

## Comparing District Achievement to Improve Decision Making in Clark County, Nevada

### The Challenge

In response to changing demographics, a tightening budget, and drastic achievement gaps (white students outperform Latino students on standardized tests) the Clark County School District in Nevada (the fifth largest district in the country) commissioned, in 2011, an educational and operational efficiency review. The district commissioned the review to understand how to better allocate their resources and make the case with state legislators for increased funding. Nevada is 47th in the nation in per pupil spending.

### The Response

The study—particularly the comparative analysis of districts with similar demographics, conducted by American Institutes for Research (AIR)—garnered an immediate response from the community. According to a *Las Vegas Sun* article, District Superintendent Dwight Jones stated, “We cannot use our demographics as an excuse. We’ve got peer districts that have (more) disadvantaged students that are far out achieving what we’re doing right now. We’ve got to be pretty honest: we ought to be doing better.”

### The AIR Approach



AIR, a subcontractor on this project, was responsible for identifying three districts—Broward County, Florida; Miami; and Houston—with similar demographics and financial circumstances and comparing their student achievement to Clark County’s. The AIR analysis identified the factors contributing to the disparity between the achievements of those districts and of Clark County. AIR staff also analyzed the districts’ student achievement data to isolate areas that need improvement.

AIR staff mined all of Clark County’s data, reaching beyond the district’s existing published reports, to focus on the relationship between subgroups of students. For example, AIR’s evaluators examined the progress of students entering third grade with limited English proficiency to determine the length of time it took for students to become proficient in the language. The evaluators then compared this progress to the other districts.

Staff coupled the data analysis with interviews of staff from the three comparison districts to provide Clark County with in-depth case studies about the districts’ strategies and approaches. AIR’s focus on cohorts of data and the comparative analysis to similar districts allowed Clark County to see their data in a different light. By adding a third layer—the case studies—AIR provided concrete information to aid the district’s decision making. The project provided timely comprehensive and actionable information for policymakers.

#### About American Institutes for Research (AIR)

Founded in 1946, AIR applies science to address real-world issues. AIR is a national leader in teaching and learning improvement, providing the research, assessment, evaluation, and technical assistance to ensure that all students—particularly those facing historical disadvantages—have access to a high-quality, effective education.

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