

Once Evidence Skeptics, Now Evidence Champions

The Nevada Department of Education Seized the Opportunity presented by the Every Student Succeeds Act and Drove a Moral Imperative to Prioritize Evidence to Improve Nevada Public Schools



Acknowledgements

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- Dr. Seng-Dao Yang Keo, Director, Office of School and Student Supports
- Ms. Gabrielle Lamarre, Esq., State Title I Director and Federal Liaison, Office of School and Student Supports
- Dr. Jonathan Moore, Deputy Superintendent of Student Achievement
- Mr. Karl Wilson, State Title III Director, Office of School and Student Supports
- Mr. Peter Zutz, Administrator of Assessment, Data & Accountability Management in the Student Achievement Division

Nevada School Districts, Nevada Department of Education:

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- Ms. Karen Holley, Coordinator of State and Federal Programs, Nye County School District
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Results for America would like to thank the **Chan Zuckerberg Initiative** for their support of this work and for the RFA State Education Fellowship.

This case study is part of **Results for America's Invest in What Works** policy series launched in 2012 to help local, state, and federal policymakers harness the power of evidence and data to increasingly shift taxpayer dollars toward results-driven, evidence-based solutions. The case study is not an endorsement, nor is it intended to serve as sources of primary data, or as examples of effective or ineffective management.



“We are grateful that Results for America chose to highlight the Nevada Department of Education’s work in the implementation of data-based decision making aligned to evidence-based practices. It is our belief that schools and systems continuously improve outcomes for students at an accelerated pace when implementing interventions that have a strong evidence base. The case study illustrates the success Nevada has had in two of our rural districts.”

—Jhone Ebert, Nevada Superintendent of Public Instruction

Introduction

At Grass Valley Elementary School in Winnemucca (population: 7763)¹, the seat of Humboldt County, Nevada, the percentage of third graders reading proficiently doubled in a single year, from 24% in 2017-2018 to 47.6% in 2018-2019.² An improvement of this magnitude would shine in any school district in any state. But it is particularly breathtaking in Nevada, which has hovered near the bottom of the nation in student performance,³ and in Humboldt County School District, where, in 2017-2018, 36% of third graders were reading on grade level⁴ and even fewer, 35%, were reading on grade level by the time they exited middle school.⁵ Could Grass Valley's success reflect a positive statewide trend? In September 2019, *Education Week* recognized Nevada for being the fastest-improving state in the nation in terms of K-12 student achievement.⁶

Increased investments in evidence-based school interventions — that is, ones that have been evaluated and shown to improve student outcomes — made the difference in Grass Valley's success. Of course, this is only one example among pockets of success in Humboldt County School District, and it is too early to tell if the changes adopted over the past two years are leading to improved student outcomes across the board. But it indicates that investing resources in evidence-based, results-driven programs and practices can turn around student outcomes in a low-performing school in an under-resourced school district in a state that had neglected its public education system for decades.

The enactment in December 2015 of the bipartisan Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) — the latest incarnation of 60 years of federal law designed to improve K-12 student outcomes, especially for our nation's most historically underserved young people ([See Appendix 1](#)) — ignited a shift in state and federal education funds toward evidence-based, results-driven interventions in Nevada. ESSA replaced the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, “returning much of the state's authority and flexibility to set policies, create timelines for progress, and develop school improvement plans that meet the needs of its students,” according to Nevada's then-Superintendent of Public Instruction Steve Canavero.⁷

Seizing the opportunity presented by requirements in ESSA, the Nevada Department of Education's Office of School and Student Supports (NDE OSSS) — which allocates most of Nevada's federal and state education grants to Nevada's school districts and schools ([See Appendix 4](#)) — catalyzed a statewide evidence-based movement to become the fastest-improving state public education system in the nation. Over the past two years, shifts in policy and practice have positively influenced adult behaviors, improved organizational cultures, and strengthened relationships between NDE and district leaders. OSSS has worked hard to overcome the inevitable skepticism and pushback from within its own ranks and from school districts that would be expected with a major policy change, and has helped districts and their schools to make evidence-based decision-making the norm. The work is ongoing, yet already offering important insights.

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Crisis: A Struggling Education System with a Booming, Diversifying Population

For decades, Nevada had not made significant investments in its public K-12 education system. Its top industries, such as tourism, gaming, mining, and cattle ranching ensured that even individuals with “limited schooling could secure employment within the mines or casinos across the state and earn a fairly competitive wage,” said NDE OSSS Director Dr. Seng-Dao Yang Keo, who is also a Results for America State Education Fellow ([See Appendix 6](#)).

However, “the Great Recession [of 2008] proved the state could no longer get by solely on the strengths of its historic industries,” according to *The New Nevada Plan Under The Every Student Succeeds Act*. “New high skill, high wage, high growth industries like electric vehicles, drones, and data centers led the first wave of economic diversification. The New Nevada economy demands a more rigorous set of skills from its workforce and requires a higher bar from Nevada’s education system.”⁸

Meanwhile, Nevada from the 1950s on became one of the fastest-growing states in the nation. Today, 486,000 children are being educated in Nevada’s 722 public elementary and secondary schools,⁹ with the two largest school districts, Clark County and Washoe County, accounting for 80% percent of students.¹⁰ Almost 59% qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, an increase of more than 8% over the past 15 years.¹¹

As it has grown more populous, so has Nevada grown more diverse, with “Hispanic and Asian populations continuing to grow faster than any other [ethnic group].”¹² Public schools, in turn, have rapidly diversified. In Clark County, where almost 75% of Nevadans reside, 154 languages are spoken and 47% of kindergartners are Hispanic¹³ in the fifth-largest school district by enrollment in the mainland United States.¹⁴

“The Governor and Legislature made clear that the system of yesterday did not produce the results our children deserve. We have made investments to build tomorrow’s K12 system and placed an emphasis on what matters — student safety and outcomes.”

Dr. Steve Canavero, Nevada’s then-Superintendent of Public Instruction

NDE was not prepared to support a growing, increasingly diverse student body. “Nevada struggled to attract, recruit, and retain effective educators and leaders to power the education system,” said Dr. Keo. “This meant that there were several years when the state and districts had large numbers of vacancies and long-term substitutes, as well as large numbers of [adults] in classrooms [who were] not expertly trained in the subjects they are tasked to teach our students.”

By the time ESSA was enacted in December 2015, Nevada had not ranked its schools for about four years following a statewide testing irregularity. *Education Week’s* 2019 Quality Counts report ranked Nevada second to last out of the 50 United States and the District of Columbia in terms of educational opportunities and student performance.¹⁵

Opportunity: ESSA is Enacted

Even before ESSA became federal law, the 2015 Nevada State Legislature -- which meets every odd-numbered year -- had approved Governor Brian Sandoval’s far-reaching education reform package of close to two dozen new education programs and initiatives, authorizing \$343 million¹⁶ to be invested in Nevada’s public schools

Among ESSA's greatest potential levers for state-driven change are the law's evidence provisions which offer states an important opportunity to work with their school districts to identify, develop, and implement evidence-based interventions, in many cases replacing existing ones, including curricula, with limited or no evidence that they improve student outcomes.

through NDE. The goal was to “improve the education system for all students, particularly those in the most underserved communities,” said Dr. Keo, and prepare students to “meet the demands of a new Nevada economy.”¹⁷

Dr. Steve Canavero, Nevada's then-Superintendent of Public Instruction, applauded the Governor's and state legislature's aligned vision and action: “The Governor and Legislature made clear that the system of yesterday did not produce the results our children deserve,” he said. “We have made investments to build tomorrow's K12 system and placed an emphasis on what matters — student safety and outcomes.”¹⁸

While the Governor, state legislature, and NDE had the aligned political will, it was ESSA that provided the opportunity to transform Nevada's education system. “ESSA played an influential role in helping us rethink state leadership and authority,” said Dr. Keo. “NDE had a strong line-up of senior leaders who understood this work and were mission-aligned. We felt a strong moral imperative to change the trajectory of the educational system and believed that it was incumbent upon us to make strategic decisions and take calculated risks at the SEA level to do this. This was our moment to shift practices and beliefs, and we were not going to squander it.”

ESSA's Evidence Provisions

ESSA marked a dramatic shift in federal education policy by giving states and school districts significantly more authority and flexibility to design education systems that better reflect local needs and priorities, provided the selected approaches are supported by rigorous evidence. Dr. Canavero seized the opportunity for greater state control to lead the charge in transforming NDE into the fastest-improving state education system in the nation in terms of student performance.¹⁹ He aimed for nothing short of turning around decades of neglect to harness a new sense of purpose that came with the state's commitment to educating Nevadans to thrive in the 21st century and, with the authority that ESSA granted the state, to develop an effective evidence-based, results-driven education system for its students. [\(See Appendix 5\)](#)

Among ESSA's greatest potential levers for state-driven change are the law's evidence provisions which offer states an important opportunity to work with their school districts to identify, develop, and implement evidence-based interventions, in many cases replacing existing ones, including curricula, with limited or no evidence that they improve student outcomes. Importantly, ESSA imposed new evidence requirements for a number of large federal education funding streams, including Title I School Improvement Grants for improving low-performing schools: those funds are now only available to school districts that agree to invest them in interventions which meet the promising, moderate, or strong evidence definitions defined by ESSA.

ESSA describes four tiers of evidence that embody varying degrees of methodological rigor — with Tier 1 representing the strongest and Tier 4 the weakest — levels of evaluation-based evidence of effectiveness. In some cases, states are required to ensure federal education funds are invested in interventions supported by Tiers 1-3; in other cases, they are free to support approaches backed only by Tier 4 research. [\(See Appendix 2\)](#). Before ESSA, there were “really smart, well-intentioned people in NDE OSSS who were eager to improve students' lives and intended to spend federal and state dollars on programs that worked,” Dr. Keo said, “but there was not a deliberate, systematic way to check that funds would be spent on programs that had an evidence base.”

Definition of “Evidence-Based” in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

ESSA’s definition of “evidence-based” includes 4 levels of evidence. The top 3 levels of evidence require findings of a **statistically significant effect** on improving student outcomes or other relevant outcomes based on:

Required for Title I school improvement and eligible for a priority under 7 competitive grants

(1) Strong	At least 1 well-designed and well-implemented experimental study
(2) Moderate	At least 1 well-designed and well-implemented quasi-experimental study
(3) Promising	At least 1 well-designed and well-implemented correlational study with statistical controls for selection bias

The 4th level is designed for ideas that do not yet have an evidence base qualifying for the top 3 levels above. Given the requirement to examine the effects of these ideas, this evidence-building level can thus be referred to as “under evaluation.”

Included for all other uses of “evidence-based”

(4) Under Evaluation	Demonstrates rationale based on high-quality research or positive evaluation that such activity, strategy, or intervention is likely to improve student outcomes Includes ongoing efforts to examine the effects of such activity, strategy, or intervention
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If the ESSA evidence provisions are implemented as intended, Results for America (RFA) -- a nonpartisan nonprofit that helps decision-makers at all levels of government harness the best available evidence and data to solve challenges and improve the lives of young people and their communities ([See Appendix 6](#)) — estimates that ESSA could potentially shift more than \$2 billion annually in federal education funds toward evidence-based, results-driven solutions.

Other Key ESSA Requirements

ESSA required states to submit a state ESSA plan, called a Consolidated State Plan, to the U.S. Department of Education, laying out how each state planned to invest its federal education funds and meet federal requirements, and chart the continuous improvement of its own plan to best meet the needs of its students.²⁰ State Education Agencies (SEAs) were allowed to choose one of two dates by which they would submit their plans: April 3, 2017 or September 18, 2017. NDE chose the April 2017 deadline.

ESSA further required each SEA “to engage in timely and meaningful consultation with stakeholders in developing its consolidated State plan,”²¹ and specified the key constituencies that must be consulted, including elected officials at the state and local levels, school district leaders, educators and school leaders, parents and students, community-based organizations, civil rights organizations, early childhood, higher education, and workforce representatives, and other members of the general public.²²

Building Support for ESSA's Evidence Provisions

In March 2016, Dr. Canavero -- who had been Acting Superintendent of Public Instruction until February 2016, when Governor Sandoval appointed him permanent Superintendent -- launched conversations throughout the state to help inform a Nevada state plan that would leverage ESSA -- including its evidence provisions -- in service of Nevada's educational priorities. NDE created a ESSA Advisory Group and held dozens of meetings with a broad and diverse set of constituencies across the state to hear their ideas and collaboratively build out the NDE ESSA plan.

NDE also created six statewide "ESSA workgroups," each with its own thematic focus or stakeholder focus: Assessment, Accountability, Services for English Language Learners, Funding Streams, School Improvement, and Teaching and Leading. More than 200 Nevadans participated in the Advisory Group and workgroups. Over the course of a year, each workgroup met three times for at least two hours and the Advisory Group met 13 times for at least two hours.²³

NDE involved these workgroups in the development of specific proposals related to the ESSA state plan. This inclusive approach, designed by NDE in response to ESSA's requirements, "was a significant step forward in their involvement and recognizing their perspectives and input in that process," said NDE State Title III Director Karl Wilson. "Then that spilled over to opportunities for advocacy with the state legislature."

Dr. Canavero's "cohesive commitment" to ESSA and his "influence at all levels across the state," said Peter Zutz, NDE Administrator of Assessment, Data & Accountability Management in the Student Achievement Division, convinced the superintendents and deputy superintendents of Clark County and Washoe County, the largest school districts in the state in terms of enrollment, as well as the superintendents and deputy superintendents in all 18 school districts, to value evidence-based decision-making. By the summer of 2016, NDE had come up with the moniker "Data-driven decision-making."

NDE leaders also reached out to out-of-state and national organizations for policy recommendations. "Leading national education organizations helped [NDE] senior leaders with our strategy," said Dr. Keo. "We also consulted with practitioners and policymakers in higher performing education systems and with leading education researchers to seize opportunities to leverage our state leadership and authority to... incentivize, guide, and support districts and schools to spend money on what works."

In addition to developing a state ESSA plan, Dr. Canavero charged NDE to come up with a five-year agency strategic plan. The five-year NDE strategic plan would be the operational complement to the state ESSA plan.²⁴

Dr. Canavero often repeated publicly that the NDE strategic plan and the state ESSA plan would need to align for both to be successful. The emphasis on alignment prevailed in conversations that Dr. Canavero and NDE Deputy Superintendent for Student Achievement Brett Barley had with state legislators, in particular the education committee chairs in each body. In these conversations, the Superintendent and Deputy Superintendent articulated what would become the 2017 state legislative session's Assembly Bill 7, which required that state education funds be invested in evidence-based interventions.²⁵ The 2017 state

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Dr. Seng-Dao Yang Keo, NDE OSSS Director

legislature also increased NDE's two-year budget by \$266 million, from \$4.38 billion in 2015 (split into \$2.16 billion in 2016 and \$2.22 billion in 2017)²⁶ to \$4.65 billion in 2017 (split into \$2.31 billion in 2018 and \$2.34 billion in 2019).²⁷ ([See Appendix 5](#))

Implementing Change

While Dr. Canavero encouraged conversations across the state, he was also strategically hiring individuals whom he believed would be strong change agents and advocates for Nevada students, including Mr. Brett Barley, NDE Deputy Superintendent for Student Achievement in April 2016 and Dr. Seng-Dao Yang Keo, Director, Office of School and Student Supports in November 2016. Other critical hires included Peter Zutz, NDE Administrator of Assessment, Data & Accountability Management in the Student Achievement Division, also a Results for America State Education Fellow ([See Appendix 6](#)) and Gabrielle Pingue Lamarre, State Title I Director and Federal Liaison. Maria Sauter was internally promoted into the role of State Title IV Director, and Karl Wilson into the role of State Title III Director. By April 2017, the core team had come together and resided within OSSS.

It would take swift, dramatic change to achieve the goal of becoming the fastest improving state in the nation in terms of student performance. In January 2017, shortly before releasing a draft Nevada ESSA plan for public comment, NDE adopted a major new approach for OSSS, mandating that certain federal and state education grant funds, which in the past had been allocated to school districts using population-based formulas, would now be allocated via competitive grants tied to evidence.

The significant shift required substantial changes to the school improvement grant application process. Before this decision, eligible Nevada school districts that applied for grants selected interventions and partners with little data- or evidence-based rationale, a practice that often resulted in decisions being made on the basis of trust, familiarity, or a hunch that their interventions would work, rather than on the basis of evidence that the interventions did, indeed, work. OSSS would mainly use a population-based formula to determine funding, and as long as the applications met basic requirements, districts were awarded the requested funds. Since January 2017, new OSSS application standards have required school districts to: 1) undergo a rigorous needs assessment to determine root causes of underperformance; 2) select interventions and partners backed by strong, moderate, or promising evidence of effectiveness, as defined by ESSA, in order to address identified needs; and 3) engage in ongoing efforts to monitor and evaluate the impact of their planned interventions.²⁸

Recognizing the challenges local leaders might face during this pivotal transition to evidence-based decision-making, OSSS provided a range of support. In February 2017, OSSS developed an initial list of pre-vetted external providers whose interventions had met ESSA Evidence Levels 1, 2, or 3, and that aligned with at least one of NDE's priority areas. ([See Appendix 2](#)). This list -- "NDE Evidence-Based Interventions for School Transformation List" — remains a dynamic and growing repository.²⁹ OSSS informed district leaders that they were not required to partner with providers from the NDE list, but if they chose a partner not on the list, they would need to include a detailed explanation of the process used to recruit, screen, select, and evaluate the proposed partner. As additional support to the districts, OSSS held a "speed-dating" event in Las Vegas in March 2017, during which school district leaders could "interview" each pre-vetted program provider or vendor to assess their fit and ability to meet the needs of students in their schools.

Resistance to the New Evidence Requirements

Though local education leaders' input had been used to shape Nevada's ESSA state plan, many responded to the new evidence requirements in the 2017 grant application process with frustration, skepticism, even alarm.

Familiar relationships with longstanding partners and millions of dollars were at stake in the shift to evidence-based decision-making.

NDE engaged in “highly contentious and exhausting” struggles with skeptical Nevada district and school leaders, explained Dr. Keo. NDE had anticipated that since it was relatively easy to meet the criteria for Tier 4 programs and practices -- that is, ones that are informed by research and seem reasonably likely to succeed, but don’t yet have the kind of evidence that would place them in Tiers 1, 2, or 3 -- districts and schools might use Tier 4 as “a way to maintain current practices, including... [those] that were failing our most vulnerable students,” she said. “And that was unacceptable.” ([See Appendix 2](#)).

“Most district leaders wanted to use the same partners, practices, strategies, activities, and interventions that were currently in place without ever having to demonstrate whether any of these were effective,” said Dr. Keo. “School leaders who struggled most” told her and the OSSS team “that they would wait us out, because new leaders come and go... , laws change...”

Even the support that OSSS tried to provide was sometimes dubiously received. Two rural district leaders — among many other district leaders — found the speed-dating experience with vetted external providers overwhelming. They met out-of-state vendors who said they had never worked in rural counties, let alone rural counties in Nevada, and did not even know where the rural county seats were on a map, shaking the district leaders’ confidence in them and in the speed-dating process.

Resistance also manifested within NDE and OSSS. People voiced their distrust of data, of experts brought in from outside Nevada, and of fixing what, in their view, was not broken, said Dr. Keo. Expressing her understanding of the natural reactions to change, she explained: there will be colleagues in SEAs and districts who are trying to understand the change, who will fight for what they always did, and who will assume this is a fad that they just have to wait out. It’s not malice, said Dr. Keo, “rather they may feel a loss of their identity,” and, as a result, they may feel threatened.



With so much money in contracts at stake, SEA leaders should not be surprised, said Dr. Keo, if program partners across the state are “very angry, demanding answers, and going after their jobs.” However, even some of the biggest proponents of data, she added -- not only in districts and SEAs, but also in the State legislature -- will not use data to make the best decisions in the best interest of children, “but perhaps will use data to weaponize the decisions they make. Please don’t underestimate that.”

Navigating the Changes

“My advice to [SEAs],” added Mr. Zutz, “would be: Get ready for a culture shift and all that it means.” Preparing for backlash “can help you frame some of the problems and obstacles that you will continually encounter.” Mr. Zutz noted that one of the biggest culture shifts to navigate is how a SEA does business with its districts.

Providing concrete support to school districts during the new grant application process was critical. OSSS offered a series of training sessions, workshops, and documents that provided guidance. However, perhaps most valuable was the individualized support NDE provided to district leaders. Dismayed that the new evidence requirements would mean finding new partners, one leader, Humboldt County School District (HCSD) Assistant Superintendent Dawn Hagness, reached out to Deputy Superintendent Barley, who worked closely with the district to identify the “right fit” evidence-based providers, ultimately resulting in a successful 2017 grant application.

OSSS also offered a “rolling review” to all districts, that is, a preview of their grant applications before the deadline, of which Nye County School District Coordinator of State and Federal Programs Karen Holley took advantage. In the process of reviewing Nye’s grant application, OSSS discovered that the district planned to maintain a contract with an external partner whose approach lacked sufficient evidence. Ms. Holley was devastated to learn that her application would be rejected. With just one week of spring break to rewrite the application, she reached out to her district superintendent and associate superintendent, who interviewed pre-approved providers and recommended their choices, and to Dr. Keo, who gave guidance throughout the week. In the end, Ms. Holley’s grant application was approved.

NDE also adopted approaches that smoothed the transition. SEA leaders from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA DESE) suggested providing “seed funding” for promising yet untested programs and practices to undergo evaluation and build evidence of effectiveness, thereby enabling them to move up the evidence tiers. The new perspective offered by Massachusetts, said Dr. Keo, provided an opportunity for NDE OSSS “to adapt and evolve our strategy in a way that could provide better support to district leaders while still staying true to our original intent.”

To help overcome some of the challenges inherent in pushing large scale change, Ms. Lamarre recommends developing a strong coalition of people within a SEA “who can push the work forward, and bring on other allies, and roll it out across the agency in phases.” A core group of supporters, she said, makes it easier to have difficult conversations with partners and to send a consistent message from across the SEA to district leaders and school leaders.

Peer Support for SEA Evidence Champions

Just as district and school leaders need support from their SEAs, so do SEA leaders need support. Organizations such as Chiefs for Change, Council of Chief State School Officers, and Results for America (RFA) help SEA leaders form communities of practitioners committed to using evidence and data in their decision-making. In

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Mr. Peter Zutz, Administrator of
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Management in the Student
Achievement Division

December 2017, RFA launched a new State Education Fellowship to support SEA leaders of evidence-based decision-making across the country. Dr. Keo and Peter Zutz are in that inaugural cohort of fellows. ([See Appendix 6.](#))

As part of their fellowship experience, Dr. Keo and Mr. Zutz gained access to a network of like-minded peers from leading SEAs across the country. These opportunities to learn from and alongside other states have been “invaluable,” Dr. Keo said. They have “expanded our thinking around what could be possible within Nevada... given our context, especially around solving common problems of practice that we share with other states.”

“Why are we doing this? So that *all* students, regardless of their zip codes or backgrounds, have access to an excellent education.”

Dr. Seng-Dao Yang Keo, NDE OSSS Director

Dr. Keo consistently refers to RFA’s ESSA [Leverage Points: Thirteen Opportunities for State Education Agencies to Use Their ESSA State Plans to Build and Use Evidence to Improve Student Outcomes](#). ([See Appendix 3](#)) “Results for America staff and tools were instrumental in influencing Nevada’s strategy, particularly helping NDE OSSS get tight on our strategy and expand our ideas of what we could do to significantly increase our impact.”

Transforming into a Learning Organization

“Why are we doing this?,” Dr. Keo often asks herself and her team. “So that *all* students, regardless of their zip codes or backgrounds, have access to an excellent education.” The ultimate goal of ESSA-driven change is “to connect evidence-based interventions to equity.”

Dr. Keo explained that NDE will assume a new role “coaching and influencing partners and districts to prioritize cultural competence,” that is, the ability to understand, appreciate, and interact with people from cultures and/or belief systems other than one’s own.³⁰ Cultural competence plays a vital role in ensuring that evidence-based interventions connect to equity.

NDE has also partnered with districts to roll out specific research studies that will focus on both evidence-based and equity issues within the state. Dr. Keo expects the research to inform NDE policy decisions and to be formally shared in convenings open to NDE, district, and school leaders over the next two years.

In 2018, NDE added to its research capacity and expertise by partnering with University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV) to create a vetted list of external providers. UNLV will own the evaluation rubric and will determine if providers’ interventions meet ESSA Evidence Levels 1, 2, 3, or 4, and how strongly they meet the criteria of a particular tier. ([See Appendix 2](#)). At the end of the school year, UNLV will share “an analysis of the implementation of each evidence-based intervention” with NDE.

On the district level, said Mr. Wilson, as data become more relevant and available to schools, some low-performing schools need to build the capacity of school leaders and teachers to enable them “to really understand that data and to make valid conclusions, which then shape future instructional decisions and allocations of resources.” On the SEA level, Dr. Keo noted that the NDE team responsible for monitoring and evaluating how schools across Nevada use their dollars “are really smart and most of them have excellent training,” yet they, too, need ongoing professional development “to enable them to stay at the forefront of evidence-based analysis.”

Dr. Keo envisions an ongoing process of continuous learning fed by research and evaluation studies as well

as continued collaborative meetings with district leaders who share qualitative data on the impact that the shift in adult behaviors has had on improved student outcomes. One challenge to that goal will be the 2019 state legislature’s cuts to NDE’s funding for evaluation. While evaluation is still a state priority, current funding will only support bi-annual evaluations that will likely be narrower in scope and less rigorous in design, and therefore “not as useful as they could be in terms of informing our work,” said Dr. Keo.

Building the Data Systems

In addition to the need to build capacity around data gathering and evaluation, the other greatest challenge around grant management, said Dr. Keo, is “a lack of system-level coherence and alignment across the state agency.” NDE — like nearly every state education agency — has large urban districts as well as smaller rural districts, and an urban district like Clark County has rural parts within it. “The variation in internal district capacity as well as available infrastructure impacts whether we can use data to drive the decision-making process and whether we can use data points to measure whether we’ve had an impact,” said Dr. Keo.

Dr. Keo would like to have an online platform like the one in the Tennessee Department of Education, InformTN, which an RFA State Education Fellow ([See Appendix 6](#)) from Tennessee has developed. “We’ll need to connect it to the fiscal and grants systems so that we can more directly follow the money to see if Nevada is actually spending our money effectively and efficiently on things that work,” said Dr. Keo.

InformTN

[InformTN](#), Tennessee’s new data-sharing and online planning tool for districts and schools, displays key annual data metrics that users can dig into to understand central challenges over time. Users can download data visualizations, start discussions about what they are seeing, and capture “key insights” that get sent to a repository for grouping and prioritizing. The tool also allows school and district users to collaborate around the creation of annual improvement plans and includes functionality for state and district review and sign-off.

NDE is launching a pilot online platform in early Spring 2020 that will host the state’s comprehensive needs assessment, school performance plan, and district performance plan, and connect them to the grants management system and fiscal system so as to streamline and align multiple systems. Dr. Keo said, “Our strategy is to build foundational pieces that are aligned with each other. The challenge is that we have limited fiscal and human capacity and everything takes a lot of time to roll out, but that’s why it’s important to continue this work.”

Indicators of Progress

Over the past two years, NDE OSSS has seen two important shifts in adult behavior: “District and school leaders are now asking partners and providers to provide evidence that demonstrates their impact on student and school outcomes,” said Dr. Keo “And they are reserving funding for evaluations of evidence-based interventions to help them continuously improve.”

These two shifts in behavior, she said, have “completely changed which interventions are funded and which partners have contracts, as well as how the school improvement planning process and strategic budgeting process work.” Before the grant requirements were changed, Dr. Keo would hear district leaders describe the reasons for their partnership with a program provider with words such as, “We know this person,” and “I’ve

worked with this person for a really long time;” and ““We have a hunch that this works.”” Now, said Dr. Keo, “If a partner says, ‘We’d like to partner with your schools in this district, and we’d like you to fund us, and here’s our great product,’ the district says, ‘Where’s your evidence to demonstrate that you’re highly effective?... How do you guys monitor?’”

“We see improvement in [the quality of] applications for competitive grants,” said Ms. Lamarre. “The plans we see across districts and schools are vastly different [than they were before. They are now] focused on evidence-based interventions and aligning school district needs and performance plans. It’s been very exciting to see.”

“Discussions are rooted in evidence, data, and research,” said Dr. Keo, “and districts and schools take this seriously, because they recognize that NDE OSSS may not approve their budgets if the requested items do not meet ESSA Evidence Levels specified in [NDE] guidelines.”

Dr. Keo noted that her home district, Clark County School District, where she has lived since she was a child, has already changed, and other districts have begun to change as well. “I had a lot of conversations with [Lead Education Agency (LEA)] leaders — really smart and well-intentioned people,” said Dr. Keo. “Before [ESSA], there was not a systematic way in which they were identifying, selecting, and matching evidence-based interventions with the needs of their local school districts. . . They now have a list of the interventions they are implementing and the evidence base around them.” Perhaps even more importantly, district and school leaders are using NDE’s evidence-based funding requirements as a catalyst for critical planning conversations internally and with partners.

Results

The next step, said Dr. Keo, is to guide district and school leaders to ask, ““Now that we’ve implemented evidence-based interventions, do they actually work in a local context?”

Humboldt County School District (HCSD) Assistant Superintendent Dawn Hagness was one of the local leaders disconcerted by the new NDE evidence requirements. But over the past two years, the district has worked hard in partnership with the pre-vetted program partners they listed on their 2017 grant applications and, again, on their 2018 and 2019 grant applications. They developed a strategic plan, created and aligned ways of working with each other and the schools, and implemented new, evidence-based curricula.

Ms. Hagness said preliminary data on student outcomes already show pockets of success, though not yet success “across the board.” One clear success is Grass Valley Elementary school. In 2017-2018, just 24% of the school’s third graders read proficiently.³¹ In 2018-2019 that percentage increased to 47.6% -- a near doubling in a single year.³² Ms. Hagness credited their partner ANet’s inspirational coaching as well as a new curriculum, [Wit and Wisdom](#), in transforming a group of third grade teachers. “When you put high-quality [evidence-based] curricula in the hands of... teachers, look what they can do!”

Perspectives from Two Rural Counties

Humboldt County: “They Made Their Structure Fit Us and Our Needs”

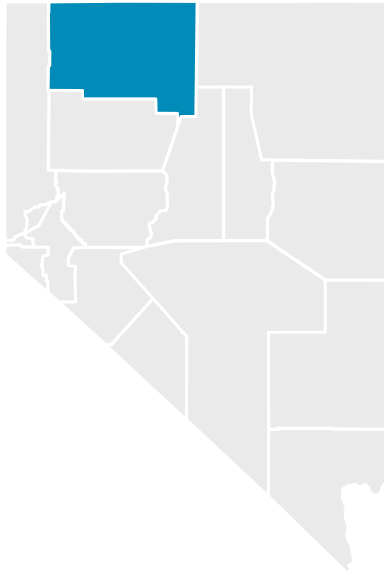
Humboldt County School District (HCSD) Assistant Superintendent Dawn Hagness at first distrusted the shift to evidence-based interventions as yet another “shiny new fix.” The new NDE grant application evidence standards required her, and other district leaders, to show that each external program provider named in an application had demonstrated that its implementation of an evidence-based intervention met ESSA Evidence Levels 1, 2, or 3 ([See Appendix 2](#)). Ms. Hagness had already developed a relationship with an external program provider, but she could not verify that the intervention of the provider met those standards of evidence. She felt “forced” to use a provider from a list that NDE OSSS had made of pre-vetted program providers whose interventions had met ESSA Evidence Levels 1, 2, or 3, even though OSSS had clarified that it did not require district leaders to use the pre-vetted vendors.

In March 2017, OSSS held a “speed-dating” event in Las Vegas in which school district leaders had 15 minutes to “interview” each pre-vetted program provider or vendor. For Ms. Hagness and other district leaders, it was an overwhelming experience. “We saw pre-vetted companies from New York City that wouldn’t know what northeast Nevada looks like or even where it is on a map,” she said. Ms. Hagness said she and others regarded the pre-vetted vendors with suspicion. “We didn’t have any idea as to how those vendors were selected. Were they big names? Were there kickbacks? When you don’t trust, you have doubts.”

Humboldt County is a rural county in northwest Nevada that is almost the size of New Jersey and Rhode Island combined. Bordering Idaho and fed by a river, Humboldt County has roughly 16,800 people, about 47% of them residing in Winnemucca, the county seat.³³ In 2017-18, HCSD served 3418 students, 37% of whom were Hispanic and 56% white,³⁴ with 36% of third graders are reading on grade level³⁵ and even fewer, 35%, reading on grade level by the time they exited middle school.³⁶



Humboldt County School District, Nevada



Ms. Hagness said she reached out to Mr. Barley to express her dismay, and he asked her what Humboldt needed. She had a checklist of needs for McDermitt, the most vulnerable K-12 school in her district, and for capacity-building on the district and school administration levels. He recommended a Boston-based, pre-vetted partner, The Achievement Network (ANet), whose Chief Executive Officer Mora Segal is an [RFA Moneyball for Government All-Star \(See Appendix 6\)](#). ANet has worked with hundreds of schools across the country.

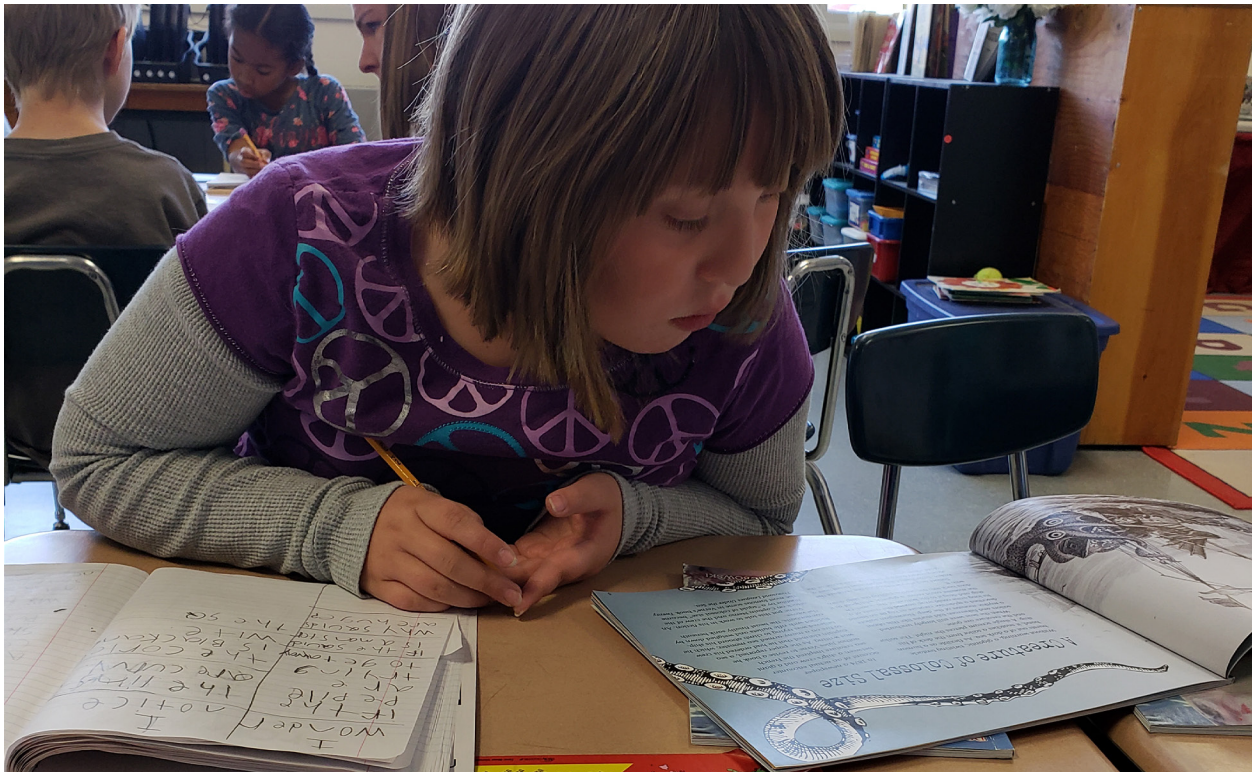
During their first phone call with ANet, Ms. Hagness was struck by the way “from the start,” she said, the ANet team proved to be people who “really listen to where we are and what we want. They ask questions to understand better, not to make us feel we were wrong.” As the relationship evolved, Ms. Hagness appreciated the way ANet drew on its diversity of experience with hundreds of schools across the country, “When we were stuck,” she said, “they had the experience and credibility to draw on their experience in other districts and situations in other states.”

HCSD identified ANet in their grant application for their 1003(a) eligible schools, and NDE OSSS funded the partnership for the 2017-2018 school year. ANet began working with HCSD in Summer 2017. Ms. Hagness described the ANet team as “super-personable yet very knowledgeable. They pushed us in a way we were not used to. They asked us all kinds of questions: ‘If you want all kids reading by the end of third grade, what will that look like? What will be the evidence you’ll use? What will the outcomes be? What will Year 1 look like? Year 2?...’” Ms. Hagness and her colleagues were stunned by ANet’s systematic approach. “I thought, ‘Oh my gosh, we’ve been living in a world of just getting by day to day and compliance, and this takes us to another level.’”

She then had to convince school administrators to work with ANet. “Just as the district had a Us-versus-Them relationship with the state [NDE],” said Ms. Hagness, “so was there an Us-versus-Them relationship between our [school] administrators and us [the district.]”

The district, Ms. Hagness said, needed to develop a vision for how they were going to function and work together. “ANet helped us slow down and do the work right,” she said. By the end of the 2017-2018 academic year, the district had a strategic plan that included aligned responsibilities for everyone from the board of trustees to teachers. “ANet was not a company to us. We both agreed we didn’t like the word ‘vendor.’ They were our thought partner.” The district could count on ANet “to ask us questions, to guide us, and to push us.” Most important, she said, “They made their structure fit us and our needs.”

A crucial part of the process, said Ms. Hagness, was when the district and administrators decided, with ANet’s support, “to open the door to being vulnerable in the same room together before we take back what we learn to our schools.” District leaders and school administrators asked questions about data and evidence terms they did not understand, about assessments and what they indicated. They learned about the shifts driven by ESSA and that “we were not aligned. We were considered low-rigor.” They discovered that teachers in different schools and classrooms used different textbooks, some 15 to 20 years old. “There was no accountability that what was taught in one third grade classroom would be taught in another.” Making themselves vulnerable allowed them to examine what was and to use that authentic starting point as a guide for next steps.



Because the HCSD had a strategic plan, it was in a position to act with clarity and confidence when ANet helped the district figure out what extra funds it might have to purchase new curricula. “With our strategic plan, we knew exactly what we wanted and could purchase curricula we needed that met our assessment goals,” said Ms. Hagness.

With each visit, ANet gave the district “nuggets” of advice, and the district, in turn, gave “tidbits” of suggestions to administrators. People felt excited and stimulated to do more. At first, Ms. Hagness noted, ANet brought in other people from DC, New York, and California, “but as they expanded in Nevada, they hired people in Nevada.” Ms. Hagness was deeply impressed that “with every person at every level they brought on, we had the same connection with them.” She added, “Whatever they [ANet] are doing in their onboarding is to be commended. ANet has a strong system of people.”

ANet visited HCSD every other month and had check-ins every other week. “There was monitoring,” said Ms. Hagness. “They held us accountable.”

At the end of the school year, said Dr. Keo, Ms. Hagness “admitted that she was thankful the district had trusted the process because... Humboldt’s district office had undergone transformational change that year. They had never examined data in the way they did that year or had as meaningful courageous conversations around equity before.”

In 2018-2019, Year 2 of HCSD’s partnership with ANet, “We focused on data-driven instruction,” said Ms. Hagness. “We needed a high-quality curriculum, and we began to ask questions like, ‘What is data?’ ‘What is a teaching-learning cycle?’ The district held quarterly professional development sessions with leadership teams

A crucial part of the process was when the district and administrators decided, with ANet’s support, “to open the door to being vulnerable in the same room together before we take back what we learn to our schools.”

Ms. Dawn Hagness, Assistant Superintendent, Humboldt County School District

on school sites to shift the standards for teaching-learning cycles. ANet showed the district how to create an administrative plan around these guidelines that builds on itself year after year. That sense of building one, two, three... eight, nine, ten years out deeply impressed Ms. Hagness, who had seen too many previous consultants bring in “one-off” remedies that failed to build a cumulative effect. For her, the foundation of this kind of year-in-year-out building was trust. “If you don’t build the relationship,” she said, “the rest will not matter.”

In Year 3, 2019-2020, Ms. Hagness expects their focus to turn to the school level, in particular to schools that need more support, as well as differentiating support between schools that are “taking off and want to go further” and those that are struggling. She said preliminary data on student outcomes show pockets of success, though not yet success “across the board.” In a five-star school rating system, she said, “one school will go from a borderline 1-to-2 to a 4-to-5 rating.” Strong, driven administrators in that school, she said, made that leap of success possible.

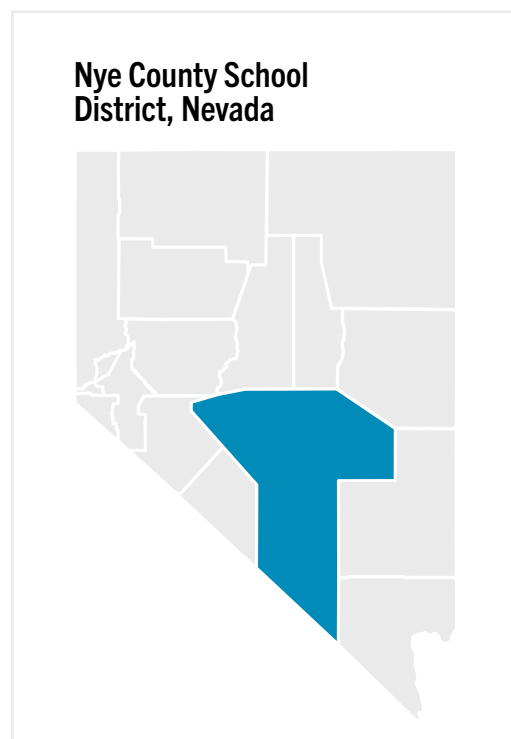
And then there is Grass Valley Elementary School in Winnemucca with its doubling of the percentage of third graders reading proficiently in just one year, from 24% in 2017-2018 to 47.6% in 2018-2019.³⁷ Ms. Hagness credited ANet’s inspirational coaching as well as a new curriculum, *Wit and Wisdom*, in transforming a group of third grade teachers. “When you put high-quality [evidence-based] curricula in the hands of... teachers, look what they can do!”

Nye County: “Our Principals Didn’t Know What They Didn’t Know”

Nye County School District (NCSD) Superintendent Dale Norton and NCSD Coordinator of State and Federal Programs Karen Holley initially felt frustrated and skeptical as NDE OSSS rolled out its new competitive grant application, prioritizing evidence-based interventions in early 2017.

NCSD is a rural district. Bordering California, Nye is the physically largest county in the state of Nevada, and the third physically largest in the contiguous United States, occupying a mallet-shaped portion of southeast Nevada that is larger than New Jersey, Connecticut, Rhode Island and Delaware combined. With about

44,000 people,³⁸ its county seat Tonopah is located in mining country in the heart of Nevada and has a population of about 2400,³⁹ while the most populous city is Pahrump, about 60 miles from Las Vegas and, with more than 35,800 residents, home to 80% of the county population.⁴⁰ The NCSD served about 5000 students in 2016-2017,⁴¹ of which 27.62% were Hispanic⁴² and 77% white. While NCSD’s student performance assessment scores “are up and down,” said Ms. Holley, overall, in 2017-2018, almost 39% of NCSD third graders read with proficiency⁴³ and almost 41% of students exiting middle school read with proficiency.⁴⁴



Beyond the concentrated population center of Pahrump in the southern part of the county, there are “many extremely small communities” throughout much of the rest of the county, said Ms. Holley. Some of them, she said, like Gabbs in the northern part of the county, are an 8-hour drive from Pahrump. “There is no hotel or motel, no restaurant,” she said. While the gas station in Gabbs recently reopened, for a time, the NCSD school bus



would refuel when a diesel truck from the mine drove over to bring gas. There is one teacher in Gabbs' K-8 school, which has 38 students.

It is nearly impossible for Gabbs' teacher — or even teachers in less remote places, such as Amargosa Valley — to meet with higher-performing schools in Pahrump during the school year. Even if teachers receive overtime pay and are provided transportation, they can't afford to take time from their classrooms, as Nye County has very few substitute teachers. Several rural schools in Nye County now have a four-day school week, which enables families to bring their children to doctor and dentist appointments in urban areas far from home without pulling them out of school so often.⁴⁵

Ms. Holley, a native Nevadan, says she sees many more children from fragmented families and many more hungry children than she recalls from her childhood. She is distressed that 70% of Nye County children are on Medicaid,⁴⁶ and worries about social and emotional services to students. "We have five social workers to cover all those [18,000 square] miles," she said. "And all of the social workers are housed in Pahrump, working one week here and one week there in different districts." Last year, the state hired a district family engagement representative to bring disengaged parents to the table. That person left, but a new person has been hired. "It's difficult for rural districts," she said, "because we can't attract people." Outside program providers, she said, often have difficulty grasping the situation in Nye County. She found that to be the case during the NDE OSSS March 2017 speed-dating convening, where she met many out-of-state vendors that had never worked in rural areas.

When Ms. Holley asked NDE OSSS to preview her grant application, and learned that it did not meet new evidence-based requirements and would be rejected, she was, in her words, "devastated." Ms. Holley had developed a relationship with a program provider that seemed to be moving in the right direction, and she worried that the pre-vetted program providers she had met at the speed-dating event would not understand the needs and circumstances of Nye County.

Then came spring break, and Ms. Holley had one week to rewrite her grant application. Dr. Keo and Mr.

Barley, she said, were in reach, just a phone call and text message away. Dr. Keo, she said, was very helpful in redirecting Ms. Holley's research, pointing her to [An LEA or School Guide for Identifying Evidence-Based Interventions for School Improvement](#), published by Florida State University. "That was my first glimmer of hope," said Ms. Holley. On her end, she had the support of Superintendent Norton and Associate Superintendent Evangelyn Visser. They conducted phone calls with some of the pre-vetted vendors that NDE OSSS had introduced them to and narrowed it down to two: Achievement Net (ANet) from Boston and New York City Leadership Academy (NYCLA) from New York, NY.

"I rewrote [the grant] through the eyes of that Florida State University research," said Ms. Holley, who made a persuasive evidence-based argument for engaging the two vendors, ANet to work with teachers and NYCLA to work with school leaders on their school performance plans and with district leaders on their district performance plan. In the end, the NCS D application was funded. It was one of the strongest applications NDE received in terms of its "alignment between school needs and school improvement plans as well as its focus on evidence-based interventions," said Dr. Keo.

Meanwhile, Mr. Norton had expressed his distress about the status quo in NCS D. "He was so frustrated," said Ms. Holley. "He knew he wanted to do things differently, but didn't know how." She said Mr. Norton approached Dr. Canavero and asked him, "What do I do? I feel the district is lacking capacity. I've got the lowest performing district in almost the lowest performing state. How do I fix that?" After some thought, Dr. Canavero suggested they both attend a leadership training at the University of Virginia (UVA) Darden School of Business. "As a result of partnering with NDE, ANet, NYCLA, and UVA," said Mr. Norton, "a focus on student learning came to the forefront over all other issues and concerns."

The leadership training, said Ms. Holley, encouraged Mr. Norton to leverage his skills as a relationship-builder with the new out-of-state vendors ANet and NYCLA. She said Mr. Norton would play a vital role in helping the new vendors understand the needs of Nye County and connect in a positive, productive way with district leaders and administrators. "I learned that it takes about six months to know a consultant," said Ms. Holley, and for the consultant to know the district. At six months, Mr. Norton conducted an "honest and open assessment" of the communication between the district and a consultant. That turning point strengthened the partnership moving forward. "It takes time to build relationships that can have an in-depth, huge impact," said Ms. Holley.

Mr. Norton, she said, changed the focus of his monthly meeting of NCS D principals and leaders in the district. Historically, they would use the meetings to talk about operations, such as their vacancy numbers, new grants they had applied for, and how a new facility might be working. Mr. Norton changed the focus of the meeting to instruction. He asked the local school board for permission to carve out 50 minutes of Professional Learning Community time for school teams in each school every morning while meeting the state requirements of instructional time. The NCS D also purchased a new curriculum for all schools to ensure instructional alignment. "Our biggest issue," said Ms. Holley, "is that if we can't improve instruction, we'll never get kids out of intervention."

Before ESSA and the partnerships with ANet and NYCLA, said Ms. Holley, "Our principals didn't know what they didn't know. They didn't know what to look for. They didn't know about standards-based instruction. They didn't know that an instructional intervention needs to be on grade level with scaffolding, not sub-grade level."

In Summer 2019, she walked into the principals' first meeting of the 2019-2020 school year. "I saw a whole different group," she said, her voice breaking with emotion. "I saw a focus on instruction that I had never seen before. The principals were all working hard and together, asking each other, 'What are you doing?' 'How do you handle that?' 'What do your teachers do when they don't know how to handle the data?'"

Under ESSA, Ms. Holley said, “Our state has opened up more opportunities for the state and districts to work together. And the state has become more transparent.” A third change is the chain of supportive relationships that enables the state and districts to solve problems together. It helps, too, she said, that just as Mr. Norton convenes NCSD principals each month, so does the state superintendent convene district superintendents monthly, a trend that has continued with the succession from Dr. Canavero to current State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jhone Ebert.

One of the most important realizations Ms. Holley has gleaned from the ESSA-inspired shift to evidence-based practices and decision-making: “If you don’t have good relationships, you can’t fix anything.” She elaborated, “If you tell me to do something, I’ll get it done, but not in the way you wanted until we talk about it and figure out how we can work together.”

Currently in Year 3, the NCSD, in addition to working with ANet and NYCLA, has brought on board a new partner, [Bedrock Partners](#), started by some of the people who had been working in leadership at UVA Darden. Ms. Holley had pointed to evidence of Bedrock Partners’ impact in New Mexico in her grant application.

Even though Bedrock Partners, based in Virginia, is “east coast,” Ms. Holley said, “they have access to curriculum insights” that help Nye go a step further. Ms. Holley hopes that Nye can be a model for other rural districts when it comes to working with outside providers. “We hope to help not just Nye,” she said, “but also other rurals. There’s not a lot of research out there on really small schools.”

Dr. Keo recalled that, after working with her new partners, Ms. Holley looked back on that “intense” Spring break week of 2017 and shared “that she learned so much about evidence-based interventions that week and the influence these interventions could have on student and school outcomes. It was a powerful revelation for her, and validation for our team that, together, we could change our practices in better service of Nevada students. . . .”

Appendix 1

About the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

The bipartisan Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is the latest reauthorization of the federal education law designed to improve outcomes for PK-12 students across the country, particularly those historically underserved. Enacted in December 2015, ESSA marks a dramatic shift in federal education policy by giving states and school districts significantly more authority and flexibility to design education systems that better reflect local needs and priorities, provided the selected approaches are supported by evidence of effectiveness.

[Results for America \(RFA\)](#) was instrumental in developing and securing a set of groundbreaking [evidence provisions](#) in ESSA, including defining four levels of evidence against which education interventions now need to be measured. If implemented as intended, ESSA has the potential to shift more than \$2 billion annually in federal education funds toward evidence-based, results-driven solutions. Since FY2017, RFA has helped state education agencies realize that potential by encouraging and supporting them and their districts to invest more resources in evidence-based, results-driven practices, policies, programs, and systems that are most likely to positively impact student outcomes, especially in our country's high-poverty and low-performing schools.

The investment of taxpayer dollars in evidence-based solutions can help improve student outcomes by:

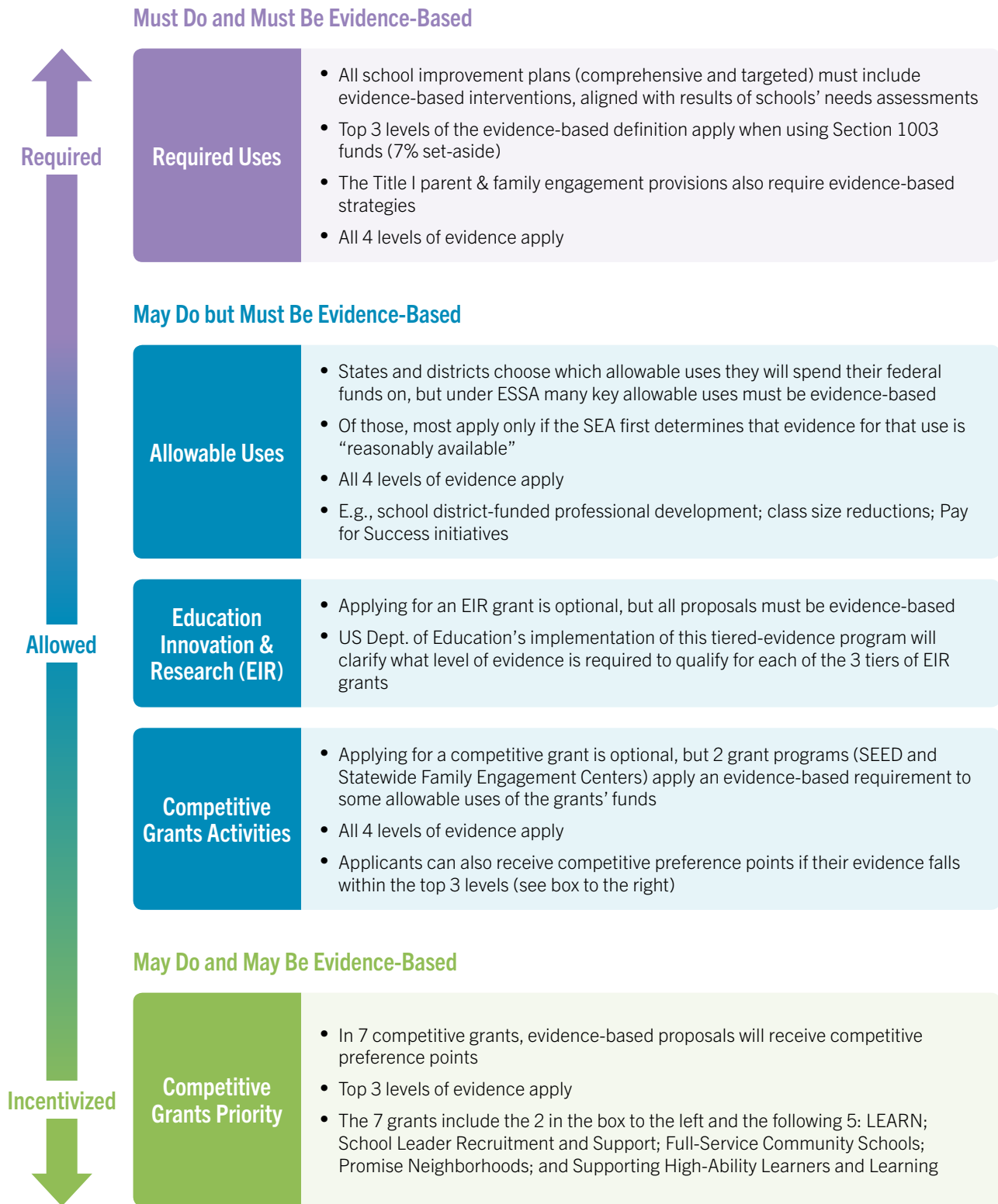
- promoting a culture of continuous improvement at all levels of the education system;
- encouraging a shift in funding to evidence-based, results-driven practices, policies, programs, and systems likely to have a positive impact;
- increasing the return on local, state, and federal education investments; and
- contributing to our documenting and understanding of what works in education.

RFA's [ESSA Explainer](#) describes the evidence provisions in ESSA.

Appendix 2

Results for America’s ESSA Explainer

The Evidence Provisions of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)



Appendix 3

13 Leverage Points Summary

Three Leverage Points in Consolidated ESSA State Plan Section 2 (Performance Management)

1 LEA Plan Process	Design a process for local ESSA plans that promotes the use of evidence and continuous improvement.
2 Monitoring LEA Implementation	Leverage the monitoring function not only to measure compliance but also to support high-quality implementation, evaluation, and continuous improvement.
3 Continuous Improvement	Build state and local learning systems that promote the use of evidence and continuous improvement in policies and practices focused on improving student outcomes.

Nine Leverage Points in Consolidated ESSA State Plan Section 4 (School Improvement)

4 Allocating School Improvement Funds	Incentivize the best use of evidence in allocating federal school improvement funds to LEAs.
5 LEA Application for School Improvement Funds	Design LEA applications for school improvement funds to emphasize the use of evidence and continuous improvement.
6 Monitoring and Evaluating School Improvement	Use data and feedback loops to monitor and continuously improve implementation of school improvement plans and evaluate the impact on student outcomes.
7 Technical Assistance and Support System	Design a state technical assistance and support system for school improvement that promotes evidence-based decision making and continuous improvement.
8 Technical Assistance on Needs Assessment	Ensure LEAs and schools conduct high-quality needs assessments that drive the thoughtful use of evidence in improvement plans.
9 Technical Assistance on Selecting Interventions	Support LEAs and schools in maximizing the thoughtful use of evidence to increase the likelihood of improving student outcomes.
10 Technical Assistance on Lists of Interventions	Design and implement any state-approved lists of evidence-based interventions to ground improvement plans in the best available evidence tailored to local needs and context.
11 Non-Exiting Schools	Promote more and/or more thoughtful use of evidence as part of the SEA's "more rigorous action" for schools that do not exit improvement status.
12 Additional Action for Certain LEAs	Prioritize evidence use and continuous improvement when exercising extraordinary state authorities to intervene in LEAs unable to improve their lowest-performing schools.

One Cross-Cutting Leverage Point in Consolidated ESSA State Plan Sections 5 (Title II) and 6 (Title IV)

13 Evidence-Based Allowable Uses	Advance the use of evidence-based approaches via the allowable uses of Title II and Title IV funds.
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Appendix 4

Examples of How the Nevada Department of Education is Prioritizing Evidence in its Federal and State Education Grant Programs

In January 2017, the Nevada Department of Education's [Office of Student and School Supports](#) (OSSS), began requiring Nevada school districts to invest their federal and state education funds in education interventions that meet one of the four tiers of evidence (Strong, Moderate, Promising, and Under Evaluation) defined in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and recommended in Results for America's [2017 ESSA Evidence Leverage Points](#) report.

Federal Grant Programs

ESSA Title I School Improvement Grants

In January 2017, the Nevada Department of Education [allocated](#) 100% of the state's \$8.5 million in federal Title I school improvement funds to districts and schools for interventions backed by strong, moderate, or promising evidence (using the definitions of tiered evidence from the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)). This represented a significant increase over the estimated 15% of funds that had been allocated based on level of evidence in the 2016-2017 school year. Grant recipients may also set aside funds to monitor and evaluate the identified evidence-based approaches to ensure the investments yield a positive impact on student outcomes. Applications for Title I school improvement funds must meet at least one of Nevada's three statewide priorities: focus on the lowest performing schools, data-driven decision making, and leadership development.

ESSA Title III and Title I-C Grants to Support Language Instruction for English Learners and Migrant Students

ESSA Title III and Title I-C provide states with resources to support the education of English learners and migratory students. With support from [Title III](#), NDE provides formula grants to school districts (\$6.4 million federal funds to Nevada in 2017-2018) for professional development and technical assistance to increase school capacity to educate English learners. With support from [Title I-C](#), NDE provides formula grants to local school districts (\$158,000 in federal funds to Nevada in 2017-2018) for education services for migratory children. ESSA Title III and Title I-C are formula grant programs that allocate funds based on how many English learners and migratory children live in a state, respectively. ESSA requires SEAs to invest funds from these programs in interventions that meet ESSA evidence levels 1-4.

ESSA Title IV-A Student Support and Academic Achievement Grant

In January 2017, the Nevada Department of Education began requiring school districts to demonstrate that their proposed interventions were evidence-based when seeking competitive [ESSA Title IV-A](#) grants (\$3 million in federal funds to Nevada in 2017-2018) intended to increase students' access to a well-rounded education, promote school conditions conducive to student learning, and implement productive uses of technology in the classroom. Nevada's Title IV-A [application](#) prioritizes applications from school districts based on the level of evidence of their proposed interventions; applications with stronger evidence are considered for funding before other applications. Applications that include proposed interventions that meet ESSA Evidence Levels 1-4 are accepted, though supplemental curriculum and professional development programs have to meet Levels 1-3; mental health, behavioral health, and substance abuse programs funded by Title IV-A also have

to meet Levels 1-3. Further, applications for Title IV-A must meet at least one of Nevada’s three statewide priorities: focus on the lowest performing schools, data-driven decision making, and leadership development.

ESSA Title IV-B Grants for 21st Century Community Learning Centers

[ESSA Title IV-B](#) provides federal funds to states (\$9 million in federal funds to Nevada in 2017-2018) to support 21st Century Community Learning Centers that promote better academic and social outcomes for children and their families. NDE requires school districts applying for ESSA Title IV-B through its [competitive grant process](#) to propose partners that meet ESSA Evidence Levels 1-4 (levels 1-3 for supplemental curriculum and professional development programs), a requirement that goes beyond the [ESSA requirements](#) for this program, which simply require that applicants demonstrate that proposed partners have “experience, or promise of success” but not empirical evidence. Applications for Title IV-B must meet at least one of Nevada’s three statewide priorities: focus on the lowest performing schools, data-driven decision making, and leadership development.

State Grant Programs

Nevada Read by Grade Three Program

On July 1, 2015, the Nevada State Legislature enacted [Senate Bill 391](#), Nevada’s Read by Grade Three Act, which promotes effective literacy instruction in grades Kindergarten through 3rd grade (\$22.3 million in state funds in 2016-17). Until 2019, Section 15 of SB 391 (pages 12-13) specifically required NDE to distribute these Read by Grade Three funds using a competitive grant process through which up to [60 of the possible 150 points awarded to grant applicants are determined based on the school district’s inclusion of early literacy interventions backed by strong, moderate, or promising evidence as defined by ESSA](#). Grant applicants could also earn up to 5 bonus points for including innovative approaches to improving literacy instruction; proposed innovative approaches must be supported by ESSA Evidence Levels 1-3. As a result of [new legislation passed in during the 2019 session](#), Read by Grade Three grants are no longer competitive; however, in alignment with other state and federal programs, funds must be used for approaches that meet ESSA Evidence Levels 1-4; supplemental curriculum and professional development programs must still meet ESSA Evidence Levels 1-3.

Nevada Zoom Schools Program

The [Zoom Schools program](#), first enacted in 2013 by [Senate Bill 504](#) and twice reauthorized by the Nevada State Legislature, supports competitive grants (\$50 million per year in state education funds) to help school districts provide English language instruction to non-native speakers. Applications that include proposed interventions that meet ESSA Evidence Levels 1-4 are accepted, though supplemental curriculum and professional development programs have to meet Levels 1-3. Applications must meet at least one of Nevada’s three statewide priorities: focus on the lowest performing schools, data-driven decision making, and leadership development.

Nevada Victory Schools Program

First authorized in 2015 through [Senate Bill 432](#) and reauthorized in 2019 by [Senate Bill 467](#), Nevada’s [Victory Schools initiative](#) (\$25 million in state education funds per year) promotes increased student achievement and school performance in the 20 highest poverty zip codes across the state. Nevada requires designated Victory Schools, through grants to the districts in which they reside, to invest funds in programs and practices that meet ESSA Evidence Levels 1-4, though supplemental curriculum and professional development

must meet Levels 1-3. Victory Schools must use the majority of funding they receive on strategies defined by the state, including free pre-kindergarten for all, free summer school, educational instruction outside of the traditional school day, and others.

Nevada Senate Bill 178 Program

The Nevada State Legislature's [Senate Bill 178](#), first passed in 2017 and reauthorized by [Senate Bill 549](#) in 2019, established a [weighted formula grant program](#) (approximately \$1,200 for every eligible student; current total funding is \$70 million in state funds per year) to support extended learning opportunities in Nevada public schools. The funds are intended to support English Learners and/or students who qualify for free or reduced lunch (FRL) and who are in the 25th percentile academically (who do not receive special education services). Funds must be invested in programs that meet ESSA Evidence Levels 1-4, though supplemental curriculum and professional development must meet Levels 1-3.

Nevada Turnaround Program

The Nevada Turnaround grant program, first authorized in 2017 by [Senate Bill 544](#), is a [competitive grant program](#) (\$2 million in state education funds per year) that helps underperforming schools implement their school improvement plans. All awarded funds must be invested in programs that meet ESSA Evidence Levels 1-4, though supplemental curriculum and professional development have to meet Levels 1-3. In addition, applications must meet at least one of Nevada's three statewide priorities: focus on the lowest performing schools, data-driven decision making, and leadership development.

Nevada College and Career Readiness Program

Authorized by [Senate Bill 544](#), the Nevada [competitive College and Career Readiness grant program](#) (\$4.9 million in state education funds per year) helps school districts establish Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) programs for middle school and high school students; increase participation in advanced placement classes; increase the availability of dual-enrollment programs for high school students taking courses at local colleges; and develop work-based learning programs. Supplemental curriculum and professional development programs must meet ESSA Evidence Levels 1-3. Other programs can meet ESSA Evidence Levels 1-4, though priority is given to programs that meet criteria for Levels 1-3. In addition, applications must meet at least one of Nevada's three statewide priorities: focus on the lowest performing schools, data-driven decision making, and leadership development.

Appendix 5

Nevada Department of Education: Timeline of ESSA Evidence Provisions Planning and Implementation

JULY 2015

Nevada state legislature convenes and passes a wide-ranging education reform package that invests \$343 million to better prepare students to meet the demands of Nevada's economy, \$120 million of which is earmarked to support a suite of state categorical grant programs (finalized in June 2015 during the 2015 legislative session; officially started July 1, 2015).

Multi-year annual evaluation of state education grant programs authorized by the state legislature, initially focused on four categorical grant programs: Zoom (for EL students), Victory (for schools in high poverty areas), Read by Grade Three, and Turnaround.

AUGUST 2015

NV Governor Brian Sandoval appoints Steve Canavero as Interim Nevada Department of Education (NDE) Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Peter Zutz, Administrator of Assessment, Data & Accountability Management, hired at NDE.

DECEMBER 2015

ESSA becomes federal law.

NDE starts developing its SEA ESSA plan.

FEBRUARY 2016

Governor Brian Sandoval appoints Steve Canavero as permanent Superintendent of NDE.

MARCH 2016

Statewide ESSA working groups created by NDE.

MARCH 2017

Superintendent Canavero charges NDE to come up with a 5-year strategic plan. External organizations provide research, position papers, and support to NDE. Key national organizations that supported and informed NDE's work: Results for America, Chiefs for Change, CCSSO.

Key research groups that supported and informed NDE's work: The School of Education at Johns Hopkins University Center for Research and Reform in Education, Dr. Bob Slavin and Dr. Nancy Madden; The Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools, Dr. Pedro Noguera.

Secondary school organizations that also influenced

and informed NDE's work: American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF), National Network of Education Research-Practice Partnerships (NNERPP), Learning Policy Institute (LPI).

FALL 2016

Superintendent and Deputy Superintendent work with state legislators to align the state ESSA plan and the NDE 5-year strategic plan.

NOVEMBER 2016

Seng-Dao Yang Keo, Director of the Office of School and Student Supports (OSSS) is hired at NDE.

JANUARY 2017

NDE OSSS begins allocating federal and state funds via competitive grants tied to evidence. OSSS leads and administers the majority of Nevada's large federal and state grants.

FEBRUARY 2017

NDE developed a first-round vetted list of "approved evidence-based providers."

MARCH 2017

NDE OSSS hosted a "speed dating" event for district and school leaders to meet potential evidence-based external partners.

MARCH – MAY 2017

Initial round of school ratings were finalized and made publicly available, after having not had an operational school accountability system in place for four years.

The Nevada State Legislature passed [SB 178](#), which provides additional funding to Nevada school districts and charter schools to implement evidence-based intervention programs and services proven to increase the academic achievement of eligible students and included a provision requiring an annual external evaluation of the effectiveness of funded evidence-based interventions.

APRIL 2017

Investment begins in building out the rest of the core NDE team responsible for overseeing and implementing the roll-out of evidence-based interventions, research, and evaluation across programs. Dr. Keo hired Gabrielle Lamarre, Esq. as

State Title I Director and Federal Liaison, Office of School and Student Supports to lead the Title I team and 1003(a) School Improvement grant program.

First round of competitive school improvement grants allocated:

APRIL 2017

Grant applications due for ESSA Title I, 1003(a) School Improvement funds.

MAY 2017

Award notices sent out.

JUNE 2017

Nevada state legislature convenes and, with the Superintendent and Deputy Superintendent's guiding input, authorizes Assembly Bill 7, which in essence became the ESSA bill for the state. Officially started July 1, 2017.

JULY 2017

Grant funding allocated for FY18.

Second round of competitive school improvement grants allocated:

JANUARY 2018

Grant applications due for ESSA Title I, 1003(a) School Improvement funds.

FEBRUARY–MARCH 2018

Award notices sent out.

MARCH 2018

Maria Sauter, State Title IV Director hired by Dr. Keo.

JULY 2018

Funding allocated for FY19.

Second round list of pre-vetted evidence-based providers developed in preparation for Round 3 of the competitive school improvement grants.

Washoe County, Nevada's second largest school district, develops and releases list of evidence-based interventions, marking a major change from "business as usual."

SEPTEMBER 2018

NDE OSSS hosted second opportunity for evidence-based partners to meet with district and school leaders at the NDE Evidence and Equity Convening.

Third round of competitive school improvement grants allocated:

JANUARY 2019

Consolidated grant applications due for ESSA Title I, 1003(a) School Improvement funds plus three state grants: College and Career Readiness, Read by Grade 3, and Turnaround.

FEBRUARY–MARCH 2019

Award notices sent out.

JULY 2019

Funding allocated for FY20

Third round list of pre-vetted evidence-based providers developed by NDE in partnership with the College of Education at the University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV). NDE OSSS expands this list from its original two categories — school leadership development and capacity building, and data informed decision-making — to include family engagement, social emotional learning, STEAM, literacy, school improvement, early learning, and equity.

SPRING 2019

During the 2019 state legislative session, NV legislators cut the funding and frequency for the annual evaluations for state funded programs in response to competing funding priorities. Evaluation is still a priority, but current funding will only support bi-annual evaluations and will likely be narrower in scope and rigor. Legislators remain committed to program evaluation and are interested in understanding the impact of state investments but were unable to pass a budget that included funds sufficient to do this work annually and in a rigorous way.

Appendix 6

Results for America

Results for America (RFA) is a nonpartisan nonprofit that helps decision-makers at all levels of government harness the best available evidence and data to solve our world’s greatest challenges and to improve the lives of young people, their families, and their communities.

RFA supports local, state, and federal policymakers through the development and promotion of standards of excellence, the development and implementation of evidence-based policies, and mobilization and communication efforts.

RFA has focused on education issues since its founding in 2012. Through our involvement at the federal, state, and local school district levels, RFA has helped:

- Shift local, state, and federal government funds toward evidence-based education solutions with a demonstrated track record of positive impact on student outcomes;
- Support state and local education agency leaders’ understanding of what excellent building and use of data and evidence looks like through the identification of key opportunities and standards for using and building evidence under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA);
- Support state and local education agency leaders in creating a culture of learning within their agencies — one that values and prioritizes the use of data and evidence to ask and answer important questions about the impact its work is having on student outcomes, and importantly invests resources in building the capacity of its leaders to do this work consistently and effectively.

RFA’s Evidence in Education Lab (Ed Lab)

In July 2016, RFA launched the [Evidence in Education Lab \(Ed Lab\)](#) to help states, school districts, and schools implement the evidence provisions in ESSA, and, in doing so, build and use evidence to solve problems and improve student outcomes.

At the state level, Ed Lab brings leading state education agency practitioners together into a community of practice designed to help them develop, implement, and continuously improve upon policies and practices that promote the use of evidence in decision making.

A key resource produced by Ed Lab is the [2017 ESSA Evidence Leverage Points report](#), revised in May 2017, which identifies 13 areas in state plans where states could, by choosing to implement certain policies and practices, drive outsized progress in the use of evidence and data by their own agencies and by school districts (or LEAs, local education agencies).

Of those 13 leverage points, RFA identified five particularly high-impact opportunities for states to capitalize on ESSA’s evidence provisions:

- Leverage Point 4: Incentivize the best use of evidence in allocating school improvement funds to local education agencies (LEAs).
- Leverage Point 5: Design LEA applications for school improvement funds to emphasize the use of evidence and continuous improvement.

- Leverage Point 6: Use data and feedback loops to monitor and continuously improve implementation of school improvement plans and evaluate the impact on student outcomes.
- Leverage Point 8: Ensure LEAs and schools conduct high-quality needs assessments that drive the thoughtful use of evidence in improvement plans.
- Leverage Point 9: Support LEAs and schools in maximizing the thoughtful use of evidence to increase the likelihood of improving student outcomes.

In 2018, RFA's Ed Lab produced [ESSA Leverage Points: 50-State Report on Promising Practices for Using Evidence to Improve Student Outcomes](#).

This 2019 *Evidence in Action* Impact Story, which focuses on how the Nevada State Education Agency has prioritized evidence of effectiveness in its grantmaking, is part of a series that will explore the hands-on learnings of RFA State Education Fellows across the country and deepen our understanding of how leading states are leveraging the ESSA evidence provisions to use data and evidence to create better, more equitable opportunities and outcomes for students.

RFA State Education Fellowship

In December 2017, RFA's Ed Lab launched the [RFA State Education Fellowship](#) to support leading state education agency leaders in developing and implementing best-in-class practices, policies, programs, and systems for accelerating the building and use of data and evidence, with a focus on effectively implementing the five highest-impact evidence provisions in ESSA. The fellowship is the first of its kind, bringing together senior program and evaluation leaders from state education agencies (SEAs) into a single network focused on accelerating the generation and use of evidence. By supporting these innovative leaders who oversee states' key education programs and evaluation efforts, RFA is creating new champions in investing in what works and helping make evidence-based policymaking the new normal in education.

RFA Moneyball for Government

In 2013, RFA launched a national [Moneyball for Government](#) campaign to encourage governments at all levels to increase their use of evidence and data when investing limited taxpayer dollars. RFA has identified almost 250 champions, or all-stars, of evidence-driven public spending in local, state, and federal government as well as in the nonprofit arena.

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Notes



EVIDENCE IN EDUCATION LAB CASE STUDY

Once Evidence Skeptics, Now Evidence Champions

The Nevada Department of Education Seized the Opportunity presented by the Every Student Succeeds Act and Drove a Moral Imperative to Prioritize Evidence to Improve Nevada Public Schools