trustees who have been gulping down the proverbial Kool-aid and not providing oversight. The good news: this community received a great lesson in how to BS and a 12-person, million dollar, PR Department to spread the manure.

In a nutshell, the district is in the worst shape I have ever seen it. The new interim superintendent has his hands full. And, rather than spending time defending the now former superintendent's work product, we should be moving forward concentrating on "what we are going to do to help our children learn" – not building resumes.