

An Interview with Brenda Pearson

Perspectives from the COVID-19 Pandemic: Leadership and Learning in Nevada

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Each interviewee had the opportunity to review their transcript. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the interviewee. This interview features Brenda Pearson, Director of Strategic Policy Initiatives for Clark County Education Association, and was conducted on 3/1/22 by Magdalena Martinez and Peter Grema. This interview covers topics including reflections on leadership, organizational challenges, and opportunities for collaboration.

Interview with Brenda Pearson

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SPEAKERS

Peter Grema, Magdalena Martinez, Brenda Pearson

Magdalena Martinez 00:03

Thanks so much, everyone for joining us today. And just to confirm you agree to be recorded,

Brenda Pearson 00:10

I do.

Magdalena Martinez 00:10

And you agree to attribute any quotes to this conversation that we may use in the future?

Brenda Pearson 00:16

I do.

Magdalena Martinez 00:16

Thank you so much. So let's go ahead and get started. And, Brenda Pearson, if you could tell us a little bit about your background and how, what you do currently at CCEA?

Brenda Pearson 00:29

Right. So I was in the school system. So, I've taught elementary through middle school for a little bit over 20 years. I moved to Nevada in 2000, and started teaching here. I have a master's degree in clinical psychology, and then I decided I'd move on to continue my education. So, I decided to get a PhD in educational psychology. So that's kind of kept me a little bit apprised on what's been happening within at least, the research and really what we can do better within our school system. I moved over to CCEA, and, gosh, seven years ago, and I am the director of strategic policy initiatives, that essentially means that I help to create local and state policy that is going to

impact our students and our teachers, whether that's retention, quality of education for our students, whatever those may be. Those types of programs are developed with me in collaboration with other entities. And so that's, that's solely my job.

Magdalena Martinez 01:39

Thank you so much. So how did you come to go from the classroom to CCEA?

Brenda Pearson 01:46

Yeah, so I was out of the classroom quite a bit during my career as either a strategist or centrally located. At the same year that the Common Core Standards were rolled out, I decided I would, you know, figure out what my worth was as a teacher and go back and teach kindergarten, which is so not my strength. Nonetheless, I did that for about four years. And then I had always been teaching classes through either the district or RPDP. And somebody recruited me to come on over and interview. And so, I was really hired to do more of the professional learning aspect of our organization. And that essentially just kind of morphed into what I'm doing now, which is more of the policy work.

Magdalena Martinez 02:38

Now in thinking about the recent pandemic, and the economic implications of the pandemic, how did you see your role? How did your role change or not? During this time?

Brenda Pearson 02:53

So I think I'm one of the only people in CCEA who has background in teaching. So, I really felt that my role would be to try to support whatever those resources that teachers needed, would be. So, there was a huge transition going from face to face to distance learning, right, and I worked hand in hand with the district to really figure out what those resources could be, first of all, to support our educators. And then I additionally just supported them, as many ways as I possibly can put through, putting either resources available or making PE available to them. But most of my work really was around synchronizing what the district was asking, seeing about what is the feasibility of what the teachers were being asked to do? So, for example, were they able to teach virtually and in person at the same time? Could they do - you know, what was their caseload or their class size going to be during that point in time? And was that even feasible, feasible or manageable for our teachers? So that's really where my position morphed into.

Magdalena Martinez 04:15

I have many friends who are teachers, and I remember there's a tremendous amount of ambiguity in those early stages in particular, what teaching would look like, right?

Brenda Pearson 04:27

Yeah, yes, most definitely. And I think that especially, you know, being a veteran teacher, we were not taught how to really keep students engaged at that level, as in hybrid, or virtually. And so that that was a huge learning curve for many people. And I don't know if many of them actually came out on the other end, feeling like they were able to engage their students. By the data, I would assume that that is actually going to be a no because of the chronic absenteeism that even persist to this day, so.

Magdalena Martinez 05:01

Right, right, boy, that must be really, really, really hard to wrap your mind around right? In terms of the teachers. So, from your perspective, which groups do you believe were the hardest hit by the COVID recession, from where you stand?

Brenda Pearson 05:28

I believe that the students got the brunt of this, whether that is from a social standpoint, from an academic standpoint, from a safety standpoint, I think adults, I don't think it was easy for adults. But I think we saw the students suffer. And that is something that I don't think any of us who've lived through this time will ever forget. Right? Even the news about suicides, child, children who are committing suicide, those were shocking. But also noted, knowing the increase in child abuse, and they you know, that that definitely occurred, although the reports were lower, right, because there wasn't anybody else there to watch over them. So I would say 100% would be the students who got the brunt of the COVID impact.

Magdalena Martinez 06:22

Yeah, that makes sense. Now, I know that CCEA represents the voices of teachers, how did how did your work change, or the focus of the organization change in order to support some of the hardest hit groups, and in this case, students?

Brenda Pearson 06:39

So um, I, so we really did, at least from maybe a senior staff level, really take a look at the health and safety of our community. So that was one of the biggest aspects of our work. So, we not only did we take a look at, you know, those high risk populations of teachers that I don't think there was a lot of recognition of prior to at least publicly of the health, health of our teachers, right? So, we have a lot of chronically ill teachers in our ranks. And that means that they needed some type of differentiated safety mechanism that was put in place to support them. We worked long and hard on making sure that those options were available to teachers, whether that's them working hybrid work, whether you know, as the years, the year progressed, I guess, or whether, you know, they needed some time to take to be at home healing, whatever the case may be, right,

we wanted to make sure that everyone felt safe. As for, as for what we ended up doing on a daily basis within our building, it's no secret that we, our job is to recruit members and make sure that remote members retain, right. But everything went to the wayside at that point in time, where we simply picked up the phone and called every single person and asked how they were doing. And that, and that was multiple times over that we did that, and it wasn't for anything, but just knowing that somebody else would be on the other end, to talk to them if they needed to. So I think, you know, we really did take a look at it from more of the emotional well-being and the safety of our teachers. We called everybody just to make sure that that they knew that we cared, and that we were there. And if they needed additional assistance, we could help as well. We also worked with some other coalitions specifically a parenting coalition, just to make sure that we heard what the parents needed too, right, because it's very easy to make decisions in my office sitting right here for other people. But that does not mean that any of those decisions are going to be meeting their needs. And so that was really important for us to make sure that we had everybody at the table discussing, you know, what, what are your biggest fears? What do you feel needs to happen to make sure that your kids are safe and you feel safe as well?

Magdalena Martinez 09:31

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And in terms of, if you don't have this type of handouts, fine. I can look it up. But I know we have a teacher shortage nationally, and of course here locally. What is the typical demographic of the teacher, cause that made me think of that when you said there are many teachers who are dealing with health issues, and it just made me think in terms of age and so on and so forth. What is a teacher-

Brenda Pearson 10:00

I think the average teacher, the last I heard was in the early 40s, and a woman and had roughly eight years of teaching experience, I think that was where we ended up. I can get to the solid information. But that's what I recall. So, you wouldn't think that that would be a high-risk population necessarily, right? Nothing about those three things make you think, you know, 40-year-olds are not generally the most ill. But you never know.

Magdalena Martinez 10:35

Now, you started to talk a little bit about working with parent groups to really look at issues related to well-being, were there any other non-government agencies or groups that that you collaborated with, during this time? And even now?

Brenda Pearson 10:53

Yeah, so our organization worked very hard to set up areas for our teachers to be tested. Right. So, whether that was COVID testing, or prioritizing the vaccines for teachers as well. So, we did

work with that. But we also set up many different COVID testing sites across the district to make sure that that was feasible and convenient for all of our educators. I mean, we were, I guess, non-governmental, I would say that the district still was somebody that we worked with, I think, at least daily--on a daily basis, whether it was simply finding out answers to questions to figure out how we can help individual people, or it was, you know, trying to figure out what's happening with the special education population? Are they receiving the services? You know, broad sweeping... We also met weekly on the reopening plan, how can we put a reopening plan together well in advance, and make sure that the district is successful and opening back up.

Magdalena Martinez 12:04

And now that we've opened up and things seem to be going back to a little bit of a different pace, but we're still in the pandemic, we're still dealing with some of the, you know, economic fallout. Have the priorities changed? Have your working relationships changed with other groups?

Brenda Pearson 12:26

So, I will tell you that I don't think that many people anticipated a teacher's union being so focused on the success of our community, right, often, we are thought of as only focusing on the betterment of the teachers. And that's not the case for our organization, right? High quality education is a product or byproduct of a great community - and making sure that both are in place, right, making sure that we have a successful community that can grow our students and make sure that they enter the workforce prepared. And you know, that was, that's something that most people are not aware of that we do. Like I have conversations, often with legislators, because we're doing a project on a workforce pipeline project. And I often hear why, why CCEA? Why you? But we because we believe in the community, right? We believe in what's giving our students the best opportunity for future, the best possible future.

Magdalena Martinez 13:58

Okay, I'd really like to hear more about that. I think, actually, Peter Grema has a question related to that. So now, before I turn it over to Peter Grema, in thinking about policies and programs that were in place to deal with, quote, The COVID recession, from your perspective, what were some of the most effective policies or programs? And then I don't know where you were during the great recession, but in relation to the Great Recession, we know that there are some real distinctions of how these two economic recessions occurred. One was caused by a specific industry that had a domino effect, and this one was caused by a virus. So, in thinking about the various policies, programs at the multiple levels of government or even locally, were there some that worked better than others, in terms of where you stand, the work that you do advocating for teachers?

Brenda Pearson 14:55

So I, so I do think that, the financial supports that were given by the federal government as well as the state were very beneficial. Right? We did not lose teachers during the time when we very well could have, right? We had a decrease in the number of students who are attending school. We, so we could have very well lost students or I mean, teachers and staff during that time, but we didn't we were continuing to be able to have those positions. I would say definitely the technology for the students, that was something that came through making sure that everybody had a device in their hand. One of those downfalls is, you know, we haven't, we haven't invested in, in the infrastructure to make sure that everybody had broadband or internet access. So that was something that, that came. Not that it wasn't something that existed before. But it really did come to light with that, that equity and access issue. So we, one of the, I think one of the good things that really happened was with the state legislature, they had dedicated money for summer school in the learning loss that occurred. I think that all of that was purposeful. And we were able to get students started learning earlier in the school year, right, so over the summertime versus waiting until September or August to start. So that was very beneficial. We also got a lot of supplemental instructional materials. So, I say all of that, because there are many components of what was received that impacted our rebound, at least felt-our hopeful rebound. But I can't, I can't say that--my perception is that it wasn't a strategic move towards reducing, the learning loss, it was ideas that would help impact a reduction and learning loss, but not a strategic plan to address that, and to bridge that divide. That's how it was perceived by me. And it just wasn't systematic. It wasn't a systematic change. And so those policies were helpful, but disjointed at times.

Magdalena Martinez 17:41

What a strategic intervention might have looked like from your perspective?

Brenda Pearson 17:47

Yeah, I think I'm, I'm grounded in data. And I don't know if we actually know what the learning loss is to this day. So, I don't think that we ever invested in understanding what that learning loss is, and then made plans to bridge that learning loss - or we have issues with connectivity. What have we done? What is the plan that was put forth? I know that there was a plan, but what is the action towards the progress? And then how is that being reflected back in what our students are able to do? I would have invested in helping teachers to understand what engagement is, and making sure that quality lessons were occurring instead of rote lessons, or being more dynamic within their education field. So strategically, I would have looked at learning loss, and as well as that gap in teacher knowledge. And then additionally, that infrastructure need. So all of that - everybody along the way, had to learn something. The administrators had to learn how to evaluate and work with teachers who were distance, as well what supports were given to them. I don't know. But we could have done better. That's my takeaway, but I don't know of any city or

state considering, they couldn't - they did the best they possibly could. I think everybody could have done better.

Magdalena Martinez 19:27

Yeah, definitely. Yeah. That's very helpful. Brenda Pearson, thanks so much. Turn it over to Peter Grema. Peter Grema, do you have any follow up questions on what we've covered so much so far?

Peter Grema 19:38

- not particularly besides outside of just some of the projects that you said you were working on with the community if you go into more depth with that.

Brenda Pearson 19:45

Yeah. So, we are working and have commissioned Columbia University this CPRL which is the Center for Public Research and Leadership, I was trying to say policies, I need to pause myself, as well as UNR's College of Business. And what we've done is we have commissioned an asset map to take a look at what's existing within our K12 education system. What does that quality of that education look like? And how are students being prepared to move on to college and or career. And specifically, those high demand high pay industries up and coming industries have targeted industries that are, you know, shared by everybody. They've targeted industries, are our kids prepared to enter those fields? So, we're looking at not only the CTE, the dual enrollment, but also, folks like our correctional institutions, how are they being prepared to contribute back? And then what are, are the needs of our education system actually aligned with what the business needs are? So that, phase one of that project should be done on June 15? So, we'll move on to phase two after that, that's going to be the Southern Nevada complex, really taking a look at what are the assets within the Southern Nevada complex? And what can we do to make sure that those align specifically also with policy and regulations? Thank you for that. What is the eventual goal of this research project? Yeah, it's really to figure out what are the strengths and the gaps of our pipeline, our workforce pipeline? And then what recommendations do we have to really move forward with strengthening our economy and ensuring that we can recruit those businesses that are going to come to Nevada and, and stabilize our economy so that we're not reliant on two industries. And it's just really, you know, one of the recommendations we already know, it's about data sharing. One thing that we have really come across is, we don't share, we're not very willing to share our own data with others. And I don't think that we can make big changes and understand what those deficits are without understanding what the data looks like. So that's an example of probably one recommendation it's gonna come for, but specifically, Columbia's doing the policy regulation recommendations, and UNR is doing more of the business and industry, and what are those needs of those organizations or the industries need?

Peter Grema 22:44

Thank you for that. Moving on to another question in terms of employment for high school graduates - have efforts to find job opportunities changed in the wake of the recession? If so, how?

Brenda Pearson 22:54

So I think one of the big things we, I'm going to go back to that whole learning loss aspect, right. So especially the students who are graduating now or last year or the year before, there's going to be a tremendous gap in their knowledge, unless they decided to go and pursue this on their own, I'm just gonna say generally, I would assume there's going to be a gap in the knowledge that they're going to move forward with. It also, there's also this equity and access aspect of everything that we've done, where, I was pulling information on math proficiency scores, and in our middle schools, the title one, middle schools, the average proficiency was nearly 8% in math proficiency that I mean, not, I'm not shocked, but I am, I'm still... And what does that look like, at other levels? You know, whether these are students who live in poverty or not. So, yeah, it looks different, because I don't think I think people feel students feel ill prepared. Yeah, I'm gonna leave it there. Unless you have any other thoughts on that.

Peter Grema 24:15

Yeah. How's the pandemic influenced our retention and recruitment efforts?

Brenda Pearson 24:35

With teachers specifically?

Peter Grema 24:36

Correct, yeah.

Brenda Pearson 24:40

So, I think we, as a state have a huge issue with recruitment and retention. We always have had an issue with recruitment and retention. But it seems to be that in the midst of the pandemic, what we ended up doing to create and open up a pipeline was to reduce the requirements to come into the profession, which at some level kind of translates into reducing the respect you have for those for the teaching profession. I think that there's been the one thing that I think that has really impacted the work that I've done at least with in COVID, is I've seen the fear in people and how

that's materialized. Whether that is fear of exposure, fear of leaving a family member who may be sick, fear of, you know, the trauma that students are going to go through, or the fear of not being embraced for the work that you're doing, or even the fear of not being able to meet the needs of the students, right. There's a lot of fear going on in the teaching profession. And I think it takes, take someone really brave to step up right now, especially in the midst of watching across the nation, the turmoil that's going on in every school district, it seems like. So, yes, hands down, our recruitment efforts have, from my perspective, have really been squashed. Because there's not many people who are looking to enter the field of teaching, the retention aspect of it has been really difficult as well, I think, you know, we've had a lot of uncertainty, and COVID was an uncertain time. So that's, that's not, that's part of what's been happening. But there's also been the perception that there isn't much trust in what the district or the state or any, whatever local government you want to talk about, is doing. And so, I'm putting as a teacher, my life, in your hands at some level. And when that happens, and I don't feel like I can trust you, people are making the choice to say, look, we can do with the single income, or I can go and find a job elsewhere, where I'm not as stressed out that I'm failing my kids. So, we have people leaving, especially those who are almost ready for retirement, right. So if, if I were in the classroom, I would, I would be struggling with all the devices and everything else that needs to be used in order to engage our students. And that's, you know, our teachers, a lot of them weren't trained that way, a lot of us were not trained that way. So, I think that there's that gap in job performance as well, that says that we're not as well prepared as we should be, to take this on. So that's also a reason why teachers are leaving. There's also the total aside with the violence that's going on on school campuses, and the behavior of students, which is also, which is also something that is a byproduct of what we've been doing with COVID, what we're living through.

Peter Grema 28:42

Thanks for sharing all that. It's pretty sad to hear. What were some of the most innovative ways that schools and school districts have dealt with the challenges of the pandemic and the recession?

Brenda Pearson 28:56

Are you specifically asking for things that we've done here? Or?

Peter Grema Yeah.

Brenda Pearson Okay. Um, I think it was innovative to make sure that we all had technology in every student's hands. I also believe that it was innovative to and well, we offered a lot of opportunities for different types of programs that were accessible to students. I think there were, you know, some shining, shining lights, you know, with, like the choirs that all sang together on Zoom. Those types of things were really innovative. In all reality, I think the lessons we've learned from the pandemic. One of the lessons I've learned is we have a missed opportunity. It

was a time for innovation, a time to embrace that innovation, and put steps in place to make our schools to reimagine what we can do within our schools. And we didn't do it. We just didn't we did things that could be considered innovative. And I hope you don't use that as a quote. But all in all, I think it was a missed opportunity. That's my honest opinion.

Peter Grema 30:32

If it's a missed opportunity, can you describe maybe some things that you saw would have been able to do in light of the pandemic?

Brenda Pearson 30:39

I'm sorry to say that I saw what do what

Peter Grema 30:41

Is there anything you think that could have come out of the pandemic that the school districts could have done better than?

Brenda Pearson 30:47

Yeah, I really do. It's back to that to understanding where students are, and understand and putting a plan in place to support them, and making sure that we reimagine education and think about can we do you know, more of a flipped classroom? Can we embrace problems, project based learning and more problem based learning, you know, those types of engaging formats that really offer our students not only an opportunity to engage with the learning at a different level at a higher level, but also bring them back to school? I think that much of what we did was the same as we would do in a typical classroom. But this time, we just had a screen in front of us. I think, there, there were shining lights across the district. I can't say that enough, because there really were, but I don't think as a whole, we've made as much progress as we've needed to, to because what happens if this happens again? Where are students going to be? And if we already have this much of a learning loss? What do we do with that whole generation? And why are we not talking about it anymore? Why are we talking about the learning loss? Um, you know, those conversations all went away. And I think that that's, um, it's just, it's sad, it's depressing, because adults can move on - students can't, can't at the same level, right? They have this this, these gaps or these traumas. whereas adults can rebound a little bit quicker and sooner than students can.

Peter Grema 32:37

In what ways is housing and food insecurity affected? Students, schools, and staff?

Brenda Pearson 32:43

Yeah. You know, it's that hierarchy of needs, right? I mean, when the pandemic shut down, we had breakfast, lunch and dinner offered to students around the community. But so many conditions have to be in place in order for somebody to actually be able to access that, right. So, what if a parent isn't willing to let that child go down there, or the parents not able to? Or somebody is sick? It's so, food insecurity, I think it's really been, I think, something we've always as a community thought was smaller than it is. So, food insecurity, home, housing, those types of things have really - good lord. Look, we have, I think the last number was around 30,000 students who never came back to school. So why? Is it because of housing? Is it because they moved in with someone else and just never went back to school? We don't know. How has it affected everything? Yeah, because students are on survival mode at some level. So, our teachers, so are, you know, parents, etc. But I think that 30,000 students gone is the number that hits me, because I don't, that's going to be our, I would assume and believe, our most disadvantaged students are going to be in that population.

Peter Grema 34:29

So, thank you. Are there two or three organizational changes that happened during the pandemic that you're most proud of? This can be either at CCEA or within the school district.

Brenda Pearson 34:44

So, I think I don't... So, this project actually was born out of the pandemic and really out of the recession, the pandemic, the COVID 19 recession. And I think we've often, as a community talked about that gap between, you know, the remedial classes that students have to take when they hit in higher education. But we've always been busy pointing fingers in other all these different directions on whose fault that is, right, whether it's, well, the higher ed needs to do something, well, k 12, needs to do something, whoever needs to do something, it's just not us, right. And business and industries think of the same thing. And our governmental agencies are... But now, if we're able to really synchronize this and say, this is what we're doing to prepare our students, and there's an alignment between CTE programs or dual language to prepare students for employability, then, then that's going to be a turning point in Nevada. And that's, that's actually one of the biggest things that I think is going to change the future of, of our state. It's, it's about people have learned and I think through the pandemic, in the work that I've, I'm doing right now, I feel like people are more willing to be vulnerable in this time, because they've seen the struggles that people have gone through, I don't think we want to do this, again, as a state. So, I think that's incredibly important for us to, you know, something that I am very proud of. We've also really focused on, you know, the legislative wins were really important. You know, the mining, tax, education, mining tax and, and increasing the funding for education. The pandemic highlighted, like we all know, all, you know, the gaps that we have in our in our education system. And so, I don't think honestly, we would have made as much progress, legislatively

funding education, if it wasn't for the pandemic, because we all now know what chronic underfunding looks like, and why, you know, all those things, we swept under the rug for so many years. They all, they all reared their ugly head again. Right. And we know about connectivity. We know about the inequities that happen. It's been highlighted across everything that you've read within the education field, and, you know, other fields as well. But so, the legislative wins, most definitely, funding of education. That was huge. And I also think the focus on how we need to align our schooling to workforce pipeline. That is, that's huge. Those are the three things I think, have been great things that have happened. The other thing that I think has happened is... I think that as a whole, I think CCA is put up... Is I guess, well, what I'd like to say is that we are seen more as a contributing member of the community. And I think that is a... I think you both know that that's been a change. And I think that's important. It's important to know that that we have a community of people who are passionate about education and the, the futures of our children, and that it's important that we're all part of that. So.

Peter Grema 39:23

Thank you. Appreciate it. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Brenda Pearson 39:27

I don't think so. Unless you have more questions or...

Peter Grema 39:30

Anything else you think we should speak to, anyone else?

Brenda Pearson 39:38

So, when I was talking about the parenthood organization, I would assume that you probably are speaking with Rebecca Garcia. If not, then I think she might be a good person to speak to and get some of that perspective as well. I also think and often forgot about portion of our community are the students that are also in the correctional facilities. I think even a man of Jack Martin with juvenile justice would be an interesting person to speak to, on how all of this has impacted them. Because I think there's, there's so many ripple domino effect or ripple effects that are happening within there. And I think that we will be seeing that too for years to come, because they're still on reduced occupancy because of COVID protocols still in place. And so what does that do to those students? Who are the those individuals who need the support? What have we done? You know, are they just not housed? And we don't give them support at all? Or are they housed? Like, I don't, I don't understand really what's happening with that whole population. I just know that. They haven't received the support that other groups have. Learning didn't even occur for many months on end, because they couldn't meet with their students. They drop off

packets, who knows what they did with them. So that would be interesting. For me to have a conversation for you to have a conversation, I guess, not necessarily me.

Magdalena Martinez 41:26

The most vulnerable of the vulnerable, right?

Brenda Pearson 41:28

Yeah, yeah. Yeah. And yeah. Forgotten about

Peter Grema 41:34

Rebecca Garcia, which organization is she at?

Brenda Pearson 41:36

She's a Parent Teacher Association. She's the president.

Peter Grema 41:39

Got it.

Magdalena Martinez 41:40

I've got her information here.

Peter Grema 41:43

Thank you. Appreciate.

Magdalena Martinez 41:44

She'd be interesting to hear. Yeah.

Peter Grema 41:46

That's it for me if you have anything else, Dr. Martinez?

Magdalena Martinez 41:49

Brenda Pearson, you've been extremely helpful. I really appreciate your time. And I noticed you're on the program for tomorrow's Women's Summit.

Brenda Pearson 41:55

I am.

Magdalena Martinez 41:56

....here as well. So maybe

Brenda Pearson 41:57

Wonderful.

Magdalena Martinez 41:58

Good to see each other face to face.

Brenda Pearson 41:59

Sounds great. Thank you. I appreciate it.

Magdalena Martinez 42:02

Take care - Bye bye.

Peter Grema 42:02

Bye.