



American Planning Association  
Nevada Chapter

## Fact Sheet-2020-03

# Overcoming Adversity, Ensuring Equity, and a Path Forward

Nevada Department of Education

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 public health crisis has surfaced barriers and inequities throughout the educational landscape while simultaneously creating new hurdles to overcome. The Nevada Department of Education seeks to seize this unique moment in history to do what is both absolutely necessary and suddenly possible to create a better future for Nevada's students, educators, families, and community.

The Nevada Department of Education is using its 2020 Statewide Plan for the Improvement of Pupils as a guide to foster meaningful partnerships with Nevada stakeholders and align outreach and engagement efforts to tackle complex issues such as bridging the digital divide, providing wraparound services, and elevating the educational experience.

The Statewide Plan for the Improvement of Pupils' goals and values – Equity, Access to Quality, Success, Inclusivity, Community, and Transparency – reflect the feedback of the Nevada community and aim to address the needs of students, educators, and families throughout the state.

The Nevada Department of Education's mission is to improve student achievement and educator effectiveness by ensuring opportunities, facilitating learning, and promoting excellence. Overcoming adversity and ensuring equity throughout this process will give Nevada a path forward and help the Nevada Department of Education to achieve its vision of all Nevadans being ready for success in a global 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The following are brief descriptions of recent Nevada Department of Education's systems-approach outreach and engagement efforts and initiatives to ensure equitable access to high-quality educational opportunities for all learners.

## Community Engagement

Nevada Department of Education leadership has regular meetings with workgroups, committees, community-based organizations, and other stakeholder groups to gather insight into their specific needs and the larger Nevada community, as well as develop continuous improvement. This includes stakeholder

groups such as, but not limited to: the Superintendent's Teacher Advisory Cabinet; the Superintendent's Principal Advisory Cabinet; the Southern Nevada Forum Education Committee; the Clark County Black Caucus; TeachPlus Nevada Fellows; Nevada Succeeds; the Nevada State Education Association; the Nevada System of Higher Education; and the Nevada Association of School Superintendents. The use of virtual platforms has greatly expanded the Nevada Department of Education's ability to meet with various groups on a more consistent basis, above and beyond Nevada Department of Education -supported public bodies and districts.

### **Public and Private Partnerships**

The Nevada Department of Education fosters relationships with its public and private partners to advance educational opportunities and close opportunity gaps. Some examples of initiatives the Nevada Department of Education was able to achieve due to its public and private partnerships with other Nevada entities include:

#### *ConnectingKidsNV*

When students shifted to distance learning full time due to the pandemic in spring of 2020, tens of thousands of students needed access to devices and the internet. Under the leadership of Jim Murren, Chair of the Nevada COVID-19 Response, Relief, and Recovery Task Force and Nevada State Board of Education President Elain Wynn, the [ConnectingKidsNV](#) initiative was established. As of December 2020, 100 percent of students who needed a device and internet access have what they need. This is thanks to the efforts of community-based partners and school and district leaders. This initiative also established the

Family Support Center, a call center for families who needed help with a device or internet access.

#### *Free Discovery Education Access*

Nevada Gold Mines, in partnership with Discovery Education and the Nevada Department of Education, invested \$2.2 million to ensure that all public-school educators and students in Nevada had free access to the Discovery Education Experience. This two-year partnership will keep students connected to learning whether at home or at school, and provides ready-to-use digital lessons, creative collaboration tools, and professional learning resources. Discovery Education is a global leader in standards-based, high-quality digital curriculum resources.

#### *READ Nevada*

During spring 2020, Nevada State Library, Archives, and Public Records, Renaissance, and the Nevada Department of Education partnered to support reading for all students by providing access to [myON digital literacy resources](#) for grades preK-12. Since its launch, over 3 million books have been accessed and students have logged over 25 million minutes of reading. As students continue distance learning, access to digital books remains as important as ever.

#### *Task Force Initiative for Educator Safety and Screening*

The Task Force Initiative for Educator Safety and Screening is a COVID-19 testing program for participating educators, administrators, bus drivers, and school staff. The Nevada Department of Education partnered with THT Health to expand the Task Force Initiative for Educator Safety and Screening to serve educators and staff throughout Nevada's 17 school districts and

the State Public Charter School Authority. The Task Force Initiative for Educator Safety and Screening program screens and evaluates for potential COVID-19 exposure, infection, or risk with the support of infectious disease experts, physicians, public health experts, and leading pathology experts. The Task Force Initiative for Educator Safety and Screening is the latest example of a number of public-private partnerships that have been integral in the Nevada Department of Education's efforts to ensure the health and safety of our students and educators and promote equity.

### **High-Quality Instructional Materials and Professional Learning**

Shifting to distance learning full time in spring of 2020 motivated the Nevada Department of Education to double down its efforts to strengthen the delivery of distance learning and promote equitable access for all learners. Some examples of initiatives that support access to high-quality instructional materials and professional learning materials and opportunities that the Nevada Department of Education was able to launch and is currently supporting include:

#### *Nevada Digital Learning Collaborative*

In April 2020, the Nevada Department of Education launched the Nevada Digital Learning Collaborative. This statewide collaborative included recruiting a corps of Digital Engineers – teachers and administrators who were digital content experts – to help the Nevada Department of Education build online learning capacities and leverage educational technology (<https://nvdigitalllearning.org/>). The Nevada Digital Learning Collaborative website includes searchable and translatable resources that align best practices for

distance and hybrid learning, while providing professional learning and high-quality curriculum and instructional materials for educators. The Nevada Digital Learning Collaborative meets on a weekly basis to update the site's content with the most up-to-date resources and professional learning opportunities.

#### *Nevada Digital Learning Symposium*

The Digital Engineers of the Nevada Digital Learning Collaborative planned and executed an all virtual symposium for educators across the state in September 2020. Over 200 educators participated in the professional learning opportunity for digital learning best practices. A second symposium is planned for spring 2021.

#### *Canvas Learning Management System*

During the fall of 2020, the Nevada Department of Education launched the Canvas Learning Management System statewide. Canvas is a platform designed to simplify teaching and elevate learning. The platform includes free professional learning as well as high-quality instructional materials and curriculum developed by Digital Engineers and other educators.

#### *Regional Professional Development Programs*

In collaboration with the Nevada Department of Education, Nevada's Regional Professional Development Programs have facilitated office hours with Nevada Department of Education staff, added professional learning opportunities to the Nevada Department of Education's professional learning calendar, taken a leadership role within the Nevada Digital Learning Collaborative, and assisted the Nevada Department of Education in the facilitation of Nevada Department of Education summits, conferences, and trainings. They have also collaborated with

Nevada Department of Education staff to improve mathematics success rates in middle school and implement new social studies and health standards.

### **Guidance, Flexibility, and Resources**

In keeping with our Statewide Plan for the Improvement of Pupils' values, the Nevada Department of Education has maximized opportunities to provide additional guidance, flexibilities, and resources to districts and educators. Some examples include:

#### *Path Forward Plan*

On April 29, 2020, the Nevada Department of Education released its *Path Forward Plan – Response to COVID-19*. The plan's purpose was to support schools and districts in continuing to provide educational opportunities for all students. It outlined the work completed to shift policies and practices for the benefit of students amidst the pandemic, and established the State Reopening of Schools Committee: a committee made up of health and safety experts, representatives from Nevada's health districts, district and school leaders, and emergency managers across the state whose goal was to help guide the state in its re-opening of schools process.

#### *Nevada Department of Education Framework for the Safe, Efficient, and Equitable Return to School Buildings*

Developed by the State Reopening of Schools Committee, the Nevada Department of Education's Framework for the Safe, Efficient, and Equitable Return to School Buildings (Framework) helped support schools and districts in the development of their plan to reopen and included information regarding the prioritization of the health and safety of

students, educators, and families. The Framework provided flexibility for districts and schools to choose between different instructional models (e.g., in-person learning, hybrid learning, remote) that aligned with state and local public health guidelines.

#### *Licensure Services During COVID-19*

Although the Nevada Department of Education's physical offices remain closed to the public for public health measures, Nevada Department of Education staff are still processing licensure applications and available to respond to any inquiries via phone and/or email. To assist in the contracting and employment process, the Nevada Department of Education worked to ensure that all existing licenses remained valid through the start of the 2020-2021 contracting period. The Nevada Department of Education's testing vendor also offered at-home administration for thousands of Praxis exams to support the licensure process.

### **Professional Learning for Nevada Department of Education Staff**

The Nevada Department of Education believes in consistently building and uplifting the capacity of staff to reflect the ever-evolving environment of education and the most up-to-date research. This is more critical than ever in today's contexts. Despite the limitations on travel and in-person events, Nevada Department of Education staff has continued to seek professional learning opportunities by participating in all-virtual conferences, webinars, and trainings including:

#### *Equity Trainings*

The Nevada Department of Education collaborated with the National Equity

Project to facilitate two staff-wide trainings on equity. All Nevada Department of Education staff attended the trainings to emphasize the importance of equity in education and the priority of equity at the Nevada Department of Education.

### *Nevada Department of Education Staff Facilitated Trainings*

The Nevada Department of Education implemented a professional learning calendar for virtual internal trainings and collaborative opportunities. Nevada Department of Education subject matter experts give weekly trainings on their specific program and/or subject area and share best practices with their colleagues. These trainings have fostered collaboration efforts across the department and keep NDE staff interconnected on the day-to-day work of their colleagues.

### *Leadership Trainings*

Nevada Department of Education leadership, in addition to attending other Nevada Department of Education staff-facilitated professional learning trainings, engage in virtual leadership summits to further develop and inform the leadership of the Nevada Department of Education. These trainings allow Nevada Department of Education leadership to build their capacity as leaders and further support the Nevada Department of Education's mission.

### **Legislative Engagement**

Engaging with the Nevada State Legislature was no exception when it came to supporting students, educators, and families. NDE worked with the state legislature during the 31<sup>st</sup> and 32<sup>nd</sup> Special Session (2020), during the 2019-2020 Interim Session, and leading up to the 81<sup>st</sup> Legislative Session (2021). As a result, the

Nevada Department of Education was able to:

- Present recommendations from the Teacher Recruitment and Retention Task Force, as well as updates regarding licensure, assessments, school safety, restorative justice, school closures and distance learning, Read by Grade 3, chronic absenteeism, and early learning to the Interim Legislative Committee on Education
- Submit bill draft requests for the 81<sup>st</sup> Legislative Session regarding school bus safety inspections; streamlining school and district reporting, licensure, and standards requirements; and more

### **Communications**

The Nevada Department of Education sends out biweekly and monthly newsletters to Nevada districts and educators to keep them informed of the latest Nevada Department of Education updates and news. These newsletters also contain links to relevant tools, resources, and professional learning opportunities that are relevant to their day-to-day practice.

### **Local and National Panels**

The use and expansion of virtual meeting platforms has allowed the Nevada Department of Education to highlight and share its work on both local and national platforms. Previously, these opportunities were limited due to travel budgets and schedules. Virtual participation has allowed the Nevada Department of Education to connect and network with colleagues and counterparts from across the country and participate in events such as:

- Council of Chief State School Officers Annual Policy Forum
- Discovery Education Equity Talks
- Education Commission of the States
- Hunt Institute Homeroom Series
- WestEd Board of Directors Meeting

## **References**

Nevada Department of Education. July 2020. *2020 Statewide Plan for the Improvement of Pupils*. Retrieved at [http://www.doe.nv.gov/uploadedFiles/ndedoenvgov/content/Boards\\_Commissions\\_Councils/State\\_Board\\_of\\_Education/2020/July/NVSTIP.pdf](http://www.doe.nv.gov/uploadedFiles/ndedoenvgov/content/Boards_Commissions_Councils/State_Board_of_Education/2020/July/NVSTIP.pdf)

## **Conclusion**

The Nevada Department of Education is determined to achieve its vision that all Nevadans be ready for success in a global 21<sup>st</sup> century. This includes improving student achievement and educator effectiveness by ensuring equitable opportunities, facilitating learning, and promoting excellence. Simply put, that means every child graduates with the tools they need to build a home, a life, and a future. In education, we need to pivot from a system that reinforces the advantages of some students over others to a system that maximizes the talent of *all* students. However, this cannot be done alone. It requires reaching out and engaging our stakeholders, community partners (public and/or private), and lawmakers. It requires holding each other accountable and learning from each other. Only then can we have a collective positive impact and achieve educational equity.

## **Special Thanks**

The Nevada Department of Education would like to give a special thanks to all of its partners for collaboratively working together to create a path forward for Nevada's students, educators, and families.