

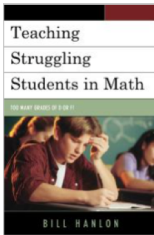
Nevada Public Education



Nevada Students – Up Against a Wall

Bill Hanlon

The Gibbons–Sandoval administrations’ policies and regulations have placed Nevada’s educational system at the bottom nationally. Those administrations, along with past local superintendents, consistently confused “activity with “achievement”, that resulted in NV students now being ranked at the bottom in the country when just over ten years ago we were being recognized nationally as the fastest improving district in the nation.



Legislators need to investigate, direct or create bills to address issues caused by the state that take away from educational experiences of our students in the classroom. – leaving them up against the proverbial wall. For legislators

looking for bills, here are some starting points.

1. There should be little doubt that our students’ classroom teacher(s) have the greatest impact on their learning experiences in the classroom. Nevada has had, and continues to have, a shortage of qualified math teachers. To address this, the state has decreased the requirements to enter the profession and the coursework requirement to remain in teaching – relicensing. That’s the exact opposite of what should be done. Research as far back as the 70’s and 80’s, as well as recent research, strongly connects that students of teachers with actual backgrounds in math out-perform students of teachers that are not trained in mathematics. Students deserve qualified teachers.
2. Class size affects what teachers can accomplish. A recent study found that Nevada has the highest student-teacher ratios in the country. Since the new standards stupidly require all students to take Alg I, Alg II, and Geometry (college prep curriculum) whether they have the necessary skills or not, placing them in classrooms with 40 or more students. These class sizes don’t help struggling students or their teachers and results in an increase in the number of struggling students because they are not getting the attention they need to be successful.
3. Nevada’s “teacher evaluation” system is another bad joke that leaves the students in a lurch. What studies indicate is that secondary principals do not have the background to provide recommendations to teachers that improve math instruction – especially at the secondary level. How would principals with a social studies or liberal arts background even know if the math instruction they were observing was being taught correctly, what examples to use, how to connect that learning to previous learning or outside experiences or how those concepts and

skills will be used in later learning? To improve instruction, to increase student learning, a person with a “real” math background should be part of the evaluation process to ensure student experiences in the classroom are maximized by having actual math recommendations being made that increase student understanding and comfort levels in math.

4. School and classroom safety are issues of great concern to students, parents and the community. A lack of consequences has consequences. With the push to increase graduation rates, the state has pushed policies and regulations that place good kids just trying to get an education in harms’ way. Students whose interest is “gaming” the system – not getting a good education, subtract from students who are there to learn. Between the “no fail” and “keeping criminals in schools” policies to increase graduation rates, troublemakers, students who regularly disrupt and distract classroom education and/or cause difficulty outside the classroom remain in school and place other students’ safety and education in jeopardy.

5. Re-licensure, not only are we not getting qualified math teachers up front because of the teacher shortage, the state, rather than requiring expertise in the field teachers are teaching require teachers to take classes sponsored by special interest groups. So rather than have underqualified teachers in math take math classes for re-licensure, they are required to take classes in “family engagement” and “ELL”. Those classes clearly don’t help students taking math in our schools where Nevada is ranked dead last on the ACT.

6. Professional development has also become a joke and is deliberately being confused with training. As with re-licensure, most parents would probably believe that teachers receiving professional development are receiving it in the field they teach – like math. Not true for a few of reasons; A. teachers don’t have to take classes in the field they teach. B. Training on programs has been mislabeled in NV as professional development. Professional development should be based on what teachers teach, how they teach and assess it with other embedded strategies. Much of teacher training is on products and services purchased by the state, district or school. And C. The state consistently gives professional development funding to friends in non-profits that pay their CEO’s back east in excess of \$400,000.00 per year. And we wonder why students have trouble in classes like math.

7. Do teachers need resources for their classrooms? Like class sizes and the teacher shortage, Nevadans have all come to accept the unacceptable. We know that teachers are spending their own dollars to help students learn. Students don’t have books, paper, pencils, ink for their printers, etc. What’s up with that? Does that really reflect our attitudes in education – we either don’t care or ignore the obvious? Those resources are meant to help students learn.

8. The state’s testing program fiasco continues. Wouldn’t it be nice if we told teachers and students up front what we expect them to know, recognize, understand, communicate and be able to do and then, hold on, test them on that information? That transparency leads to credibility, which in turn leads to trust. The state has failed that transparency test while literally wasting millions of dollars and costing students hundreds of hours of instruction each year while teachers are trying to “guess” how questions might be asked on a test. Why is testing in NV such a big secret? I’m guessing the state knows if the exams were to be made public, they would lose support immediately. If parents, students, and teachers are not able to view practice tests and materials like they can on exams like the ACT, SAT, AP, GMAT, LSAT or civil service exams,

then we should not support that testing or allow our students to take them. Under Sandoval's administration, the state dropped the high school proficiency exams required for graduation, replaced them with "end-of-year" exams that were never implemented, then dropped as a graduation requirement, and now want to use those secret exams to impact student grades earned in classrooms. That's just "dum" dumb.

9. The state has been able to get away with a lot of nonsense because they have successfully confused the public into mistaking "activity" for "achievement". If you talk to people at the Nevada Department of Education or the State Board of Education, they will run off a litany of new programs they have implemented. When talking with these people, the question that you should be asking is "how has all that helped my child learn in the classroom?" Our educational ranking suggests those programs kept "state people" busy, building personal resumes, creating networking buddies, all while costing our students a good education. NV's educational rank is testimony to these follies.

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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