

PUBLIC COMMENT TO INTERIM FINANCE COMMITTEE

April 30, 2020

The Nevada State Education Association has been the voice of Nevada educators for over 100 years. 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. Governor Sisolak issued an executive order closing all Nevada schools on March 16th and extended school closures through the end of the school year. In this time, our members have quickly responded, with classroom teachers now engaging their students in distance learning and food service workers on the front lines, providing meals to families in our districts. This transition has been a difficult one. We learned earlier this month of an NSEA member working in food service in Clark County who passed away after contracting COVID-19.

In addition to school closures, the Governor introduced a COVID-19 Risk Mitigation Initiative that closed all non-essential businesses and services and postponed or canceled all large gatherings. While this bold action was the right call to protect the health and safety of every Nevadan, we are afraid the economic impacts of this crisis will be devastating and long-lasting. On April 7th, Governor Sisolak asked all state agencies to review their budgets and make recommendations for general fund reductions of 4% in the current fiscal year and between 6-14% in FY21. General Fund cut proposals requested by the Governor could mean a reduction of over \$173M for public education in the current biennium. As you know, the operation of Nevada schools also depends on revenues from Local School Support Tax (LSST) as well as the Public Schools Operating Property Tax. We assume LSST revenues will be devastated in the current quarter and will likely be depressed well into FY21. With the likelihood we are entering a recession, property taxes could take another long-term hit.

Education funding was a central focus during the 2019 Legislative Session, as elected leaders worked to address the chronic underfunding of public education and to deliver a long overdue 3% increase for Nevada educators. While not transformative on the chronic issue of underfunding, significant progress was made. Nevada began the legislative session ranking 47th in per-pupil funding in the 2018 Quality Counts report from Education Week. During the session, legislators redirected money into the K-12 education budget, including \$120M in marijuana money to the DSA and the extension of the modified business tax. This provided a year-over-year education funding increase from last fiscal year to this one of hundreds of millions of dollars, one of the largest year-over-year increases in the history of the state. (The projected increase in FY21 was significantly smaller, however, outpaced by projected inflation.) Proposed General Fund cuts alongside loss of local revenue will likely wipe out these gains and then some, cutting further into the bone of Nevada's public schools.

We are hopeful our students and educators will be able to get back to our school sites to start the next school year. It is clear distance learning is not the answer for most students, especially those with disabilities, at-risk students, and English learners. The return to school will be critical not just for students, but also for hundreds of thousands of Nevada families going back to work and restarting their lives. Strong public schools need to be a major focus of getting Nevada back on its feet. Sending kids back to schools compromised by draconian budget cuts, including layoffs and corresponding increases in class sizes, fewer supportive services, and less individualized and differentiated instruction is not the answer.

None of the budget decisions facing the Governor and this committee will be easy. However, these decisions reflect our shared priorities and values. We ask that decision-makers prioritize and work to protect the institutions and services that are the most important to everyday Nevadans. We believe this includes strong public schools. Thank you.