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Testimony on AB 266
Before the Senate Finance Committee
By
Anne Loring, President, Nevada Association of School Boards
May 28, 2003

Chairman Raggio, Members of the Committee:

For the record, I am Anne Loring, President of the Nevada Association of School Boards. Thank you for this opportunity to present our association's bill to you.

Your committee has completed work on SB 191 implementing No Child Left Behind. But our bill – AB 266 – is actually about Leaving No Child Behind. They are two very different issues.

We need to step back a moment and look at this task before us. In the early part of the 1900's when my dad, who is now 94, graduated from high school in Pennsylvania, about 75-90% of high school freshmen dropped out of high school before graduation. That was true nationwide. It wasn't until the 1950's that we passed the 50% dropout point in this country – the point at which more students graduated from high school than dropped out. In that era, that was okay. A man could support a family with unskilled labor that did not require a high school diploma – whether it was in the coal mines of Pennsylvania or manufacturing jobs or other unskilled work around the country.

As we start the 21st century, that is no longer true. Now students preparing to enter the workforce need to plan on graduating from high school and pursuing at least some post-high school education or training to obtain a job that will support themselves and their families. The days of unskilled jobs that will support a family on one paycheck are gone. Even now in Nevada, minimum wage or low-skill, low-pay service jobs will not support a family, which is why in many households both parents must work, not uncommonly at more than one job each, to earn enough to live. As Nevada struggles to diversify its economy, we must provide a skilled workforce to attract high-paying jobs to our state.

Educating all of Nevada's students to high standards is not just about meeting the requirements of a Federal law. It is about giving Nevada and all Nevadans a bright future. But understand – never before in the history of this state or of this country have we ever tried, or had, to do this. This is a huge challenge.

The challenge is even more than this, because our state's population is changing dramatically. Large numbers of our K-12 students arrive in our schools not speaking or understanding English. Those numbers will continue to grow dramatically. While that was also true at the turn of the last century, the difference then was that a rudimentary knowledge of English and a willingness to work hard could provide enough money for a family to live. Today, a student must not only know how to speak, understand, read, and

write English but also know and be able to use algebra and geometry and science in order to obtain a good job. This is an incredible challenge.

During the last legislative session, you and Governor Guinn asked us – your 17 school boards and our superintendents – to lay out what it would take to educate Nevada’s children to the standards you set through the Nevada Education Reform Act of 1997. We provided that answer through what has popularly been known as the “iNVEST” plan. We appreciate the efforts you are currently making as you complete the K-12 budget to begin to implement that plan. AB 266 lays the foundation to provide you sound information for each legislative session as you continue to invest in education in Nevada.

A.B 266 is based on four tenets

The first tenet is that we must stabilize the basic support of our school systems. We simply cannot continue to keep “robbing Peter to pay Paul,” or delaying textbook purchases to pay for liability insurance. I am continually asked by our constituents, “Why if you get more money per student do you have to cut anything?” That’s a fair question. The answer is that the “more money” hasn’t been enough in recent years to cover the skyrocketing cost of health insurance premiums for our employees, or gasoline for our school busses, or electricity for our classrooms, or post-9/11 increases in liability insurance, or that threshold cost of opening a new school building.

The second tenet is that we must have the capacity to attract and retain a high-quality workforce to operate our schools. In the last four years, purchasing power of our employees has been eroded by up to 10% at a time when competition for high-quality teachers, administrators, and classified employees has become tougher. We need to provide training and professional development to our staffs to meet the requirements for high-quality teachers and paraprofessionals in No Child Left Behind and to operate safe and efficient school facilities. We now know the incredible power of effective teachers on our students’ learning, and we must ensure that every child has an effective teacher in every subject, every year. That takes time and professional development.

The third tenet is time – instructional time for students. We know that the children entering Kindergarten in Nevada arrive with enormous variations in the level of their preparation. The achievement gap exists the day the children walk in the door. There is no way to close that gap if in their first year these children all get the same 2 ½ hours of instruction and over the next 13 years the children who start out behind never have the chance to catch up. We must give them that time. And we must give extra time to the students who need extra time to figure out algebra, or physics, or reading.

Finally, we must provide additional educational opportunities for the most challenging students. We cannot expect the students who come to us not speaking English to be able to master Nevada’s standards without extra help. Regrettably some of our students are serious discipline problems and yet we must educate them to the same high standards.

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, you and we, the 107 elected school board members in our districts, have a huge task ahead of us. We must Leave No Child Behind – not because it is the law but because it is the right thing to do for those children and for Nevada's future.

We urge you to pass AB 266 to provide a framework to continue our work together in the next session.

Thank you.

Anne Loring, President
Nevada Association of School Boards