



January 24, 2024

Commission on School Funding
Guy Hobbs, Chair

Re: Agenda Item 9: Discussion of “At-Risk” Definition

Educate Nevada Now, powered by The Rogers Foundation, is a non-profit focused on ensuring every student has the opportunity to succeed in Nevada’s public schools. ENN has advocated for fair, equitable, and adequate public education funding for nearly a decade. Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on Agenda Item 9, a discussion of the “at-risk” definition used within the Pupil-Centered Funding Plan.

Since the implementation of the formula, numerous schools have reached out to ENN with questions and concerns regarding the new “at-risk” definition. The agenda notes that the Nevada Department of Education (NDE) will be presenting on the history and development of the “at-risk” formula, so we will address that briefly. More importantly, ENN wants to relay to the Commission concerns from the community and provide insight on what is happening *now* in schools under the new definition.

History and Development

ENN and others sought public records regarding the development of the “at-risk” definition and formula. Much of responsive materials shed light on this subject, and we would like to share the following:

1. The formula was *designed* to reduce eligibility. In a promotional [video](#) provided to NDE by Infinite Campus, a key selling point was that the grad score could be “adjusted to meet the bandwidth” or desired number of students the customer *wants* to serve. If the state wants to serve only 20 students, no problem, the Infinite Campus model offers easy tools to adjust the grad score and percentiles to do that.

And that is exactly what they did. The formula essentially worked backwards to determine eligibility based on a pre-determined number of students that NDE wanted to serve. When ENN asked in a previous meeting, why not adjust the formula over time to eventually fund all truly at-risk students, we were met with disregard and made to believe that such an adjustment would somehow upend these carefully determined factors and machine learning - but that simply was not true. Adjusting eligibility was a selling point, not a deal-breaker. What would be upended was the goal of saying the state is “fully funding” all at-risk students, even though in reality thousands of vulnerable students who are not served by the new formula will continue to suffer from abysmal academic outcomes.

2. The weight is arbitrary. We have learned that there is a fundamental misunderstanding of how the target weight interacts with eligibility figures. The Commission openly used the APA studies to develop funding targets, determining the total per-pupil amount that included the recommended per-pupil base and weights.¹ But the target at-risk weight developed by APA used Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) as the proxy for at-risk.² The cost-based recommendations were created by multiplying the target weight by the number of FRL students. How can we change a fundamental factor in this equation and still use the exact same recommended weight. Why are we not studying whether the 75% reduction in eligibility multiplied by the target weight from APA gives districts the TOTAL dollars needed to provide appropriate resources to vulnerable students?

3. NDE has no data on the school-level budget effects of the new formula. Community members seeking school-level data have been told NDE is not tracking that information. ENN attempted to get school-level data from the Clark County School District but were told they also do not have it, despite individual schools telling us they have known their new eligibility figures and funding for at-risk students since September 2023. Why is no one tracking this seismic shift in school funding? What schools are not being served? What are the characteristics of those schools? It seems critical in evaluating if this formula makes sense in practice.

Concerns from Schools and the Community

Perhaps more important than the history of the definition is its current effect on schools. ENN has been inundated with questions and concerns from schools and community members since the implementation of this model. We want to make the Commission aware of those concerns, which include:

A Complete lack of training and understanding of how the formula works. Members of this Commission claimed that principals would embrace the new formula, with one member stating in an April 22, 2022 meeting that “[Principals] are very excited to see these grad scores and understand the major components that drive this risk factor so they can actually address them.” Principals have communicated with ENN that this is not their experience. Not only do they not find the application of the formula particularly useful, they simply do not understand how it works.

One principal noted that of two students with identical factors, only one received the at-risk weight with the only difference being gender (the girl was denied the weight). Other schools are not even aware of what the

¹ Comm’n on School Funding, Nov, 2022 (stating “In 2015 and again in 2018, APA updated the 2006 study and also estimated the base cost figure for per pupil expenditures as well as the adjustments necessary for students with special needs, including Special Education, At-risk and English Language Learner (ELL) students(...). The funding per pupil as recommended by APA is the closest current approximation of funding adequacy that would provide for quality education in Nevada, and it is this target that should be viewed as a rational funding goal for K-12 education in this report.”)

² Augenblick, Palaich and Assoc., Estimating the Cost of An Adequate Education, 72-73 (2006) (recommending a range of .30 to .35 as a multiplier for at-risk using FRL as a proxy for at-risk).

factors are or if they are adequately documenting the factors in Infinite Campus. Many schools only use Infinite Campus for limited reasons and use other software to document factors like behavior, for example.

What training has been given to individual schools on the formula and how it works? Are unusual reporting issues being evaluated by NDE? Have charter schools been included in any communication or trainings?

A Drastic Reduction in Funding with Little Warning. Schools were completely unaware how the formula would affect their schools during the budgeting process. One Washoe school attempted to get information on how the at-risk weight would be distributed to schools across the state and were told it did not exist. That school, a non-magnet school where all students qualify for free and reduced lunch, had already reduced their budget in anticipation of the formula change. But they later found out that **only a single student in their school qualified**. Incidentally, this made the allocation effectively useless in delivering “Victory Services,” as is required by law.

Another school had to **reduce their budget by several million dollars** upon learning of its new at-risk allocation. This school is not a magnet school, and most of its students are verifiably low-income. The school is highly diverse and in a low-income neighborhood. Of their approximately 2,000 students, only 45 were eligible for the weight. The school is designated as 100% FRL through the Community Eligibility Program, but direct certification of poverty reveals that, conservatively, about 65% or 1,300 of its students, are verifiably low-income. And again, only 45 received the weight. Under the new formula, this high-needs school has instituted a hiring freeze and canceled targeted programs for students.

When asked if the increase in the dollar amount of the weight itself “evened-out” the reduction in eligibility, schools that contacted us answered “absolutely not.” These changes resulted in important resources being eliminated or reduced for high-needs students.

Incentivizing Failure and a Potential Reduction in Funding as Students Improve. Schools explained that many students that are clearly at-risk and facing incredible hardships are not eligible under the Infinite Campus model. Some of the students are only on-track to graduate because of intensive interventions that are no longer sustainable due reduce at-risk funding. Schools gave countless examples of non-eligible students that clearly need additional resources to continue their success.

For example, one student has been homeless for a year, living on couches and bouncing from house to house. The only reason this student is considered “on track to graduate” is because of the school’s intense efforts to ensure the student is in the classroom, including but not limited to administrators personally picking up the student to avoid absenteeism. The school has been hyper-focused on addressing the individual needs of each student, and they feel that because of their efforts, this student and others are not considered “at-risk.” Obviously, this student is the very definition of at-risk and vulnerable, but until they fail, they will be ignored. Only then, will the new “at-risk” formula account for this child. Schools must fail their students to address the obvious house of cards vulnerable students sit upon.

Conversely, the formula is designed to eliminate funding once a student is “on-track to graduate.” Like SB 178, schools expressed concern that the moment students are lifted from the bottom quintile, they too will be left behind and lose the resources that helped them improve.

Little to no emphasis on proficiency. Several schools were perplexed by the abysmally low proficiency of students that are not eligible for the weight. ENN had expressed this concern, but schools are now verifying that many students that are well-below proficient in core academic subjects are not eligible. Principals have expressed that the emphasis on grad scores misses the entire stated goal of NDE, to graduate students that are “college and career ready.” This formula appears to create a different and lower standard for students simply because they are “at-risk,” fostering serious equity concerns.

Poverty, the most accurate indicator of a student’s need for additional resources, is not adequately addressed by the formula. Formula proponents claimed that poverty was a key factor, and the dramatic reduction in eligibility was largely due to Community Eligibility Program schools serving non-poverty students. Hyde Park was often given as an example. But figures from the Department of Agriculture reveal CEP’s impact has been exaggerated, and schools have told us that many students in poverty are not being served.

ENN had suggested using direct certification (ie. TANF, SNAP, other social services) as an indicator for poverty and a key element of at-risk eligibility, as many other states do. Of Nevada’s 411,246 students, 209,386 are verifiably living in poverty according to direct certification figures.³ Even assuming every English learner or Special Education student overlapped with this direct certification figure (which is a gross overestimate), 93,670 students would be eligible for the weight when eliminating other duplicate higher weights. Realistically, the figure is likely more than 133,000 students that would be eligible for the at-risk weight after excluding duplicate weights. **That is almost TWICE the number of students who qualify under the Infinite Campus model.** Even this figure does not account for non-poverty related challenges that may leave a student at-risk. As such, it is apparent that poverty, the most evidenced-based and accurate predictor of a student's vulnerability, is grossly unaccounted for.⁴

Formula Places Too Much Emphasis on Middle and High School. School leaders also expressed concern that the Infinite Campus model’s emphasis on grad scores tends to ignore elementary school student needs, particularly students in grades K-3. **Infinite Campus’s own promotional materials clearly state that the grad score formula is only designed for use in grades 6-12.**⁵ Elementary age students are

³ Nevada Dep’t of Agriculture, SY2022-23 Direct Certification.

⁴ See e.g. Kendra McKenzie, The Effect of Poverty on Student Achievement, BU Journal of Graduate Studies in Education, Volume 11, Issue 2, 2019.

⁵ *Early Warning Demo*, Infinite Campus, available at <https://www.infinitecampus.com/video/campus-early-warning-demo>.

in a critical time to be set up for success but are ignored. Why has this limitation in the model not been discussed?

Concern Over Human Error and Data Manipulation. Several schools had concerns about the likelihood for human error in the application of the formula. One principal noted errors in the application of the School Performance Framework star ratings as a recent example of botched communication and state-level errors. They worry of the highly consequential effect of errors around this complicated and opaque funding model.

Further, they expressed concerns that schools could overreport student issues to qualify for funding, especially as it pertains to behavior. Schools worry that some of the factors are easy to manipulate and worry of too little oversight.

This “at-risk” definition and formula deserve further attention. All vulnerable students deserve the support necessary to succeed. Success should mean being ready to participate in their community, go to college, and find a career. The problems identified here are urgent. We ask that you consider the input from the community and reexamine issues surrounding the Infinite Campus “at-risk” funding model. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Amanda Morgan, Esq.
Executive Director, Educate Nevada Now