

Education association gives most Nevada lawmakers a poor grade

By Anne Knowles, Nevada News Bureau

School just started and every Republican state lawmaker has already received a failing grade from Nevada's teachers' union.

The Nevada State Education Association has released its 2011 Legislative Report Card card and the 16 Assembly and 11 Senate Republicans all earned an F.

"Taking away educators' rights is not education reform, it's union-busting," the report said. "You cannot have proper reform unless the proper funding is in accompaniment. In this regard, the 2011 Legislature came up woefully short."

But the report didn't spare either political party.

"NSEA believes this unfortunate outcome lies at the feet of the leadership in both parties, along with Governor Sandoval," the report says.

Only one Democrat, Sen. John Lee, D-North Las Vegas, received a failing mark, while the rest of the members of the Senate Democratic caucus got A or B grades. But more than half the Assembly Democrats fared little better than their Republican colleagues, accumulating eight C and seven D grades.

Assemblywoman Debbie Smith, D-Sparks, for example, the speaker pro tem, who is known for her interest in education issues, received a D.

Smith was chairwoman of Assembly Ways and Means, where two major education bills, Assembly Bill 225 and AB579 originated.

AB225 changed teacher probationary rules and supersedes collective bargaining, while AB579 funded K-12 education. Smith was also a primary sponsor on two other key bills: AB222, which created a leadership council to evaluate teacher performance, and AB229, a broad reform bill.

"I'm disappointed, of course," Smith said. "My whole adult life I've worked as an advocate for K-12. I understand the teachers' union has a job to do, to represent their members on jobs and benefits. But I'm comfortable with the packages we put forth."

Republicans lawmakers were less concerned with the report.

"I'm not really as bothered by the failing grade for all the Republicans as I am by the failing grades in our schools," said state Sen. James Settelmeyer, R-Minden.

Settelmeyer said the Republicans were right to work to reform collective bargaining and get rid of the so-called "last in, first out" way of laying-off teachers that protected seniority regardless of performance.

"I think the report shows how out of touch with reality the association is with both the economic situation and the desires of both parents and students," said state Sen. Ben Kieckhefer, R-Reno.

Kieckhefer said NSEA's stand on legislation showed it cared more about protecting its adult members than students.

NSEA disagrees.

"Kids right now are going to school with fewer services and more kids in the classroom," said Craig Stevens, director of government relations at NSEA. "If they were truly putting kids first, they wouldn't have done what they did."

The NSEA says the Legislature gutted the budget, cutting \$300 million from the previous budget and forcing a 9 percent pay

cut on school employees.

In addition, says Stevens, the Legislature did nothing to address the state's budget deficit.

"To truly fix the funding problem we must fix the deficit. They're going to walk into the next session with a billion dollar hole," Stevens said. "At least the Democrats came out with a plan to try to fund the budget responsibly. The Republicans made no effort and sat there saying 'no, no, no.'"

Assemblywoman Marilyn Kirkpatrick, D-North Las Vegas, said she thought lawmakers did the best they could on education measures in light of the challenges of balancing the state budget.

"In my mind, we are sent up to Carson City to make hard choices," Kirkpatrick said. "And it could have been so much worse. If the taxes that were set to sunset had not been extended, I don't know that I would have supported deeper cuts – but they were, so we found a way. And I think the reforms were fair."

The Nevada Policy Research Institute, a conservative think tank based in Las Vegas, characterized the report as misleading, especially on funding issues.

Victor Joecks, communications director for NPRI, said the education budget was cut in a 2010 special session by several hundred million dollars so the budget passed in 2011 actually increased funding slightly.

"It's a false narrative that flies in the face of reform," Joecks said of the report.

Joecks said per pupil spending will increase from \$5,192 last year to \$5,263 this fall and \$5,374 in 2012-13.

He also said the 9 percent cut in teacher pay cited in the report includes contributions teachers will now be making to

their Public Employee Retirement System accounts. Previously, teachers did not contribute to their retirement accounts.