

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.

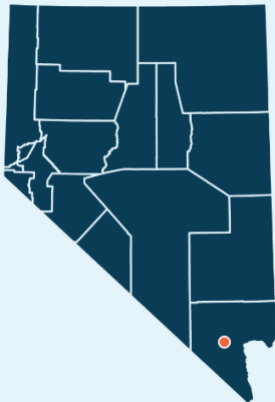
How does the Nevada Future of Learning Network advance learner-centered, future-ready education?

- 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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