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Nevada State Education Association

Testimony on SB 44

Senate Human Resources Committee

February 10, 2003

Over the last 5 years we have heard much about flexibility for the class size reduction program. With the implementation of the Elko pilot program we saw class size ratios in the primary grades increase from 16:1 to 22:1. Presumably one of the main goals of the Elko program was to eliminate team teaching.

S.B. 44 would now give other Nevada school districts the option to duplicate the Elko model, and that would be the only variation from the current mandated class size ratio that would be allowed.

Before you take action to eliminate smaller classes for the primary grades in Nevada, please remember why Nevada created the 15:1 ratio for grades 1-3. The Nevada Legislature utilized the findings of the Tennessee STAR Study in making the decision to reduce class sizes in the primary grades to 15:1.

In the handout I have provided, you will find the conclusions of that study. It is important to note that, in this study, "small classes" had 13-17 students, and "regular classes" had 22-26 students.

- In the study, in grades K-3 in all schools, the small classes made the highest scores on the norm-referenced Stanford Achievement Test (SAT) and the criterion-referenced Basic Skills First Test (BSF).
- Small classes located in the inner-city schools made the greatest gains on the SAT.
- Small classes located in rural school made the highest SAT and BSF scores.

Researchers have tracked the progress of students who participated in the Tennessee study and the indications are that the benefits of being in small classes extend well into the students' upper grade educational careers.

According to STAR researchers who tracked study participants, students who had been placed in classes of 13-17 students in grades K-3 continued to outperform their peers even after they went into larger classes beginning in 4th grade. These students were six to 14 months ahead of their regular-class peers in math, reading and science when they reached fourth, sixth and eighth grades.

The indications further show that students who were in small classes graduated from high school at a higher rate. They completed more advanced math and English courses. They dropped out of high school at a lower rate, and they were more likely to graduate with honors.

Further, the lead researcher for the Tennessee STAR study concluded that small classes could actually save school districts money in the long run with fewer students having to repeat grades.

The findings in Tennessee were so conclusive and so compelling that over 20 states have moved toward smaller classes. The Tennessee school finance plan now includes incentives for school systems to reduce class sizes.

Nevada has never thoroughly tracked the performance of students who have been in small classes, but there have been indications that Nevada's students have benefited in a manner similar to those in Tennessee. And Nevada's teachers and paraprofessionals who work in those small classes can provide anecdotal evidence of the benefits for children who are in those small classes. In the "No Child Left Behind" Act, decisions are to be data driven and scientifically based. The decision to change class size in Nevada is neither data driven or scientifically based. A decision of this magnitude should require the same standards President Bush is asking for all public schools. I call for a study to evaluate the effects class size reduction has had on Nevada's students. We feel confident that Nevada's students will also show the same positive results from class size reduction that have been demonstrated in the Tennessee study.

The first class of Nevada CSR students, I believe, are now seniors. With Nevada's growth it would take a great deal of effort to track students who have been 12 years in our public schools and have been part of CSR. However, to make any decision before

thoroughly reviewing the data from a Nevada study is premature and would lead to decisions that could harm our students learning and achievement. The public demands accountability and we ask the same. Let us look at the question of CSR based upon a study that will make this decision one that is based upon scientific evidence—not political or budgetary agendas.

Does Nevada now want to take a step back and actually take those educational opportunities from students who have enjoyed the 15:1 ratio?

We all know that students must have a strong grasp of the fundamentals in reading and math in order for them to succeed as they progress to the upper grades in school. The research is conclusive: the very best setting for students to learn is in small classes.

SB 44 will be referred to as the “class size flexibility bill,” when in fact it does not provide flexibility. It provides for either the status quo of class size ratios or the Elko model.

There is much attention being given to lower-performing schools. There is much discussion about how to attract highly qualified teachers to such schools to help ensure that students get the instruction they need. A district might want to apply the Elko model to some schools, but choose to keep the 15:1 ratio in those schools in need of improvement. SB 44 does not allow for that choice. We would also strongly recommend

that any move to class size flexibility should prohibit any waiver that would raise class size over 22:1.

If we are truly going to work to ensure that no child is left behind, then we ask you to consider the research and not adopt a state policy that will lead to the abandonment of the small class. Or, if you want districts to have flexibility, then please allow for the possibility that the students who need them most will still have the advantages of being in a class with a ratio of 15:1.