

## A Few Lessons Learned

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Few will debate the fact that a high-quality education opens doors and expands opportunities for students of all ages. The best economic development strategy, the best anti-poverty strategy, is a forward-thinking education reform strategy. That's what the Board of Trustees sought for the Clark County School District, and that's what I hope to deliver.

Anyone who knows me has heard me say time and again, "Hope is not a strategy." It is, however, a motivational catalyst for implementing change and moving reform forward. It played a big part in influencing my decision to come to the Clark County School District. It influenced many of the reform efforts implemented or soon to be initiated in Colorado. And I believe it will play a critical role in changing education for the students (and staff!) of Clark County.

The downturn in the economy offers all of us a real opportunity to change the way we deliver services to our customers. Yes, funding will be a challenge, but the greater imperative is outlining the vision we want to achieve.

I have been brought to CCSD to be a game changer. Change will not happen overnight. It will not happen by luck. Rather, change will happen by design. I will be about the business of designing a new system for the Clark County School District. We cannot simply cut our way out of this budget crisis and get better results. Instead, we have to change the way we provide education in CCSD.

So, how do we get out of the box we are in and think differently? How do we spend the budget we have to create a world-class workforce? We certainly can't keep doing the same things and expecting different results. Clark County is the fifth largest school district in the United States, and the only thing most people know about us is that we're facing hard economic times.

As superintendent and with support from the trustees, it is my job to define how we change the game and how we invest our resources – human and capital – to achieve it: We need an **effective teacher and leader** in every classroom and school. We need a state-of-the-art **data system** that assesses every student's progress and provides information for teachers to tailor real-time instruction to their students' needs. We have to effectively implement the **common core standards** and align our assessment system to them. We must develop **blended and online learning** that better serve our students and lower our costs, as well as scale our **empowerment school model** and offer greater **school choice**. And finally, we need to continue our efforts to **decentralize** and move resources to the schools.

My experience as Colorado's commissioner provided me an insider's view and role in setting a reform agenda and defining the path along which that reform could travel. Key pieces of legislation were initiated and passed in a bipartisan way in Colorado in order to ensure sustainability and longevity. I call it "a few lessons learned," and the following are highlights of those lessons and the legislation that supports them.

**Lesson #1: Students deserve an effective teacher in every classroom and an effective leader in every school. (Senate Bill 10-191)**

We all know that it's the teacher who has the greatest affect on student achievement. We also know that not all teachers are effective. Senate Bill 10-191 paved the way for the development of a system to evaluate educator and principal effectiveness, based in part on student achievement, and established fair and defensible provisions for recognizing effective educators, providing professional development and opportunities for improvement to struggling teachers, and removing from the classroom those found to be ineffective.

In essence, Senate Bill 10-191 allows educators to be treated as are their professional colleagues in other fields; they will be evaluated with a variety of measures and will earn salary increases commensurate with the results achieved with their students. Should a teacher or principal be underperforming, individualized improvement plans will be developed to allow the educator time and opportunity to hone skills in areas of identified need.

Just as there are in every district across the U.S., I am certain that the Clark County School District has a fair share of effective teachers and principals who are passionate about education and helping students learn. I am also certain that there are some who are equally as passionate, but who may not be as effective, just as there are others whose instructional skills leave much to be desired. Please know that I am committed to professional development that is meaningful and to training that is practical, useful, and can be implemented immediately. Teachers have a most important job with the most important people in our lives, and we had better make sure they are well-equipped for the tasks before them.

**Lesson #2: Individual student data that takes into account where each student starts is a must-have. (Senate Bill 09-163)**

Colorado, at one point, had three separate accountability measures, which contradicted each other at times. Also, accountability focused solely on a student's score on the state assessment and didn't take into account how far that student had truly come. Senate Bill 09-163 eliminated the previous three systems and established the Colorado Growth Model as the measure of student growth, as well as school and district performance for accreditation purposes. Now adopted by 13 states (Nevada among them) with others expressing interest, the growth model considers the starting point of each student and identifies not only the student's proficiency level, but also how much growth the student makes over time.

I believe district staff and parents of CCSD students will find the growth model extremely useful and beneficial in understanding where each individual student's level of proficiency is presently and how much growth that student needs in order to reach or maintain the desired proficiency level. Students, too, will find this information helpful in understanding what is expected of them academically.

**SchoolView**

To support communities and school districts, the Colorado Department of Education launched SchoolView, an easily navigated, online resource that depicts growth model data in vivid and easily understandable ways. SchoolView provides the general public access to school and district performance, allowing them to compare results on a school, district, or state level. With the adoption of the Colorado

Growth Model by other states, the public soon will also be able to compare like schools and districts (based on demographics, performance and achievement) across the country.

When fully operational, Nevada's version of SchoolView will provide parents, educators, legislators, and community members a more complete picture of their schools' and district's performance, as well as that of every school and district statewide.

**Lesson #3: Academic standards must be relevant and rigorous, and curriculum must align to these standards. (Senate Bill 08-212)**

In addition to laying the groundwork for a seamless preschool-through-college system, Senate Bill 08-212 called for the revision of academic content standards and an aligned state assessment program that were more rigorous, relevant, and benchmarked against the highest standards nation- and worldwide.

In summer 2010, the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers put forward the common core standards in English language arts and mathematics. These standards aligned at least 90 percent with the Colorado Academic Standards, and as such, proved their rigor and relevance. Given the job market and economic times, today's society has become increasingly mobile. The more states that implement the common core, the better off all our students will be should their families have to relocate.

I am pleased to know that Nevada was one of the first states to adopt the common core standards. It's now imperative that we not only align our curriculum to these standards, but also that we ensure all our teachers receive training to become familiar with the standards their students will be responsible for attaining, as well as to learn how to best assist students in the mastery of these standards.

**Lesson #4: "School choice" is far more than charter schools, and in order to meet all students' needs, we must provide as many avenues to education as possible. (Senate Bill 08-130)**

Senate Bill 08-130, the "Schools of Innovation Act," was passed to essentially allow schools to try new and creative ways to increase student achievement. With district approval, schools are granted greater autonomy and managerial flexibility with regard to staffing, resource allocation, and programming. In Colorado, this autonomy waived collectively bargained agreements and hiring practices and allowed principals and teachers to change the class schedule and coursework instruction, whether in person, online or in a blended learning environment.

Nevada's empowerment school model is a good start at providing parents and students options in education. But I believe we can – and need to – do more, whether via charter schools, online programs, Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate coursework, experiential learning activities ... the list goes on. Our students deserve our most creative efforts to provide them a relevant and meaningful education.

**Lesson #5: Resources are best utilized at the school and classroom levels.**

In times of economic crisis and severe budget cuts, it is imperative that we keep the main thing – student achievement – the main thing. It's true for Colorado, and it's true for Clark County and all of Nevada.

In Clark County School District, we need to evaluate what we spend where, and to continually ask ourselves, “To what extent does this [fill in the blank] improve student achievement?” “How much student-achievement bang can we get for our buck?” “What do our students receive in return for the resources we are given?” Hard questions to answer, true. But we’ll soon face even harder realizations if we don’t answer them now.

So, what do these lessons mean for Nevada? They mean that we don’t have to start from scratch. They aren’t lessons about Colorado; they are lessons about *education*, based on principles that already have proven to be instrumental in the success of other schools and districts. The lessons also ensure that we stay focused on our mission as educators: high quality instruction, rigorous and relevant curriculum, effective use of robust data, choice for families and autonomy for professionals, and the commitment of resources to our core purpose of student achievement. Much groundwork has already been accomplished in CCSD – student data systems, adoption of common core, empowerment, choice, and others – and the time is right for us to propel significant improvements in student achievement by committing ourselves to these lessons.

When told I had accepted the offer to be superintendent of schools in Clark County, more than a few blatantly asked, “Now why would you want that job?!” The reasons are simple. Student achievement – our children deserve it. Student achievement – I know how to increase it. Student achievement – our students’ futures, and that of Clark County, depend on it.

I look forward to working with colleagues, community members, and students to make a difference in student achievement in our district.