



## Nevada Future of Learning Network Case Studies

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# Nevada Future of Learning Network Case Study

## Churchill County School District

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### What is learner-centered, future-ready education?

Being learner-centered means **prioritizing the needs, interests, and experiences of learners**. Instead of focusing on delivering content from the teacher to the students, learners are empowered to take an active role in their own education. Being future-ready means attending to and **anticipating the needs of society and the future labor market** when considering the goals of schooling. This approach includes considering global economic trends and environmental changes along with local history.

### How does the Nevada Future of Learning Network advance learner-centered, future-ready education?

- Connects and supports coherence among school, district and statewide efforts to advance learner-centered, future-ready education
- Provides coaching, professional learning, and resources for educators, leaders and innovators
- Spotlights promising practices in Nevada and nationally

### Resources:

- [Nevada Future of Learning Network](#)
- [Nevada Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education](#)
- [Nevada Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education Final Report](#)
- [Nevada Innovation Guide](#)

## DISTRICT SPOTLIGHT



**Buildings:** 1 early-childhood center, 1 school (K-1), 1 school (2-3), 1 school (4-5), 1 middle school (6-8), and 1 high school (9-12)

**Enrollment:** 3,221 students

**Locale:** Town, Remote

**School Week Schedule:** Modified 4-day school week for students; students typically have every other Friday off

**Portrait:** Local District Profile of a Learner

**Student Demographics:** <5% American Indian or Alaska Native, <5% Asian, <5% Black, <5% Pacific Islander, 8% two or more races, 27% Hispanic, 57% white

### Getting Started with Learner-Centered Education

Churchill County School District’s journey with learner-centered education began with their own learner profile that included the following expectations for its graduates: critical thinking, inspired innovator, collaborative learner, effective communicator, global citizen, and lifelong learner. In 2022, the district attended a statewide convening in Las Vegas to envision the future of learning and identify mindsets and skills students should have before they graduate. In 2024, the district formally joined the Nevada Future of Learning Network when the state began building the Portrait of a Nevada Learner. Joining the Network allowed them, as one teacher explained, “to review what our learner profile looked like and fine-tune some things.”

### Building and Maintaining Momentum

Churchill County School District is highlighted in the [Nevada Innovation Guide](#) for bringing the district’s Profile of a Learner to life. An educator agreed that the district had done a “good job of rolling out [the Profile of a Learner]” and helped them understand the shared vision of “working towards better things for kids.” As a district leader shared, “When we are working with kids, there needs to be an individualized path for every student. We need to recognize the student as a unique individual and make sure that the program of study that we have developed for them meets them where they are and what needs they have.”

Churchill County School District has grade band schools; for instance, there are three elementary schools, and each school focuses on two grade levels — Kindergarten and first grade, second grade and third grade, and fourth grade and fifth grade. The district administrator emphasized how important the district’s profile has been to support students’ transition. He shared, “Whenever you have a transition, you’re going to have periods where you spend a lot of time transitioning rather than engaged in new learning. The district profile can help minimize that impact.”

## CLASSROOM SPOTLIGHTS

### Fostering Social Emotional Learning Using Choice in Elementary School

“My classroom management has always been on point,” an elementary school teacher explained, but incorporating choice for social emotional learning supports her kindergarten students to make informed decisions about how they learn best. It started when their school received a grant for flexible seating, and her team invested in wobble seats, stools, stadium chairs, and big cushions. Because of that support, students now have a choice for where they sit, how they sit, and what kind of chair they sit in.

Seating options allow students to explore what environment they work best in based on what they are working on. The teacher shared, “I say things like, ‘You can sit in that seat today if it’s a good choice for your learning. If you’re sitting next to someone who might distract you, that might not be a good choice.’” The conversations turn into a creative space for students to explore what works for them when fostering their own learning process.

The first time she gave her students choice, she was nervous about it, but “it worked out so well.” She had several students who decided on that first day that they needed to swap out chairs or locations. She continued, “I thought ‘it can’t be this easy. There’s no way they can do this. That’s nuts...wow, point proven!’ They can very quickly learn how to make good decisions...I don’t think I’ll ever be able to go back to the way I used to teach because these kids are [now] learning that responsibility for themselves.”



She shared that for social emotional learning (SEL), they check in every morning about their emotions. The school uses Zones of Regulation<sup>1</sup> and many other SEL lessons tied to the zones. Every morning, she does a check-in to identify which monsters the students align to, ranging from blue zone (sad / tired), green zone (happy / calm), yellow zone (worried / excited), red zone (overjoyed / angry). After they identify their monster, she checks in with them to see what their zone means for how to support the start to their day. For instance, she said, “If I’m seeing a collection of kids that are just kind of groggy in the morning, instead of having them sit and not move their bodies, we get up and we do something different to get them ready to learn.”

<sup>1</sup> Kuypers, L. (2011). *The Zones of Regulation*. San Jose, CA: Think Social Publishing.

## Showing Mastery through Data Binders in Elementary School

With the district’s shift to standards-based grading, an elementary school teacher shared how her students are using data binders to show mastery of what they are learning. She explained, “We have deep conversations about the tasks they’re completing. They also reflect on their progress toward achieving their goals.” The students also create a roadmap<sup>2</sup> that “outlines the micro skills that they need to build up to get to the macro skills.” Her students use the data binders to track their learning targets and their progress toward mastery. She asks them questions similar to the following:

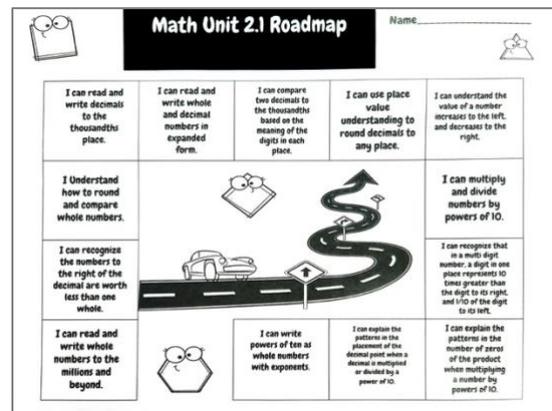
- “What did this assignment show you about your learning?”
- “How are you making steps to improve?”

The students are always looking at their progress. Goal setting and progress monitoring are widespread practices in the district as reflected in a 2025 student survey about learner-centered practices. Approximately 84% of fourth and fifth grade students who responded to the survey agreed or strongly agreed that they set goals for their learning, and 80% agreed or strongly agreed that they work with their teachers to check progress toward their goals.

The teacher also shared that some of the elementary teachers are working toward personalized-learning plans and learning guides, but a curriculum shift has required them to shift away from that work and toward aligning to the curriculum instead. Ultimately, the goal for their team is for students to be connected community members and they plan to continue their efforts to reach that goal. The teachers aim to support students as they develop skills, such as communication and problem solving. She shared that during their professional learning community (PLC) meetings, her team asks:

- How are we helping our students learn how to set goals and achieve them?
- How are we supporting our students with opportunities to develop these skills?
- How can we design lessons that allow our students to dig into those skills even more?

The shift to standards-based grading also changes the conversations and structures with her students: “The question from students changes from ‘How can I raise my grade?’ to ‘How can I get better at this skill?’ Over the last several years we’ve been working on learner-centered strategies. It’s been very interesting to have these discussions and see the changes not only in my own instruction, but what the students are engaged in as well.”



<sup>2</sup> The image of the roadmap was created by the district based on the district’s use of LEAP Innovations’ Modern Teacher.

## Exploring Choice with Elementary School Students

In another elementary school classroom, the teacher uses project-based learning to provide her students an opportunity to explore choice. The goal of the project is to design a travel guide, which gives students a chance to learn about other countries and their cultures. The teacher shared, “My kids learned new cultures within different countries they’re researching. They learn [about] currency, languages, transportation, whatever they’re most interested in.”

The first time the teacher embarked on this project was last year and she gave the students 10 countries to choose from so there was some overlap. She asked them to only include six pieces of information about the country. She expressed, “I was very worried. I thought ‘This is going to be a disaster because I felt like I was giving them too many options.’” The result: It was such a huge success that she wanted to give up the reins a bit more this year. “It makes me so proud. It really does. They’re making the project their own.”

This year, her students chose from any country in the world and included up to 16 facts about their country. She shared, “I stepped way back this year. Just let them do it. As a human, it’s scary to give up those reins. But it’s so rewarding.”

Some of her peers from other districts are hesitant to give students more agency and express concern to her: “If I give the kids that opportunity to do it all themselves, my job’s going to be gone. They won’t need me anymore.” She explained, “It’s a misconception because we’re always going to be needed. Having a student-centered approach doesn’t necessarily mean the teacher is not needed. The teacher is there to help guide student learning. Adapting and changing, that’s how we survive.”

One of her students visited the district office and had the opportunity to share her travel guide with one of the district leaders. The district leader reported back to the teacher that the student proudly exclaimed, “I’m an inspired innovator!” The district leader asked her why, and the student confidently talked about her project and how it demonstrated her creativity and problem-solving skills.

## Empowering High School Students in Computer Science

“I teach kids how to make video games,” said the teacher. “I call myself the project manager of our students’ game design company,” the teacher continued, “and our principal is the CEO.” Each year, the teacher’s classroom is set up like a mock business that the students work for:

[The students are] interns or independent developers. Every class period, students come in, and they report on their Key Performance Indicators (KPI). The KPIs represent the learning standards. I ask them, “What have you done that fits this [KPI]?” They report to me, “Oh, I did that. We designed a level today, and we had to consider visual storytelling elements and level design.” Once approved by me, they document it and move onto the next standard.

The teacher reflected, “I’m able to facilitate the standards in a way that the kids are finding joy and measurable success in school and in society after being in my program.” Because learning is treated like a job, there is flexibility around deadlines as needed. The students are given “the freedom to explore and make mistakes, exploit bugs and glitches, and dig into their work. Because of that, they are understanding deeper and broader with more exploration, risk-taking, experimentation, and reflection, which definitely makes it a more lasting learning experience.” The teacher also tries to connect the work they are doing with other disciplines, such as English language arts, History, and math.

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– Teacher, elementary school

Once a year, the teacher takes students who meet at least 80% of their KPIs to a game design competition for their Career and Technical School Organization (CTSO) requirement that focuses on leadership development, skill building, and practical application of their learning. This year, the teacher is taking the students to a game design conference for the first time, which will have more than 150,000 people in attendance. The students are creating a digital portfolio throughout the year, and those traveling to the conference will use a portfolio card to network and potentially find job and internship opportunities. The teacher expressed, “I hope the conference becomes a yearly activity!”

“When they leave high school, their work is not going to be seen by one person. It will almost always be judged by society, by their peers, by their coworkers, by the public. And so this event, the intern showcase, and ultimately our public beta and release party, are great ways to get them used to that,” the teacher emphasized. The intern showcase is an event the teacher hosts for first-year students to prepare them for the larger gaming conference.

The teacher shared a story about a previous student who is now a game designer ready to release a game. “During his time in my program, he did a little of everything, level design, computer programming, voice acting, and marketing. Now, he’s doing all of that as a job, and some of our current students are contributing work to him.”

The teacher shared that another student was offered a 50% scholarship to play video games as part of an esports program in college. The same student now has a job as an esports organizer in a state college. Another student had lost interest in school, but when he entered the game design class, the teacher worked with him to find his passion. The district administrator shared that he knew the student well and was “happy to see him a short time after starting the game design class presenting at one of the district board meetings. He changed within one school year, and it was just amazing to see that because something in that class had given that student a purpose for school, for life.”

## Cultivating Creativity and Engagement in High School Culinary Arts

In this kitchen, students choose what they want to learn about in culinary arts. That does not mean they are limited to “cooking, cooking, cooking,” said the teacher. She continued,

That’s what they think it is, but then they find out there’s more. There’s running a restaurant, there’s menu planning. They’re learning that there’s design and construction for restaurants. I have a couple of students who are legal-minded, one wants to be a judge and the other a lawyer, and I said to them, “Well, restaurant owners need lawyers.” They asked, “What do they need lawyers for?” And I responded, “Let’s talk about insurance. Let’s talk about the temperature of food and drinks. Let’s talk about food allergies.” I have another kid who’s all about the health department issues, and he is enthralled with sanitation and inspection. My kitchen has never been cleaner [Laughing].

Sparking their interest with the multifaceted business of culinary arts, the teacher allows students to explore what is most important to them based on their interests. While she is new to the school, she has expanded what is possible for career and technical education experiences. Last year, she found an opportunity that allowed one of her students to go to France for an internship over the summer to learn with world-renowned chefs. This year, she’s trying to do the same in Italy and take more students this time around. The biggest challenge for this opportunity is budget, but she was inspired to find a way to make sure her students had the opportunity to dive into their passions.

One way she dreamed up to fund these career experiences was a food truck — now becoming a reality. She shared her excitement: “The students named the truck. Another student who is in a digital arts class designed the wrap for the truck. We bought a slushy machine. They’ve started to write the menu. They’re so excited about it!” They are hoping to raise enough money to take five students to Italy for two weeks.



The teacher also cares deeply about student voice and family engagement. This year, she started a roundtable discussion called “Coffee with the Chefs,” where students and their parents can ideate on what they would like to see happening in her class. The students prepare for the roundtable by baking treats and serving coffee and cocoa. She shared, “This will be an activity I do for all six of my classes to get feedback and make tweaks based on that input. I took notes upon notes upon notes in our professional learning classes, and ‘Coffee with the Chefs’ came out of that learning. I’m excited!”

## REFLECTING ON PROGRESS AND WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

The district administrator shared how their involvement in the Nevada Future of Learning Network supported educators in their teaching. While the district recently implemented a new curriculum that has slowed their progress, educators are hoping to continue moving forward on learner-centered work. The district administrator emphasized, “The district’s profile is putting language to what good teachers have been doing for a long time and allows us to have a common language that everybody can talk about and promote those pedagogical discussions about their students and their learning.” He continued that one of his goals is to “develop a roadmap for our district’s profile to make sure when we have a student go through our system that we’ve addressed all the parts of our profile with each student by the time they graduate.” For the district, the most important thing is the “belief that teachers and school staff have in our students. That drives the work that we do, including the work of our profile.”

### Methodology

This case study highlights the experiences of one district that participated in the Nevada Future of Learning Network. The information shared in this case study is based on six interviews (one district leader and five teachers) and student and staff responses to the Nevada Personalized Learning Implementation Surveys at an elementary school. In 2025, there were 341 survey responses from students in grades 4 and 5.

To learn more about Nevada’s efforts in learner-centered education, visit:

<https://www.nvfutureoflearning.org/>

This case study was made possible with the generous support of KnowledgeWorks and the Nevada Department of Education. For more information about KnowledgeWorks, please visit <https://knowledgeworks.org>. For more information about Nevada’s efforts in learner-centered, future-ready education, please visit <https://www.nvfutureoflearning.org/>.

Kennedy, K., & Zweig, J. (2026). Nevada Future of Learning Network Case Study: Churchill County School District. Retrieved from <https://www.nvfutureoflearning.org/jobs/case-studies>.

# Nevada Future of Learning Network Case Study

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## DISTRICT SPOTLIGHT



**Buildings:** 7 elementary schools (K-5), 3 middle schools (6-8), and 3 high schools (9-12)

**Enrollment:** 4,927 students

**Locale:** Town, Distant

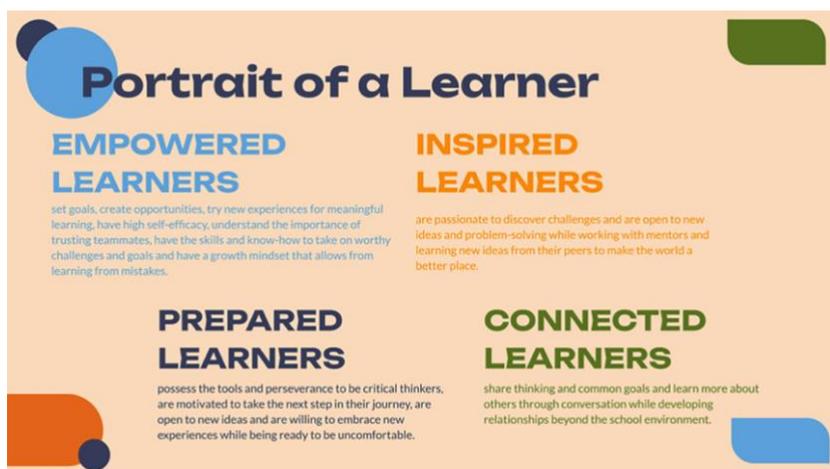
**School Week Schedule:** 5-day school week for students (except George Whittell High School, which operates on a 4-day school week)

**Portrait:** Local District Portrait of a Learner

**Student Demographics:** <5% American Indian / Alaska Native, <5% Asian, <5% Black, <5% Pacific Islander, 6% two or more races, 25% Hispanic, 64% white

### Getting Started with Learner-Centered Education

Before joining the Nevada Future of Learning Network, Douglas County School District (DCSD) was engaged with their own local Portrait of a Learner. The district started intentionally incorporating personalized learning into their instructional model in 2022. Their local Portrait of a Learner’s attributes are Empower, Prepare, Inspire, and Connect, and as an acronym – EPIC – serves as a representation of their instructional model. When the district formally joined the Nevada Future of Learning Network in 2023, they formed a design team made up of seven stakeholders, including teachers, instructional coaches, a principal, district leaders, and the family engagement and communication coordinator.

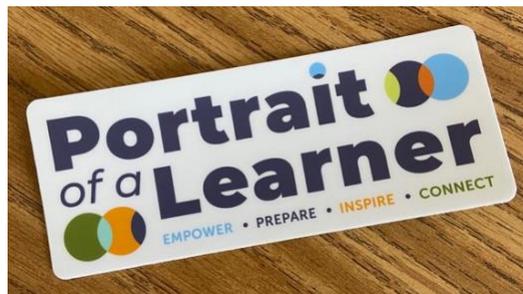


One of the district leaders emphasized, “We wanted our portrait to be more than just sticking something on the wall.” The design team had many ideas about how to integrate their portrait but decided to focus on operationalizing their portrait with help from students, community members, and educators.

The design team first launched a student symposium where students completed a multi-age design challenge to connect with the district’s portrait. Through the process, they came up with inspiring ideas for sharing their portrait with the community, such as creating stickers illustrating their portrait, wrapping district vehicles with their portrait, or hanging flags along heavily-traveled roads. A school administrator shared, “It was one of the few times that we brought students together from across the district, high school, middle, elementary, alternative. And we asked them, how do you feel connected? How do you feel inspired?”

After the student symposium, the district design team moved on to engage the community in the design challenge as well and asked, “How do we bring this out to the community?” A school leader emphasized that at the community level, it was about “what we want our kids to be able to do and where we want them to go.” They invited business owners and community members to the community symposium to understand their perspective on how to operationalize their portrait for the community. The community focused on the skills and attributes they wanted district graduates to possess, both as future employees in local businesses and as engaged community members.

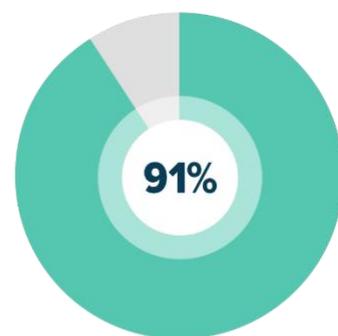
After the community engagement, educators across the district also participated in the design team challenge. Through this activity, the district leaders focused on the importance of educator voices in their district’s portrait work. They invited educators to talk about their own practices of personalizing learning and acknowledge their co-workers who were doing amazing work in their neighboring classrooms. This design challenge, according to one of the instructional coaches, led to the signature practices that the district’s educators are doing in their classrooms to implement EPIC for their students.



From there, the district’s collective work with students, educators, and community members ignited more inspiring ideas. School leaders brought the learning back to their buildings and included their bus drivers, cafeteria workers, staff, and other support staff so that everyone was part of their portrait work. The message to all involved focused on how “we’re already doing this.”

## Building and Maintaining Momentum

To continue the momentum, the district hired EPIC coaches to work alongside teachers as implementation specialists. When EPIC coaches were initially hired, there was one at each school, and they worked collaboratively with the Professional Development Center (PDC) facilitators. Currently, EPIC coaches are housed at a building close to one of the elementary schools and visit the schools to provide support as needed. According to a district leader, the coaches and other support systems for teachers have resulted in a 91% teacher retention rate for DCSD.



**Teacher Retention Rate for Douglas County School District**

Because of their meaningful efforts in teacher support, DCSD is highlighted in the [Nevada Innovation Guide](#) for building educator capacity. Every teacher goes through the onboarding and support process, known as the Teacher Academy, for two years. All of the training that teachers receive is aligned to their district's portrait, EPIC Learning (their instructional model), positive culture, responsive instruction, and learner-centered strategies.

Every school has a teacher leader apply to work with Professional Development Center (PDC) facilitators, and they work at their own school site to provide professional learning workshops, observations, and support for teachers based on needs assessments that the district conducts. One of the district leaders emphasized, "I feel like our goal is to create the conditions where teachers feel like they can take risks because we want our students to feel like they can take risks as well." The instructional coach also shared that it is important to support teachers by:

- Encouraging them to "let go of control,"
- "Helping them see that the district's portrait work is all connected, and it's not just all these separate things," and
- Designing professional learning that models what they will do with their students.

One teacher shared, "The instructional coaches are really supportive. They meet with us during prep time every week or every other week. Sometimes, they come to support you or model something for you in class."

## **SCHOOL AND CLASSROOM SPOTLIGHTS**

### **Empowering Students to Lead their Learning in Elementary School**

In one elementary school, they use badge books to support students' learning progress. Students know what standards they need to meet and map out the path to meet that standard. This empowers students to take more responsibility for their learning. The school administrator shared, "They need to know what they're learning, why they're learning it, and how they know if they're successful."

The teachers unpack standards with the students so they know how they are being assessed using the district's standards-based grading approach. For each standard, the students reflect upon their assessments and discuss with their teacher what work they need to do. Data notebooks go home each trimester so parents can use them to understand their child's progress.

Instead of having parent-teacher conferences, the school conducts student-led conferences where the students share where they are with their parents and have the support of their teacher. The students talk through their roadmaps, as the school leader explained, "The student will say, 'Here's where I started. Here's where I'm going. Here's where I need to get to. Here are the standards I've already accomplished. Here's what I'm doing well on. Here's what I still need to work on. Here are some examples of my writing. Here are some examples of my math. Here's some science we've done.'"

The school leader emphasized the need for more student voice:

Why not give kids more voice, right? Why not ask them more about what they're learning and why? And what do they need to be successful? One of the most valuable pieces of this work is kids are able to speak to their learning far more than they ever were able to because we have them practice that regularly. They have more buy-in for their learning. They truly feel more connected because they have a better understanding of what it is they need to do.

One area this school leader wants to improve upon is getting more input from students and families. He hopes to administer a survey about their experiences and continue to enhance their school's approach to learner-centered education.

## Cultivating a Learner-Centered Elementary Classroom

One elementary school teacher talked about her intentional approach for cultivating a learner-centered classroom for her students. She shared that, at the start of the year, she talks to her students about their district's portrait. From there, she works with her students to create a positive classroom culture and a shared vision. The shared vision answers the question, "Why do you come to school?" Once they create their shared vision, they co-develop a class code that revolves around three key concepts:

- "We are safe."
- "We are respectful."
- "We are responsible."

Class Code		
HOW...we make our Shared Vision come true		
Safe 	Respectful 	Responsible 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Respect Personal Space</li><li>• Use Indoor Voice</li><li>• Walk</li><li>• Follow Seat Expectations</li><li>• Protect yourself and others</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <u>Be an Active Listener</u></li><li>• Be Kind to yourself and others</li><li>• Be Honest/Truthful</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Make GOOD Choices</li><li>• Try your Best</li><li>• Be Organized</li><li>• Ask 3 before me</li></ul>
Treat others the way you want to be treated!		

The teacher expands on these with her students by asking what each of these looks like in their classroom. For instance, "We are respectful" is broken down into four bullet points, including "We are kind to ourselves," "We are kind to others," "We are active listeners," and "We help each other." Co-development of standard operating procedures (SOPs) comes next.

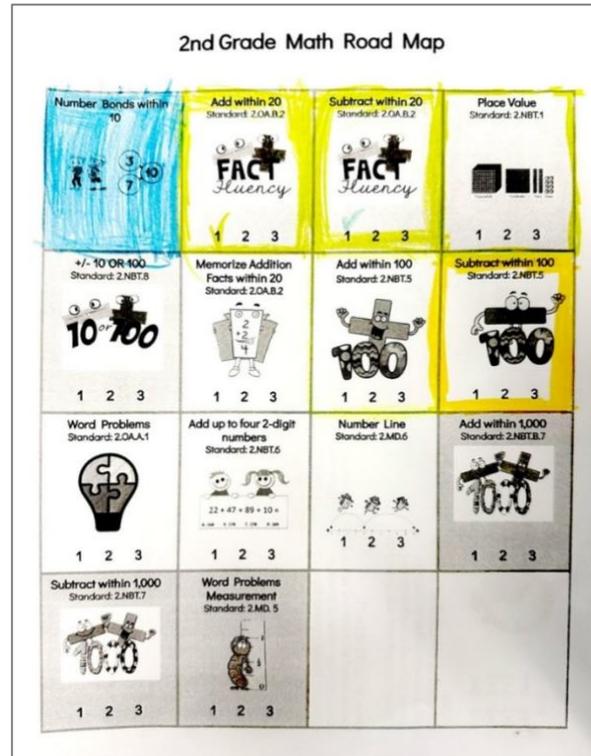
*"I feel like our goal is to create the conditions where teachers feel like they can take risks because we want our students to feel like they can take risks as well."*

– District leader

Students use data notebooks and roadmaps for English language arts and math to track their learning progress. As their learning continues throughout the school year, the students shade in their progress toward proficiency.

The teacher also uses a parking lot, a place where her students provide her feedback and suggestions to make their learning experience better. She shared, “Our parking lot is basically a large poster board that has some spaces for them to leave me a note. These include shout-outs to someone as a ‘thank you’ or leaving questions about something they’d like to try or an idea they had.”

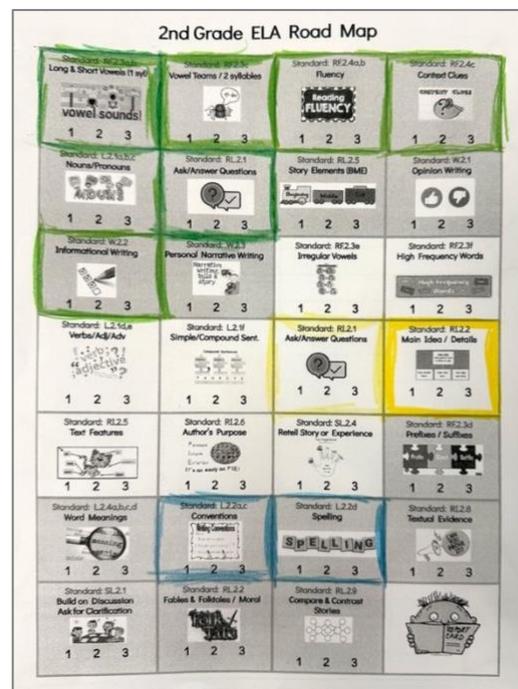
Students also create learner profiles, which are snapshots of themselves in a given moment, and they can change their profiles over the year and revisit who they are. The teacher shared that this activity helps them see how they grow and change over time. It also helps them when they are having a hard day. The teacher encourages them to “look at your learner profile and remember who you are as a person. You are a person who has strengths. You know what they are.”



## Using Social Emotional Learning as an Anchor for Art in Middle School

A key learner-centered practice for an art teacher at one of the middle schools is “getting to know who the students are and what their passions are all about.” To do this, the students engage in many projects that help them express themselves. The teacher shared, “The students have different paths they can choose for each project based on their interests, whatever their passion is, I’ve kind of developed different roads for them to nurture [their passions].” The students have a standard to meet, but how they get there is their choice. This year the teacher fosters even more agency in the eighth-grade students by having them write their own criteria to meet the standards, whereas the sixth graders co-create theirs with the teacher.

Students also have ownership of the class itself since the teacher set up the learning environment in a job-centered way. Each person has a role to play, and they



take ownership of that role; they know what to do when they come in and what they need to do before they leave. If someone misses class, one of the students who has the role of “scribe” catches that student up and supports them.

Inspired by learner-centered practices, the teacher consistently uses the district’s portrait to cultivate a learner-centered classroom. Students are immersed in EPIC from the beginning of the school year:

We spend about a week and a half learning what it means to be EPIC. Those four words, we really dive into it. What does it mean to be an empowered artist? We talked about that for a couple of days. What does it mean to be a connected artist, connected with each other, connected with the subject matter, connected to the cultural relationships between art, and how can that tie in where you’re coming from to the creation? Those four words are the way we stay engaged throughout the entire semester.

This year, the teacher focused on rigor, as the teacher put it, “have every student know exactly the reasoning why they’re doing things to a deeper level of understanding. So that’s kind of where I’ve been tweaking lately.”

This teacher also acknowledges the complexities of being a middle school student and the importance of using a grounding practice at the start of every class. They always come back to this grounding practice when the students are struggling with something, whether it is their classwork or something else. The teacher explained the concept further:

Everything in life starts in your heart. If your heart’s not in it, you’re not going to be thinking. If you’re not thinking, you’re not going to create. And so, it starts in our heart, it goes to our mind, and out our hand. That is transferable in any class. And that’s kind of my goal is any skill here, they’re going to be using in all of the other classes. Every day, we start with a heart warm-up, and that’s in our journal. And then we go to a mind thing where we’re learning something, like one of our skills. And then, after our mind, we go to our hand where we practice the skill. And so that’s the first 10 minutes of every class.

By revisiting the heart-mind-hand concept, students tend to re-focus, re-center, re-ground, and support themselves to move forward. The teacher emphasized, “Art class is important because it’s key in becoming a well-rounded human. I’m not going to make a million artists. I’m going to make people who are bigger thinkers, who can be creative in their thinking, and apply that anywhere they are. I want them to experience art, but I want them to become well-rounded people in their human career.”

## REFLECTING ON PROGRESS AND WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

While district leaders shared that they believe they are making great progress, “we acknowledge that the work is never done.” They continued, “No matter what we do, it’s a slow process,” but the district continues to find ways to engage in more learner-centered, future-ready approaches.

One area of future work that district leaders noted is career exploration “even at the younger age groups.” They explained how the high school has 13 career and technical education pathways and that the middle school has after-school programs for their eighth-grade students. In the after-school programs, they conduct interest inventories that help the students choose their high school focus area. District leaders also looked into internship opportunities and hired a coordinator who is grant funded to support that part of their career and technical education program.

They are also thinking about supporting educators with standards-based grading to see more educators make a shift from percentage grades. The hope is to build practices around collecting data and reflecting on student progress toward competencies. One of the district leaders said, “This is about student clarity and teacher clarity.” It’s “changing the mindset to be less focused on the content and more on the durable skills our students will need and how the content can help them apply, practice, and build those skills.”

### Methodology

This case study highlights the experiences of one district that participated in the Nevada Future of Learning Network. The information shared in this case study is based on six interviews (two district leaders, one school leader, one instructional coach, and two teachers).

**To learn more about Nevada’s efforts in learner-centered education, visit:**

<https://www.nvfutureoflearning.org/>

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Kennedy, K., & Zweig, J. (2026). Nevada Future of Learning Network Case Study: Douglas County School District. Retrieved from <https://www.nvfutureoflearning.org/jobs/case-studies>.

# Nevada Future of Learning Network Case Study

## White Pine County School District

The [Nevada Future of Learning Network](#) is a coalition of districts, leaders, educators, students, and community partners building a learner-centered, future-ready education system. It launched in 2023 as part of the Nevada Department of Education's (NDE) effort to create the statewide [Portrait of a Nevada Learner](#) and advance [personalized, competency-based learning](#).

### What is learner-centered, future-ready education?

Being learner-centered means **prioritizing the needs, interests, and experiences of learners**. Instead of focusing on delivering content from the teacher to the students, learners are empowered to take an active role in their own education. Being future-ready means attending to and **anticipating the needs of society and the future labor market** when considering the goals of schooling. This approach includes considering global economic trends and environmental changes along with local history.

### How does the Nevada Future of Learning Network advance learner-centered, future-ready education?

- Connects and supports coherence among school, district and statewide efforts to advance learner-centered, future-ready education
- Provides coaching, professional learning, and resources for educators, leaders and innovators
- Spotlights promising practices in Nevada and nationally

### Resources:

- [Nevada Future of Learning Network](#)
- [Nevada Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education](#)
- [Nevada Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education Final Report](#)
- [Nevada Innovation Guide](#)

## DISTRICT SPOTLIGHT



**Buildings:** 3 elementary schools (K-5), 1 middle school (6-8), and 2 high schools (9-12)

**Enrollment:** 1,260 students

**Locale:** Town, Remote

**School Week Schedule:** 4-day school week for students

**Portrait:** Local District Portrait of a Leader

**Student Demographics:** <5% Asian, <5% Pacific Islander, <5% Black, <5% American Indian / Alaska Native, 6% two or more races, 22% Hispanic, 68% white

### Getting Started with Learner-Centered Education

Prior to the creation of the Portrait of a Nevada Learner, White Pine County School District (WPCSD) was engaged in creating a local version based on their work with the Leader in Me program. WPCSD calls theirs the Portrait of a Leader. After participating in the Nevada Future of Learning Network, the district deepened their work by incorporating more intentional competency-based, learner-centered education practices. They gathered input on their portrait through community engagement workshops and listening sessions.

After gathering feedback, the collective vision for the Portrait of a Leader resulted in four domains with eight competencies, which the district called durable skills. The community partners had a big-picture vision for socializing these durable skills. The portrait was accompanied by learning progressions for elementary, middle, and high schools, which supported students' development of portfolio presentations in fifth, eighth, and twelfth grades to show evidence of progress in the durable skills. According to a 2025 student survey about learner-centered practices, approximately 82% of high school students agreed or strongly agreed that their school has communicated what they should know and be able to do after graduating.

One teacher emphasized, "One of the things that we are really proud of is this is not White Pine County School District's portrait. It's White Pine County's Portrait of a Leader, which involves all of our constituents: families, community members, school district leaders, officials, and organizations around town. We are all involved in this project." This distinction, according to this teacher, is important because it ensures that "we are out in front of creating opportunities for holistic learning for our students so that students' entire academic identities are not reduced to a moment in time for a test score on one test." A number of the WPCSD staff also engaged with the work at the state level on the Portrait of a Nevada Learner and brought back new ideas and approaches from that work to the district.

## White Pine Portrait of a Leader

<p><i>Positive Identity</i></p>  <p><i>How do I lead myself?</i></p> <p><i>Self-Management Courage</i></p>	<p><i>Sense of Belonging</i></p>  <p><i>How do I lead with others?</i></p> <p><i>Social Awareness Collaboration</i></p>	<p><i>Original Thinking</i></p>  <p><i>How do I lead in learning?</i></p> <p><i>Critical Thinking Creativity</i></p>	<p><i>Agency</i></p>  <p><i>How do I lead for the future?</i></p> <p><i>Curiosity Resilience</i></p>
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Magnifying my WILL and developing my SKILL create HOPE for my future!



**Our vision is to collaboratively grow leaders who will change the world!!**

Provide High Quality Tier 1 Instruction and Resources

Build Leadership Capacity of Students and Staff

Partner with Community and Families to Shape High Expectations for All

Invest in Student and Staff Well-Being



### Building and Maintaining Momentum

During the summer of 2025, the district’s Board of Trustees adopted two policies to continue operationalizing the Portrait of a Leader. The policies focus on endorsements and credentials that students are expected to work toward during their time in WPCSD. The first policy was to create endorsements for students to earn in grades 8 and 12 aligned to academic performance in courses linked to science, technology, arts, and mathematics (STEAM), STEM, and literacy. The second policy was to create credentials aligned to the durable skills in the Portrait of a Leader that employers expect of graduates. These endorsements and credentials are outlined as [Middle School](#) and [High School](#) Learning Requirements and Aspirations.

Additionally, according to the district leader, they have been working toward incorporating more project-based learning and have done this more at the elementary and middle school levels and continue to work on this at the high school level. The district is also developing and formalizing their learning model. This model includes their instructional playbook, which is a list of conditions in the classroom and across the district to operationalize the portrait. The district leader shared, “There’s a lot that’s still in the works of making that happen.” As one teacher emphasized, “Our ultimate goal with this Portrait of a Leader is to ensure our students are good human beings. This work has given us guidelines to help students better themselves and bolster teachers with the tools that we need in our toolbox to help them do that.”

The district leader is intentional about being inclusive with this work. There are many opportunities to serve in leadership roles to represent grade-level and school site teams. Based on a 2025 survey about learner-centered practices, approximately 61% of educators at the high school strongly agreed or agreed that they have opportunities to lead, influence, or guide efforts in their school. The portrait presents another opportunity for educators to be leaders. Meetings focused on the Portrait of a Leader work are open to anybody, including community members, who want to shape the way the work moves forward. One teacher added, “This is a holistic opportunity for all stakeholders so that everybody’s involved and invested.” They want to make sure everyone “knows what’s happening and can help us make sure it’s happening in a good way.”

## **DISTRICT-WIDE LEARNER-CENTERED EFFORTS**

### **Amplifying Student Voice Through Community-based Advocacy**

To continue to build their students’ leadership skills, another opportunity in which students were engaged was an interdisciplinary legislative research project. Students in fourth through eighth grades worked together and created pitches for their school community. Because the area doesn’t have a local tax base to fund itself, the students shared interest in researching how to replace old buildings that had fallen into disrepair.

Supported by their teachers who served as guides, the students researched how the assembly in Nevada works, how the senate works, and what the governor does to enact a law once it has been passed out of the chambers. The students also conducted research on the health effects of asbestos as well as social policy around the American Disability Act (ADA), especially for students who are immobile when there is not an elevator.

Based on their research, they created a multimedia presentation and wrote an essay. They also created a social media post about how they needed the support of Nevada legislators to replace the schools and why. The Board of Trustees selected a champion from each grade level, and the district leader took the students to Carson City to introduce the bill that a legislator wrote for the district. The students testified, the bill passed with only one dissenting vote out of 63 legislators, and the governor signed it. Because of the students’ efforts, the district will have a new school building in a couple of years.

### **Measuring What Matters Through Annual School Showcases**

White Pine County School District is highlighted in the [Nevada Innovation Guide](#) for measuring what matters. The district leader shared, “There’s a misalignment between the measures that are currently used to define school quality and student progress versus the shifts that need to be made to more accurately reflect the good work that’s going on in all school districts.” He explained how some of the district’s schools are not highly rated according to the Nevada School Performance Framework (NSPF). One of the schools, an alternative school, is considered a one-star school according to the NSPF. The district leader explained that “adult diplomas and HiSET (a national high school equivalency credential) completers do not count as graduates in Nevada’s formula for graduation rate.” Many of the students who attend the alternative school are adult diploma graduates and HiSET completers; thus, the school’s low rating. He said, “**The alternative school**

**serves our most at-risk kids. Every graduate that comes out of that school is a success story, every single one.**” He explained, “When we’re talking about choice and agency and being student-centered, it is hypocritical to require the system to create all of these opportunities for choice and agency in every possible way while at the same time only measuring learning in the same old way. Kids don’t have any choice or agency about that.” State leaders recognize that this is an issue, and efforts are being made for better alignment.

To illustrate this misalignment and show the Board of Trustees that learning is taking place across the district, every year, the district leader invites board members on a journey to each school for a showcase where students demonstrate their learning. Hundreds of students, teachers, and parents gather, and “it’s really beautiful and powerful to see them push back on the constraints of how we define schools in the public narrative,” the district leader shared.

## **Investing in and Building Teacher Leaders**

The district leader shared that their Portrait of a Leader does not just apply to students; it also applies to the district’s teachers. The district has formal paid leadership roles for their experienced teachers, including collaborative team leaders, professional learning community leaders, and mentor teachers. Experienced teachers apply for these teacher leader roles each year. The district leader explained that these teacher leader roles are “a great opportunity for exceptional teachers who want to stay in their classroom but also want a formal leadership role. It allows us to pay them for their time and recognize those efforts.” The teacher leaders support the new hires, who participate in a year-long mentoring training program that occurs outside of contract time.

Five Fridays a year are designated “Friday learning days.” All teachers come to campus for Friday learning days to engage in professional learning. A next step for the WPCSD’s professional learning team is to differentiate learning on the Friday learning days for teachers. This shift would allow the teachers who are early adopters of learner-centered practices to move to their next step or serve as support for later adopters while allowing later adopters to learn together using introductory materials. According to a 2025 educator survey on learner-centered practices, 72% of high school educators reported that their professional learning is helping them implement personalized learning.

One teacher shared, “I am fortunate to work in a district that is very serious about making sure our students are best supported by supporting teachers with opportunities to learn what they need to learn.” One teacher explained how the district celebrates internal talent by inviting teachers to share what they know with their peers:

The district and school leaders provide the opportunity for professional learning to come from within our district. If you have something that you would like to share to support other teachers, they invite you to do that. Sometimes they come into your classroom and see what you’re doing and say, “Would you be willing to share what you’re doing? Can we help you prepare something to make sure that this is in our next professional learning opportunity?”

The district also pays educators to share their knowledge and expertise as well as to attend professional learning opportunities. One teacher expressed, “Teachers in our district are treated like professionals, valued for their work, asked to share that work, compensated on those days when we attend professional learning opportunities, and given the supplies we need after the professional learning so that we can engage intentionally in the work in our classroom.”

## **SCHOOL AND CLASSROOM SPOTLIGHTS**

### **Exploring Learner-Centered Approaches Through Club Offerings**

At the district’s STEAM Academy, learners self-select into two types of learning experiences. On Monday after the school day, students join one of 17 clubs, such as piano, culinary, and Shoshone language. The clubs are not overly structured and allow students the freedom to explore what they are interested in and how they want to learn it.

Another opportunity for a more structured, learner-centered approach is through their inductive STEAM model that occurs one Friday per month. The district operates a four-day school week, so this is an opportunity to provide additional hands-on learning. The district leader shared, “The students build stuff, blow stuff up, make things. It’s not required. The students who want to join come in. Out of the 400 students in the school, about 160 take part in this learning experience. Our plan is to scale this up so that it’s much more than 160 students.”

### **Growing Student Agency with a Garden in Elementary School**

Born out of a student’s idea, the kindergarten class grows a garden that supports the whole school and community. The teacher shared the story of how the garden started:

I had a student in my first year of teaching who had gardened with their grandma when they went and visited her. In school, we were going into our plant unit using the little cups in the window. We were going to do that, and my student said, “Oh, but what about if we planted them outside in the ground like a garden?” At the time, we didn’t have a space that was developed for that yet. Then the student said, “We could build a box. My mom has a box outside.” Then all the other kids said, “Yeah, that would be fun.”

The students wrote a letter to the principal asking if they could have a school garden. The teacher shared excitedly, “Our principals said, ‘Yes, you can do it.’” They found a spot on the school grounds that wasn’t being used that was fenced in and protected. The class found community members who volunteered their time and resources to level the area and build the boxes. They also provided soil and other tools that the students would need to tend the garden. The teacher explained, “While we would have hit our science standards and grown a flower in the window, these students created an entire garden!”



The students use the garden throughout their time in the elementary school, and then the fifth graders help the kindergarteners the following year to prepare the garden for seed. The other grades in the school also support by incorporating composting and exploring how to defend plants against different pests and diseases.

The teacher shared, “I think sometimes people think for our littlest learners that they don't necessarily have the words or understand the world or their learning enough to have the opportunity for things like voice and choice. But they are so vocal, and they are so excited about so many things, and willing to work and try.” She expressed, “They know themselves. They know their interests. They know their peers’ interests because they’re very interested in each other already.”

*“I think sometimes people think for our littlest learners that they don't necessarily have the words or understand the world or their learning enough to have the opportunity for things like voice and choice. But they are so vocal, and they are so excited about so many things, and willing to work and try.”*

– Teacher, elementary school

Their garden, which is called “Kinder Garden,” gives students the opportunity to plan and prepare for plantings, though the season is short because of the local climate. They decide what goes in the garden and learn about plants’ life cycles. Students also learn about the economics of running a garden. The teacher explained, “They know that things are going to cost money and that they can also turn a profit. They learn about opportunities like farmers’ markets.” They grow pumpkins every year and can see them sprouting all the way through decomposition and back again to seed.

Students also take what they grow and create meals for different school events throughout the year. For instance, the kindergarteners baked a pumpkin cake for a school board meeting. They made tomato soup for the whole school. The school also hosts a Thanksgiving feast each year, and this year, the first graders and fifth graders used zucchini from the garden to make a zucchini bread for dessert. The teacher explained, “They’re getting opportunities that address their standards and also grow socially and emotionally. They also get invested in something that helps them learn about the world outside of our four classroom walls.” She continued to share how this work is authentic not only for her students but also for the community as a whole:

This work is authentic for all stakeholders. The authenticity not only supports student engagement and learning; it’s also motivating and supportive for teachers, parents, and community members to be involved in the portrait and the partnerships it inspires.

## **Supporting Freshman in their Transition to High School and Beyond**

The transition from middle to high school can be challenging for many students, so White Pine County School District intentionally created a support structure to bridge the gap. Called “Freshmen Achievement,” the class is a holistic learning experience that supports students not only on the social emotional side but also immerses freshmen in the Portrait of a Leader. It provides students with an introduction to expectations for their time in high school, including portfolios, and getting ready for “enrollment in college, enlistment in military, or employment in jobs,” said the teacher who facilitates the course. There are also peer leaders in the class, who are juniors and seniors, who work with the freshmen every day.

The teacher integrates the Portrait of a Leader throughout the course. For example, students use the portrait’s four domains to create projects that represent themselves. To do this, students use a storyboarding document to illustrate how they live the domains, and from that, they create their final project and present it to the class. Students also work in pairs if they want to. Students create podcasts, digital posters, brochures, and presentations. The teacher expressed, “This project is a good reminder that when you give students agency and the tools and information they need, they generally do really well with that.”

The teacher shared another goal of the work he is doing with his students:

A lot of students see school as a function of their social identity instead of their academic identity, naturally. But I think a lot of students also see those as mutually exclusive categories. I feel like with our portrait and with our portfolios, we're trying to help students understand how those two worlds collide in a very productive way, and that *that* can be as valuable for their overall learning as just focusing on academics over here and social networking over there. I've talked to my ninth graders a lot about it, and they see it. They see the importance of it.

## **Using Student Autonomy and Relationships to see Relevance in Literature**

A high school teacher uses learner-centered practices to support students in thinking critically about the world around them. He said, "It's less about the answers and more about how we get to the answer." He shares the path with students first: "We have this required reading – Hamlet. Here are our standards. Here's where we need to get to. The play is the vehicle in which we are going to do this. How do you guys want to achieve the standard?"

This year, after giving his students the freedom to choose how they wanted to meet the standard, they chose to act it out using modern-day scenarios and reflected on what they are learning. "For example," he started, "I said, 'How would you feel if you didn't have anybody to talk to, and the one person who you did talk to all of a sudden started ghosting you.'" They took the play, made it their own, and put it into something they understood. He shared,

What's really fascinating is that, after their first assessment, the class performed higher than my traditionally-taught classes. They're starting to build a relationship with these characters. Those relationships lead to empathy and this whole myriad of social emotional learning that isn't always expressed. It is a safe space because there is not going to be that emotional up and down of a real-life relationship as we are working on empathy.

The teacher emphasized the importance of building meaningful relationships with his students. This helps him to be in tune with where they are and what they need. He joked that if he did not have those relationships, it might be harder to get into the content they are working through:

The world's coming down as it does for my teenagers, right, and I'm like, "Hey, now we're going to talk about this book that's 450 years old." They're, for good reason, going to be like, "What the heck?" And so there are days that I come into my classroom and based on how I greet students and what's going on, that I adjust my lesson plan based on the needs of the class. I might say, "Hey, yeah, you know what? Today, we might just have to do reflective writing for the first part to get us into a space where we can learn."

According to a 2025 student survey about learner-centered practices, approximately 82% of high school students who responded to the survey strongly agreed or agreed that teachers and other adults in their school care about them, and 100% of the high school educators who responded to the survey reported that they work to create meaningful relationships with students.

On the first day of the school year, he tells his students that they have 140 days in the classroom, and he said, “If you leave here the same as you entered after the 140 days, then I failed you as your teacher.” He continued, “My satisfaction at the end of the day is knowing that I’ve helped kids improve themselves. That I’ve created a space where kids can develop themselves into better humans.”

## REFLECTING ON PROGRESS AND WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

The district leader conveyed that they continue to incorporate student-centered learning throughout their district. He shared, “There's always more questions than there are answers. Thinking about things from an ideological standpoint, I think most people understand the shifts that need to be made. I think the hard thing is the practicality in operationalizing some of these ideas.” The district leader sees his role as someone who can “continue loosening and removing the roadblocks that people perceive get in the way of doing some of these things.” One teacher added that having a district leader who “thinks outside the box” is so transformative and inspiring:

I'm very pleased to have the opportunity to work in a school district with a superintendent who is always thinking outside the box in terms of what's best for students and not necessarily what's dictated that we have to do. And yes, there are things we have to do. We all know this, and some of those things are not going away. But he has consistently looked for innovative ways to bring our portrait into the district because authentically, we build value. That's what's best for our students and what's best for their learning, and we really want to see that grow.

### Methodology

This case study highlights the experiences of one district that participated in the Nevada Future of Learning Network. The information shared in this case study is based on four interviews (one district leader and three teachers) and student and staff responses to the Nevada Personalized Learning Implementation Surveys from two schools in the district. In 2025, there were 247 survey responses from students in grades 9 through 12. There were 18 survey responses from educators at the high school in 2025. The term “educators” as used in this survey includes classroom educators, special education educators, subject matter educators, specialist educators, and paraprofessionals.

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# Nevada Future of Learning Network Case Study

## Western Youth Leadership, Engagement, and Empowerment Middle School (WYLEES)

The [Nevada Future of Learning Network](#) is a coalition of districts, leaders, educators, students, and community partners building a learner-centered, future-ready education system. It launched in 2023 as part of the Nevada Department of Education's (NDE) effort to create the statewide [Portrait of a Nevada Learner](#) and advance [personalized, competency-based learning](#).

### What is learner-centered, future-ready education?

Being learner-centered means **prioritizing the needs, interests, and experiences of learners**. Instead of focusing on delivering content from the teacher to the students, learners are empowered to take an active role in their own education. Being future-ready means attending to and **anticipating the needs of society and the future labor market** when considering the goals of schooling. This approach includes considering global economic trends and environmental changes along with local history.

### How does the Nevada Future of Learning Network advance learner-centered, future-ready education?

- Connects and supports coherence among school, district and statewide efforts to advance learner-centered, future-ready education
- Provides coaching, professional learning, and resources for educators, leaders, and innovators
- Spotlights promising practices in Nevada and nationally

### Resources:

- [Nevada Future of Learning Network](#)
- [Nevada Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education](#)
- [Nevada Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education Final Report](#)
- [Nevada Innovation Guide](#)

## OVERVIEW



**Buildings:** 1 middle school (6-8)

**Enrollment:** 203 students

**Locale:** City, Large

**School Week Schedule:** 4-day school week for students

**Portrait:** Portrait of a Nevada Learner

**Student Demographics:** <5% American Indian / Alaska Native, <5% two or more races, 7% Asian or Pacific Islander, 26% white, 26% Black, 40% Hispanic

### Getting Started with Learner-Centered Education

WYLEES, which stands for the Western Youth Leadership, Engagement, and Empowerment Middle School, is a public charter school located in Las Vegas serving students in sixth through eighth grade. The school joined the Nevada Future of Learning Network in 2025 during a Summer Institute hosted at University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV). One of the educators shared, “This is our first year in operation, so there are a lot of moving pieces, opening up the school, many obstacles, but our grand vision is to bring the Portrait of a Nevada Learner to life and infuse the school with project-based and personalized learning.”

### Building and Maintaining Momentum

When the school was in the process of developing their application for authorization, they were aware of the Portrait of a Nevada Learner and tried to intentionally connect to that work. They also invited the Center for the Future of Learning (CFL) to provide an overview of the work to their staff. One administrator shared more about the continued work they are doing to align to the Nevada portrait:

We aligned the work to what we’re doing at WYLEES and what our plans are. The staff are in! Now, we’re trying to leverage the portrait work with the help of our Project Based Learning Coordinator and Personalized Learning Coordinator. They are our torch bearers in terms of trying to develop systems, strategies, and procedures school-wide to ensure there are pathways that are aligned to the students’ unique strengths and interests.

He continued to share how the school focuses on “How a student, as a whole person, experiences school.” He was excited about the portrait’s domains – empowering, connecting, impacting, and thriving – because it aligned with their school model and WYLEES’ Way competencies. He shared that “empowerment is in the name of the school.” Their WYLEES’ Way competencies include “world-changer, that’s impacting.” He emphasized, “The idea of our school is to inspire our young adults to learn about the world around them and become leaders and change the world for the

better.” To do that, the school intentionally focuses on “connecting students to community-focused work and work that’s rooted very deeply in relationships between teachers and students, students and each other, and students and teachers in the community.”



## **SCHOOL AND CLASSROOM SPOTLIGHTS**

### **Supporting Students with Intentional Social Emotional Experiences**

The school designed three intentional spaces where students are supported with social emotional experiences, including: Explorations, Advisory, and What I Need (WIN) time. Explorations is an elective that one of the administrators designed when he was a teacher to create a learning experience where students could take control of their own learning through goal setting. He shared, “Explorations starts with a student deciding what they want to learn, then setting a goal, and what the outcome is going to be of their learning.” From there, students backwards map over the semester or quarter, depending on the length of time they need to reach their goal. The students then document their progress toward that goal and reflect when they complete the goal using the following questions:

- “What did I do today?”
- “What challenges did I have?”
- “Was I successful?”
- “What will I do next time?”

Students also engage in Advisory, which meets twice daily, once in the morning and again in the afternoon. The course is similar to a homeroom, and the students will keep the same Advisory for the three years they attend the school. They stay with the same teacher and fellow students, which helps them build meaningful, deep, long-term relationships. Advisory serves as a place where they can continue goal setting and get support with social emotional learning as well as executive functioning.

The school also has WIN time, which stands for “What I Need” time. Students use WIN time to get the support they need. They can meet with a teacher in a particular subject they’re struggling with, work on projects, or start homework.

## **Cultivating Connection, Safety, and Learning with Hydroponics**

Despite the hurdles of launching, students designed and created a living wall, shaped like a “W” for “WYLEES.” The living wall includes more than 360 plants that are all part of the school’s hydroponic system. The hydroponics lab also has different gardens, all designed and created by the students.



Because the school initially prioritized supporting students’ behavior, they were looking for a way to “reward the students who were choosing to do the right thing.” The motivation for the hydroponics was to empower the students so they can take ownership of their learning. There’s a lot of healing happening. There’s a lot of social emotional learning. They’re taking care of the plants. Teachers also come into the garden to de-stress.” One coordinator shared, “The kids are eating it up. Everybody wants to be involved.”

The hydroponics lab has 22 students working on it. In conjunction with the lab, the students choose a professional path for themselves. Engineer, web designer, documentary creator, photographer, culture storyteller, community storyteller, culinary, and artist are among the available pathway options. For example, one coordinator shared, in the art path “students painted the buckets that some of the gardens sit in. They made posters to decorate the lab, and they’re contributing art to the website. Just yesterday, they said, ‘We really need to start doing paintings and art of the different kinds of plants.’”



They also have students recognizing other students based on their talents; for instance, one educator shared that a student said, “‘Oh, this student is really good at art. She’s really good at sketching.’ So, we went and checked their work, and we’re like, ‘Yeah, come join us.’” Students sign a contract to participate in the program; as part of the contract, students need to maintain academic excellence, have integrity, and take ownership of their learning.

To form the living wall, the math teachers developed a plan to integrate grid and fraction-based learning so the students could apply what they were learning. One of the school leaders shared that there's buy-in from the students and authentic care for the plants. She shared, "A woman was cleaning up the garden, and a couple of the students walked by and said, 'Oh, thank you for taking care of it.' There's a real ownership there and connection that might not have happened otherwise."



In addition to math and science, the school is thinking about adding a nutrition / culinary class to the lab. One of the coordinators shared, "We harvest 13 to 15 pounds of greens a week, so we send food home to families as well as use it during the school day. Yesterday, they were serving burgers for hot lunch. We had a student go down to the hydroponics lab to get lettuce to put on her burger [laughing]."

Skill building is also part of the experience in the lab, as one coordinator shared, "It's a lot of critical thinking and creativity. There's problem-solving. For instance, right now, they're dealing with aphids. They're harmless, but students are excited to figure out 'how do we get rid of them?' The students are excited about taking care of the plants and protecting them."

Students are learning social emotional skills as well. A coordinator explained, "What's amazing is [that] kids who are not in our pilot come seek us out, and they want to take ownership of plants. Their behavior has gotten better because they have something to care for and nurture. We're trying to teach self-awareness with that, to empower them to know who they are so that they can take care of something else. I think it's just happening beautifully through this program."

### **Giving Back to and Connecting with the Community Through Water-to-Table**

The hydroponics lab also served as the beginning of Water-to-Table, a way for students to give back to and connect with their community. The school has ties to local community spaces. An educator shared, "We have certain places here that we're growing food for. We want to build this program to the point where those community connections are very explicit." One of the school's elective teachers had an idea to build a culture of community service into courses. A coordinator shared, "She wants students to find several organizations in the immediate community, such as a women's shelter, food pantry, things like this, and put the kids in electives together so they could experience various pathways, researching the organizations' needs, making contact, [and] writing up plans. We know our sixth graders can do that."



Connecting with the community also includes showcases to share their gardens with parents and families. Additionally, the Master Gardeners of Las Vegas visited the school, and students shared presentations and cooked for the guests using ingredients from their gardens. One coordinator shared, “We’re also teaching them culinary skills, including how to read recipes and take ownership of their nutrition.” The students also went to a farmer’s market to see what other schools were doing with their gardens and hydroponics because they wanted to grow the program. The coordinators also took students to a catering business and “made real-world connections, and were building those partnerships with our community,” said one of the coordinators.

## Supporting Students Using an Accountability Academy

Some students in eighth grade were expelled from their previous schools, and many came to WYLEES with high needs for behavior support. Many students went through significant trauma, so the school created a supportive structure for the students to thrive, which is different from the schools they experienced before. Supporting these students to unlearn what school was for them previously became the school’s biggest task. To support their effort to provide students with a grounding structure, two of the coordinators created the Accountability Academy, which is built to emphasize to students that “you need to have integrity within yourself that you’re doing everything you’re supposed to do so that we can trust you with more.”

Students are selected for the Accountability Academy based on teacher recommendations as well as consensus across teachers that the students would benefit from the intervention. The Academy consists of trauma-informed, culturally-responsive support through mindfulness, holistic conversations around accountability, leadership, empathy, self-love, self-respect, and more. One of the coordinators shared, “It starts with you and your choices. They say, ‘Well, what did I do?’ We respond, ‘Let’s take accountability and let’s work through it so that this pattern isn’t repeated.’”

The Academy lasts about a month. During the Academy, when a student is disruptive, one of the coordinators takes them to another room and asks them, “Tell me what you’re feeling. Are you mad? Are you sad? Let’s name it.” Initially, students are reactive until they realize that the coordinators are trying to support them rather than punish them. There is a restorative approach to the care being provided in the school, which makes a difference for the students. “We want to understand them and talk to them and give them space to share. We emphasized to them, ‘We don’t want to give you detention. We don’t want to send you home. We want you to stay here. But how can we work together?’ So, most of the semester was spent building relationships, getting to know the students, and understanding how best to support them.”

Sometimes when diffusing situations, the coordinators opt to take the students involved into the hydroponics lab. One coordinator shared, “I’ll say, ‘Touch the plants. Smell the flowers.’ They’re the ones coming back to us. It’s their safe space.”

*“We don’t want to tell teachers what to do. We want their input. What would work for you? What doesn’t work? What do you want to see? We want teachers’ input. We’re all building this project-based learning structure together so that students know that routine and the system is the same.”*

– School Administrator

The Accountability Academy runs for approximately three to four weeks. Students complete the program by finishing all restorative and reflective activities. The activities include reflective writing assignments, learning the WYLEES graduate competencies (also known as "The WYLEES Way"), and other vocabulary, performance tasks, and community-building experiences aimed at helping students internalize ways to demonstrate accountability and self-respect. After completing the Accountability Academy, all students continue to have check-ins and support as needed, with some students who would benefit from more intervention receiving support from the Personalized Learning Coordinator. Based on observations from their first year of implementation, the coordinators see that the grounding structures and restorative approach of the Accountability Academy is helping create a positive school culture.

## **REFLECTING ON PROGRESS AND WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS**

One area that WYLEES is moving toward is aligning the standards for competency-based grading. They use software to support grading and have professional learning to support implementation during the second half of the school year. One of the administrators said, “We’re starting to see the competencies in our students. We’re really seeing that growth in them.” The administrator continued, “Starting in January, we’re doing a whole school rollout to put emphasis on the competencies, make sure that they’re seen and lived school-wide, and develop those competencies in conjunction with students’ mastery and abilities in the content area standards.”

Another administrator shared that they plan to emphasize student leadership in the new year. He shared, “I currently have a group of leadership students. At the start of the school year, I realized we needed students who were vision oriented. This group of leadership students I pull into discussion every two weeks, more often if I’m able to.” With that group of students, he ideates with them on leadership building opportunities, including the qualities and dispositions they need to help shape their community rather than just live in it.” He hopes to continue expanding this work.

Because of the growth of their Water-to-Table program, the school is considering creating a second lab to support more students. One of the coordinators said, “[Water-to-Table is] becoming an identity. We hear the enthusiasm of students and want to feed that engagement.”

Another area that they want to explore is “reigniting educator imagination [and that] desire to get it to the next level,” emphasized one of the administrators. Specifically, they want to continue infusing project-based learning and personalized learning into core classes. The administrator continued, “We are putting the puzzle together to do that. We don’t want to tell teachers what to do. We want their input. *What would work for you? What doesn’t work? What do you want to see?* We want teachers’ input. We’re all building this project-based learning structure together so that students know that routine and the system is the same.”

The school also hopes to continue to expand their professional learning opportunities. Currently, as one educator shared, “We give our teachers a prep every day and Fridays off. Fridays are dedicated to collaboration, professional learning, and planning. So, there’s plenty of time for collaboration on those days.” Eight Fridays throughout the year are dedicated as wellness days, which are days off for teachers to help maintain a positive work-life balance. The school recently administered a staff climate survey that found that 100% of staff members reported that they felt like they belonged at work. One administrator shared, “In a startup situation like this, [where] we’re building the plane as we go, that is a really cool metric to have.”

Given that the school opened in August of 2025, they are continuing to shape it as they go. He expanded, “We’ve learned a lot. We are now at the point where we can start to think about what structures do we need to have in place that are not there already? How do we take the idea of personalized learning and meet the reality of the students and their needs? It is exciting for me to see the excitement of the teachers who are saying, ‘Let’s see what next semester could look like.’”

## Methodology

This case study highlights the experiences of one school that participated in the Nevada Future of Learning Network. The information shared in this case study is based on four interviews (one school leader and three school staff).

**To learn more about Nevada’s efforts in learner-centered education, visit:**

<https://www.nvfutureoflearning.org/>

This case study was made possible with the generous support of KnowledgeWorks and the Nevada Department of Education. For more information about KnowledgeWorks, please visit <https://knowledgeworks.org>. For more information about Nevada’s efforts in learner-centered, future-ready education, please visit <https://www.nvfutureoflearning.org/>.

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