

An Interview with Irene Cepeda

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 Irene Cepeda, CCSD Trustee, and was conducted on 7/11/22 by Magdalena Martinez. This interview covers topics including reflections on leadership, organizational challenges, and opportunities for collaboration.

Interview with Irene Cepeda

Date: 7-11-2022

SPEAKERS: Magdalena Martinez, Irene Cepeda

Magdalena Martinez [00:04]

Okay, all right. Well, today is Monday, July 11th, and I am here with Clark County School District Trustee, Irene Cepeda, an access professional from Nevada State College. Irene, I just wanted to make sure, if you could, confirm that I read the – or rather, describe the consent form to you, and that you are consenting to be a part of this interview and this research project.

Irene Cepeda [00:32]

I indeed heard the description of the consent. I indeed consent to using my name and being recorded.

Magdalena Martinez [00:43]

Thank you so much, Irene. Let's jump right into it. So, as I said, we're really interested in hearing from practitioners and policymakers how Nevada has recovered from the different challenges of COVID.

So I'll start off with this. As a post-secondary professional and K-12 policymaker, how did you see your role during the pandemic?

Irene Cepeda [01:09]

So it was emergency management because things were changing so quickly, like consistently, that it was not one meeting was ever the same. It took some time for – and I don't mean this to be a criticism – but just in general, when an unprecedented type of event happens, it takes some time for folks to get organized.

It took some time to get some systems going, and then it was consistently changing with information that was changing about the pandemic, about the coronavirus. So it was absolutely emergency response framing because we didn't know, and even at the beginning of the pandemic, it seemed that we couldn't, I guess, we didn't imagine that we would have to wear masks. So there were a lot of pieces that eventually changed, and there was a shift that had to take place consistently as new information came out.

So it was that. It was that – just emergency management. I'm thankful for a lot of folks that did put their leadership caps on, and were like "Okay, these are our weekly meetings." This is information sharing, which is so critical, especially in those emergency-type situations. So that was the lens of emergency management.

Magdalena Martinez [02:47]

Can you talk, a little bit, about how your work at the Nevada State College, as a college access professional differed, or was similar to your role as a CCSD school trustee?

Irene Cepeda [03:02]

So in my professional life – I think there's two ways I see this. One, as a supervisor of a team, we had to be really flexible. We had to be really flexible with our programming, we had to be really flexible with our students, and we had to find a whole lot of grace to be able to roll with the flow of things that were happening. We eventually – because being at Nevada State College, we took direction from our president, which takes direction from the Board of Regents.

So there was some trickling down of information, and then eventually, we went remote, and then remote got extended a couple months. Then it became essentially almost a year – goodness, we ended up – in March, we went remote. Then – yeah, it was just a couple months ago, but we're back to full in-person. So it was a little over a year of remote work. Again, having to learn, you know, different communication platforms, learning how to be "digital selves." It's very different, you know, being in person is very different from being virtual.

As we started managing programmings to be fully virtual, you know, we had lessons. We had to learn lessons in how to manage our time, and we had to learn the amount of content received online is a whole lot more than in-person. So we needed to be very mindful about taking breaks and removing ourselves from screens. Then the well-being, and having to be extra mindful, and extra intentional about the well-being of – my team was something that was absolutely necessary, but also, absolutely draining. This is all in the context of – as a supervisor-professional, I'm also facing that, but I'm also taking care of my staff as well.

So, yeah, it adds that additional layer of, yeah, just stress, work. I think it absolutely contributes to some of the burnout, and it has also contributed to the whole Great Resignation piece; needing to have – needing to do something different. Because it's just been, you know, two-plus years of essentially managing chaos and never knowing what's going to happen. It's a level of uncertainty compiled with having to learn different systems, compiled with this trickle down. So I take care of my team, but my team is also taking care of students. There's also this trickle effect of care, all of it is super- exhausting, and it's that mental work that doesn't seem like it's a whole lot, but it becomes a whole lot.

Magdalena Martinez [06:29]

Mm-hmm.

Irene Cepeda [06:30]

So in thinking about it with my trustee hat, it was how do we convey – how do we manage the impossible? Because we asked a whole lot from teachers to turn and to go to virtual learning. Again, we thought, you know, I know the conversations were "Well, this will last maybe a month or so to two months," and then that became longer and longer.

Then again, we had a year of virtual, and then a year of hybrid – kind of a hybrid year, so it's a lot to ask from folks. I think as trustees, we understand how difficult it has been. It's hard to keep moving forward when there's a whole lot of chaos and uncertainty. I guess uncertainty is more of a word. It's a feeling of chaos because we're asking folks to do one thing, and then the next day, it changes because CDC guidelines, or some other health district guidelines come out, so it's a lot.

Magdalena Martinez [07:40]

So you started to do a little bit of this, talking about the timeline. Can you walk me through the timeline of the COVID crisis, as an access professional, which I think you did a little bit more of, and as a school trustee? What happened, and what did you do?

Irene Cepeda [08:00]

As a trustee, as I remember things rolling out – which is always funny because it's just been two years, but it's been two years since we had this dichotomy – it hasn't been a whole lot of time, but it feels like it's been decades. So I remember vividly seeing things start to come through the news in December or January, and things were happening in China, and I'm like hmm – you know, it's scary, but do we think it's going to happen here? Maybe or maybe not. Also with the understanding that we live in a global world, more folks – we are more globalized than what we were, 10, 15, or 20 years ago, so we're becoming more globalized.

So that was in the back of my mind. Then, as things started to progress in March, it started to get more and more real. Eventually, in mid-March – early March, we started to get more pressure. "Hey, we're going to have to shut down schools because things are not looking very good."

Then there was a time where we really sought leadership from the governor because we were starting to see other governors from other states also starting to make a call for state of emergency directives. I think that's what I was trying to say. At one point, we looked to our governor to make that final "Okay, we're going virtual," and that happened in mid-March.

From there, that's when we started to see folks get organized and getting on more calls. Again, the critical nature of information-sharing, to be able to make the decisions was really important, and that's when we started seeing things move. So that was consistent updates from our superintendent, and then eventually those items trickled into our boardroom in terms of emergency responses. I'm trying to think of the document we have that update every six months.

Funny enough, we have a board – we have an agenda item actually coming up to update that – give me a moment, it's going to bother me (searches on computer). Let me see what the document is called. I'm pretty sure that's in our agenda item for the 14th. So moving to having regular staff. We have emergency management folk, but this is a little bit different because now we're asking the whole system – we're asking the fifth largest school district in the nation to shift to distance learning.

Magdalena Martinez [10:52]

To do what now?

Irene Cepeda [10:55]

To shift to distance learning.

Magdalena Martinez [10:57]

Oh, right. During that time, mm-hmm.

Irene Cepeda [11:00]

The continuity of service. So it's our safe return to in-person instruction and the continuity of service. So that's our agenda item for July 14th. So those are regulations that the state asks us to consistently revise the plan. Every six months or so, at least twice a year, we get this update.

Magdalena Martinez [11:22]

Can you tell me what the title is again?

Irene Cepeda [11:24]

The title is – this is a plan for the safe return to in-person instruction and the continuity of services.

Magdalena Martinez [11:32]

Okay, continuity. With the idea that it's updated every six months for future crises?

Irene Cepeda [11:43]

And/or current, so anything that may happen in the short term.

Magdalena Martinez [11:45]

Mm-hmm.

Irene Cepeda [11:46]

So, I actually linked the documents so that you have it.

Magdalena Martinez [11:47]

Thank you.

Irene Cepeda [11:51]

Again, the last edits were specific for changes the CDC brought down not too long ago. It reflects new CDC guidelines – what low, medium, and high transmission rates are. Then what we're doing, to some degree; testing and distance.

Magdalena Martinez [12:16]

Mm-hmm. So, that plan was created. I'm trying to remember if it's the document I'm thinking about. It was made public, there was solicitation from parents, and things like that. Is that the document I'm thinking of?

Irene Cepeda [12:37]

(searches on computer)

Magdalena Martinez [12:39]

When was it created? And in your opinion, how has it evolved?

Irene Cepeda [12:49]

I'm trying to see when it was created.

Magdalena Martinez [12:50]

Nineteen in each document. Okay, so it looks like there's some guidelines from the CDC, as you mentioned. So this was a little bit different than what was shared with families and parents.

Irene Cepeda [13:10]

Well, I think this was created in 2020.

Magdalena Martinez [13:15]

Mm-hmm.

Irene Cepeda [13:22]

There's a couple of different documents and things that were mandated from the state board.

Magdalena Martinez [13:33]

Okay. So this was one of them.

Irene Cepeda [13:37]

Yeah, it was fairly new. We have a committee for school-based emergency plans which get reviewed annually, but the pandemic response was—this was so new, and it was not something that our emergency plan really had.

Magdalena Martinez [14:03]

Right.

Irene Cepeda [14:04]

And on top of that, this was a prolonged emergency. After a certain period of time, I think we know we faced that fatigue associated with the pandemic-related protocols. I think we saw it, especially in our boardroom, that mandating masks, mandating vaccines, and all of that just caused – from certain sectors of our political world—folks who were just very angry, and essentially were denied the existence of this vaccine. You have these conspiracy theories bubbling up into our public realm, coming into public comment, and just debunking – "This isn't real. This is all hoax."

Magdalena Martinez [15:09]

And that was pretty early in the pandemic, right? I'm thinking about the timeline. So in March 2020, everything got shut down in April-May. Really, we had about two and a half months of the school year left over, and during that time, as you said, it was about managing chaos and uncertainty.

In terms of policy, it was really looking for direction, whether it was the federal government and/or the governor's office. So when that came down, it was able to provide somewhat, from what I understand, a framework for the trustees, right, to move forward.

Irene Cepeda [15:52]

Yeah. I think, because, yes, Clark is the fifth largest district in the nation, but there are 16 – there are 17 school districts in our state. So there was also that additional complexity: we're not the only school district. We knew if we were to – there's a level of a "follow the leader" type of

piece, and once you do that, then other districts will start to consider it. With everything the way it was, it did help; it provided that additional framing from our governor. That absolutely made a difference because, again, things were starting to move in that direction, and it just helped with the shutdown.

Magdalena Martinez [16:37]

The resistance from various pockets to school shutdown masks and vaccines, was that still within that period of the spring semester of 2020, or is that something that evolved over the summer and then the fall? Do you remember?

Irene Cepeda [16:59]

So the most – the peak of protests, of this uncivil discord, the rise of these very loud, very vocal, angry, and yelling folks was in 2021. From the beginning of the school year through the end of the year, it was the most we had seen. It's when our board received death threats. It's when folks were protesting outside of trustee homes and other electeds homes. Again, personally, we all received death threats. Some of my trustees were a bit more vocal than others about the threats. I mean they existed, and 2021 was the year where it was the most – it was the peak. I would say it was absolutely the peak, especially around agenda items specific to masking and vaccines.

Magdalena Martinez [18:06]

Mm-hmm. So that was when the school district was distance learning, right?

Irene Cepeda [18:15]

We had started in distance learning. Yes, it was. In 2021, we started to come back, though. So we were, at least, trustees were starting – because in 2020, all of our meetings were virtual. So there were directives that helped us have virtual meetings because boards are under open meeting law. So there are some accommodations that we have to make for the public. Under emergency directives, we were able to, again, have our meetings virtual, taken, written comment versus having to have a space for in-person comments.

But yeah. I think in thinking through this timeline – 2020, then the school year ended, then we started virtual, and then we started, again, in-person and hybrid. I would say also sometime in March-April of 2021 – I might be off by a month or two – I think it was sometime in March-April, sometime in that spring 2021 semester. My teenager, because he was a freshman, so he started high school virtually, and then towards the end of his freshman year, he was doing hybrid.

So yeah, it was toward the spring of 2021 that we were doing hybrid. There was a choice, right? Then this time, we're also seeing, in terms of accommodating, we see an increase to our Nevada Learning Academy, because in the start of 2021 – so fall of 2021, we see increases to the Nevada Learning Academy, which is our distance learning, and yeah, we still had those restrictions, and we had the – you had to have your mask on. And goodness, I don't remember when we started – when we had the agenda item for mandating vaccines. I want to say that was definitely in the summer of 2021 because we were in Clark County, and we were in the county commission's space, so that was early in the summer of 2021.

Magdalena Martinez

And thinking about this time period, what would you say were the biggest challenges as a trustee and as a college access professional during this period?

Irene Cepeda

Well, as a trustee – so I think there are three different spaces here. So personal, it was shifting all our programming to virtual, and the engagement piece was absolutely – is – *was* the hardest work and a difficult piece. Even now, we still see engagement, not where it used to be in '19, so we're still battling some of those low engagement environments.

I think that managing some of the interpersonal pieces was difficult because we're all in different spaces. This is also in the context where loved ones, or loved ones a couple of folks removed, either got COVID or had passed away from COVID. So there was a level of grieving. There was a grieving of events and nonevents, so all of the things we couldn't do, and all of the things we're doing but are different, all of that took some grieving because it was not what it used to be, and now we're changing, and we keep changing.

I think, too, the folks who could work remotely and those who couldn't. I know all of my staff that would have – that was affecting my staff too. Everyone knew someone who either got laid off; everyone knew someone who still had to work the front lines. So there are some of those social-emotional pieces. As a trustee, it's this feeling of, to some degree, helplessness, because there's only really so much we could do. Like these, we are making, the lesser of two evils, and it makes me think of that ethical dilemma. Do you kill one person, or do you kill five? I can't remember what that ethical dilemma is called, but those types of decisions.

That was to the extent of what we could do because this is all – yes, we were receiving ESSER funds, but those ESSER funds were specific to testing, and they were specific to bridging digital divides. So how do we get technology into the hands of students? Once we had that technology, well, that technology is no good if they don't have internet [access], so how do we get internet [access] into some of these homes?

So it was funding those pieces, and all of that took a whole lot of effort. We had some really good and really amazing partners in the community that helped us do that. Again, an amazing staff who went above and beyond to get the Chromebooks into the hands of kids. Again, the internet, and [23:54]. Then I think to the complexities of the district because we were urban, we're suburban, and then we're rural, so we have all those different types of communities. Making sure that our rural communities had Khajiits, so those hotspots that don't require – that are made more for rural areas. Again, having internet [access] in the homes of our students.

So it was that, and it was a feeling of wanting to do more, but really, these are our options. Now, you have the wellbeing of our teachers, and we had to be careful and be extra-mindful of the wellbeing of our admin because they're taking care of teachers; the wellbeing of our students and families because they're suffering. Not having enough mental health professionals in general, we never had enough in the state, which our state doesn't make nearly enough, so there's those pieces and those challenges.

Again, I'm sure we've heard this a billion and one times, but it's these gaps widening because of the pandemic – or at least being – we're hyper-aware of them now because the pandemic is exasperating them. It's not feeling like there isn't more we could do, and even as a trustee – this is my first term. So my first year, as in '19, was really understanding the role. It's so much more complex and difficult and difficult than what people may understand. A governance role is different from the perception the community may have of this role.

So it's not a role that inspires action, where our board is monitoring data, we're making sure that we're in the direction we're going, we're setting goals, and we're setting the vision of the district. On top of that, there's seven of us, so we had to come to a consensus on those goals and those missions. I mean '21 was, by far, the most chaotic year of my term as a trustee. So '19 was figuring out the role, and 2021 was just managing this health crisis, this pandemic, and this emergency, and even in '22, we still see a whole lot of that.

This year was really important for me to be very – have student-centered outcomes at the front of every conversation we had as a board, so we could see where we're at. So we see those achievement gaps widening, and we see – we also are facing – all – the Great Resignation labor force challenges; staff, we already had an aging workforce, so we see more of them taking retirement and leaving the teaching profession in general.

It's been difficult because we see it all. We see everything. I think, if anything, as my term as president this year, it just showcases how important it is to have goals and be focused with the goals. Otherwise, we're just shooting everywhere, we're going in a bunch of different directions, and we then go nowhere if we are not unified in our goals and focus.

Magdalena Martinez [27:45]

Mm-hmm.

Irene Cepeda: [27:47]

So I don't know if I answered your question because I went in a couple different directions because it is a lot. It was a lot, and I think even on a personal level – my own humanity, and having to deal with my own personal pieces, my trustee stuff, and my professional life, all is also a whole lot. I know, personally, I feel burnt out, but how do you manage that when all your staff are also feeling burnt out – we have teachers who feel burnt out. And when I say, "teachers," I mean, also, teachers, staff, support staff, Adam, and everyone.

Magdalena Martinez [28:30]

And your son was born before or after? What year was he-?

Irene Cepeda [28:34]

He was a pandemic baby. He was born in April 2020.

Magdalena Martinez [28:37]

Mm-hmm.

Irene Cepeda [28:39]

Yeah. And then I got my stepson in May of 2020. Those were all of the other pieces. We're home – this whole time, we're also home, so it's not like we could leave a whole lot. Everyone's asking, just in general, public health is like "Stay home if you don't want to leave." Well, for your basics, which I mean, that's what it ended up – and it ended up being that I was really the only one leaving home. Then my husband would say because we don't want a multiple of us to be exposed at the same time, and I myself caught COVID, and it wasn't until – I caught COVID in June. So, last month, and we had mild symptoms, but yeah, my whole family caught it. My husband fell next, then my little guy, my teenager, for the purpose of being a teenager, he stays in his room, so he actually didn't catch it because he lives in his room. It's all scary stuff.

Magdalena Martinez [29:41]

I hear you. What stood out to me, as you were talking about the grieving of events and non-events. Could you say a little bit more about that?

Irene Cepeda [30:01]

Yeah. So the grieving of events and non-events. So from my trustee lens, I couldn't be out in the community like I wanted to be. I couldn't get folks together, because it was irresponsible of me to do, as it would put everyone else's lives in danger. And goodness, just about five or six months ago, we started to get another hike, so we're everyone's starting to get more cautious about in-person events. I think to all the folks who lost a loved one or someone they knew but couldn't go to a ceremony. I think to folks who adapted their events – so one of our colleagues on our board, she also had a baby in '21 – yeah, I think it was last year – she had a drive-through baby shower. So we did our good wishes, gave her air "high-fives," and dropped off our baby shower items, we got a cookie, and that was the extent of the celebration.

Magdalena Martinez [31:26]

Who was that, Irene?

Irene Cepeda [31:28]

Evelyn.

Magdalena Martinez [31:29]

Oh, I didn't know she had a baby. Okay.

Irene Cepeda [31:31]

Yeah, little Eve. Little Eve. I'm pretty sure she was born last year because [s]he's a – yeah, it wasn't this year for sure. It was definitely last year, so I think it was pretty early last year. I don't remember exactly, but definitely last year because we had a virtual drive-through baby shower.

Magdalena Martinez [31:58]

So events like that, yeah.

Irene Cepeda [32:00]

Yeah. Events like that at the college. I love Summer Bridge events. It's one of my favorite things to do, and just having to turn those [to] virtual were really difficult. They were really difficult

because – I mean there was a silver lining. There were absolutely some silver linings. We saw more students logging in, but it was a different type of level of engagement. It wasn't the fully-immersive in-person event. It was only giving part of yourself: you're kind of listening, you might not be – you're there, but you're not fully there. We appreciate them being there, but it's always a little difficult when cameras are off, and you're speaking to a void or speakers are speaking to a void, and that engagement isn't there.

Then the things we have to do, you know, we're all wearing masks. We all had to face the – goodness, what are they called? The supply shortages. There's a better term for that.

Magdalena Martinez [33:16]

The PPE.

Irene Cepeda [33:18]

Well, yeah. So yeah, we had PPE. But no, specifically, toilet paper – the 2020 toilet paper supply chain shortage.

Magdalena Martinez [33:25]

Right.

Irene Cepeda [33:26]

That's what I was talking about before, supply chain shortages.

Magdalena Martinez [33:25]

Mm-hmm.

Irene Cepeda [33:29]

So that was its own kind of just surreal moment of dystopian reality – going to a store, not seeing everything that you would, and I'm sure that has implications. I know people were just like hoarding things, which led to other things. So it was – it's a lot. Then in having this conversation, I think, too, how wild 2020 was, and how we're still facing that, you know? Now, we're seeing inflation, we're seeing a whole lot of other repercussions from this pandemic, plus a war. So there's a whole lot of environmental pieces that are striking.

Magdalena Martinez [34:24]

Now, you talked a little bit about some of the federal funding that flowed down early on, and how that was very specific in terms of its purposes. What do you wish the different levels of government would have done, or could do differently, for the COVID crisis and the COVID recession?

Irene Cepeda [34:42]

So I will speak to some of, I guess, my perceptions of the public and/or folks in the community about the ESSER funds. The ESSER II and III, those monies still have a deadline. They're a bit more flexible with some of the funding. I think there's this perception that "Oh, now, the district has money, so we could solve all the things." To some degree, we have more funding, and yes,

it's federal funding. It's money that isn't sustainable. It is one-time funds. So once it's gone, it's gone.

Our district, for 10 to 12 – goodness, well, over a dozen years has faced budget cuts. So there's a level of yeah, now, we're getting this money, but consistently, our capacity has dwindled over the past 10, 11, to 12 years. Because of the implications of budget cuts, those implications are going to be – our budget cuts are going to be reflective of us; we have to cut people. 70-plus percent of our budget is personnel, so when we have massive budget cuts, personnel are eventually going to have to go. It's just the unfortunate nature of budget cuts and just how our budget is. We're mainly a people organization.

Magdalena Martinez [36:28]

Mm-hmm.

Irene Cepeda [36:29]

And there's only so much you could do in terms of across-the-board cuts of teacher salaries or teacher staff salaries. There's only so many supplies you could cut. So there is a fundamental capacity that is missing, at almost every single layer of government – we talk district, but in almost every single layer of government there's a lack of capacity, and it's run by folks who are – they wear multiple hats and are probably burnt-out, and it trickles down. I think to how underfunded the state department of education is, and how very – they only had a couple of folks at one point.

I think this piece is with a bit more confidentiality – not too many folks know this, but there are only one or two people doing background checks at the state level, which hurts our recruiting, but our recruiting process because every teacher has to – every staff member needs a background check, so it slows down hiring at our level. Again, we were often accused of – the district is often accused of being too admin-heavy, but we have the highest admin-to-teacher – admin-to-student-ratio of any district in our state.

So there are some high expectations for this money without, I guess, a whole lot of understanding that it's going to take some time to spend this money because we just don't have the capacity to do all the things we want to do, and the same thing with teachers. We wish we could hire all the teachers we need. There is a shortage of teachers, more and more folks are leaving the profession, and we see the decline in schools of education, so we're not producing much.

Our state, again, never produced enough, so now, that's the case with other states. We can no longer depend on other states to create those teachers and then bring them here. We know those teachers don't tend to stay anyway because they don't have roots here. And so, after a couple of years, they go back to where they had their roots.

So initially, that's where my mind goes is – we have this money, yes, but it's difficult to do all the things we want to do with this one-time influx. We know that it can't really go towards hiring people because that funding is going to dry up. We've used a good chunk of those funds for new curriculum.

Also, more on a DL-confidential level, we know that the State Department has some curriculum, especially in ELL, that is over six years old, and haven't approved any additional curriculum, and that's been in waiting for years. Again, all of that trickles down to us, and then we're using older curriculum because the State Board is the one that approves all the curriculum.

So I think those are some of the frustrations. We have this funding, it's their one-time funds, and there's only so much we could really do with it. So we think the feds allowed us to do retention bonuses, where we're paying the \$5,000 bonuses that staff are receiving this year. Those are in two chunks of \$2,500. Then we had retention bonuses last year, and we were able to find \$26 million in our budget to be able to bump up teacher pay from \$43 to \$50, which we've gotten a lot of pushback in the sense of "Well, you should have done it evenly across the board." Really, in this scenario, a \$7,000 increase does the most impact at those bottom levels of those schedules. It's the salary ladder – we know rent is going up, and we have inflation. So we thought, yeah, that's probably the better – the place will make the most income, and then everyone else will get a \$5,000 bonus. Then we'll come '23, which is just a couple of months away, we'll lobby and ask the legislature for more money to increase salaries.

Magdalena Martinez [41:17]

Now, what I hear you saying then is the money – the federal funding was great, thanks. But when you don't have the human capital capacity to really disperse, and to implement, and to do what these funds are intended to do, that creates another layer of complexity.

Irene Cepeda [41:43]

Yes. Yeah, I think we're doing the best we can. Again, the curriculum makes a difference in getting folks – at least teachers – building principals will have the choice of some new curriculum. Again, bonuses, a good chunk – goodness, from this last round of \$5,000, it's almost about 100 million. It's a lot, especially in a district as large as ours, raises and/or retention bonuses, all those add up really quickly, so we're looking at hundreds of millions. I think it was about 100 million for the \$5,000 retention bonuses. So if we were to do \$5,000 raises for everybody, that will look like \$100 million in perpetuity, which is always a hard 'ask.'

Magdalena Martinez [42:37]

Yeah. You started to get into some of this a little bit, I think. In your opinion, what can we learn from the COVID crisis that could be lessons for future crises?

Irene Cepeda [42:53]

Well, I guess, immediately, I think to systems because it took some time to get folks connected, again, to the information sharing. This was at a different level, so there was a local piece and there was a state piece. But even information-sharing with other trustees – other school boards across the nation, that took a little bit to get started.

I think I find a lot of value as a school board trustee, when I'm able to engage in conversations with my colleagues from other school districts. At least in the state of Nevada, we are so unique: there are 17 of us, we have 70% of the population and 70% of the students, give or take a couple

of percentages. Then we have Washoe, which is the next largest school district in the state. So finding a district that is similar to ours provides that additional insight.

So this year, as president, like I'm on [Council Great City School Calls] [44:02] with others for presidents. It's really eye-opening to one, understand these issues at a local level but then at a national level because these are national trends. On a personal level, it makes me feel a little less alone because then it's happening nationwide. What can we learn from each other to address the teacher shortages, and to address staffing shortages? What are you all doing to retain?

So, to your question, in terms of learning, it is absolutely some of those systems and strengthening them. It's money that is not – I would say that isn't an attractive use of money but is so worth it to be able to have folks who are readily available to help create this – to have a system in place for things to happen. So I would say that would be the first piece. Again, there's just so much infrastructure that our state needs, in general, that sometimes it feels a little daunting because there's a lot of work to do.

Magdalena Martinez: [45:26]

Mm-hmm.

Irene Cepeda: [45:27]

So I think it would be that investing in some of the structures to be able to quickly act and to start communicating with others, and getting people together to solve whatever may arise. I think it was impressive, at least at community levels, how we started to take care of each other, so that is impressive. I think that's something that happened a bit more organically, I thought that was really impressive, and I think it should be celebrated.

So much of my time is spent on "Okay, how can we fix something?" I think sometimes it's nice to be able to celebrate what we did well. Goodness, I think it's also hard to think of the lessons learned because so much of this is also in the context of politics. When we have – politics play now, you know?

This year, it's going to feel like a referendum on, essentially, the COVID response. It's a it's a whole lot easier to criticize because one, a lot of this information wasn't – it happened, but it wasn't happening so much in the public, so I think there may be some distrust there. But in the space where even scientists not trusted, is also difficult. So I think those are the additional complexities in being able to share that these were some of our – what we did well because so much of it also feels political as well, and it shouldn't be that way, right? It shouldn't be that way, especially because our roles are nonpartisan roles, we're supposed to be able to hear each side, and make a decision that's based off of the information we have, but it's difficult because it's not their unpopular choices. Again, I could say our board – I know we that tried to do our best with the information we had at hand, and it still wasn't very popular. There weren't a whole lot of amazing choices.

Magdalena Martinez [48:03]

Right. Yeah. And so my next question, actually, you started to get at as well. You talked about having amazing partners in the community, and how communities responded and should be

celebrated. Could you tell me a little bit more about that, and maybe, some specific examples of how you think the schools, universities, and states have been innovative in dealing with the challenges of the pandemic and the recession?

Irene Cepeda [48:32]

So the first thing that comes to mind is my personal work with our HSI grants. We essentially – well, it took a little bit of time, but we were able to get the okay from our program officers to purchase technology first. If students needed technology or if they needed hotspots, we were able to purchase that using our HSI grants, which is more at a federal level. So I thank them for those partnerships because they were quick hear what we needed; we needed technology and connectivity, and they said, "Okay, you could use money from your HSI grants to buy that stuff."

Magdalena Martinez [49:17]

Mm-hmm.

Irene Cepeda [49:19]

Partners in the community here – we had Cox Communications, who beefed up their \$10-a-month connectivity program. There's still bumps in the road with that program, but it definitely helped with some folks getting internet [access]. I think too, the Public Education Foundation, somewhat like our county and cities, who all wanted to help. Again, we're actively distributing any type of goods – so distributing technology and distributing food. I still see food distribution pop-ups, so we have those still happening. Our nonprofit sector helped a ton, again, in distributing and purchasing technology, getting it out there and giving it to the schools, and having schools distribute.

Our schools became hubs, so our school became food hubs. The federal government allowed us to essentially waive the fee of lunches and school meals. So schools became a place where anyone – you didn't have to be a CCS student. You could go and get a meal at one of our schools. There's those pieces.

I know that Poonam, Kiersten, and our communications department were leading the hotlines to help students get connected with internet technology. That was a huge one, and they led a lot of those efforts. Those are the ones that I think of immediately, and again, just the care and the check-ins. So we had, at least as electeds, I know, we tried to do check-ins "Hey, you're okay, you know. We're all a text message away." So even though it wasn't an in-person piece or going out to coffee, there were still those check-ins, and I tried to extend that to my staff, and we were like "Hey, you know, how are you?" and having interpersonal check-ins were also really important.

So I think those are some of the pieces I think about. Even coming out of the pandemic, we're increasing our communities and schools. So we're using some extra funds to be able to expand those sites. We know that we need more humans and buildings being able to provide some of those wraparound services, so we extended the communities and schools to a couple of more sites, and that just passed – I think that was just last month where we increased that funding.

Magdalena Martinez [52:36]

Really helpful, Irene. And you touched on this in some of the previous questions; if there were specific policies that the state or the federal government implemented that you noticed impacted people either positively or negatively. So you talked about the HSI grants, the modification, and how to use those resources. Can you think of any other examples, at the state level or federal level, where there were specific policies that allowed you to bring about some of the – respond to some of the crisis and chaos?

Irene Cepeda [53:12]

So, again, more at the federal level, allowing us to use ESSER funds for retention bonuses. That was pretty huge. They were responding to not just our pleas, but the pleas across other school districts that were losing staff really quickly. The burnout is real and the resignations are real. So they acted and said, "Okay, you can use these ESSER funds for teacher recruitment and retention." So across the nation, we had school districts who gave out these retention bonuses.

What else? Goodness, I think I'm blanking on anything else. I think my work, as in recruiting future teachers because my day job – I work at Nevada State College, but I help future educators get into college and then in graduating them. Again, that flexibility to use our funds to help support them was always important.

Magdalena Martinez [54:27]

Yeah, that's helpful. Thank you.

Irene Cepeda [54:28]

If I can think of anything else-

Magdalena Martinez [54:29]

So I'll conclude with this question. Are you hopeful, and if yes, what are you hopeful for?

Irene Cepeda [54:38]

I kind of have to stay hopeful. I think if I wasn't, we'd fall into this pit of despair because it is always a whole lot of work all the time. Honestly, it's going to get a whole lot worse before it gets better, at least in our state, as we have seven institutions of public higher education. In thinking about some of our neighboring states, all of them have way more institutions of public education than that.

So there's still a lot of looming doom, I think, of the diversification piece, our economy took a hit, and it's just the same thing over and over again. So we had our recession because of the – we had our hit in 2001 because of 9-11, a hit in 2008 because of the recession, and because of the pandemic now. Our economy is still so much focused on the entertainment piece it's – we need to be able to fund higher education to be able to help diversify our economies because that's really where you do it. In my humble opinion, we have a real state of emergency with our teachers, not having enough teachers, and that's been the case for a long time. We have not opened with the amount of teachers we need. It's pretty dire, especially after coming out of this pandemic, and so we need to be able to invest in teacher education programs and teacher recruitment programs. Again, it's hard. I think our work here at Nevada State College, it's taken a lot of – we have a director, a teacher of our Teacher Academy Pipeline Project, then we have two site coordinators.

Slowly, we have been able to build out the services required to help our students go through this entire pipeline and pathway, which is moving from our dual credit pieces of the high school to getting them through college. That's a whole other hurdle. Then getting them through licensure, that's also the hardest piece because we have the Praxis core at the very front, then the Praxis subject exam at the very end, and placements. Oftentimes students are doing this while they're working full-time.

So I mean, things I'm hopeful [for] – I am hopeful because we have a lot of folks who are willing to get this work done. I am hopeful because I'm hopeful. What else am I hopeful for? I think that we have leaders in our colleges and schools of education here who are actively trying to find solutions. I will say – yeah. I said that I'm hopeful, but maybe I'm not as hopeful as I thought I was (laughs). It's been hard for me to find things I'm hopeful for. I'm hopeful for our humanity as a state, but yeah, it's going to be really hard, and things are going to get worse before they get better.

That's just kind of the reality. It takes some time to build, and it takes funding to build, and sustainable sources of income to build. A lot of the work we've done here at Nevada State is also because we picked up two HSI grants, both \$2.7-\$2.8 million over the course of five years to fund these. So we've done good work and we'll be able to showcase some of our numbers here soon. I know in the district it seems sometimes a little dire, but we have a whole lot of amazing people doing a whole lot of amazing work, and that keeps me motivated to do this work. What keeps *you* motivated, Magda? What keeps you hopeful?

Magdalena Martinez [59:15]

I'm going to turn off the recording. That concludes our interview, but I do want to chat with you afterwards.

Irene Cepeda [59:20]

Okay.

Magdalena Martinez [59:21]

So let me turn off the recording.

End of audio: 59:24