

Nevada Public Education



Decades Old Bad Decisions Continue to Plague Our Students

Bill Hanlon

How did we get here? The simple answer, decisions were made that did not prioritize students' classroom learning experiences.



Yesterday's poor decisions often limit our options to fix issues today. That has certainly been true in Nevada. A string of bad decisions continues to plague our educational system by having our future options limited by past decisions.

Just looking at a few of them strongly suggests why our students lag in achievement and our schools continue to struggle.

With Nevada's growth spurt beginning in the 80's, the district needed more seats for students. The question, the argument, build larger schools at a cost saving or build regular size schools. The research, then and now, smaller schools and smaller class sizes were in the best interest of students. The district went large.

Having school populations that are two and three times than the average size of a school provides too many opportunities for students to fall through the cracks, puts too many students in a high density setting that results in anonymity, less achievement, and greater safety concerns.

Along with that growth and money being an issue on how to attract and retain teachers, the school district moved funds around and began the practice of balancing the budget by seemingly increasing class sizes almost annually. Nevada has been identified as having the highest student-teacher ratios in the country. In 1985, the average size of an algebra class was approximately 25 students. Today, many first-year algebra classes have over 40 students in them. Because of that student-teacher ratio, the class climate is sometimes more about crowd control than learning.

With the hiring of Superintendent Jones, his deputy Martinez, and outside consultant Turner, the district made the decision to play “money-ball” with teachers. That is, rather than hire the best teachers available, they would hire new teachers who cost less and/or outsource to other organizations to keep costs down. Research suggests that it takes between seven and twelve years of experience to reach the peak of teaching profession. Too many of the hires since that decision leave well before five years. Research and common sense suggests having well-qualified, experienced teachers is in the best interest of students. Deliberately hiring inexperienced and underqualified has and had an immediate and long-term negative impact on students and their ability to learn and be safe at school.

Adding to “moneyball” approach, Jones deemphasized professional development in the content areas and stopped reporting common semester exam scores followed by Skorkowski eliminating them altogether – supposedly because the district could not afford to fix the machine that grades them. Eliminating the district’s common semester has a tendency to eliminate a uniform curriculum which places students in difficult situations when moving from school to school.

Knowing there was, and is, a teacher and substitute shortage, Governor Sandoval and State Board of Education exacerbated the problem by redirecting professional development funding at the state level to the politically connected when the new math and ELA standards were being implemented. With the number of under-qualified hires, the shortage itself, too many teachers did not receive the assistance in content they teach, instructional & assessment strategies, or resources that would assist them in their daily instruction. New teachers were pretty much on their own, experienced teachers were not aware of changes in the curriculum. Test scores reflected that within two years. Not investing in teachers is a very sad commentary and set our students up to fail.

Adding to these issues were postponement of facility repairs and updates that has resulted in students sitting in sweltering or freezing classrooms depending upon the time of year and sometimes the time of day. These issues impact students’ attention and achievement, and increases the price tag to address the facility concerns later.

Then when the Nevada Legislature could have addressed the problems in the Clark County School District by dividing the district up around municipalities; Boulder City, Mesquite, Laughlin, North Las Vegas, Las Vegas, etc., they dropped the ball and went for a “reorganization” that clearly looks like all the other reorganizations I have seen under every new superintendent. Rather than seeing how making smaller districts, the national model, would help in competition, community

involvement, and new ideas and less of an ability to hide poorly performing personnel or funds, the legislators concentrated on the obstacles – not the solutions.

These previous decisions have impacted what we are doing today, since those decisions are in place, that results in not being able to make the most optimal decisions for our students today.

Those decisions cost students, the Clark County School District went from the fastest improving district in the nation a decade ago to where we are now. Our students continue to pay the price for these bad decisions.

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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