

Nevada lawmakers urge reconsideration of school funds

Legislators write to U.S. education secretary saying Silver State's population of English language learners has not fallen

By JASON C. GREEN
STEPHENS WASHINGTON BUREAU

September 25, 2007

WASHINGTON -- Nevadans in Congress pressed Education Secretary Margaret Spellings on Monday to fix an "inaccurate and flawed" formula that slashed \$2.6 million in federal aid this year from schools in the Silver State.

Lawmakers asked Spellings for a report on the accuracy of census data the department relied upon to calculate state funding under an English language learner program.

"For Nevada, the (American Community Survey) had proven to be highly flawed and we are hopeful that your findings will come to the same conclusion," the lawmakers stated in a letter to the Cabinet official.

The American Community Survey, an annual population sampling formed by the Census Bureau, indicated there had been a decline between 2003 and 2005 of 20,000 Nevada students who are not proficient in English.

As a result of that finding, federal funding to the state this year was reduced, with most of the losses to Clark County, where Hispanics make up the largest student segment.

Nevada educators reacted in disbelief because the state's Hispanic population has grown steadily.

An English language clearinghouse at George Washington University that relies on state counts "shows an increase in Nevada's English language learners population from 53,492 in the 2002-03 school-year to 72,117 in 2004-05," Spellings was told in the letter.

The letter was signed by Sens. Harry Reid, D-Nev., and John Ensign, R-Nev., and Reps. Shelley Berkley, D-Nev., and Jon Porter and Dean Heller, both R-Nev.

"The Department of Education has neglected to consider the real demographics when making this decision," Porter said.

"Nevada has grown at an unprecedented pace over the last several years, and it is vital that we work to make certain our federal funding keeps up," Ensign said.

"The entire delegation agrees that a better system needs to be implemented to make sure our schools have the resources they need," Reid said.

Education Department officials have the choice between using census data or state numbers.

The Nevada lawmakers said their staffs were told the department chose to use census data because as many as 20 percent of states and school districts had not reported their numbers.

"We are respectfully requesting the department make public a list of those states," the Nevadans wrote.