



# Every Child, By Name and Face, to Graduation



Nestled in northeastern Nevada and encompassing Reno and its suburbs, Washoe County School District models doing more with less. Despite massive budget cuts and frequent superintendent turnover, Washoe’s teachers embraced the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and led the charge to implement more rigorous instruction. The district directs its scarce resources to data-driven teaching and turning around low-performing schools. The results: strong support among staff and community for reform—and achievement gaps that are closing.

In 2010, Nevada adopted the CCSS, directing school districts to gradually implement the standards until 2014–15—just in time for students to take the CCSS-aligned Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium assessment. Nevada did not provide additional resources to go along with this mandate. Despite losing \$40 million (or 9 percent of its budget) in 2012–13 due to state budget cuts, Washoe was hailed nationally as a “creative implementer” for its early, high-quality CCSS adoption. Its success stemmed from Washoe’s classroom teachers, who launched a grassroots movement to take advantage of the Common Core opportunity and brought the expertise of national experts together with Washoe teachers to create a new culture of high expectations.

In spite of several superintendent turnovers (three in seven years) and severe budget cuts, Washoe’s goal remains getting all students “college and highly skilled career ready.” Washoe has increased proficiency rates on state assessments and graduation rates between 2012 and 2015, with learning gains in all student subgroups. Students earning college credit in Advanced Placement (AP) and dual credit classes increased by 4 percentage points over the last three years.

These gains reflect the district’s commitment to “every child, by name and face, to graduation.”

## Implementation of the new standards and assessments: An integrated strategy

Despite the district’s leadership turnover, “the thing that holds us to a north star of college and career readiness is our strategic plan,” notes Scott Bailey, chief academic officer in Washoe. *Envision Washoe 2020* emphasizes alignment of curriculum, instruction and assessment to the Nevada Academic Content Standards (which include the CCSS) and the Next Generation Science Standards. *Envision Washoe 2020* also lays out a plan to recruit, develop and retain highly effective teachers.

Alignment to the new standards forms a cohesive framework for all of the districts’ initiatives and keeps the focus on the end game: student achievement. The district does not mandate a single

**Washoe County School District** Urban District 2015–16

**96 SCHOOLS**  
62 elementary 15 middle 18 high 1 online

**3,717 TEACHERS** **95 PRINCIPALS**

**63,108 STUDENTS**

**Demographics:**

- 44% White
- 41% Latino
- 6% Multiracial
- 4% Asian
- 2% African American
- 2% American Indian
- 1% Pacific Islander

**Other Statistics:**

- 13% special education
- 16% English language learners
- 48% free or reduced-price lunch

- ▲ Profiled in a 2013 national report as one of four districts across the nation that exemplified early outstanding Common Core implementation.
- ▲ Awarded two Teacher Incentive Fund grants for \$9 million (2010) and \$25 million (2012).
- ▲ Recognized for fiscally responsible practices by the Government Finance Officers Association for 14th consecutive year.

*Source: Washoe County School District*

DISTRICT PROFILE

curriculum, but it provides district guides, paced by units and aligned to the new standards, to help teachers decide what and when to teach. In 2012 and 2013, Washoe teachers invited the Basal Alignment Project and Student Achievement Partners (SAP) to help augment and align the district’s existing English language arts (ELA) materials to the new standards. A teacher-led Core Task Project and Core Task Implementation Project also introduced teachers to the CCSS through an inquiry-based professional development approach.

The Core Task Project has since morphed into a lesson study implementation model for Core Knowledge® curricula in Washoe’s elementary schools. The district is currently adopting a K–5 curriculum. During the adoption process, the district will train teachers to review materials and use them in classrooms before deciding which materials to adopt districtwide.

Building on this foundation of teacher-led academic improvement, in 2014 Washoe received a grant from NoVo Foundation to integrate social and emotional learning (SEL) skill development into the academic curriculum and into the district’s ongoing standards-aligned professional development.

Nevada administered the Smarter Balanced assessments for the first time in 2014–15 and initial results indicate that Washoe fared well among a sample of consortium member states and districts. District leaders credit these better-than-expected scores to their focus on standards and pushing students to achieve higher-than-proficient levels on previous state assessments. Washoe also is using the test results to assess how well the district’s pre-packaged interim assessments are aligned to the CCSS.

*“When we’re able to bring the big initiatives we’re doing under one cohesive system, then [the changes] are going to be smoother and more efficient and will seem easier.”*

Ben Hayes, Chief Accountability Officer,  
Washoe County School District

## Professional learning and support: No silos

All district evaluation, learning and support initiatives fall under Washoe’s [Professional Growth System \(PGS\)](#). Washoe used two Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grants to develop and pilot the PGS. District staff from Human Resources and the Department of Professional Learning worked with the Office of Accountability to create a user-friendly system.

The district engaged the Danielson Group and SAP in 2013–14 to test the updated Danielson Framework for Teaching that incorporates CCSS-aligned expectations for teaching quality. These revised observation rubrics now form the basis of evaluation, professional development planning, coaching and other teacher supports in Washoe.

Teacher evaluation data are stored online in the PGS system, and in February 2016, the district will add all of its professional learning offerings, providing a “one-stop shop” for teacher effectiveness data. Teachers and administrators will be able to see what professional learning teachers have attended and how that relates to their evaluation and classroom observation results. “This was the first year we could say how many of our employees were evaluated and who wasn’t, and why. That’s a huge metric for us. It also stepped up the level of conversations around evaluations,” Dawn Huckaby, chief of human resources, explains.

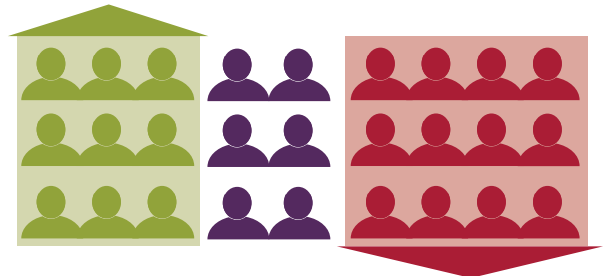
## Supporting New and Struggling Teachers

The district and Washoe Education Association (WEA) co-developed the Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program to support new and struggling teachers. Teachers are referred to the PAR process based on their evaluation data. According to district leaders, the PAR process improves the performance of many teachers and helps other teachers decide whether the classroom is the right place for them. In the first year of PAR (2014–15), 27 teachers began the year in PAR after being rated either ineffective or minimally effective on their evaluations. Of these 27 teachers, 21 of them (78 percent) had either improved to effective (nine teachers) or were out of the classroom (six resignations, two retirements, two non-renewals of contract, two leaves of absence).

Union leaders and members are particularly supportive and excited about this program. “[Washoe and] the Washoe Education Association (WEA) were true partners in getting PAR off the ground,” Dana Galvin, WEA President, explains. “What I like is that we get buy-in from everybody. It’s not done to us. We do it together.”

**Of the 27 teachers rated ineffective after one year in the Peer Assistance and Review program...**

**9 improved to effective**



**12 left the district**

Source: Washoe County School District

Washoe uses a Design Team approach to plan all district professional learning activities. This approach was developed as a result of stakeholder feedback about the content and quality of district professional development and built into the district’s comprehensive professional development plan, implemented in 2013. The Design Team, made up of representatives from all district departments, sets the content and schedule for all [districtwide trainings](#). This approach has resulted in greater alignment of resources to support teaching and learning (including district implementation coaches assigned to schools), less duplication of efforts and the breaking down of silos across the central office. Departments also collaborate in offering professional learning, which helps the district, for example, embed SEL topics within curriculum trainings and respond to school needs without creating competing initiatives.



## There's a child behind each data point

*Envision Washoe 2020* also sets goals to build strong community and family partnerships and create transparent and meaningful accountability systems that align to the new standards. Washoe staff developed a data warehouse that allows all teachers, principals, parents and students to access all the data for any given group or individual student. The data include enrollment, test scores, courses taken and grades, special education or English language learner status, SEL indicators, and where students fall on the district's innovative early warning risk index.

Washoe's early warning risk index predicts a student's GPA, test scores and on-time graduation rate—and helps district leaders and schools determine which students to support with home visits, classroom interventions and grant money. The district currently is piloting additional indicators to predict college readiness.

*“The best way to describe it is that ‘every child by name and face to graduation’ is not just a simple slogan. Data are used to support our [vision]. It’s taken off throughout the community.”*

Ben Hayes, Chief Accountability Officer,  
Washoe County School District

All of these data appear on a student profile page that helps the student and his or her parents, teachers and principals understand whether the student is on track to graduation. Teachers are encouraged to call parents whenever the data show a student is at high risk; in fact, parent phone numbers appear on every page of the data warehouse.

Student profile pages are available to teachers on demand, and every six weeks the system sends updated student profiles to every teacher. Although initially leery about making their data available to colleagues, teachers now appear to have embraced this transparency. Teachers bring student profile pages to their school professional learning communities to discuss individual students, share ideas or develop personalized academic plans for each student. The district's “implementation coaches” offer training on how to use the reports and encourage teachers to collect data from

their own formative assessments as well. And students use the profiles for student-led conferences.

Tracking data show that all principals and about one-quarter of teachers regularly use the data warehouse. The accountability office's goal is to get the teacher usage to 80 percent by 2016–17.

## Bringing it all together: Targeting money and support to high-risk schools and students

Washoe's commitment to teacher development, its emphasis on providing a range of data points for every child and its creative use of funding have helped district leaders target support to teachers and students in its low-performing schools.

Nine of the lowest-performing schools receive TIF support that funds incentives and pay-for-performance bonuses to recruit high-quality teachers to these schools. The district provides full-time embedded implementation coaches (assigned to schools based on school performance levels). With support of the teachers union, the district offers high-need schools their first pick of teacher applicants. High-need schools also are not required to take overage or excess teachers.

The district groups all of its lowest-performing schools into an “acceleration zone,” which gets a different level of support than higher-performing schools. The area superintendent overseeing the acceleration zone has fewer schools to manage so she can focus her time specifically on these schools. Every school in the acceleration zone qualifies for Title 1 funds as well.

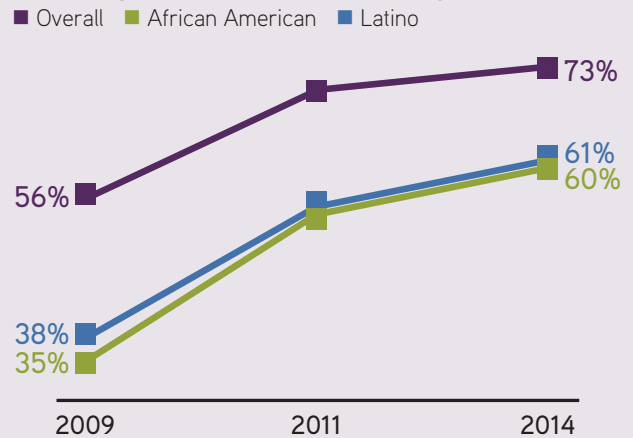
Washoe also uses student data and its early warning system to identify students in their junior year of high school who may not be ready for credit-bearing college courses. The district places these students into support classes that use the same material, scope and sequence as college remedial courses and have been developed with local colleges. Students receive college elective credit. Washoe signed memoranda of understanding with local colleges so that if students can prove they do not need remediation, the college will provide provisional acceptance when they enroll. In 2014–15, the district moved 176 students from needing remediation to not needing remediation, and in fall 2015, 230 students successfully completed the high school remediation courses.

## Results

Washoe's reforms are leading to student growth in several areas:

- ▲ In grades 3–5, proficiency rates on the state assessment increased from 2008–09 to 2013–14.
- ▲ In grades 6–8, proficiency rates on the state assessment decreased from 2008–09 to 2013–14, but Washoe students outperformed state averages.
- ▲ In five years, African American graduation rates increased by 25 percentage points, and Latino students' graduation rates went up by 23 percentage points.
- ▲ The percentage of students earning college credit in AP and dual credit classes increased by 4 points in 2015.
- ▲ In 2014–15, Washoe 11th graders outperformed the state average on the ACT.

### Washoe graduation rates are rising

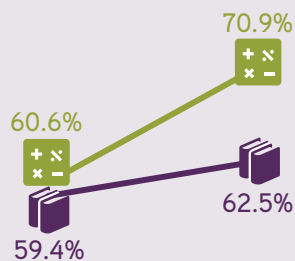


Source: Washoe County School District

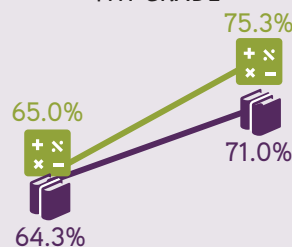
### Proficiency rates on state assessments increased in grades 3–5

+ x - Math
 📖 Reading

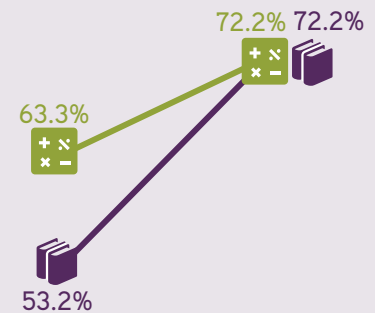
3RD GRADE



4TH GRADE



5TH GRADE



Source: Nevada Report Card

## Conclusion

Washoe's success has been built on extensive districtwide collaboration to improve instruction, creative and purposeful use of data (academic and non-academic SEL), and intentional moves to identify and strengthen teacher talent in the district's lowest-performing schools. While they are excited about their successes, district administrators say they are not finished. They have more work to do to close student achievement gaps and help teachers to understand and effectively use student data from a variety of sources.

Fiscal limitations and legislative session reforms can always throw a monkey wrench into the best-laid plans as well. As Ben Hayes, Washoe's Chief Accountability Officer, reminds us, "If you focus on the things you can control—the fundamentals of core instruction, inclusive practices, climate and engagement—that doesn't change."

Washoe's new superintendent, Traci Davis, continues to support and further this work and the focus on every child. "All children matter. From my experience as a classroom teacher, principal and superintendent, I know it is possible to ensure that all students succeed, regardless of race and/or ethnicity, socio-economic status, language, or physical or learning abilities." **Washoe is busy focusing on every child, by name and face, and that has made all the difference.**

READ MORE ABOUT DISTRICTS RISING



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Photos courtesy of Washoe County School District

