

# Thornton's SB80 on Return to Play approaches governor's desk

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Nevada youth legislator Stella Thornton never expected an entire gut replacement for her education measure Senate Bill 80 that advocates for Return to Play policies or concussion legislation for students. Still, she stays optimistic that the spirit and intention of her bill will remain intact coming into enrollment.

Thornton, a senior at Carson High School and Nevada Youth Legislator, has been working to get SB80 passed through both houses and sent to the governor to be signed. On May 26, it achieved passage through the Assembly 40-0, with two excused. On April 17, it passed the Senate 14-6 with one excused.

According to the Nevada legislature bill tracker, the bill was delivered to the Gov. Joe Lombardo on May 31.

Thornton has fielded questions and concerns. She has crafted language for conceptual amendments with Assembly Majority Floor Leader Sandra Jauregui, D-Clark, and Assemblywoman Selena La Rue Hatch, D-Washoe, to address prescriptive language needs, she said.

"I hope that it is a bipartisan effort to pass," Thornton told the Appeal on May 24 in recapping recent meetings about the amendments SB80 has gone through since March. "It's not something I see as political. Even senators who said that they appreciate the idea but were going to have to vote no, none of those senators outright were like, 'I don't like the bill.'"

Thornton has been diligent to capture the precise language and requirements that would benefit Nevada's students who experience traumatic brain injuries (TBIs) to help them return to school safely and swiftly, inspired by her own personal experience. She was bucked off onto rocky terrain in a horseriding accident during Labor Day weekend in 2021 and has been recovering from a concussion since then. She was well-protected but didn't recognize anything she was experiencing a concussion until she felt the onset of blurry vision, nausea and an inability to focus the following day. After hitting her head on a cabinet, her symptoms worsened through a second-impact concussion.

Thornton has been pleased to see SB80 move forward and become incremental legislation to previous



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**Stella Thornton, a Carson High School senior and Nevada Youth Legislator, awaits the final outcome of her Senate Bill 80, an education measure advocating for head injury and concussion legislation.**

language regarding the prevention and treatment of head injuries in the Nevada Revised Statutes, adding evidence-based policies instead. Philosophically, she agrees with legislators that proposals should be added slowly to previously established policies so as not to overwhelm constituents, which was some of the discussion in the May 4 Assembly Committee on Education meeting.

"Some of the concerns in the May 4 hearing is the prescriptive language of the bill that a lot of the Assembly people felt that it would be easy to accidentally, and not willfully, disobey the law because of the prescriptive language," Thornton said. "That I understand."

She also was asked to incorporate private schools, an incremental addition of the Return to Learn policy and one of the more controversial steps. This was hard to fully conceptualize as a high school student concerning any legal aspects of integrating penalties into a bill, she said. Thornton never had conceived of citing any misdemeanor into the bill or into the Legislature's tracking website, NELIS. Ultimately, she was advised to have some fine or consequence to ensure educational institutions would comply with the policies she was establishing.

"For any bill that might regulate private schools, if there isn't any penalty mentioned, the penalty mentioned immediately becomes a misdemeanor," she said. "So in my very first draft of SB80, I didn't put any penalty or specifically state any penalty, so before it came out, NELIS had a gross misdemeanor for private schools, so I was like, 'Why is there a gross misdemeanor?'"

"There was a lot of learning in this process," she said. "As a teenager, I didn't know that yet. It seems adverse or seems like something people wouldn't respond well to, so I changed it to a misdemeanor. So I did try to bring the penalty down."

Adam Hunsaker, an athletic trainer for Carson-Tahoe Health assigned at CHS, has been assisting Thornton as a youth legislator. However, in her amendments to fulfill legal obligations, some discussions often came down as "harsh."

"If there is a requirement or obligation, and that obligation isn't fulfilled, it is automatically a misdemeanor, and that was some of the concern, and we didn't think it was as big a deal as it turned out to be," Hunsaker said. "Some teachers are mandatory reporters for child abuse and other things, so there's other instances where teachers know something or find something else and those sorts of laws carry penalties so we're like, that makes sense."

Thornton's term as a legislator officially ended on Wednesday, although she still awaits the outcome of SB80. She said she looks forward to graduating from CHS today, with her cords and stoll in place.

Thornton said she never imagined serving as a Nevada Youth Legislator and the process of advocating for her bill would consume the past two years of her academic life.

"I feel have matured as a person and as a person within Nevada in the focus of this bill in the Legislature," she said. "It's given me more as a stately view and as more of a worldly view. I don't think a lot of us get to deal with stakeholders in so many places a lot as youth."

The CHS senior still refers to the barn as her "one true love" as her place of meditation and still goes horse-riding when she's not tied up at school or the Legislature this year.

"We all need a place we can go to center ourselves," she said.