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INTERVIEW

Modeling Innovation, Autonomy, Accountability, and Performance in Clark County, Nevada: An Interview with Dwight D. Jones

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Modeling Innovation, Autonomy, Accountability, and Performance in Clark County, Nevada: **An Interview with Dwight D. Jones**

SUPERINTENDENT DWIGHT D. JONES has worked in virtually every aspect of public education, from public school teaching, district administration, and charter school management to state agency leadership. He began his career as a public school teacher, and rose through the ranks to become Assistant Superintendent of the Wichita Public Schools; Operational Vice President of Edison Schools in Maryland, Kansas, and Missouri; and Assistant Superintendent and later Superintendent of Fountain-Fort Carson School District in Colorado. Jones became Colorado's Commissioner of Education in 2007, a position he held until January 2011, when he assumed the Superintendency of Clark County School District (Nevada).

Jones' involvement in education reform has been similarly expansive, covering a range of topics such as innovation, accountability, student growth, and the achievement gap. He achieved statewide recognition for narrowing the socioeconomic and minority achievement gap as Superintendent in Fountain-Fort Carson. As Colorado's Commissioner of Education, he instituted a longitudinal student growth model and streamlined the state's accountability system.

Now, Jones is drawing on the breadth of his experience and depth of his past accomplishments in his new position as Superintendent of Clark County School District (CCSD). CCSD encompasses the Las Vegas city limits, making it one of the largest school districts in the country. Just a few short months into his tenure, Jones has already published Phase One of *A Look Ahead*, his clarion call for changing the status quo in CCSD to improve schools and achieve better results. In this edited interview with DMC Managing Director Nicholas P. Morgan, Jones discusses local challenges, national trends, and the structural changes he would like to implement in CCSD. His approach integrates policy recommendations, district reorganization, a focus on student performance, and a framework that links performance to continuous improvement. >

You came from the Commissioner's Office in Colorado, and decided to take up a superintendency in a large, prominent district here. What prompted that transition? How did you think about some of the leadership challenges that are inherent in the superintendency?

As Commissioner of Education in Colorado, I worked with 178 school districts, serving about 830,000 students. And here in Nevada, there are just 17 school districts. But, this district alone has 310,000 students — it's the fifth largest in the country. The difference creates some significant challenges, but, ultimately, there were two themes of my work in Colorado that inspired this next step.

The first was that we were really pushing a reform agenda in Colorado. My goal as commissioner was to say, "Can we graduate more kids who are ready by exit — who can access college or even the workforce at the very highest levels?" We now tell kids that high school is no longer the destination; it's just the beginning. What you do is backmap that through every grade level: first graders ought to be ready to exit to second grade, second graders ought to be ready to exit to third grade. And it goes right through high school to something post-secondary.

We passed some great reforms in Colorado. But telling the superintendents that this is what you ought to be doing is different than trying to do it yourself. My friends asked me why I would leave the commissioner's job and go back to a superintendency. I said that I wanted to get in the trenches and see whether what we passed could work in practice. So part of the roadmap is being very precise about the specific benchmarks that will take us to the goal of preparing all students to progress to post-secondary opportunities without the need for remediation. For example, we aim, within five years, to have 80% of those exiting third grade read on-level on the state assessment, and to have an annually increasing percentage of those exiting eighth grade achieve proficiency in Algebra 1. These are examples of leading indicators that will tell us whether students are on track to be ready by exit.

The second theme I took from being commissioner related to urban districts, which tend to be constantly in flux with new superintendents

coming in and changing everything. I wanted to see whether I could go into a large district and bring a lot of what it does to scale. Equally, I wanted to be able to look at some things it does and ask, "What should we stop doing?"

Also, the opportunity as a superintendent to get back to teachers and kids really mattered a lot to me.

A Look Ahead, the preliminary reforms report you recently released, has many themes that are very relevant to DMC members. There is a big theme of empowerment or "earned autonomy" — the idea of giving really successful principals the freedom to operate, and then getting closer to the ones who are struggling.

That's right, we call it your license to operate, or to continue to operate.

Earned autonomy is an idea that resonates with many superintendents but it can be tricky to execute. How are you making that idea a reality?

That's actually a really great question, because it's one thing to write about it, and it's another to go out there and do it. *A Look Ahead* is a living document that's going to evolve [see pull-out box on p. 8]. As we get smarter, we're going to release Phase Two and then Phase Three.

Part of why we developed this plan was that the rest of the country seemed to be moving forward with a reform agenda that just was not getting to Nevada. As a district, we're one of the few, if not the only, large urban systems to have met our federal targets in three out of the last four years, but as a state, Nevada comes in last in a ranking of educational performance by state. A number of the things we put in Phase One of the reform are things that are already happening across the country. My wife, who's a very innovative educator, read the plan and said, "Well, that's all good, but most of that is already happening." I said, "It may be happening there, but it's not happening here." What we want to do is catch the district up on some of the reforms that are paying great dividends elsewhere to get better results for kids here. It always comes back to the kids and their results.

What I also recognized was that I've got schools right now here in the Clark County School District that have been on corrective action for six, seven, or eight years. At some point, you have to say, "How long? How long should the parents and the community expect us to take to turn a school around? How long should the taxpayers keep investing?" Every year that schools perform worse, we put in more money. It's like we're rewarding low performance. At some point, we have to say that enough is enough. Our budgets are really difficult, and we can't afford to give a school six, seven, or eight years to improve. If it doesn't turn around in two or three years, then we've got to look at another option, and I'm a big supporter of choice.

On the flip side, if a school is getting results, its ticket to operate free from our intervention is to keep getting results. We're creating an "autonomous zone" of empowered schools that get to operate without unnecessary oversight. The autonomous zone will be in addition to a dozen or so "performance zones" that encompass feeder-aligned schools. We want to remove bureaucracy to make schools more efficient. The principals in each zone report to a single academic manager, who will in turn report directly to the deputy superintendent, without an intervening associate superintendent. We're building the zones as we speak and we're going to roll them out in August with the start of the new school year. This is a pretty aggressive timeline, but I don't think we can wait. I hope that, someday, all our schools will be ready to exercise empowerment. But, to get our lower-performing schools toward autonomy, we need to start in the short-term by actually providing more oversight. On the theory that we need to align our resources around the greatest need, these lower-performing schools will enjoy certain benefits, such as having first priority in hiring new teachers or using professional development funds.

It's also important to underscore that empowerment is not just about reorganizing the district. Empowerment is a much more deliberate effort that creates a space for innovation at the school level. The schools in the autonomous zone will have more latitude to make budgeting, staffing, and programmatic decisions, as long as they continue to get results. Through experimentation, we can

foster alternative models that can help us to think about new ways to deliver instruction most efficiently and effectively.

“Site administrators seek a defined role and a meaningful purpose, and they welcome greater accountability for results in exchange for autonomy to use their own thinking to achieve those results.”

How does your experience in Colorado inform this idea of earned autonomy and empowerment?

This drive towards autonomy draws heavily on my experience in Colorado. Colorado has been one of the leading states to adopt policies that nourish innovation, and I hope to see similar legislation passed in Nevada. The Colorado Schools of Innovation Act, which passed in 2008, when I was Commissioner, let districts give schools more flexibility in order to make their own managerial decisions. This freedom enabled principals and teachers to introduce non-traditional forms of instruction, like online and blended learning.

You talked about flattening the organization, and removing levels of bureaucracy. How does that fit into your empowerment and autonomy agenda?

Flattening the organization reflects my own desire to get closer to the principals, especially those in the lower-performing schools. I want these schools to receive more personal time and attention, and that's precisely what we're trying to accomplish by flattening the organization. Principals shouldn't be at the bottom of the organization; they should be on the top of the organization. If a principal is ultimately going to be accountable for results, then he or she has to have direct access to the ▷

superintendent and deputy superintendent, and shouldn't have to go through layers to get there.

When I arrived here in Clark County, the elementary principals — we've got over 200 of them — weren't even meeting with the central office staff or with the deputy of instruction. I said to the principals, "How can you get aligned around a common vision and make sure you're getting the support and service you need from us, if we're not even having a dialogue?"

It sounds like the role of the principal is going to change pretty substantially, at least for a significant percentage of your principals.

True. But, it's interesting: in April, I commissioned a report examining the barriers to improved student achievement in this district. What we found — and this reinforces broader research into human capital — is that site administrators seek a defined role and a meaningful purpose, and they welcome greater accountability for results in exchange for autonomy to use their own thinking to achieve those results.

So how are you going to shift the support side, not just the accountability side, for the building leaders? How do you help them get their job done in a different way?

There are a few things that have to happen immediately. Then there's learning that takes place over time. We're going to get a lot better down the road than we're going to be when we roll out in August.

First, while principals want autonomy, they often don't know what to do with it. Everyone has a different definition of what autonomy means. So first, we have to train principals to create the right kind of conditions for exercising autonomy. They have to know how to work collaboratively on their budget, hire staff, retain top talent, and analyze research-based programs that yield results for students. We shouldn't make assumptions that all principals will initially know how to do that well.

Second, we have to make sure principals continue receiving the training they need. And a lot of this will come from the principals themselves. The best way for teachers to learn is from other teachers. Likewise, the best way for principals to learn is from other principals who are using empowerment well.

A Look Ahead Phase One: Improving Achievement in the Clark County School District

Organizing Principles: CCSD's mission and vision center on ensuring that students are "ready by exit." This means that students are ready for postsecondary education (without remediation), or are prepared for the workforce. To achieve this goal, CCSD has organized around the following five principles. Together, these principles create greater ownership for students' academic success by defining success for CCSD employees in terms of student performance.

Principle 1	<i>Get the optics right: transparent data drives learning and continuous improvement.</i>
	Improve metrics to gauge student, teacher, principal, and school success.
Principle 2	<i>Grant greater autonomy in return for greater accountability for improved results.</i>
	Use an expanded notion of empowerment that flattens the organization and promotes greater autonomy.
Principle 3	<i>Recognize that enhanced student success depends on greater educator effectiveness.</i>
	Create a stronger link between how students perform and how teachers are evaluated.
Principle 4	<i>Align to what matters most and ensure that literacy remains the linchpin.</i>
	Ensure that all students exit grades 1, 3, and 5 reading at or above grade-level, and develop common interim benchmark assessments.
Principle 5	<i>Recognize that choice and innovation are the engines driving needed school reform.</i>
	Leverage technology to alter and supplement instruction, to improve efficiency and effectiveness of instruction, as well as to provide for more "anywhere anytime learning."

Source: CCSD



DMC's Nicholas Morgan (left) and Superintendent Dwight D. Jones (right).

That's a great insight. There are so many interesting dynamics to this.

The fiscal crisis has presented both an opportunity and an inescapable need to be a lot smarter and more strategic in connecting what we're doing with the results we are getting for kids. We have to learn about how we're currently spending our dollars — under what conditions, with what groups of kids, and what return we are realizing on that investment. What happens in a lot of large districts is that we just do more and more stuff over time. We have some stuff that works and some stuff that doesn't. We don't know which is which, and we don't know why it's working or why it's not.

I've brought in consultants to analyze how we're spending resources. The project is different from an audit. It's much more about drilling down to determine what needs to be invested in and what needs to be stopped. When the legislature asks me whether I have enough money, I have to say, "I don't know," even though that's tough to admit. But I don't think we should just throw money at a problem, especially in these tough economic times. First, I have to get my arms around how we're currently spending our money. Then I may find that I have enough money, or I may have to go back to the legislature and ask for more. It's the same approach I took as Commissioner of Education in Colorado. Before I asked for more money for the department, I took a look at how we were spending our money and what kind of results we were getting.

I absolutely agree. We've been using the term "strategic abandonment" to describe sophisticated resource allocation that gives the marginal dollar to the highest-return activity.

Nice. I may take that term!

It's profound to recognize, as you do, that, depending on what the data reveals, you may actually not need more money. That's not a common thing to hear. How has that insight been received by some of the stakeholders in the district and in Nevada?

I always say that it depends on who's doing the evaluating. Certainly, for the Chamber of Commerce and the business leaders, it's a breath of fresh air. The business community has been asking education for a long time to take a real look at resource expenditure and return on investment. And we're taking that message to heart. You're not going to have to file an Open Records request to get the information. All of the analysis about how we're spending dollars and the results they're producing will be transparent.

With teachers, principals, and the union, it's more of a wait-and-see. They like the concept, but they worry that we don't have enough resources to do all of the things around the reform agenda. And they may be right. But, I want to have a dialogue about what is the right amount to invest. One of the things I've said clearly is that we must invest in ▷

our teachers, because at the end of the day, it's the teacher in the classroom who either achieves results or doesn't. My job is to create and invest in the conditions for their development. This was a fast-growing district, so we hired a lot of teachers and we hired them really fast. Now we have a chance to go back and invest in those people.

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At DMC, we've been doing a lot of work focused on evaluating and promoting teacher effectiveness, which sounds like what you're talking about doing here.

Yes. One of the important ways to develop the district's human capital in a much more robust way is to sharpen our focus on teacher effectiveness. We often talk about teacher effectiveness in terms of evaluation, but evaluation is actually just one component of a broader pipeline that prepares teachers. It starts with evaluating teacher preparation programs much more directly based on their impact on student performance. Last year, I co-chaired a National Blue Ribbon Panel, and the main idea that emerged from the panel was that the preparation of new teachers has to be more tightly connected to their students' subsequent learning outcomes. Then we need to get smarter about teacher recruitment, which includes opening up more non-traditional avenues and making sure that struggling schools can access the highest-quality candidates. After they're hired, teachers need continuous feedback and development, informed and customized by student performance.

In terms of the evaluation itself, *A Look Ahead* outlines my idea for a four tiered evaluation system

— rather than the more common, and less helpful, “satisfactory/unsatisfactory” evaluation rubric. Evaluations should draw on multiple points of data, and student growth will be an important element. We need to design metrics that capture student and class year-to-year growth in achievement, so that we're measuring progress as well as proficiency.

The Nevada Growth Model that's being rolled out this fall is a great start, but we need to extend that model. First, the growth information has to be transparent, so that we continuously improve and keep moving students up in the performance distribution. That way, teachers and principals can see and replicate the success of their colleagues. Imagine this scenario: a teacher is able to search the Nevada growth data online to find a comparable teacher whose students are achieving higher growth. That first teacher could then watch a video with a 360-degree view of their colleague in the classroom, and learn from his or her practice. Each time someone viewed the video, the teacher being filmed would receive a small performance payment.

This growth model shouldn't be confined to just a student or school performance framework. It should also link financial information so we can get a better idea of how to make the most progress at the lowest expense. So, in other words, growth data would be a key underpinning of the return on investment analysis we discussed earlier.

In coming back to some of the comments you made about your business community and other stakeholders, I'm curious about the concept of a “critical friend,” which you discuss in *A Look Ahead*.

This is a large district. I've got 38,000 employees and 360-plus schools. Things are going to happen. We want to be accountable for the things that happen, and we want to get better continually. The only way to get better is to embrace the brutal truth.

But you can't be part of tearing down a system if you're not also going to be part of building it back up. So, I'm asking folks not just to criticize, but to recognize that schools are owned by their communities. As I say in the document, our success will

ultimately be based on what the community demands and expects. Right now, the community hasn't set a high enough bar for the school system. So, I've got to convince the community to demand and expect more. It's going to make my job harder, but, boy, is it going to make it better for the young people that we're trying to serve!

I use the model from Florida. I think former Governor Jeb Bush was onto something — though he really got criticized for this — when he started to give grades to the schools. I don't know whether he had the right approach or not, but what I do know is that when the communities saw the schools that were graded D and F, they embraced and partnered with them rather than attacked them. They felt ownership and wanted to make the schools better. It's the same concept I'm talking about here. Let's identify where our highest need is, let's own it, and let's come together as a community to make it better. That's what I consider a "critical friend."

Given your background, what words of wisdom would you like to share with other superintendents as you think about the bridge between school districts and state or federal initiatives?

I've been so fortunate to have had the opportunity to be commissioner of education in Colorado, and, wow, did I learn a lot! Before that, I was superintendent in Fountain-Fort Carson, which is a district outside of Colorado Springs. As a superintendent, I saw the Department of Education as a bureaucracy that was all about monitoring and compliance. Sitting in the commissioner's seat myself, I realized that it's one thing to complain, and another thing to do something about it. As commissioner, I learned that the Department of Education had to be about support and service, and that our success was the success of the districts. I learned to create an environment where the districts can tell you what they need, rather than vice versa. We changed the name of Senate Bill 163 from the "Accountability" bill to the "Support and Accountability" bill to convey that those two concepts actually go together. Compliance and monitoring shouldn't define the mission. As a state

official, you have to believe that you can lock arms and embrace the difficult work of turning around the lowest-performing schools. And, let me tell you, it is hard work.

Finally, as commissioner, I learned a lot of really good lessons about partnering with the legislature, the governor, the superintendents, and the union and bargaining groups to change the system and the bureaucracy. It was a great collaboration. It didn't mean that we always agreed. But we learned that we could come together if the focus was going to be on students.

I bet some of the disagreements actually helped to push the conversation forward.

Oh, they did. I think Jim Collins has it about right that "norming" and "storming" are the best way to reach the best outcome.¹ At the end of the day, I'm proud of the people who supported making the Colorado Department of Education an agency of service.

This is how I gauged my success in Colorado: when I started as commissioner, I'd be in a big meeting with all of the principals or all of the superintendents in the state, and I'd say, "Hi, I'm Dwight Jones from the Colorado Department of Education, and I'm here to help." The laughter would erupt and the audience would respond, "I don't want that help. I don't want to be on your list." So I told the state board that, to determine progress, I would continue to open meetings with that same statement. Progress would come when the laughter stopped. By the time I left, when I introduced myself and said, "I'm here to help," you could hear a pin drop. The districts now wanted to partner with us.

¹ Jim Collins studies how companies and organizations can improve their performance, and has written a number of books, including: *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... And Others Don't* (2001), *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* (2004), and most recently, *How the Mighty Fall: And Why Some Companies Never Give In* (2009).



NICHOLAS P. MORGAN IS MANAGING DIRECTOR AT THE DISTRICT MANAGEMENT COUNCIL. HE CAN BE REACHED AT NMORGAN@DMCOUNCIL.ORG.