

Sandoval outlines how he wants to reform education

By Sean Whaley, Nevada News Bureau

CARSON CITY -- Establishing school choice for parents and ending social promotion for students are two top priorities in Gov. Brian Sandoval's education reform agenda for the 2013 legislative session, an administration official said.

Linking pay to performance and providing professional development to ensure students have the best possible classroom teachers is a third major priority, said Dale Erquiaga, senior adviser to Sandoval.

Erquiaga briefed the Nevada State Public School Charter Authority last week on the governor's education reform agenda being readied for the next session.

Erquiaga said Sandoval is a strong believer in parental choice for schools and that he will again pursue that objective. Whether it will be through a voucher system or by providing opportunity scholarships directly to parents to pick a private or public school has yet to be determined, he said.

Implementing a voucher program would likely require a change to the state constitution, a time consuming process. A scholarship option might circumvent the need for a constitutional change. Florida implemented school choice by giving tax breaks to corporations that provide scholarships to parents for private school, including those operated by religious organizations.

"Fortunately though, we now, really for the first time, have a superintendent of public instruction who supports those concepts and will be working hand-in-hand with the governor's office to present the best bill," he said in an interview

after his briefing. "The superintendent the governor has hired is a national expert with a national network, and we're going to bring all of that intellect to bear on providing the very best bill that we can."

James Guthrie, formerly the senior fellow and director of education policy studies at the George W. Bush Institute in Dallas, Texas, was named by Sandoval as the new state superintendent of public instruction in March. He started his job April 2.

Erquiaga said Sandoval was disappointed that the 2011 Legislature failed to act on his proposal to end social promotion. His bill would have required children to be reading proficient by the end of third grade or they would not advance to the fourth grade.

The bill had a hearing but never made it out of the Democrat-controlled Assembly.

"We already provide class size reduction dollars in grades one, two and three," Erquiaga said. "We have smaller class sizes and it is the intent of those dollars that those children receive the special attention. And yet we're still passing on thousands of children who can't read. We're dooming them to failure.

"We may need to draw a bright line in the sand there," he said.

Ensuring that each classroom has a highly effective teacher is Sandoval's other major priority, Erquiaga said.

"We have a performance pay framework but the new superintendent has great ideas around a career ladder so that teachers can see a progression in their career and so we're really going to look at that as well," he said.

"We recognize that if we have an effective or highly effective

teacher in the classroom, there is almost no better gift that we could give a child than that," Erquiaga said.

The intention is to reward highly effective educators, including principals, and find ways to keep them, he said.

One element of Sandoval's education agenda that was well received by the Charter Authority was the idea that many of the existing separate funds designated for specific needs such as textbooks, be placed instead in performance-based block grants that would give school districts more flexibility in how to use the money. Charter schools would be eligible for these block grants as well, Erquiaga said. A bill to accomplish this was introduced in the 2011 session but did not win approval.

The State Public School Charter Authority, itself created by the 2011 Legislature and viewed as a major education reform success by Sandoval, will have at least one bill draft, he said. The authority, created to focus on the creation and oversight of quality charter schools in Nevada, met today and had a discussion about what proposals to bring to the 2013 Legislature.

One of the key issues for the Charter Authority is the creation of "performance-based" charter contracts, which would link accountability to outcomes.

Erquiaga said Sandoval is a strong supporter of accountability throughout the public education system.