

An Interview with Assemblywoman Selena Torres

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 Selena Torres, Assemblywoman for State of Nevada, and was conducted on 7/5/22 by Magdalena Martinez. This interview covers topics including reflections on leadership, organizational challenges, and opportunities for collaboration.

Interview with Selena Torres

Date: 7-5-2022

SPEAKERS: Magdalena Martinez, Selena Torres

Magdalena Martinez [00:05]

All right. So today is Tuesday, July 5th, 2022. I'm here with Assemblywoman Selena Torres. Selena, I just wanted to confirm that you are okay if I record today's meeting.

Selena Torres [00:17]

Yes, it is.

Magdalena Martinez [00:18]

And you're okay if I use your name for any specific quotes that might be included in future writings.

Selena Torres [00:24]

Yes.

Magdalena Martinez [00:26]

All right. Thank you so much. Well, let's get started, Selena. It's more of a conversation between you and I. So, like I mentioned earlier, you are really in a unique position because you're a teacher *and* a policymaker. And you were doing both, probably two of the most challenging roles during the peak of the pandemic, really, when you think about it, right, in terms of frontline professionals, and then also as a policymaker.

So, if we could start off with that, as like a teacher and policymaker, how did you see your role during the peak of the pandemic, and even now?

Selena Torres [01:11]

So I want to say, during the peak of the pandemic, especially Las Vegas shut down and when the world shut down, quite honestly, I think the schools didn't really have access to provide students instruction. So, our professional responsibilities as educators really shifted, and some were supporting students and families. And working at a Title I school, we had a lot of difficulty getting ahold of students and their parents.

Attendance for students was tracked by just initiating some type of contact with the teacher. There were a couple of weeks though, where there was just a limbo; we didn't know what to do, or our bosses didn't really know what to do. And there was very little communication with students and their families except from the school level. And some schools had a really challenging time getting out our Chromebooks and digital, and some families didn't have

internet. And that was one of the big barriers that we faced as educators when the pandemic really initiated here in the Las Vegas Valley.

On the other hand, I think, although those responsibilities became less, my policymaking responsibilities became greater, just because there was this desire for us to do something in response, and make sure that we were serving our community. And especially as a member of the Hispanic Legislative Caucus at the time, we didn't have – there was a very bad Latino outreach strategy when the pandemic initiated. A lot of information wasn't available in Spanish. The Latino community was kind of left hanging, and it felt like a lot of our families were still going to work because they were essential workers, grocery store workers, construction workers. So, working in hospitals in some capacity; a lot of our community was still operating every day, but if anything, they were just operating at a greater risk.

And so, it became very challenging to know what to do in those moments. So the Hispanic Legislative Caucus kind of took some steps to make sure we were reaching out to community members, and that we were gauging the needs of the community and that we were creating action items and trying to find ways that we could serve the community with the resources that we had.

Magdalena Martinez [03:29]

Mm-hmm. Now, you said that as a teacher, your responsibilities shifted. And then as a policymaker, that role really started to take up more of your time in terms of thinking about how to proceed. At the time, you were – I don't know if you still are – the chair of the Hispanic Legislative Caucus? Is that-

Selena Torres [03:54]

At the time, I was just a member of the Hispanic Legislative Caucus, and now, I'm Chair.

Magdalena Martinez [03:57]

Okay. And how did the caucus work with the larger legislative body, and was there a specific role? You just talked about the Hispanic Legislative Caucus advocating for the Latino community. But is there something that – how were you able to meaningfully contribute to the overall body and discourse around what was needed as a caucus?

Selena Torres [04:24]

Well, initially, just because of the nature of our legislative session – the legislature is part-time, so we didn't have any legislative capacity at all or power to change things legislatively at the beginning of the pandemic. It wasn't until obviously, we were receiving funds and helping disperse those funds that I think there was more of a say. But initially, there was no power.

However, as legislators, we were in constant communication with the governor's office, with their advisory council, and the members that they had. And you know, Senator Cancela, at the time, she was still Senator – was appointed to chair the advisory taskforce, I believe, it was called, that was working on COVID-19 issues.

And so, I think that that was another way the Latino community had a voice in those efforts, but a lot of it really initially was not legislative. And it really took a lot of hard conversations with the governor's office and the other local officials and saying, "We don't have this information available in Spanish." Initially, we had information coming out about COVID, and it would take days for us to get any translation. And so, it felt like there was no desire to provide that information in another language. And I think it was very hard because we took on a lot of that role. I mean there were times where there were press statements, where it was literally myself and a couple of other people translating the document. We were trying to find a way to convey to Spanish media, and that really was not in the scope of our responsibilities. But it was out of a desire to make sure that this information, somehow, became available.

Then we saw that regarding healthcare issues, but then we saw that regarding eviction, which was one of the largest barriers for our community members.

Magdalena Martinez [06:17]

Yeah. And so, you've talked about the Latino community. Do you believe there were other groups that were also hardest hit or which groups do you believe were hardest hit by the COVID pandemic?

Selena Torres: [06:27]

Yeah, I think, quite honestly, anybody that was working were in those essential positions that didn't have the liberty to be off, be home, be safe, and things like that. That was a hard hit community. Obviously, historically disenfranchised communities are Black/Brown, community members. They were very hard hit. And when we saw surges going up in our community, at times, there were surges going up – like in my community and my zip code, we had a very high rate of COVID cases. Nonetheless, for a while, we didn't have any testing sites. There were no places to get vaccines here. When vaccines opened, sometimes there were vaccine locations open in this area.

And so it became a real barrier to people that had just economic – were not in an economic situation where they could just go transport themselves somewhere. You had to get on a bus. If you had to get on a bus to get a COVID test – and a lot of them were drive-through only – that prevented a lot of our community members from going and getting tested. And quite honestly, early on, there were a lot of people that didn't even have access to that.

There were also a lot less – it was hard for people, I think, just the lack of resources within the community even. Food became a big barrier. Thousands of people were losing their jobs at a time, you know. Our unemployment system was inundated with claims, and I don't think that initially, you know, there was the capacity to serve those cases. And my family was hit hard too. My dad lost his job. And when that happened, there were issues to his unemployment that took a while for us to get fixed. And fortunately, we have a multi-income family, and I was able to help contribute, and we all contributed to that. But the reality is, not all families had that luxury. And so while – there were families that were literally looking where they were going to get their next meal because they're having issues getting their unemployment.

And so, it was hard for families. And I think navigating the systems – the data systems, at some point, you could call and be on hold all day, and still not get an answer, and they would just call back. So I think people felt desperate and hopeless because there was also this lack of communication of what's going to happen. Nobody knew at that time, you know? As policymakers, we didn't know what was going to come next, or how hard this pandemic was going to hit us, and what the impact was going to be here in Southern Nevada, or in Nevada as a whole. And it was hard to provide that comfort and that leadership to the community when we ourselves did not know.

Magdalena Martinez [09:02]

Yeah. And as you're talking, it also occurred to me that you carried me through this kind of timeline of sorts, right? And if we could maybe talk a little bit about that, you know? We're now two-and-a-half years out, right? So we shut down in March 2020, which was right after spring break, right? And the legislative session would not be in until '21, right?

Selena Torres [09:31]

Yep.

Magdalena Martinez [09:33]

And there was no special session, right?

Selena Torres [09:36]

There were two special sessions.

Magdalena Martinez [09:36]

Okay.

Selena Torres [09:39]

And that was for us to accept the federal funds, and that was a really weird special session. Because at that time, I didn't feel safe traveling on a plane yet. So we had two special sessions in June 2020 or July 2020. One that was at the beginning of the month that lasted about two-three weeks. At the same time, we had – I forget which – it feels terrible to say, but I forget what initiated the "Black Lives Matter" protest in July of 2020. But there was that as well going on in the community.

Magdalena Martinez [10:17]

Mm-hmm.

Selena Torres [10:18]

And all those businesses had started to reopen; most people were still not gathering in-person. So we kind of had the virtual special session of 2020. Almost everything was as virtual as possible, and then there was no social engagement. I think it was challenging as a policymaker to be in that – I mean, in July 2020, we had weekly tests for COVID. Then we also had masks, obviously, as a requirement. And then people were getting COVID while we were in Carson City, so there was this additional fear. And this is before vaccines, so it wasn't like there was anything we could do to feel protected. It was really just hope at that point. And it was a very uncomfortable special

session, you know, because we didn't know how long we were going to be there, really. And then, at the same time, we had multiple people getting COVID.

Magdalena Martinez [11:11]

Yeah. So the first special session was in June, and lasted for about two-three weeks, you said?

Selena Torres [11:16]

I want to say it was early July, maybe right after the 4th of July, and it lasted about two-three weeks. And then we had a week off, with two weeks, and then we had a couple of days off, five-six days, and then the next special session was called to deal with some criminal justice police reform.

Magdalena Martinez [11:30]

Oh, okay. So the first special session was to deal with the funding, right?

Selena Torres [11:35]

Yes, with budget. And we were making just extreme cuts to programming here in the state. Sometimes education programming, and there were cuts – although the poor people were saved with the cuts that we made in July of 2020, but there was other additional education funding that we had to cut. The saddest things were looking at – that was such a terrible experience because we were cutting things that nobody wanted to cut. Nobody wants to cut access to dental for Medicare. Nobody wants to cut preemie baby care. And that's where we were making those cuts, and there was nothing else on the table – our state had to survive. Our rainy day funds had been depleted. Nobody expected – and I remember the summer of 2019, when we ended that session, and our rainy day fund was higher than it had ever been before. And we were like wow. If something happens, we're okay.

Magdalena Martinez [12:41]

Mm-hmm.

Selena Torres [12:44]

And I mean it's kind of surreal that we weren't okay. That even with that rainy day fund – nobody could have expected or predicted that COVID was on the way. And I don't know that there was anything really we could have done about it in June 2019, but that definitely impacted some of the decisions we made.

Magdalena Martinez [13:06]

Yeah. So, one year later, you all were having to make these real drastic cuts. And I'm trying to remember what type of federal funding had flowed to the states by then. Do you recall?

Selena Torres [13:21]

So, was that the ARPA money?

Magdalena Martinez [13:25]

The CARES-

Selena Torres [13:28]

I think it was the CARES Act money.

Magdalena Martinez [13:29]

Yeah. And so, you were able to buffer some of those cuts through some of those federal fundings. Is that right?

Selena Torres [13:36]

Yes.

Magdalena Martinez [13:37]

Mm-hmm. So then, that happened, the special legislative session, and then a new school year began, right? I'm going to kind of go back and forth because again, you wear so many hats.

Selena Torres [13:48]

Yeah.

Magdalena Martinez [13:50]

So then in August, a new school year began. And then, tell me about that. What was that like?

Selena Torres [13:58]

So it was interesting because I had just switched schools too. In the middle of this pandemic, I was also transitioning schools. So I was moving into my new school, and at our school, we were completely virtual for those first couple of weeks. And we had our students online, and we had a limited shorter-day schedule. So I think it was like eight until noon or something like that. So the kids were really only in their classes for like an hour at a time for classes [14:26] one hour, and that was it. Which was a lot faster than obviously, your seven to eight-hour days that the kids are on campus and getting that curriculum.

It was challenging teaching through Zoom, as I'm sure anybody teaching in education at the time knows. Students were dropping offline. There were those issues where their internet wasn't strong enough. And then there were students that had trouble logging in. Our school did a very good job of reaching out to families and making sure they came in. Tracking kids down – going out to get them or finding where they were. It was a challenge at first, and as soon as my principal was given permission to open a little bit – I think we were allowed, at some point, 25% capacity. And we were able to bring in our ELL students and our students with special needs, and we brought those students onto campus first, to make sure that they were getting that curriculum because they were the ones that we were worried would fall the most behind.

And for some of them, honestly, I think it was actually helpful because it was one-on-one almost with the teacher and their support, or their special ed person, that they would never have gotten otherwise. So some of those kids actually advanced tremendously, but the kids that were still online, I felt like, were losing a lot of that. I mean it was hard for them to stay glued to a screen for multiple hours, I think. And when you're in a meeting with one person, it's easy to stay engaged. I'm meeting with one person, and we're having that conversation for one hour. But

when you have 30 students online, it's very hard, in a 60-minute period, to provide that one-on-one connection to students and to create that connection.

So some of my students – probably the hardest one was, there was this student, and her name, although I had had students with a similar name, she pronounced it differently. And so I couldn't – every time she would try to correct me, I could not get it right because her internet would always drop, and it wasn't strong enough for her to tell me her name. Finally, another student told me how to pronounce her name, and that was helpful. But I felt bad for that student because she was frustrated. She was obviously mad that I kept calling her the wrong name, but I had no idea. So I would just try to go by her last name or something like that, and it was really challenging because we know that's one of those things that we, as educators, use to build that connection with our kids. And so I know that I was having a difficult time creating that connection.

It was also a lot more prep work to create an hour Zoom lecture to engage – at the time, I was teaching 9th graders – is very challenging. And I had multiple screens, so I would have one laptop where I could see what they're doing on their Chromebooks, so I could provide that one-on-one "Oh, okay, I can get you to get – that redirection when they're off-task, or if they're opening the wrong windows and have no idea where to go. Then I had to use my Zoom screen, and then it was hard for me to also navigate whatever screen I was actually working on to see whatever the activity was.

Also, everything was on the computer, and it was so overwhelming. Physically, it was overwhelming because I was sitting down. As educators, we're usually walking around for an eight-hour day. But I was sitting down – could not stand up for the entire day, just trying to connect with as many students as possible. Trying to call parents when the kids weren't there. And so, it was definitely a transition, and some students really excelled, you know. The reality is that some students did very well with independent work at home, but a lot of our students struggled. And a lot of our students just didn't have the support at home to do what they needed. Maybe they had multiple siblings at home. So we had a lot of students where – because at this time, the city *was* back open. Families *were* going back to work. And so, a lot of our kids, especially our high schoolers, they were there, and they were also watching their little siblings at the kitchen table. And they were in school together, which made it harder for our high school kids to really be engaged in what they were doing.

Magdalena Martinez [18:41]

Mm-hmm.

Selena Torres [18:42]

You also had kids that were home, completely by themselves, that were not really our self-starters, and so they were at home sleeping all day. And so it was definitely a challenge to keep kids engaged, to provide them with content. To make sure that they were able to learn – everything kind of became – I struggled to learn, how do I provide various – surface – all of the introduction of this information-

Magdalena Martinez [19:09]

Mm-hmm.

Selena Torres [19:07]

- in just a couple of minutes because that might be all I get their attention for. So you have to really be concise and somehow entertaining.

Magdalena Martinez [19:20]

Yeah. And now, you had mentioned that you transitioned to a new school. Did you go from one charter school to another?

Selena Torres [19:27]

I went from the school district to a charter school, so there was also that transition.

Magdalena Martinez [19:28]

Oh, okay. The public, regular, traditional to the charter.

Selena Torres [19:33]

Yeah. I was doing a Title I public school, and then I switched to a Title I charter school in East Las Vegas. Which was a lot more similar to the community I grew up in. It was like a block away from the middle school I went to; so that was nice, but it was definitely a transition too, just professionally. There were different expectations, different – we had a lot more family engagement. Parents reached out a little bit more. It did make our job a little bit easier, I think, in that our parents did – we could call our parents and they often responded. In some ways, that makes more work for you, though, when your parents are actually answering and actually engaged. That definitely, as an educator, is more responsibility for you because now they *want* you to reach out. And then the school district – oftentimes, I'd call families and there was just no answer. The phone number wasn't right.

Magdalena Martinez [20:27]

Mm-hmm. And your school is a K-12 charter school. Is that right?

Selena Torres [20:32]

It's moving that way. So we were, at the time, K-9. And then last year, we were K-10, and then this next year, we're Pre-K-11, and then we'll be 12th grade in another year.

Magdalena Martinez [20:41]

Okay, that's really helpful. So then that was like first semester, right?

Selena Torres [20:50]

Yes.

Magdalena Martinez [20:51]

Because the 25% capacity, I think – was that first semester or the second semester?

Selena Torres [20:57]

Yeah, that was the first semester. I think it was September. I think it was pretty early on that we were able to bring kids onto campus. And then at some point, we got permission from the State Public Charter Authority to open up to 50%. And in addition, I will say my school did a

phenomenal job making sure that we had – especially once we had students in classrooms, we had custodial staff that would come in every single period to sanitize and just spray everything down. We had masks. We had COVID testing on campus, which was a great resource. If I thought I had COVID, I could go get tested in the nurse's office at our school.

We had tons of cleaning supplies in our classroom. We were expected to use them. Expected to use hand sanitizer. Our students were supposed to use hand sanitizer at the beginning of every class, and then I also had all my students wipe down their desks at the end of every class too. So there were a lot of protections in place, and obviously, teaching with a mask. And so by November – because it was right around the Thanksgiving holiday, we had 50% on campus. And so that was a switch too because we kind of switched into a cohort system just to make it work. So we had one week – this cohort would be on campus, another week, the next cohort.

And then there were also some students that were online the entire time. And that cohort system allowed for us to have maybe 12 kids in a class, 15 kids in a class at a time – I can't remember the exact limit – but it was half the size of a normal classroom. And even with that there were some kids that were still staying home and logging in from home, even though they were in a cohort, whatever it was, or they did get COVID, and now they were home.

And so, as a result, that was the hardest part, was actually, when we switched to 50% on-campus. So we had cameras to – it was called a "swivel." So we had set up our swivel, and that would be on the iPad, and our students on Zoom would be on the iPad so that they could see me teaching.

Magdalena Martinez [22:58]

Mm-hmm.

Selena Torres [23:00]

But then I also had kids in-person, so it was just very challenging – there was a tech. At the end of the day, my brain was fried just from how many screens I had to look at. Because I had stuff on my projector, and then I had something on my TV, so that I could see the kids a little bit more, so I felt like I knew what they were doing because on the iPad it was too small. I had three different screens, four different screens set up at that time. But for a lot of our kids, that made a big difference because they were there in person, and then I could start building those relationships that maybe I didn't have, and the kids really liked it.

And I will say, going back from that, the kids really wanted to be there in person. They really did. And the one thing that I noticed was that their socialization skills were not the same. They were, very much – you'd have a group of kids, they would – they had "free time," maybe before school or after school, whatever it is, and they would all be on their phones. They did not know how to talk to each other.

Magdalena Martinez [24:00]

Mm-hmm.

Selena Torres [24:01]

And so it was something that we had to work on, and I had to find ways to incorporate into the

class as well. And it's something that I think, even now, I've continued to see as kids not knowing how to talk to each other because they spent so much time at home and did not engage with other kids their age that often.

Magdalena Martinez [24:19]

Mm-hmm. And so that was, I think, a difference. Because I'm trying to remember, traditional schools, I don't know that they went back face-to-face until-

Selena Torres [24:31]

They didn't go back face-to-face until April-May.

Magdalena Martinez [24:35]

Right.

Selena Torres [24:36]

And that was in a cohort system too. And so I don't know. I haven't taught those students, too many of them. I had some that were mixed in, that had maybe switched to our school from the district. But I do think that is an additional barrier – because even if my students were struggling, and they were only out of the physical classroom for six months, I imagine then, the students that were out for a year, over a year, struggled with that even more.

Magdalena Martinez [25:05]

Yeah – no, for sure. Because by then – everything shut down in March, pretty much, instruction stuff. It was mostly mental and physical interventions, you know, like providing food, technology, and things like that, right, in the latter half of 2020.

Selena Torres [25:25]

Yeah.

Magdalena Martinez [25:29]

And then the first semester, I remember there were a lot of discussions about different plans at the trustee level, and that kind of ebb and flow all the time, it seemed like.

So, in terms of policy implications for charter schools, I'm thinking, it seems like one of the advantages is that autonomy, right?

Selena Torres [25:54]

Yeah. For the public charter schools, I think that there was more autonomy for individual principals to make the decision that made the most sense for the kids in their community. The reality is that for a lot of our Title I kids, they were hit even harder by COVID because they didn't have people at home to help them with their homework.

Magdalena Martinez [26:11]

Mm-hmm.

Selena Torres [26:13]

And they didn't have people at home that even knew how to use a computer oftentimes. And so, like the lack of flexibility, I think, our schools provided challenges for principals to make the decisions that they needed.

And I know that there was like a lot of hesitation for a lot of teachers to go back. And I think part of it is that they knew that if they went back, they felt that, you know, the district isn't going to have the materials that they need to keep kids safe or to keep, you know, our teachers safe.

And I think at my school, because we were able to have like our, our, our principal was able to make those decisions. And the board of the school helped make those decisions. Like as a result, like we were able to advocate, like. Masks like we have masks on campus. You know, we had hand sanitizer and I know, you know, working in the school district, I think I got one bottle of hand sanitizer in all the years that I taught there.

And that was like two weeks before the pandemic. And like, that's it. Like, there were no other cleaning supplies provided to us. They would not have had the resources to have people coming in to sanitize every class. I don't think my classroom ever got sanitized in the district, so it's just a very big, like, they're, they were just, they had the means, school leaders had the means to make decisions and to make purchases that they needed as a result of COVID.

Whereas I think in the district, you know, a lot of that was in the hands of the district office and, the principal's hands were tied. If the district didn't say they could do it, then they couldn't do it.

Magdalena [27:46]

Yeah. Now, in thinking about that, what do you wish the different levels of government would have done differently or could do differently during the COVID shutdown and or recession? You've touched on the recession that followed.

Selena Torres [28:04]

So I mean, the first thing is like there, there has to be a bigger effort to get information out in multiple languages. Like it was frustrating. And you know, I see improvements being made, but I still think that there's a lot of work to do, you know, like, just making sure that our families understand.

There's the cultural competency to provide that information in places where like people are going to trust it and where it's safe for them. And so those go hand in hand, like if the language...and some of those are things that were translated completely wrong, provided in COVID.

It felt like especially in Spanish, there was definitely misinformation about COVID in English, but the misinformation in Spanish was like even more so and so I wish that there had been more communication in Spanish in social media and in news outlets for the community. I think that the school district, the school district has an interesting, like the, just relationship, because I think that there's a lot of other stuff going on in the school district in COVID.

Was one of the things but there was just a lot of other strange dynamics and I think that the reality is like they needed to create...they needed to work together to create a plan and give principals a little bit more autonomy with what that was going to look like. And they didn't, they didn't really work together.

And I think that's what held schools back from reopening more so. And I know that there were a lot of concerns about teacher health and safety, but I felt like they didn't work together to create that plan. And like, from the get go. You know, they waited, they waited, they waited, it felt like they were waiting to make policy decisions based on the information presented without saying, Okay, once this happens, this is what we can do like they didn't plan ahead, they planned in the moment, every single time.

And so, there was no plan for what was going to happen next because they barely had a plan for what was going to happen today. And so I felt like there had to be a little more planning in order for them to get where they needed to go. And I think, you know, there were several trustees that had, you know, stressed that early on in the pandemic, like, okay, what are we going to look like?

What are we, what is that going to look like? So I think that would have been positive. One of the things that I think local governments should not be doing is running schools. I think it was, you know, offensive that the city of North Las Vegas decided that they were going to create their own little micro school.

And I believe that it's now closed they've announced that but they have this school for two years without like licensed educators running this school, just to provide like parents I guess some way to access education but the reality is they weren't providing them with a place that was licensed to get educated, you know, it was just like kind of like tutoring, like, Oh, you can get anybody to bring them as like babysitting.

That wasn't effective. And their numbers don't show to be effective. There was no tracking of that. They just kind of like, did it on their own. So I think that, you know, local governments had the responsibility to make sure there was information out. I think that they have the response. They can work together with schools and school districts to provide opportunities for families and their kids to be engaged during that time.

You know, a lot of kids didn't have a place to be during school. And I think that the local government should have stepped up more to help provide those safe spaces and partnered with schools to do that. And they didn't.

I don't think in any place in the state of Nevada, we didn't see local governments creating those partnerships. And the role of local governments is supposed to be education and community education and I think there was a real missed opportunity there.

I know that you know, something that we did see those like the, there was like a bigger, push on like childcare and that there I think there's like a more notice of the fact that we need to figure out what we're going to do with childcare because this is something that's holding working families back.

Selena Torres [32:02]

And oftentimes, unfortunately it's, you know, disproportionately impacting women, because they're the ones that are expected in their families to stay home with the kids. And so you have families where the woman now isn't able to go out, sometimes the man, but like the communities have to step up to help make sure that there's child care available.

I know that was actually something that we were able to do through one of the many grants that we did. We had like the child care grants, and it became available at a significantly discounted rate because you could use that grant to help fund your child care. Those are some of the issues that we had with local governments.

I think that there was just a lack of coordination on sometimes political identities, like they just conflicted with each other for no reason. Or like they let their personal dislike of one another get in the way of making good policy decisions. So you would hear one thing maybe from the county, one thing from this other office, one thing from this other office.

And it felt like there was like this lack of communication, that I think could have been.

Magdalena [33:17]

Yeah, that's really helpful. And you've covered a lot of strands, right? Everything from communication to clear mission differentiation, right? Between school district, local governments. federal government, state, state level governments.

I mean, there has to be a clear differentiation or priority as to the mission of that particular body, right? Yeah. Governing body which is really insightful. And then you talked about some specific examples, right, that each level of government could have engaged in; you said it came back to really planning and sometimes it came back to political egos, my words, right, where people were in conflict, regardless of what their role was.

And it occurs to me that it's an issue of trust at multiple levels. And this idea of having trust in government and government, trusting the people and trust overall. You know, you have the racial social justice movement. I mean, that's an example of a kind of a deficit of trust, right?

I have been thinking about this idea of trust and I'm just wondering if it has a place at the multiple levels of government.

Selena Torres

Yeah, I think I mean, there was a lack of trust, right? I mean, I think we saw the term political egos like we're getting in the way of what could be done.

And you know, part of it is you saw groups dragging their feet, like the fact of the matter is when we think about...you saw some governments not providing any information, any other language for like the longest time. Even after this issue had been raised.

And I just can't fathom that, our local governments don't have anybody that was able to do that role or could have done that job within their offices that was already existing there. Like that, that doesn't make sense to me. And there's the, "oh, the cost or, oh, it was this," and it does not make sense to me that there was no planning ahead of time, like in the case of an emergency.

This is something that we have to consider. And you know, and a lot of things we saw like the digital divide in our schools and community groups eventually did step up. And they created partnerships to help us get that information out there and how to access the internet if you don't have it, how you can afford it.

But a lot of times, I felt like that information was there and it's still an issue that exists right now is that there are resources in our community and yet if I were to ask you how to find them, you're going to have to call 20 different people.

And maybe I have a little bit more access to that as elected. I sometimes know, "Oh, I can call this person and I can get fixed," but I'm not a social worker and I'm not a caseworker. And I felt like during the pandemic, that kind of became my role in a lot of ways. And maybe more so for myself, because I felt like I had to do something and my expectations as an educator, especially early on in the pandemic where I felt like I was just constantly connecting people to resources and trying to find them the information and investigating stuff myself.

And that really wasn't my role and my responsibility. And, you know, our local governments just have to do better about making sure this information is easy to access. I think they did increase funding for 2 1 1. The information line? Yeah, 2 1 1. The information line. Which helped I think get like some of that.

And so that was helpful because people could just call that number, but then even then in the community, there's this lack of trust, like, "oh, they're not going to give me the right information." "If I even call 211 and I asked about a specific community need, they're going to give me 20 different numbers to call. It doesn't feel like there's one centralized place where I can just get the information I need.

Magdalena Martinez [37:35]

Yeah, and you touched on this a little bit. But in terms of and think about, I know during the Great Recession, you were probably very young.

Selena Torres

Yeah. I remember it though.

Magdalena Martinez [37:50]

You might have been in high school. And, perhaps though in your role as a legislator, maybe there were conversations about comparison to the Great Recession because it was a shock to the system just like the pandemic.

I'm wondering if you've thought about or if you can think of any policies or programs that were in place to deal with the recession or vice versa, the COVID recession or crisis. What were the

differences and could what did we potentially learn from the Great Recession that could have been applied?

And what are we learning now from the COVID recession and COVID crisis that we can apply to other crises? I think that's a better way of phrasing. What are we learning from the COVID crisis that can be applied in, in future crises?

Selena Torres [38:44]

Yeah, so I think like the, the one thing is that like community groups were not talking to each other, like community partners, that there was no convening of the nonprofits locally or around the state.

Like they didn't, they weren't talking, they were operating very much in silos. And I think post COVID that's changed a little bit that there is like a movement at least to kind of connect and talk with one another so they know the services that one another is offering. And if they cannot provide it, then they know to reach out to somebody.

One of those groups in that coalition that does. So there was that I think that there was, you know, obviously like the, you know, I think is coming from the political side to, you know, the rainy day fund and the importance of that maybe. And obviously we depleted it in the summer of 2020. But you know, we're definitely making efforts to restore the rainy day fund and to make sure that the funding is there, recognizing that now more than ever, how critical that is.

And the rainy day fund was established as a response to COVID 19. I'm sorry, as a response to the recession. And you know, it's a really good thing that we had that during COVID 19 where I can't imagine the amount of programs we would have needed to cut if we didn't have that rainy day fund.

So I know that that's something that we would learn from the recession, maybe learn a little bit more from COVID, and are going to continue to need to fund.

Magdalena Martinez [40:19]

Yeah, yeah. Interesting.

Selena Torres [40:20]

And I just think we need to explain to the community why you need all these millions of dollars just like there, but I think that COVID was a good proof of why we need that.

Magdalena Martinez [40:30]

What about at the federal level, do you think there were any lessons?

Selena Torres [40:36]

Well, I mean, that was 20 that was back in 2019. So obviously, President Trump was still leading the nation at that time. So I think that there were a lot of interesting things. I mean, obviously, I think that the racist rhetoric that the pandemic stemmed from, made a large impact on our nation and our community as a whole.

I mean, the rise of API hate, I think, has left its mark even in our community. And I think it's sad and tragic. I remember going to a Costco early on in the pandemic. And after everything had shut down and I was looking, I was just doing my shopping and I remember getting something and a woman next to me looked at it and she's like, "Oh, it's made in China."

"After this, I'm never going to buy anything from the Chinese ever again." And I just stood there like I didn't expect such blatant racism while I'm shopping at a Costco, like it was offensive and I just froze. I would never have made that connection. And that's not how I personally think.

And so it was just like a shock to me that it became accepted at that time. So I think that there was also a very slow response. It was like, "Oh, it's fine. It's, you know, it's just in China." It was kind of like the national rhetoric with like, it didn't feel like it was something that was coming here.

It was like, very much like, "oh, that's a Chinese" that I mean, though, the messaging that was used was it's the Chinese virus that's in China. I felt like, you know, I remember as a kid, like there were like bigger things about like the avian flu, like the bird flu felt like a bigger deal than how they made COVID 19 very early on in 2020, you know, January, February. It didn't seem like it was a big issue where it became an issue here in Nevada. I mean, I think it is when we saw the rise of what was going on and like other countries, you know, and sometimes other communities, like once I have a family member that lives in New York and they were telling us about some of the stuff going on there.

And that's when it was like, well, it's a matter of time before it comes to Vegas, another big tourist location. And the last couple days, I was on the phone with multiple different political leaders in the state the last couple of days and I was like, "how are we going to go to school on Monday?"

That was a real concern because we called it on a Sunday evening. And I remember being on the phone with people just thinking like, "how am I like", because we knew now all this information started coming out about what was going on across the nation with COVID, the death rate. And I was like, "You're going to send me to school tomorrow? I'm supposed to focus on teaching English tomorrow?" That doesn't seem like a practical reality.

And so, when they made that decision, I think if anything, it maybe would have been helpful to make it a little bit earlier, because I think that there was a lot of panic too for like... when we talk about like the lack of appreciation for educators, like, you made us think that we were going to work at 5am.

You know, we thought that like, and I think for a lot of essential workers, like we thought that the world around us was shutting down and we didn't feel that sense of appreciation.

Magdalena Martinez [43:54]

Some people have referred to it as this kind of collective trauma, right? That is, I think an example of it, this disconnect from reality of what's going on. Yeah. During the early, early stages.

Magdalena Martinez [44:12]

Now back to the leadership during that time, the presidential leadership, and you talked about the racist rhetoric and sadly we're still in a situation where there's a lot of racist rhetoric. Not necessarily from the White House, obviously, but just people have been emboldened and like you let the genie out of the bottle. I'm just wondering what your thoughts are around where we are now and how we got here and how we get out of this?

Selena Torres [44:48]

You know, I think obviously, we're in a better state now than we were a year ago. I do think though that there is like this rise of lack of trust in government. And it's interesting to me because we had at the, I mean in 2019 our president was, you know, active or 2020 actively saying like, you know, "it's not an issue, like this doesn't exist, telling us to drink Lysol" or whatever it was, you know, use drugs that were not proven or approved by the FDA.

And so there are a group of people that felt that way. And so this animosity between parties, between races, really heightened.

I think the partisanship, like the lack of ability to see humanity in one another, despite political differences has increased. I mean, it's definitely at a high that I've never seen in my lifetime before. And that's something that I'm noticing things that I wouldn't expect.

For example, yesterday was the Boulder City Parade. And I walked alongside the governor's campaign, and the lack, like, just the environment was, I've never been in a situation that was quite that bad. And we see that in Carson City sometimes. And we saw that in Carson City this last legislative session where like, if you're on the other side, then you are the enemy.

You don't deserve to live. And I mean, we're seeing that, you know, with like the Proud Boys, we're seeing that across the nation. And it looks like actually from the, from the incident that occurred yesterday in one of the communities that had the July 4th parade where there was a shooting. And so we're seeing that more and more and it's kind of a, I don't know, quite honestly what we do to come back from that.

And I think some of that has to come from the leaders within their political party. Right. I do think that you know democratic leadership has made an effort to work together here in Nevada. I mean over 95 percent of our bills are passed with bipartisan support. So here in Nevada I think our like State leaders do a good job of that, but the national rhetoric has to change too.

And unfortunately, I think that there's too many alt right heroes that are thriving and probably like making money off of hate speech and divisiveness. And I think that it's hurting our nation. And, you know, I hope that soon people recognize that. For me, that's not what it means to be an American. You know, I think being an American is much more than disliking somebody because of one political difference.

Magdalena Martinez [47:43]

How do we pivot as a state government, as teachers, as a community?

Selena Torres [47:45]

And as a community, I think the need is to focus on, you know, as a politician, I say that the need is to focus on the good that we are doing and how we're doing it together, right?

I think that there is a lot of significance to finding ways to work together and finding that happy medium. And I think in Nevada, more often than not, we are doing that because it is such a purple state. And, you know, we do have progressive and also moderates, and so I think it kind of brings us to find that happy medium working together even across the aisle.

As an educator, I think that, you know, we teach history from the lens of what actually occurred. I'm using primary source documents and in my classroom I've had parents ask about things like, whether or not something is appropriate to use and I'm always ready to provide the rationale if I need to.

But I also just make sure that I am using our curriculum to teach within the scope of my subject, but I encourage students to think critically about the material that they're engaging with.

Magdalena Martinez [49:03]

And along those lines do you think there were innovative ways that the schools and states dealt with the challenges of the pandemic? Like, we know about what could have been done differently. Were there any kind of, like, gee, that's a good idea. That was, that was a good response, you know?

Selena Torres [49:21]

So I think that there were school districts, like, across the nation that had, like, the cohort system much earlier than ours. I think that that would have been a great thing.

I think, in schools, like...you know, it's interesting because I feel like teaching communities were sharing. We here in Nevada, like we're using Google for most of our schools instead of Zoom. I think that was a hardship for teachers because Zoom has so many functions. So I think that there were even technological purchases.

There was a lack of resources like a digital library and things like that. I think that's something we need to explore because the prices for digital libraries nowadays have gone way up.

And it is, it's an unfortunate expense that I think is necessary nowadays more than ever. But accessing books became a big issue and information. I think that there were, you know, other school districts that did like a lot more with hotspots in the community and making community centers where there was internet accessible. I know in Nevada, they did like the school bus model in some of the areas where the school bus would go for like two hours or so, which is good.

But I don't think that's like, I don't think that that was completely helpful. You know, if you only have access to the internet for two hours, you know. Maybe some of the schools, it was like 6am to 8am or something like that, like super early, like that's not equity. At all, for our kids.

So I think that there had to be a bigger push for the internet. I think that there still has to be a bigger push for community wide access to the internet. I don't understand why we couldn't have used schools as hubs for that internet because they were already there in the community and students already go there.

So we could have had like internet from there, essentially, even if the kids were not in classrooms, but from the parking lot, like there could have been more done, I think, to make our schools really community centers because I don't think that schools should just be places for learning in the classroom. I think communities should be, schools should be community centers.

Magdalena Martinez [51:27]

Yeah. Are you hopeful? And if so, what are you hopeful for?

Selena Torres [51:36]

I think more than anything right now, like I'm still very, I'm cautious, right? It feels like not everything has gone back to normal completely. The lack of trust in government is at an all time high. I'm hopeful that we as a state are going to do better. I think here in Nevada, we've already made those steps.

But, you know, I definitely think it's also cautious leadership right now that maybe is going to be what takes us across the finish line.

Magdalena Martinez [52:09]

Selena, thank you so much for taking an hour of your day.

Selena Torres [52:14]

Oh, no problem.

Magdalena Martinez [52:16]

I really appreciate you.

Selena Torres [52:18]

No problem. Thank you so much. Good luck.

Magdalena Martinez [52:21]

Okay, we'll talk soon. I'll send you a copy of the transcript. Okay, rest of your summer and have a great time in El Salvador. Un abrazo y un beso.

Selena Torres

Okay, thank you. Likewise.

End of audio: 52:33