

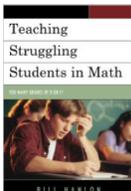
Nevada Public Education



New Superintendent Should Come From Secondary Ranks

Bill Hanlon

Clark County's new superintendent should come from secondary education – preferably someone who has had experience in high schools.



No one should doubt there are major cultural differences between elementary and high schools. Those differences can be attributed to the very make-up of the schools.

In elementary schools, schools are typically much smaller, offer little variation in subject matter offerings, elementary principals have typically taught a number of grades they will supervise which results in their expertise in elementary education, instructional and assessment strategies, teachers have smaller classes and are with the same students almost the entire day resulting in tighter bonds with students. Teachers are responsible for approximately 30 students. Because the students are much younger, parents take their kids to school and are more apt to know their child's teacher and that increases parental involvement. The schedule is flexible, teachers can change the time they spend on subjects based on perceived student needs. Most parents also have the background to help their students learn at home.

Many of the issues that confront education, the dropout rate for instance, might have their origins in elementary education, but they manifest themselves in the secondary schools. Whether it's students not knowing how to read or knowing their basic arithmetic facts and procedures, those problems create all kinds of issues for those students as they progress through grade levels.

In contrast to an elementary school principal's experience, high schools are much larger, offer a great variation in subject matter offerings and programs, secondary principals have not had the luxury of teaching almost everything taught at their schools, they don't know instructional or assessment strategies for the courses being offered, class sizes are much larger, and students are not with the teacher all day, they typically see teachers for approximately 50 minutes per day, so those nice, caring bonds are more difficult to craft. The schedules are more rigid and can't be changed to accommodate daily or weekly needs. Rather than being responsible for 30 students per day, high school teachers are responsible for 180-200 students per day. And because the students are in their mid-teens, parents don't take them to school. And, it goes without saying, most parents cannot help their students with learning once the students hit classes like algebra, geometry, biology, chemistry or physics.

While little kids can be defiant, as students get bigger, so do their problems. Their environments, ability to find trouble, also expands greatly.

The problem with superintendents whose experiences come from elementary schools is they try to implement elementary strategies in the high schools that are just out of whack for secondary schools. We saw repeatedly with former CCSD superintendent Dwight Jones, his inexperienced deputy Martinez, and his \$240,000.00/year consultant Turner.

One example of an unrealistic strategy put in place during the Jones administration was having teachers' write a weekly intervention plan for each student. That just sounds great and might work very well when a teacher has only 30 students they see all day and can adjust their schedule. How does that work for teachers serving 200 students per day for only fifty minutes?

So, at a time we are trying to recruit better teachers to teach struggling students, we reward them by giving them additional paperwork which takes time away from what made them successful teachers in the first place – planning. After creating frustration, morale issues and havoc, the elementary strategy was dropped in secondary schools. That central office had no clue that most of the students with deficiencies had the same teachers trying to address them. A tremendous burden on those teachers and no burden on teachers teaching honors classes – clueless.

My point is that while many of the problems might originate in elementary schools, they truly manifest themselves and have to be addressed at the high school level since graduation rates are the “new” metric being used to determine schools' success. Superintendents not having those high school experiences places student success in their district in jeopardy because of a basic lack of understanding of the cultural differences between elementary and secondary education.

Here's the unfortunate position we find ourselves. Our community and business leaders judge the value of a superintendent on their own networking and friendships. I would not be surprised to learn that our own trustees don't know the differences in the elementary and secondary worlds of education. What I do know is “*what works is work*” at any level – not some glitzy program. And that work happens in the classroom.

Well managed classrooms with well-prepared teachers results in better instructional practices and increased student achievement. Anything, any program, taking away from that preparation should be re-evaluated.

From the state level in Nevada, we have seen a proliferation of programs under this administration. Why are we as a state “whiffing” in education? Why are we dead last? The answer is simple enough, programs are only as good as the teachers using them. Nevada, with a \$1/2 Billion increase in taxes, did nothing to invest in teachers. How could the governor increase taxes that amount, have the state experience a severe teacher shortage, and not address it in his budget?

Let's hope that people involved in the superintendent search do more than brag about their involvement. Let's hope they understand there is a difference between candidates' backgrounds and how that might address how they approach issues confronting education.

Personally, I'd like to see a superintendent hired that is more than a PR person for the district, a person that stays home, so to speak, to work on issues. I'd like to see a superintendent that regularly discusses “current” student achievement openly at board meetings; grade distributions, state and national test scores, discrepancies in those, and what schools are doing to ensure all students have

qualified teachers and the resources to address students that don't - a superintendent that focuses on our students' experiences learning in the classroom.

Wouldn't be nice if we hired a superintendent that concentrated on ensuring students qualified teachers, students had better access to their teachers by lowering class sizes, that they knew the importance of teachers' professional knowledge and concentrated on professional development, and knew that competing for the nation's best teachers means we have to pay competitive salaries, and students had resources that help them learn. Not too sexy, is it?

Oh, that's right, before Jones and the Gibbons-Sandoval administrations, we did have superintendents focused on students' classroom experiences. And their work resulted in the Clark County School District being recognized nationally as the fastest improving district in the nation. Why did we get off that train?

Bill Hanlon, is a noted speaker, an author, educator, consultant and coach for schools, former Director of the Southern Nevada Regional Professional Development Program, and is a national presenter for organizations such as AASA, ASCD, ALAS, NMSA, NASSP, NSBA, and NCTM. He was the coordinator of Clark County School District's Math/Science Institute and was also responsible for K-12 math audits. He served as vice president of the Nevada State Board of Education, Regional Director of the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) and as a member of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) States Partnership Board. He also hosted a television series, "Algebra, *you can do it!*" on PBS Las Vegas.

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