

Editorial: Time for bold steps in Nevada

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In his State of the State speech this past week, Gov. Brian Sandoval showed pictures of second-graders as he spoke. They were, he said, members of the "class of 2023."

"It is my hope that the faces of these children will inspire us as we consider both the short- and long-term realities of our state," Sandoval said.

Cynics might scoff, given that invoking policies for the good of the children is a tired political cliché, but we believe Sandoval is sincere. His use of the class of 2023 was a nice reminder of what adults – particularly politicians, educators and parents – are supposed to be doing: making things better for the generations to come.

Sandoval didn't stop there. He noted that the work the Legislature does "will shape the future of our great state," and he urged lawmakers to think beyond the next two-year budget cycle, which is typically what lawmakers and governors focus on.

"Our greater challenge is helping a Nevada that is still on the horizon," Sandoval said. "It awaits us in the future. Not too far off, but far enough that we must consider what we can be."

Again, cynics might scoff because speeches like this are typically filled with references to the future, but Sandoval's call is relevant and necessary given the damage Nevada suffered in the Great Recession.

The nation's economic woes exacerbated Nevada's long-standing problems, including a poorly ranked education system and a threadbare network of social services.

The question this year is whether the state can make significant strides for not only the class of 2023 but also for the current generation.

Despite his call to consider the future, Sandoval's budget is modest. There are some welcome increases, including those to education and social services, but they are hardly enough to restore previous cuts. There also is a business tax cut and a demand of no new taxes.

That's hardly a bold leap into the future.

The excuse for not taking more dramatic steps is the economy. The state hasn't recovered from the Great Recession, the boom times may never return, and the revenue isn't there and no one wants to raise it.

But it's worth noting that the good times – even those of a decade ago – were never good enough to make the investments needed. The state's problems were routinely pushed into the future.

The results of that have been evident: The state hasn't made needed investments in public programs, and Nevada ranks near or at the bottom in national rankings for education, children's services and health care.

It's dumbfounding that rankings like this have been acceptable for so long, but lawmakers and governors have come and gone with little significant change. Public apathy and small budgets, along with a fierce aversion to taxes, have resulted in political inertia. What passes for progress typically comes in small, incremental steps that are often later erased by budget cuts.

Something has to change if Nevada wants to see improvements. Obviously, real change doesn't come overnight, but it takes bold action.

What will Nevada look like in 10 years for the students coming out of high school? Will it offer, as Sandoval called for, "an educated and healthy citizenry, a vibrant and sustainable economy, safe and livable communities, and an efficient and responsive state government"?

The question that he and the Legislature will have to ask is not only whether their actions take significant steps in that direction but whether that is the best they can offer to the members of the class of 2023.