

Historical Background of iNVEST '09

Before the 2003 Legislative Session, the political strategy for funding public education used by legislators during each Session could be characterized as “divide and conquer.” School boards and superintendents competed against each other for funding for programs or projects in their districts, all worthy and designed to improve student achievement. There was no demonstrated unity of approach or purpose among school boards or superintendents. In other words, legislators spoke privately with individual superintendents or board members about the specific needs in their districts, funded one or several programs/projects that were priorities for those districts, and basically ignored the exploding needs of school districts across the State. The prevailing attitude in those years was “one for one and none for all.” This strategy resulted in limited funding for K-12 public education and enabled legislators to focus on a narrow slice of the overall big picture need to increase funding for Nevada schools.

After the 2001 Legislative Session and in response to a challenge from Governor Kenny Guinn, Nevada’s seventeen school boards and their superintendents joined together to create a blueprint for academic improvement in the State of Nevada. The result was a document known as ***iNVEST***—an acronym for “**Investing in Nevada’s Education, Students, and Teachers**.” While previous efforts to improve education had been focused on simply asking for money for individual school districts without identifying how it would be used or how accountability might be implemented, the authors of ***iNVEST*** answered the question, “What is needed to improve student achievement in Nevada?” Through the identification of common needs and goals, Nevada’s instructional leaders developed a statewide vision that would result in increased learning for Nevada’s students. Included with the description of how funds would be used, accountability measures were built into the plan so the success of programs could be measured. School boards and superintendents were, for the first time, united in their approach and demands for funding for K-12 public education. The document known as ***iNVEST '03*** signaled a new attitude of “all united for all.”

The \$900 million price tag of the plan as introduced in 2003 caught many by surprise. Superintendents and school trustees were quick to assure legislators that although the academic improvement plan was extensive, it was a long-term approach that should be funded and implemented over a period of years.

When the 2003 Legislative sessions were over, more than one-third of the programs identified in ***iNVEST*** were approved and funded in part or in whole, including increased funding of \$50 per student for textbooks and supplies; 2% raises for employees in each year of the biennium (plus an additional .75% to offset increasing retirement premiums); a \$15 million allocation to cover inflationary costs; \$52 million in basic support for health insurance cost increases plus an additional \$5.8 million appropriation to the Interim Finance Contingency Fund to be accessed with Committee approval if costs ran higher; signing bonuses for new teachers; and the flexibility for most Nevada counties to reconfigure the number of students in elementary school grades funded with class size reduction funds.

In the 2005 Session, the Legislature again responded to the ***iNVEST*** program in part by continuing essential existing programs, such as teacher signing bonuses to attract quality teachers and additional textbook funding, including adding an inflation factor to

the calculation. Additionally, funding was provided for two new major initiatives outlined in *iNVEST*: full-day kindergarten and educational excellence. Recognizing the importance of a strong academic foundation for our youngest students, the Legislature provided \$22 million for districts to institute full-day kindergarten programs in at-risk schools, including funding for portable classrooms in several locations throughout the state. Finally, *iNVEST* proposed \$50 million over the biennium for the purpose of helping all students meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). The governor proposed \$100 million for similar purposes and added a component of individual school-level programs aimed at “educational excellence.” The Legislature modified both proposals and appropriated funding for a \$78 million grant program to support educational excellence and innovative programs at the individual school level.

During the 2007 Session, the Legislature continued a number of existing programs and appropriated additional resources to the fund for educational innovation and remediation as well as for career and technical education and educational technology. The per pupil basic support was also increased. These funding increases, nonetheless, remained well below the needs of K-12 public schools and school districts.

After the 2007 Session, the national economy began a downward spiral and Nevada faced severe revenue deficits. All government entities—including K-12 education—faced reduced funding and were called upon to dramatically decrease expenditures. School districts were asked to make 4.5% cuts to their budgets in the middle of the 2007-08 school year, shaving \$92 million from education budgets across the state.

Further cuts in the 2008 Special Session have brought the total decrease in state education funding since the 2007 Session to \$173.1 million, amounting to a nearly 11% budget cut for K-12 education. This has resulted in significant belt-tightening in operational budgets, including a major setback in the expansion of full-day kindergarten, the loss of funding for empowerment schools, and the elimination of promising programs that were approved by the 2007 Legislature, including a Pay for Performance pilot program endorsed by the state’s business community.

Digging the hole even deeper, superintendents and school boards were told to prepare budgets for the 2009 Session reflecting a projected additional funding decrease of perhaps as much as 14.1%, equating to approximately \$263.8 million. For public education, these budget cuts come in the face of astronomically increasing expenses for basic necessities such as the fuel required to transport students to and from school, the food needed for school lunch programs, and basic educational materials such as textbooks and paper, to say nothing of the perennially unfunded and underfunded mandates, such as retirement health care subsidies—a responsibility the State recently transferred to school districts.

Meanwhile, Federal funding for Nevada students has also decreased significantly. In Fiscal Year 2007-08, Nevada’s Title I funds, used to support programs for students living in poverty, received flat funding in spite of the increase in students qualifying for Free and Reduced Lunch. In Clark County, Title III funds (used for students who do not speak English) were reduced by more than \$2 million, even though this segment of Nevada’s population is growing faster than any other. Medicaid reimbursement is facing a change in rules which—unless Congressional action is taken—will result in the loss of another \$4 million statewide. These funding shortages are amplified by the continuing

failure of the Federal government to increase the long-promised funding for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

In short, public education continually has faced an ever-increasing list of mandated programs that grows more burdensome each year yet receives less funding from those who mandate the programs. Nevada is doubly challenged in some instances, since Federal funding for some grants is based upon State funding—if a state underfunds a program, the matching Federal funds are reduced proportionately.

The State's seventeen local superintendents and the school boards of all seventeen school districts remain uniformly supportive of full-day kindergarten, programs for English Language Learners, classroom discipline measures, and the long list of other specific programs that have been outlined in previous versions of *iNVEST*. What is most needed to improve education in Nevada, however, is adequate funding and the freedom to use that funding in the most effective manner, as dictated by the needs of students.

Student achievement is the core business of Nevada's school board trustees and superintendents. The ultimate goal of *iNVEST '09* is to improve academic achievement for all students. Since its introduction three sessions ago, iNVEST has maintained three foundational principles:

1. Education can be improved when adequate basic support is provided to districts;
2. Districts must have the resources to attract and retain qualified teachers; and
3. Districts must have the means to provide enhanced educational opportunities for students.

Over time, adhering to these three fundamental principles will increase student achievement and provide meaningful accountability.

Further, since the inception of *iNVEST*, the fundamental question driving requests for legislative support has been, "*What is needed to improve student achievement in Nevada?*" *iNVEST '09* reframes that question slightly, to emphasize the need for adequate support from Nevada legislators so that schools can provide a quality educational experience for our students: "***What can the Legislature do to improve education in Nevada?***"

While educators readily agree they should be held accountable for the expectations that are set for them and for their students, they firmly acknowledge it is a shared accountability with those who determine the level of expectations and control the corresponding level of funding—i.e., State legislators. Without a common vision that is shared by legislators and educators alike—not only of those standards Nevada's graduates should meet, but also of how we ensure students reach those standards—we will continue to see our students struggle to reach the standards and expectations that lawmakers are eager to set.