

Tearing schools apart

BY REBECCA ZISCH

REBECCA ZISCH SPLITS HER TIME BETWEEN THE WOMEN'S STUDIES DEPARTMENT AT UNLV AND THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT AT CCSN. SHE IS ALSO A REGULAR COMMENTATOR ON NEVADA PUBLIC RADIO.

During the 2005 Nevada legislative session, \$250,000 was set aside to investigate a long-debated issue in Clark County public education: the deconsolidation of the Clark County School District. The money will pay for consultants to think up a possible plan for such a deconsolidation.

There are those that say this plan will be a welcome solution to the obvious shortcomings of our oversized, county-wide school district. After all, the school district is currently the fifth-largest school district in the nation, encompassing 313 schools and 292,000 students. As an organization of such mileage and population, accountable to more employees and customers than some Fortune 500 companies, the Clark County School District has suffered from organizational and administrative limitations. Furthermore, graduation rates and test scores have repeatedly pointed to the insufficient means for educators and mediocre results for students.

The inadequacies of the school district are obvious and, over the years of vast growth in the county, taxpayers have clamored for solutions. However, the assumption that deconsolidation is the quick fix that's needed is faulty. While deconsolidation can potentially lead to better communication and administration within each smaller school district, it will also create additional problems of inequity throughout the county.

Take a drive around Southern Nevada, visiting classrooms and campuses in our public education system, or read up on local statistics by zip code; it will be obvious that Clark County students already benefit or suffer at school based on the income level of their surrounding neighborhoods. For example, I have witnessed classrooms of 30 or more kindergartners in low-income neighborhoods being taught by lone teachers with no aides, in a single room with no windows, usually in an all-day school scenario with no recess or outdoor time. On the other hand, in newly developing upper-income neighborhoods, I have visited elementary classrooms with as few as 15 students in newly built, spacious, open facilities who are being taught by team teachers or have paid teacher's aides. This is just one example of the discrepancies already in place when funds are supposed to be spread equally throughout the district.

Additionally, in neighborhoods with higher per capita incomes, where stay-at-home parents are more common, schools have the added bonus of volunteers who help in classrooms, organize events, extra-curriculars and even fundraisers to help offset costs of field trips, library books, supplies and equipment that may not be covered by the school district budget. It is these same parents, students and schools that will most benefit from the potential deconsolidation of the school district. Because public schools are traditionally funded through property taxes, obviously there is more money available where real estate is more valuable — in the newer, wealthier neighborhoods. Moreover, with deconsolidation some districts will have more money to pay teachers, resulting in better teachers winning higher-paying positions; therefore, the quality of classroom teaching becomes directly related to the salaries offered in each district, ultimately affecting the overall success of students.

The deconsolidation of the Clark County School District will result in even greater disparity between the facilities and opportunities in competing smaller school districts than already exists. To deconsolidate is to tacitly approve these inequities. **CL**