

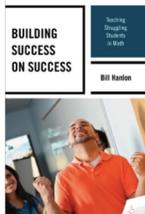
# Nevada Public Education



## *Set Up to Fail*

*Bill Hanlon*

Success of any program depends upon the foundation in which it is built. In secondary math, the foundational class, the gateway class, is recognized as first year algebra. Students' success in that class allows them to succeed in subsequent math classes as well as in science classes, such as chemistry and physics.



There is new evidence that suggests that the popular assertion that placing students who are not ready for algebra into algebra will result in increased achievement is just plain wrong.

State and local superintendents have and continue to use this assertion as their call for higher standards that they built into their resume. Teachers of math knew from the onset, this was folly.

To be sure, we have students entering high school who do not have the knowledge or skills to be successful in Algebra I. We know that students who struggle in first year algebra not only fail that class but also results in them ending up hating math and performing poorly in later classes. Those students need assistance. They don't need a soundbite about "increased rigor". They need action that will place them on a path to be successful in math. They need a class that addresses their weaknesses so they can move on successfully.

Automatically placing ninth grade students in an algebra class is a recipe for failure. When the district administered semester exams in math a few years ago, the results were horrible. So, rather than fix the problem, they stopped reporting the scores, then dropped the exams entirely.

According to the common core standards the state adopted, students are supposed to be proficient in whole number operations, fractions, decimals, ratio and proportion and integers before they take algebra.

What happens to students who do not meet those qualifications in ninth grade? The “Calculus by Grade 3” folks dismiss the needs of these students and place them in algebra anyway. That’s just not fair to those students, it sets them up to fail.

These misplacements also negatively impact students who are ready for the more abstract concepts in algebra. They are not getting the rigorous course they need to be successful in college. Having unprepared students in an algebra class slows the class down, causes frustration for underperforming students, which often results in the content being watered down as well as increased behavioral issues. And those issues are further amplified because we don’t have qualified, experienced math teachers teaching algebra classes because of the teacher shortage. Being ranked dead last of the ACT is not acceptable.

Let’s stop posturing and address student needs. Better placement, offering a pre-algebra class or an algebra class for non-math and science majors in high school is a no-brainer. Let’s prioritize student needs above resumes and posturing of adults. Let’s set students up for success, then build on that success.

**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 on 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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