

PUBLIC COMMENT TO NEVADA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

November 12, 2020

The Nevada State Education Association has been the voice of Nevada educators for over 100 years. This public comment is in reference to item #12 regarding school operations and education during COVID-19.

In our history, there have been few more challenging times than the one we find ourselves in right now, with the global COVID-19 pandemic. After school buildings were closed last spring, NSEA has been actively engaged in the discussion of safely reopening school buildings and many of our local affiliates have been active in the process of returning to full in-person or hybrid education models.

This summer, we lauded the work of NDE in developing “Nevada’s Path Forward: A Framework for a Safe, Efficient, and Equitable Return to School Buildings”. We felt if this framework was followed by school districts, in consultation with local health districts, it would help facilitate a safe reopening of school buildings this fall. However, NSEA also raised concerns that districts may lack the resources or feel pressured not to follow important recommendations. It turns out our concerns were valid.

The key to safely reopen and operate school buildings is to lower community transmission of coronavirus. Unfortunately, the decision to resume in-person learning in Washoe County was made while community transmission of COVID was still very high. This decision went against guidance issued by the CDC and even the Washoe County Health District. We know that Washoe County has experienced elevated COVID-19 cases ever since, including their highest reported case numbers this week. The Washoe County Health District reported experiencing a spike in number of cases over the past month associated with K-12 students and school district staff. This is exactly what NSEA, WEA, and educators across the state have been warning about. We fear that any effort to reopen school buildings with high community transmission rates, like the one currently contemplated in Clark County, will only lead to the same, devastating result.

NSEA is further concerned that current policy on student assessments, teacher evaluations, and school star ratings is unfair during the COVID-19 pandemic, with some districts operating fully in-person, others with hybrid models, and still others in full distance learning. NSEA has previously expressed our concern that existing policy on student assessments, teacher evaluations, and school star ratings compromises the safe operation of schools during the COVID-19 crisis. These mechanisms have failed to foster the improvements in either achievement, or student engagement they were intended to deliver. With a continued reliance on these old schemes, students and educators have counter-incentives to come to school when sick; to teach to tests instead of teaching and reinforcing health and safety; and to maximize numbers and time in classrooms, even when that may be outside of the guidelines. Suspension of elaborate sorting and rating mechanisms, including federal, state, and district mandated assessments, use of SLO/SLG’s in teacher evaluations, and school star ratings during the COVID-19 public health emergency is the right thing to do.