

Supporting Underperforming Schools in the New Nevada

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When I came to the Department of Education, one of the first initiatives we launched was to help our school districts and charter schools tackle chronic underperformance. I benefitted from work with WestEd and the University of Virginia Darden School of Business on the topic early in my tenure and we have realigned resources around this important function. Last fall, the State Board of Education also took up the topic and expressed strong support for fully implementing a measure that will make a difference for students – including use of the provisions related to differentiated supports and interventions provided in the Nevada School Performance Framework for one- and two-star schools.

In his State of the State Address and the recently submitted Executive Budget, Governor Sandoval took this effort to the next level. Recognizing that chronic underperformance stands in the way of too many students reaching what he calls the “New Nevada,” the Governor announced that the Department has aggregated all forms of reporting underperformance into a single list. This list, which is a current snapshot based on the existing data sets approved for this kind of reporting, includes 78 schools. This list is available on the Department’s website.

Our first task is to help these schools improve. The Department’s Office of Student and School Support has the primary responsibility for this task, working with other Department Offices and all stakeholders. We have introduced Senate Bill 77 to bolster this effort and federal resources will be applied as they are available.

The Governor’s Budget will provide \$10 million in “turnaround grants” for the Department to use in supporting underperforming district and charter schools. Currently, the only funding for such schools is provided by the federal government. These funds will be used for vendor contracts, performance management assessment, staff incentives, and other services targeting student achievement in the lowest performing schools.

The Governor also provides funding for Zoom Schools and Grants targeting English language learners and for Victory Schools targeting poverty in the poorest zip codes in Nevada. We know that both these populations can often be found in underperforming schools, so these funds will be of tremendous help.

Our goal is that schools exit underperforming status as soon as possible. Should that fail, the Governor has called for the creation of an Achievement School District, modeling on the New Orleans Recovery District, here in Nevada. A bill is currently being drafted in the Assembly; we are assisted in this work by former Washoe County Superintendent Pedro Martinez and some national experts. (Pedro will work with us through June 2015, but has no plans to remain as the permanent leader of the new Achievement District.)

If the new district comes to pass, we expect that the State Board will declare approximately 10 percent of the 78 underperforming schools to be eligible for management in the new district. These schools would then come under State management by charter schools and/or charter management organizations. This will not happen until July 2016, at the earliest.

The work of turning around failing schools is hard and requires new ways of thinking, collaboration, and additional resources. The Governor, State Board, and Department staff are committed to all three. I hope you will join us in supporting this work on behalf of our most vulnerable children.