

State of the District Address

**Dr. Walt Rulffes, Superintendent of Schools
Clark County School District**

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Hello, my name is Walt Rulffes. I am the superintendent of the Clark County School District.

I would like to begin my remarks by thanking Chancellor Rogers not only for providing this opportunity to focus on education but for his relentless advocacy on behalf of students of all ages.

Both the chancellor and I have been in regular communications with the state's leaders on critical education issues, but, more than anything, we need Nevadans to grasp the seriousness of our current budget problems so that you can help protect and improve education in our state.

As we approach a critical legislative session, it is important that we put all of our cards on the table. I listened to the Governor's address, and I appreciate his forthrightness in establishing his starting point for discussions.

As your superintendent, however, I can tell you that these proposals are unacceptable. Nevada is already at the bottom of the nation in education funding, and further reductions in funding will have a destructive impact on our state and will dim the prospects of every child in school at this time.

At this point, I can only say that I look forward to working with our state leaders during the session to craft solutions to economic problems that don't involve compromising the futures of our students or taking advantage of a loyal workforce.

So, what is at risk in the Clark County School District if education is undermined?

- All data show that we are making progress on closing the achievement gap between high and low performing populations. Students in poverty, students with limited English ability, and students with special education needs all showed improvement last year.
- Last year, CCSD was the only one of the nation's top ten districts to make Adequate Yearly Progress under the federal No Child Left Behind Act. And we did it again this year.
- The District continues to open new career and technical centers. Research shows that students in these learning environments outperform peers on virtually every measure.
- We continue to expand dual credit opportunities that allow high school students to earn college credit for some of their high school courses. Nevada has one of the lowest rates of high school students going on to college. Earning college credits in high schools builds a bridge that leads many students straight to higher education.

- As of this year, all middle school students are taking three full years of science.
- CCSD developed and implemented the 21st Century curriculum, which the Legislature adopted as law because of its high standards.
- We implemented ParentLink, which is an Internet- and phone-based communication system that facilitates a superior level of contact between parents and schools.
- We continue to develop and support many partnerships with the Nevada System of Higher Education and that ensures the college readiness of our students.
- Last school year, CCSD students earned a total of \$142 million in scholarships to the very best institutions in this state and the nation.
- And, to round things out:
 - CCSD was named a “best-practices” school district by the American Productivity and Quality Center.
 - One of our elementary schools was named the top magnet school in the nation.
 - Six CCSD schools were named in *U.S. News and World Report* best high schools in America.
 - Our District won the Nevada Taxpayer Association’s Good Government Award for energy conservation.

Despite how we are sometimes portrayed, there is a lot happening in your school district that you can be proud of. But these are the very things that are at risk if we begin undermining education.

There are fantastic families and students in our communities, and every time I visit a school, I am reminded that the generations who follow us have unlimited promise. Our job, as today’s business and civic leaders, is to ensure that today’s students have the opportunity to realize their potential.

Reducing support for education while the demand is increasing just doesn’t make sense. Unlike some private sector businesses where work is tapering off, our clients continue to come. We grew by over 3,000 students this year, and our population continues to grow in need as well.

Forty-two percent of our students qualify for free or reduced meals and one of every six has limited English proficiency. At a time when there are more students and greater needs for services, solving the budget problem at the expense of education will have consequences that will not only outlast the economic downturn – they will perpetuate it in Nevada.

By all national measures, Nevada has been funding education at a minimal level, even in the good times.

This chart, prepared by the Department of Education and based on data from the National Center for Education Statistics and the National Education Association shows that per-pupil support in Nevada has not only lagged behind the rest of the nation for many years, but notice that the disparity has been steadily increasing.

Keep in mind that during the past year CCSD has already sustained \$133 million in cuts:

- We lost expansion of full-day kindergarten before it was born – a direct hit on the student population that could have benefited most.
- Empowerment schools – the foundation of the Governor’s original education platform – never saw the light of day. However, generous private donors continue to invest in the empowerment program.
- School improvement grants – many of which were used for tutorials and programs to help students pass their proficiency exams – were cut by the state.
- Replacement of aging buses has been deferred.
- Critical positions have been left vacant.
- Dollars designated for textbooks and instructional equipment were reduced by 50 percent.
- Elimination of teacher mentoring programs leaves us unable to help improve the skills of teachers who need and want assistance.
- Elimination of school positions means greater work for those who remain, whether it’s teachers with even larger classes or counselors and nurses who already have too many students to serve.
- Elimination of programs like block scheduling and AVID means cutting programs that help move students toward graduation and restricting opportunities for students to discover elective interests in high school.
- Reduction in budgets for sports and extracurricular activities diminishes our ability to provide a well-rounded education for students.
- The elimination of over 260 nonschool positions will have a negative impact on how promptly we can respond to everything from parent phone calls to broken computers.
- And we are now preparing for the likelihood of employee layoffs at all levels.

The only happy ending for us in a national or global economic crisis is to return to a point where our goods and services and information are needed and desired by the rest of the world. Nevada most certainly is not investing in education to the point where we can say our children will be competitive in that arena.

I must add that higher education is facing all these same issues: a loss of funding, elimination of courses for students, and a reduction in staff. Across the board, education in Nevada is systemically being reduced to minimum services.

Ironically, education is not the problem in an economic crisis. Education is the solution. Yet, it remains in the balance as if compromising the future of our children is a sensible consideration.

The Governor talked about Nevada investing in renewable energy as one means of providing jobs and returning to prosperity, and that would be great. But let's not place ourselves in a position where we have to import the talent and the intellect to make that dream a reality. Those jobs should go to Nevadans. And they will if our schools and universities have the resources necessary to educate our children.

From the beginning of the budget crisis, my goal has been to protect the classroom as much as possible. We have thousands of extraordinary teachers who are already going above and beyond, and I intend to protect them as much as I can. I asked all nonschool sites to make 12 to 20 percent cuts so that schools' cuts would be limited to 3 percent or less.

Now I've been criticized for that strategy. Many folks say that the only way to get people's attention is to eliminate sports and fine arts and transportation. However, I believe that my job is to offer our students the best experience that resources allow.

Some people have suggested that all nonteaching positions be eliminated – especially those in administration. While management is always a popular target, the fact is no organization, corporation, military unit, or family can function without leadership.

Eighty-nine percent of the District's general fund employees work in the schools, and the majority of them are teachers. Another 6 percent of District employees work in transportation. The remaining 4.8 percent of staff includes central administrators, but it is predominately secretarial, clerical, and other support staff.

Like any business, we have operational functions such as payroll, maintenance, transportation, and others that require oversight. Our ratio of employees to administrators is about 35 to 1. That is already a far leaner ratio than I can find in other public or private organizations.

It's difficult for most of us to grasp the enormity of the cuts we've already made and those that have been proposed. In a three-year period, we will be losing about \$375 million in operating revenue.

To give that some context, \$375 million equates to the salaries and benefits of about 6,000 teachers for those three years. Presently, we have 18,000 teachers and they represent the largest expenditure in our budget. Clearly, it would be impossible to cope with a loss of that amount and leave the classroom untouched.

I should also point out that CCSD is one of the most audited entities in the state. I welcome that scrutiny. We have a huge budget, and it is appropriate that there is plenty of oversight. The audits always make recommendations for improvement, but we also have received many commendations.

Overall, our audits have been favorable – including those imposed by the legislature. They consistently show us to be responsible stewards of tax dollars. CCSD compares well with peer districts, and a greater percent of every operating dollar goes directly to the classroom than in most districts across the country.

While the state must cope with the current loss of revenue, we also need to take steps to protect education from cuts every time the economy falters. The Clark County School District is introducing a bill during this legislative session to accomplish just that.

Every year, taxes are raised in the name of education. What most people don't know, however, is that when revenues are strong, the excess taxes raised in the name of education don't go to schools; they are placed into the state's general fund for use in other state programs. In fact, a recent study by the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce noted that reversion of education dollars "... constitutes a significant supplement to the state budget as a whole."

In short, hundreds of millions of dollars have been diverted away from education over the years and placed in other budgets. The Board of Trustees and I believe that if people are taxed under the impressions that the funds are for education, then the funds, in fact, should be reserved for education. We propose that when revenues are strong, the additional dollars should go into a stabilization account for education so that services can be preserved during difficult times like these.

At the very moment that critical and creative thinking are imperative, we are beginning to dismantle higher education, while at the K-12 level, we are making additional cuts in a state that already funds at the bottom of the nation.

Whether you are a parent or not, there is no way that the crippling effect of a substandard education should be considered as a solution for our current problems.

Degrading our education system ultimately will cost more than it saves. The economy will recover, but students who are denied adequate opportunities will forever pay the price. I urge policy makers and citizens to take the long view and protect the asset most critical to ensuring and sustaining Nevada's prosperity, a sound system of public education.

Thank you.