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Hello, I am Senator Mo Denis, Majority Leader of the Nevada State Senate.

I appreciate the opportunity to give the response to Governor Sandoval's State of the State speech.

On behalf of Speaker Kirkpatrick and myself, I wish to welcome the new members of the Nevada Legislature. This upcoming session will include one of the biggest changes to our legislature in the history of our state.

We thank the new members for committing their skills and time to our citizen legislature.

Additionally, we wish to thank Governor Sandoval for his open door policy as Speaker Kirkpatrick and I transition as the new leaders of the Nevada Legislature.

We agree with the Governor on many issues, and we share his deep concern for the well being of Nevada's citizens. We are thankful for his integrity and commitment to working together to solve our problems.

This year we lost two stalwarts from our legislature. Assemblywoman Gene Segerblom passed away recently and earlier this year we lost Senator Bill Raggio. I am humbled and honored to serve in his footsteps, and will work hard to continue Senator Raggio's legacy of fighting for Nevadans. We will miss Gene and Bill terribly.

I also want to take a moment to thank the many brave members of our Armed Services. I'm proud Nevada is home to so many world class military institutions like Nellis Air Force Base and Fallon Naval Air Station. I also wish to thank the members of our legislature who have served in our Armed Forces.

As Nevadans, we share a common desire to make our lives better for ourselves and for our families and neighbors. We have struggled together; yet continue to help one another, as we strive to achieve the American dream.

Like many of my fellow citizen legislators, I never planned on becoming a public servant. In fact I am the son of Cuban immigrants who came to this great land of opportunity to better provide for their family.

My parents instilled in me a great love for this great country but also for this wonderful state. I serve because I feel a debt for all the marvelous blessings that

have been given to my family and me.

As a father, I became involved in my community after my first child was born. My early involvement included working with the PTA, where I first met Speaker Kirkpatrick, who was also involved in the PTA.

We both had the opportunity to meet with parents, teachers and business leaders who wanted to make things better for our children; we wanted to help transform our education system. The biggest concern amongst parents then, as it is now, is the education of our children.

During the 2011 session, Governor Sandoval proposed significant amounts of cuts to our schools. This year he is promising the world, but his policies won't change our schools soon enough.

His plan fails at providing immediate relief to our middle class families.

A quality education and paying their fair share are two of the biggest issues facing our middle class, and yet our schools are not providing the tools our children need to succeed and the middle class are asked to pay more than their fair share to support our state's budget.

What's worse, with very little new revenue, we don't know how the Governor plans to pay for these expenditures while cutting taxes. Let me be clear, the Governor is proposing to cut taxes on 2,700 businesses in the state while raising the sales tax on middle class families.

We disagree with this approach. It places more of the burden on middle-class families while giving businesses even more generous tax breaks.

Tonight, we also heard from the Governor about the graduating class of 2023.

What about the graduating class of 2015?

Middle class families need immediate relief, not long term promises. The Governor's budget isn't going to help kids like my son, who's forced to sit in a crowded classroom, where his teacher is dividing her attention between 35 students.

Also, our schools need to be fully funded before we start subsidizing private schools.

While we agree with the Governor that it is irresponsible to just throw money at our schools and hope for the best, we must make a bigger investment in our children's futures by implementing educational policies and programs that have proven to improve student's proficiency and graduation rates today and not just kick the can down the road for two more years.

Since 1990, our graduation rates have dropped almost 20.7%. Our students rank below national average for proficiency in reading and math and below regional states.

We have seen tremendous gains in proficiencies over the last few years but we have a long way to go. Some students in Clark County high schools are sitting on the floor because of excessive class sizes.

Governor Sandoval's proposed "modest" increase in education spending from last year is not sufficient to make up the hundreds of millions of cuts that have been made over the last four years. This is unacceptable, not just to our current students but to the future of our state.

Democrats in the Assembly and Senate are proposing a series of policies that have proven to effectively improve our educational system. We are proposing the following:

1. Implement a pre-k system for all at-risk students.
2. Fund a full-day kindergarten in all public schools.
3. Smaller class sizes.
4. End social promotion before the 3rd grade.
5. Change the k-12 funding formula.

These proposals are common sense solutions that need to be implemented now and not phased in over several years. Our students, our families, and our businesses have waited long enough.

We are committed to continuing to work with the Governor and our colleagues in both houses and parties to build a better Nevada. It is the fair thing to do for our students and for our middle class families.

Improving our schools is key to creating new jobs right in Nevada. All Nevadans win when our kids succeed. Schools are the incubators that will help bring the high tech and biotech jobs of the future.

In 2011, the Governor stated that he doesn't believe it is government's responsibility to create jobs. We agree, it is government's responsibility to create an environment in which jobs and businesses flourish.

We are told that taxes are too high and thus, stifle job growth. I agree, taxes are too high on the middle class and poor. Yet, other states in the Western United States have higher tax rates and have seen larger job growth.

Last year Nevada created less than 20,000 new jobs.

By comparison, Utah created 41,000 jobs, California created almost 400,000, Arizona nearly 53,000 and almost 54,000 new jobs were created in Colorado.

Again, it goes back to education. Job creators see the quality of the schools in those states and have chosen to relocate there. To maintain our status quo and only invest a modest amount more in education is troubling, given what other states are doing.

Nevada will continue to fail its residents if we don't compete in our investment in education and economic development. Too many Nevadans are still unemployed and too many homes are still being foreclosed upon.

Democrats and Republicans must move beyond political rhetoric aimed at winning the next election and instead, think outside of the box in order to create more jobs and growth here in Nevada. We must work together to find solutions.

Better schools grow and bring better jobs. There is no getting around this fact. High tech, engineering, computer science and biotech industries are the good paying jobs of the future that require a world-class education and there is no reason we should shrink from that challenge.

I join my colleagues in the Assembly in saying we must create short-term solutions and create a long-term vision for economic development in Nevada.

Our colleagues in the Assembly Democratic Caucus released their jobs plan, "Nevada Jobs First", and I will be working with them, to pass these common sense proposals, aimed at providing immediate relief to our working families.

- They have proposed giving contractor-bidding preferences as long as their materials and workers come from Nevada.
- We can also work to team up business with the state's higher education system and invest in programs that train the types of workers our Economic Development office has determined we need.

While Nevada remains one of the great tourist destinations in the world, we can no longer expect to sustain a vibrant future by asking resorts to provide all the jobs and revenue for our state. It is irresponsible to do so.

A strong health care system also creates a good environment for job growth, and we applaud the Governor's decision to expand Medicaid in Nevada, under President Obama's Affordable Care Act.

The Silver State Exchange will help improve the lives of the disadvantaged, and we commend the Governor on his leadership in moving this forward.

We also need to ensure we have a dedicated public workforce – and while we applaud the governor's proposed reductions in furloughs, it restores less than one-fourth of their pay and benefits. We can't continue to ask our employees to

do more with less, or else we risk our ability to recruit and retain our valuable public employees.

One of our greatest responsibilities as a society is to protect our most vulnerable.

Yet, the Governor's policies have been devastating to families with children with autism or mental and physical disabilities. Senior citizens have seen their services cut as well.

We cannot provide the services necessary for our vulnerable populations if we do not adequately fund social services.

Again, middle class families were hurt by these cuts and will continue to suffer. Middle class families rely on these social services to help their special-needs children, to help their parents as they age and to assist our veterans as they transition to civilian life.

Additionally, we must make a greater effort increasing our standard of ethics for political candidates and elected officials. We will work together with Republicans to create solutions and restore citizen's trust in their government.

Tonight you have heard many ideas about what we would like to see done differently here in Nevada. Throughout the legislative session, Speaker Kirkpatrick and I will be introducing a series of proposals designed to "Build a Better Nevada."

Our goal is to introduce common sense solutions to our many problems. We hope the Governor and our Republican colleagues can join us in supporting our policies of investing in education, economic development, funding of social services and ethics reform.

But we cannot implement these plans on the backs of the middle class.

Nor can we ask tourists and our resort industry to pay more for these investments.

We cannot ask our small businesses to stretch resources any further.

Tough choices will have to be made over the next several months and we hope our colleagues will forgo political rhetoric and support policies that move Nevada forward.

The Assembly and State Senate received a mandate this year from the public. The public is tired of the policies and politics of the past and want to see increased investment in our schools and new policies that promote economic development.

My family moved to Nevada when I was young because this was the land of opportunity. Anyone could move here and find a good job to provide for their family. Nevada became home to immigrants from other countries and also, from

other parts of our great nation. Nevada became home to hundreds of thousands who wanted a new life.

We must continue to work towards making Nevada the state of opportunity. In the last decade, thousands flocked here in hopes of a better life and it is incumbent upon us to provide their families with the ability to achieve their dreams.

We must begin today towards building a better Nevada, so that our families and children can once again view this great state as a land of opportunity.

Thank you for your time and may God continue to bless the great state of Nevada.