



SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT | SUCCESS STORY

## Nevada Virtual Academy High School finds a unique path to increased rigor

### Nevada Virtual Academy High School:

State-chartered public online school



2 physical sites in Nevada



900+ students from all counties



38 home-based teachers



### Services McREL provided:

- ✓ Four years of partnership to support teaching, leading, and learning
- ✓ Customized research-based professional learning to develop and implement schoolwide instructional routines
- ✓ Capacity-building leadership coaching focused on NVVA's real-time problems of practice

### Results: A focus on rigor



Course pass rates have climbed for all cohorts of students.



For the 2019 cohort, students' course pass rates increased from 76% in 2017-18 to 98% in 2018-19.



Graduation rate increased steadily from 64% to 84% over the last four years—2015-2019.

“ McREL helped us put in structures and systems that never existed.

— Janine Calhoun, principal, Nevada Virtual Academy High School

NVVA has gone through a whole-school transformation, and they've done it by working together on practices that make a difference for their students. ”

— Kristin Rouleau, senior director, McREL International

# Virtual school goes beyond bricks and mortar, yet embraces “concrete ways of doing things”

## The Challenge

Just because computers are involved doesn't mean an online school can run itself. As Nevada Virtual Academy High School (NVVA) principal Janine Calhoun can attest, the students, teachers, and administrators behind the computers have the same needs as all students, teachers, and administrators—needs that are about how people, not nodes, connect. But as NVVA and many other online schools have found, maintaining structures for productive, aligned planning and communications is challenging.

When NVVA decided to use a federal School Improvement Grant to do some people-to-people work, they turned to McREL International to help their futuristic school rediscover some basics. “Because we're virtual, it's easy for people to become isolated,” Calhoun said. “McREL helped us put in structures and systems that never existed. We needed concrete ways of doing things.”

NVVA is a charter school serving students in all of the Battle Born State's 17 counties. Teachers, like students, work at home. It's considered a “blended” school because in addition to the online courses there's also a Las Vegas school site and a tutoring location in Reno. Unlike the asynchronous online-college platforms many people are familiar with, NVVA's online high school happens largely in real time, from 8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.

While a for-profit education management organization provides NVVA's technology and curriculum, and all the usual state standards apply, it's up to local educators to put flesh on those bones. As Kristin Rouleau and other McREL consultants visited with the NVVA faculty, sometimes virtually but often in person, they saw Calhoun's point that the teachers weren't quite aligning their efforts to state standards—or to one another. Some were having difficulty concentrating while working at home, and team-teaching proved challenging.

## Strategic Solution

“We developed a plan of services and support for NVVA designed to help teachers establish and implement the same stages of improvement we like to see at any school that's striving for improvement,” said Rouleau, “Things such as adopting better routines, ensuring greater consistency, developing collegial expertise, and fostering shared innovation.”

Calhoun said she was impressed with something McREL *didn't* do: “It was never a canned program that they give to everybody and say, “This is what worked elsewhere, so just go

do this.’ Instead it was a lot of conversations with Kris guiding us toward what we would discover to be good for our school.”

Those conversations included a lot of discussion about academic rigor, differentiated instruction, and professional learning communities (PLCs).

Rigor was a worthwhile thing to talk about because the curriculum was more of a floor than a ceiling for student achievement. At the dawn of distance education, many people assumed online students would be so motivated by the experience that rigor would be a foregone conclusion, but in reality, kids are kids, and teachers need to be crystal-clear about their learning goals.

PLCs, meanwhile, have become an important part of the before-school routine for NVVA teachers. On Mondays, instructional coaches work with the academic departments. On Tuesdays, teachers examine the content-level data they have access to, which is copious but sometimes hard to interpret. On Wednesdays, it's homeroom-level data that gets scrutinized. Thursdays are planning days, when teachers use all those data analyses to plan lessons together. And instructional rounds happen on Fridays. Here's where an online school has a distinct advantage over a traditional building, Calhoun said: All lessons are recorded, so any teacher can observe any lesson by any other teacher and provide peer feedback.

## Results

Teachers are working harder but also working happier, says Calhoun, pointing to survey data collected by McREL that shows an increase in just about every area relating to trust among teachers and between teachers and administrators. “Teachers are on board, and they're happy to be on board, and they're happy to be rowing in the same direction.”

This purposeful community of educators is making a difference for students: Attendance and pass rates have risen, and credit deficiency has fallen.

“NVVA has gone through a whole-school transformation, and they've done it by working together on practices that make a difference for their students,” Rouleau said.

## Next Steps

McREL's approach is highly sustainable because it emphasizes new practices that require effort, not money, Calhoun said. “The structures we've put in place aren't dependent on additional funding. That is what will allow us to continue—because McREL provided us a pathway that we can sustain, with good leadership that they've helped us get to.”