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SB 391 testimony (April 7, 2015)
Brent Husson, President, Nevada Succeeds

My name is Brent Husson, and I am the President of Nevada Succeeds. Chair Harris, Vice-Chair Hammond and education committee members: thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this afternoon. Let me begin by thanking you for your leadership on education this session. This is a unique opportunity in the history of our state to make a real difference for Nevada's students. I applaud each of you for your commitment and dedication.

I am here to speak in support of SB 391, Nevada's Read by Third Grade bill. Over the past year, Nevada Succeeds has brought together stakeholders from across the state to advocate for this policy, which we believe will have a transformative effect on public education in Nevada.

As business leaders, we are looking for ROI, what really works, what truly moves the needle, and which investments matter most. Research shows that early literacy lays the foundation for all other learning to come. Nothing is more essential than supporting our schools to ensure every student is on track for reading success by the end of third grade.

Here's why I'm so concerned about this issue.

The fact is that Nevada is at the back of the pack when it comes to preparing our students for college and career success. We have the lowest high school graduation rate of any state in the union. And even among those who graduate high school, many lack the skills and training they need to transition successfully into the workforce. Nevada's business community has experienced the ramifications first hand; hiring can be incredibly difficult and many employers are forced to look beyond our state borders for qualified candidates. The long-term sustainability of Nevada's economy hangs in the balance.

So how does Read by 3 move the needle? According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, nearly 90 percent of students who fail to graduate high school were struggling readers in third grade. Think about that. We basically know whether a Nevada student will graduate high school by the time he/she turns nine years old. If he/she cannot read proficiently, the rest of his/her education will be an uphill struggle. We should recognize this as an urgent wake-up call. But as a state, we've been sleeping through the alarm.

Consider these facts:

- Children who are not reading proficiently in third grade are four times less likely to graduate from high school. Economically disadvantaged Black and Hispanic students who are struggling readers are about eight times more likely to drop out of high school than proficient readers.
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EXHIBIT K Senate Committee on Education
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- Seven of every 10 prison inmates can't read above a fourth-grade level.
- High school dropouts make up 75 percent of citizens receiving food stamps and 90 percent of Americans on welfare.

We need to get serious about making sure our students are reading proficiently by the end of third grade. It's the best investment we can make with tremendous long-term returns.

Like other states that have come to understand the significance of early literacy, SB 391 takes a holistic approach to educational improvement. The bill reflects a commitment to proven and comprehensive strategies.

The key strategies in SB 391 include a balance of greater accountability and increased support. These include:

A focus on early diagnosis and early intervention: SB 391 requires school districts and charter schools to develop a literacy plan designed to provide targeted supports to students struggling in reading. This marks a fundamental shift in the culture around literacy instruction in Nevada.

A needed emphasis on professional development: SB 391 helps teachers and leaders have the explicit skills to ensure that students master the essential components of reading.

Retention as a last resort: SB 391 provides multiple pathways for students to demonstrate reading proficiency, so this intervention is only used when necessary. In cases where it would be used, it would require students to be placed with a highly effective teacher.

With this policy and the attached funding, Nevada will take a huge first step in preparing our students for a competitive global economy.

Too many students are not receiving the education they deserve; let's start changing that today. This policy is a strong step in the right direction.

On behalf of Nevada Succeeds' board of directors, I ask you to support SB 391, and Seth and I are happy to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you.

Brent Husson
President, Nevada Succeeds