



## The Nevada Policy Research Institute

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Contact Andy Matthews  
(702) 222-0642

### **NPRI analyst: Reforms, not higher spending levels, needed in Nevada education**

LAS VEGAS — Patrick R. Gibbons, an education policy analyst at the Nevada Policy Research Institute, today offered the following public comments at a meeting of the Nevada Vision Stakeholder Group:

My name is Patrick Gibbons and I am an education policy analyst at the Nevada Policy Research Institute.

Education is an important issue facing Nevada's parents and students. Improving education can and will improve the fortunes of Nevada's next generation. But spending more money will not buy greater student achievement. While some have stated that Nevada has already cut to the bone — in reality, Nevada's education apparatus is in desperate need of liposuction.

Moody's provided you with data showing how U.S. students are near the bottom among OECD countries for their international exam scores. What Moody's didn't show was that in 2004, the U.S. ranked second-highest in the world for spending on K-8 education and fourth for high-school spending.

Even more embarrassing, Estonia's students best Americans in both math and science, and they do so for far-lower per-pupil costs. Estonia is able to graduate a better educated student for the same price it takes Nevada to get a student into middle school.

The fact is, there is no correlation between spending and student achievement. Despite this, confusion regarding Nevada's public education spending is rampant. Even though you've heard Nevada ranks 49<sup>th</sup> or 50<sup>th</sup> in expenditures, in reality the state's rankings depend entirely on what is being counted. Thus, K-12 education expenditures may come in as high as 26<sup>th</sup> or as low as 47<sup>th</sup>.

You should also understand that Nevada's expenditures on education have risen dramatically in the last 50 years, with nothing to show for it. In 1959, Nevada spent \$420 per pupil on public education. Adjusted for 2007 dollar values, that equates to a bit under \$3,000. The latest data from the U.S. Department of Education puts Nevada's spending in 2007 at \$8,029 per pupil. In other words, Nevada nearly tripled its inflation-adjusted per-pupil spending — without results.

It is notable that these spending figures do not include the Nevada tax dollars spent on school capital expenditures or debt repayment, some of the very highest in the U.S. on a per-pupil basis. Examine the budgets of each school district in Nevada, and you'll find that spending came in at \$11,000 per-pupil for the 2008-09 school year.

The fact is, government spending on public education does not translate into student achievement. What it translates into instead is the funding of jobs for adults. Indeed, the Clark County and Washoe County school districts, the two largest in the state, employ one adult for every eight students. This swollen spending on staff has not produced results.

Today more than half of low-income, African-American, and Hispanic fourth-grade students in Nevada cannot read at grade level. That information comes from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the nation's most credible report card. Massive 20-to-30-point achievement gaps exist between white and minority students. Equally embarrassing is the fact that Nevada's high school graduation rate is *dead last in the nation*. According to *Education Week*, our rate is a mere 47 percent. That is worse than Detroit!

Nevada needs fundamental reform, and many people recognize this. Unfortunately, the loudest voices insisting on ever-higher spending are also the most eager to make excuses for failure.

The state of Florida has proven, however, that there are no valid excuses for failing public schools. Florida is similar to Nevada in many ways. It is a tourist state, it spends below the national average on public education, and it has a majority-minority student population. Please also note the state has a lower median household income and its teachers are paid far less than teachers in Nevada.

But Florida made dramatic gains over the last decade. On the NAEP, those gains have been across the board, for all students, regardless of race or income level. The achievement has been so great that Hispanic students in Florida taking the English reading exam beat the statewide average of *all* students in 15 states — including those of Nevada. Low-income Hispanic students are even able to beat the average of all students in Nevada.

Florida's achievement growth bests some of the biggest spending states in the nation, like New York, New Jersey, Connecticut and Massachusetts. These states increased spending on K-12 three times as much as Florida did over the last decade.

Florida used a host of reforms to improve education, including merit bonuses for high-quality teachers, alternative teacher certification programs, a social promotion ban for the third grade, charter schools, virtual schools, tuition tax credits and vouchers for students in failing schools. These reforms worked in Florida and there is no reason to assume they would not work here in Nevada.

Now a final personal word, if I may. Please remember that Nevada didn't become one of the wealthiest states with one of the lowest poverty rates because some planners sat down a century ago to create a collective vision. Indeed, those planners would have gotten it all wrong. Nevadans turned sand into gold because the pioneers, ranchers, miners, gamblers and entertainers who came before us all had their own individual visions which they were able to pursue freely. Because their ideas could compete freely in an open marketplace, the best could rise to the top, and success followed.

Nevada doesn't need a collective vision imposed from the top down. Nevada is a state made up of individuals who moved here, or have remained here, because they want to be free to pursue their own vision of happiness.

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The Nevada Policy Research Institute • 3155 E. Patrick Lane, Suite 10, Las Vegas, NV 89120  
Phone: (702) 222-0642 • Fax: (702) 227-0927 • Web site: [www.npri.org](http://www.npri.org)

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