

Nevada Future of Learning Network Case Study

Douglas 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.

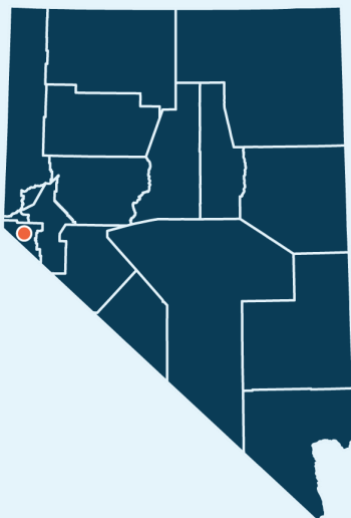
How does the Nevada Future of Learning Network advance learner-centered, future-ready education?

- 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: 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.

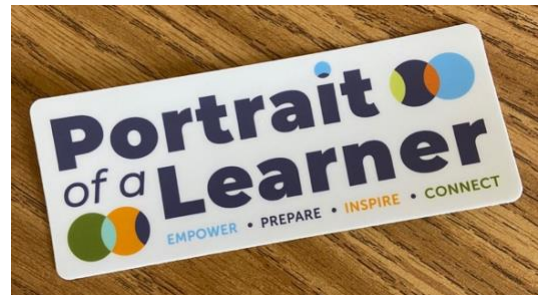


One of the district leaders emphasized, “We wanted our portrait to be more than just sticking something on the wall.” The design team had many ideas about how to integrate their portrait but decided to focus on operationalizing their portrait with help from students, community members, and educators.

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.

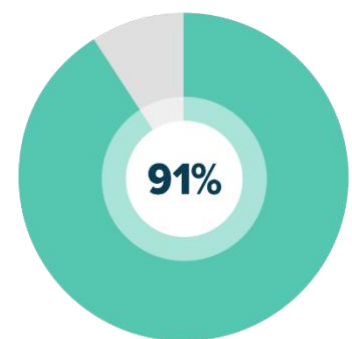
After the community engagement, educators across the district also participated in the design team challenge. Through this activity, the district leaders focused on the importance of educator voices in their district’s portrait work. They invited educators to talk about their own practices of personalizing 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">• Respect Personal Space• Use Indoor Voice• Walk• Follow Seat Expectations• Protect yourself and others | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <u>Be an Active Listener</u>• Be Kind to yourself and others• Be Honest/Truthful | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Make GOOD Choices• Try your Best• Be Organized• Ask 3 before me |
| 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.

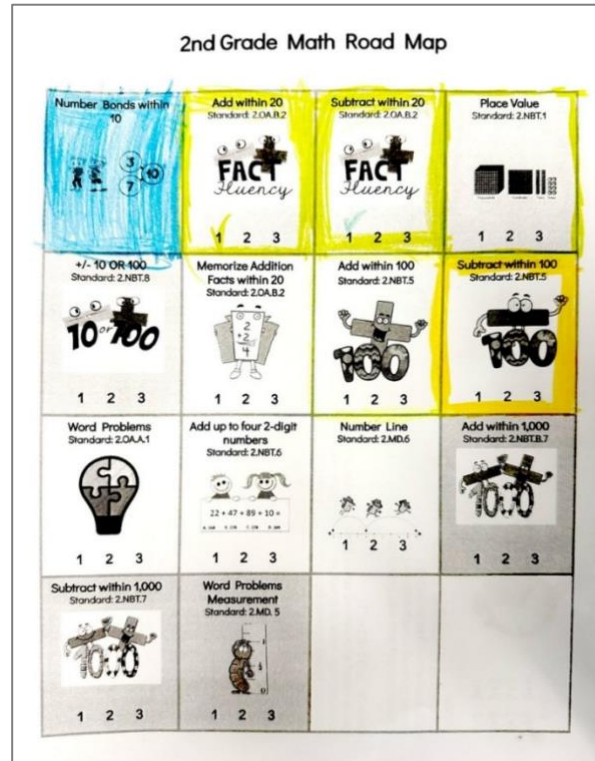
"I feel like our goal is to create the conditions where teachers feel like they can take risks because we want our students to feel like they can take risks as well."

– 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.”

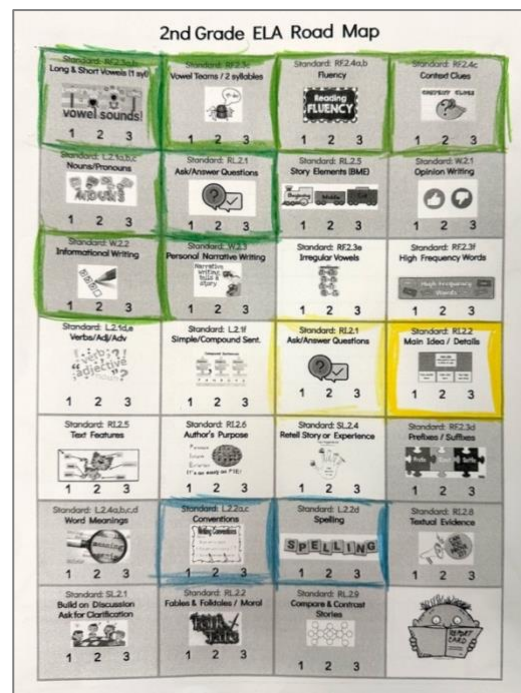
Students also create learner profiles, which are snapshots of themselves in a given moment, and they can change their profiles over the year and revisit who they are. The teacher shared that this activity helps them see how they grow and change over time. It also helps them when they are having a hard 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/>

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: Douglas County School District. Retrieved from <https://www.nvfutureoflearning.org/jobs/case-studies>.