

May 19, 2015

Testimony before the Assembly Committee on Education

Prepared Statement of the Kenny Guinn Center for Policy Priorities

Introduction

In February 2015, the Guinn Center (in collaboration with Nevada Succeeds) published a report titled, *Examining Nevada's Education Priorities: Which Initiatives are Worth the Investment?*, in which we examined the Victory Schools proposal and its potential impact on student outcomes. Based on our findings, we offer the following for consideration.

Nexus Between Poverty and Student Achievement

The Victory Schools proposal would target funding towards schools with high numbers of pupils living in poverty and performing low academically. Nevada data shows a strong nexus between poverty and student achievement. (See Guinn Center for Policy Priorities *Literacy Challenges in Nevada Schools*, March 2014.)

- Average Free and Reduced Lunch rate (FRL) at proposed Victory Schools- 86 percent
- Average reading proficiency rate at proposed Victory Schools- 46.5 percent
- Average math proficiency rate at proposed Victory Schools- 43.3 percent

Interventions Can Improve Student Achievement

Any effort to improve student achievement in literacy should focus on research-based practices. Findings from a comprehensive review of studies of interventions for struggling readers identified the following best practices:

- Cooperative learning is a particularly effective classroom instruction model, where students work in teams of four to five to help each other learn academic content;
- Professional development is key to ensuring quality instruction;
- One-to-one tutoring is very effective in improving reading performance;
- Tutoring models that focus on phonics obtain much better outcomes than others;
- Teachers are more effective than paraprofessionals and volunteers as tutors; and
- Small-group, phonetic tutorials can be effective, but are not as effective as one-to-one phonetically-focused tutoring.

Need for Flexibility and Accountability

- Victory Schools should have the flexibility to use funds to meet the needs of individual students using evidence-based practices.
- Under SB 432, the majority of funds must be used for a list of seven authorized uses and the remaining funds can be used for four other uses. Making this list of uses more flexible would help ensure the needs of individual students are met.
- Strong accountability provisions should be put in place and programs should be regularly evaluated. Best practices for accountability include:
 - Greater emphasis on teacher quality and effectiveness;
 - Comprehensive integration between the school budget and the goals in the School Performance Plan;
 - Technical assistance to assess and select research-based programs, develop goals, benchmarks and intervention plans, and manage program funds and accountability measures;
 - Oversight by an external entity [Nevada Department of Education (NDE) and external evaluators] to evaluate progress towards goals, provide technical assistance, and help the school district retool interventions; and

- o Concrete interventions for schools that do not make sufficient progress.

Read by 3, Zoom Schools, and Victory Schools have overlapping populations, goals and eligible uses

- Programs aim to serve overlapping populations:
 - o Victory Schools are targeted at high poverty areas but also have high rates of ELLs. In FY 2014, the schools proposed to become Victory Schools had an average Free and Reduced-price Lunch (FRL) rate of 86 percent and an average English Language Learner (ELL) rate of 32 percent.
 - o Zoom Schools are targeted at ELLs but these schools also have high rates of FRL students. In FY 2014, Zoom Schools had an average FRL rate of 97 percent and an average ELL rate of 52 percent.
 - o Read by 3 funds are competitively available. Schools that receive these funds will have a mix of ELL and FRL students. The plan required by Read by 3 includes a focus on ELLs.
- All three programs aim to improve literacy and/or English language acquisition:
 - o Assessment of reading and literacy problems is included in the Zoom and Read by 3 programs.
 - o Instructional intervention to enable students to read proficiently by grade three is included in all three programs.
- The three programs have overlapping eligible uses:
 - o All three programs allow funds to be used for intervention programs, summer academy, extended school day, and professional development.
 - o Zoom and Victory Schools both allow funds to be used for pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, reading centers, recruitment and retention, and parental involvement.

Decision-makers Should Explore Advantages of Consolidating Categorical Programs

- Consolidating Read by 3, Zoom and Victory programs into one grant could remove the artificial barriers between these programs and recognize that all of the targeted schools have a combination of both ELL and FRL students.
- Having one program could move the focus to individual student needs as opposed to creating different labels for schools.
- Having one program could reduce State and district administration costs.
 - o The Governor's budget includes one position for Victory Schools and two positions for Read by 3 in the Nevada Department of Education. Two positions for Zoom Schools are included in the base budget.
 - o The Governor's budget includes \$30,000 per year to evaluate each of the three programs for a total cost of \$180,000 over the 2015-2017 biennium.
 - o Allocations for staff and evaluation could be reduced if there is one categorical grant instead of three.

See full report: *Examining Nevada's Education Priorities: Which Initiatives are Worth the Investment?*
<http://guinncenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Guinn-Center-Nevada-Succeeds-Education-Priorities-FINAL.pdf>

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