
Public Comment to the Nevada State Board of Education 12.10.20

The Nevada State Education Association has been the voice of Nevada educators for over 100 years. NSEA represents a majority of educators across the state, with members in every Nevada school district including teachers, other licensed education professionals, and education support professionals (ESPs) who provide vital services to students in Nevada's public education system.

In our history, there have been few more challenging times than the past year with the COVID-19 crisis. After school buildings were ordered closed last spring, NSEA members quickly responded, with classroom teachers engaging their students in distance learning and food service workers on the front lines, providing meals to families in our districts. This semester, our members are responding in a diversity of ways depending on their district and the status of the COVID-19 crisis in their communities. Some educators are back at their school building offering in-person instruction. Others are working in hybrid models, juggling in-person learning with distance learning opportunities. Many others, including in Clark County, are working to create meaningful education experiences through full distance-learning.

This summer, NSEA supported the work of the Department of Education to develop "Nevada's Path Forward: A Framework for a Safe, Efficient, and Equitable Return to School Buildings". We felt this was the proper framework, along with consultation with local health districts, to safely reopen and operate school buildings this school year. Educators, as much as anyone else, appreciate the importance of returning to school for in-person learning. Distance education is not an ideal replacement for in-person, classroom learning for most educators and students, and educators are concerned about the impact the COVID-19 crisis is having on education equity. Top concerns with full distance learning include providing the same level of education for all students, the complexity of teaching students with disabilities, and absenteeism. Also, most educators find distance learning and hybrid models more difficult with more time required to teach the same lessons.

However, educators also are very concerned about their health and the health and well-being of students. NSEA has consistently raised concerns that districts lack the resources needed to follow the recommendations to safely open and operate school buildings during this pandemic. And we know all districts have felt pressured to open or keep open buildings, even when the baseline, lower community transmission rates were not met. This includes recent comments made by the State Superintendent.

Unfortunately, the decision to resume in-person learning in Washoe County was made earlier this year while community transmission of COVID was above the baseline threshold and went against guidance issued by the Washoe County Health District. We know that Washoe County has experienced elevated COVID-19 cases ever since school reopening, including their highest reported case numbers in recent weeks. This includes a spike in number of cases associated with K-12 students and school district staff last month. These numbers gave WCSD little choice but to move to full distance learning for middle and high school students. With record COVID transmission likely to continue through the winter holidays, it will also not be safe for in-person education to begin in Clark County in January.

With recent good news on the development of vaccines juxtaposed with the alarming increase in COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations, NSEA believes it will be critical to prioritize educator access to COVID vaccinations as soon as possible, before safely reopening or returning to school buildings after the holidays. NSEA has asked the Governor to make this a priority, and we appreciate any role the Board of Education can play to facilitate a safe return to school buildings next year. Thank you.