

“We’ve got to elevate student achievement.”

After decades as an academic in educational administration, James Guthrie made an unusual career move when he was hired as Nevada’s superintendent of public instruction.

Guthrie has a Ph.D. in education administration from Stanford University and most recently was director of education policy studies at the George W. Bush Presidential Center.

State Legislatures: Why did you leave academics for the world of state education?

Guthrie: I didn’t need a job, but I wanted this job. I was enthusiastic when I accepted it, and if anything, I’m more enthusiastic now. I’m a little more humble now that I have seen the complexity of it. But I still see the promise of it, I see that the talent in the state education department is enormous. Also, there are only 17 school districts here, so it is not Texas or California with a thousand. Here you can actually get your arms around it. The other good news is that the economy is coming back. And I work for a governor, who is absolutely committed to making these schools better for children.

SL: What’s on the top of your to-do list?

Guthrie: We’ve got to elevate student achievement. We’ve got to close the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students. We have to start measuring success by performance—not time put in. We want youngsters to go to college. We want to assist those who want apprenticeships. And we want to bring back those who left the system and believe they made a mistake. We want to make it comfortable for them to finish high school.

SL: What are you doing in regard to dropouts?

Guthrie: The path to dropping out doesn’t start at high school. I’m very mindful of that. So we’re moving toward a voluntary, full-day, full-



state kindergarten. We will also have a “ready by three” goal—that youngsters will be able to do math by third grade. And if they aren’t proficient at that time, we will have intensive instruction, so we don’t move them mindlessly to the next grade. And for high school, youngsters who get a diploma often think, mistakenly, that they are prepared for college, but they end up in remedial courses. We’ve got to make a seamless transition into post secondary activities. So we’re going to start in kindergarten and end with college and in between we’re going to try to make it all work.

SL: What are the biggest challenges with the common core standards?

Guthrie: The biggest challenge is to translate them into the reality of the classroom and let teachers know what we expect of them. I am enthusiastic about the standards because they are higher than what we have now. I have colleagues who have criticized me for going along with the initiative on the grounds that it will result in some kind of federal takeover. Maybe it will, but right now I endorse them.

SL: You’re an expert in education funding reform, what are you recommending for Nevada?

Guthrie: Nevada determines how much money a school district gets by a student count on one day. I want to move to an average daily attendance system. Second, I want a weighted student formula for rural districts and remote schools, and for big cities, for things like limited English proficiency or poverty. Three, there are too many incentives now to spend all your budgeted money. We get this strip mining at the end of the fiscal year. I want more incentives to save. I want schools and districts to be able to carry any money saved over to the next year. There are about 20 things like that.

SL: What is your advice to state legislators?

Guthrie: I believe that mission, money and measurement should come from the top. And management should come from the bottom. Legislatures should be clear in specifying mission, providing money and ensuring there’s measurement. They should not dictate how to perform.

SL: What’s the biggest challenge state lawmakers face trying to do what you are describing?

Guthrie: There are two. One is getting away from the idea that the absence of money is the problem. It might be a problem, but it’s not the first problem. It is how we use the money. The second is the unusual intense influence of individuals who would rather see the system serve adults than students. They’ve got to escape the special interest. These systems have to be for the benefit of children and not adults.

Editor’s note: This interview is one in a series of conversations with opinion leaders. It has been edited for length and clarity. The opinions expressed are those of the interviewee, and not of NCSL.

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