**District Profile: Nye County (NV) School District
Student Population: enrolled 5,393; special needs, 15%; ELL, 9%; economically challenged, 80%
Schools: 17
District Characteristics: urban, suburban and rural; low performance**

**Educator Profiled:**Richard Wiley, Director of Student Achievement, Alternative and Adult Education

When Richard Wiley assumed his role as Director of Student Achievement, Alternative and Adult Education in Nye County in the 2018-2019 school year, the district was “trending down” student achievement-wise, he says. “Several district schools had been recently identified as either ‘Comprehensive School Improvement’ or ‘Targeted School Improvement’ campuses, meaning they were on the state’s ‘watch list’ and subject to significant sanctions from the Department of Education if they did not make significant improvement within a three- year timeframe.”

**A Host of Challenges**

The Nye County School District encompasses a vast geographical area. In fact, it is the largest district by area in the country outside of Alaska, says Wiley. Comprised of urban, suburban and rural communities, it is also the poorest county in the state of Nevada and home to some of the state’s lowest-performing schools.

Along with the challenge of providing services to 17 different schools, Wiley is faced with visiting remote schools as far away as a five-hour drive one way in order to stay in touch with the rural communities, some of which contain a large percentage of his struggling English language learners (ELL) reside.

“Teachers in these rural schools often have to teach all subjects in pre-kindergarten through eighth grade,” he says. “With that kind of burden, it’s almost impossible to personalize learning to the degree needed for effective intervention while also keeping track of data on each student.”

In a district with sparse resources, Mr. Wiley wear many hats. When the principal of the district’s lowest-performing elementary school resigned last year, Wiley stepped in to take his place as well as being assigned to helm several other remote rural schools. He also had additional duties as principal of the district’s struggling online alternative education school as well as the district’s adult community education and adult prison education programs.

**ELL Primary Reading Challenge**

At one rural combination elementary and middle school, Amargosa, there were classrooms where more than 90 percent of ELL students failed to make adequate progress on either the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) standardized state assessment, the English Language Proficiency exam, or both. Amargosa has the highest population of ELLs in the county, 98 percent of whom are Spanish speaking and 35 percent of whom are children of migrant farm workers.

**The Positive Impact of MindPlay**

Mr. Wiley first heard about MindPlay in his former job at Washoe County School District. At the suggestion of other principals, he tried MindPlay at a school that was struggling for years. After one year with the online reading program, students had improved so much, the school earned the highest possible index points possible in the ELL accountability indicator for ELL and saw up to three years growth in reading for special education learners after only months of usage. “Once implemented, the teachers loved it,” says Wiley.

With that knowledge, Wiley was convinced MindPlay would also be a reading intervention worth trying in Nye County. In late September of the 2019-2020 school year, they began with a single pilot school with 25 students, and then expanded to include two other schools in mid-October. In early January, they added three more schools. “There were 175 total students among three of the schools that had achieved 20 or more hours of usage for the year by March,” says Wiley. “The average grade level reading growth of those 175 students was 1.7 years in the six-month period between Oct 2019 and Mar 2020.”

Two other district schools, that began their respective MindPlay trials in January, also exhibited above expected reading growth during their very short time using the program.

**Teacher Enthusiasm and Training**

When first implementing MindPlay, Wiley saw the grassroots feedback from teacher to teacher regarding their successes with the program. “I didn’t push it. I just let the groundswell build,” he said. As soon as teachers began seeing the needle move for their struggling ELL and special education learners, they broadly embraced the program.

For the over-burdened remote rural teachers, MindPlay was the solution for data tracking and personalization they were unable to do otherwise. “I tell them to use MindPlay because the program is adaptive and will enable effective differentiation that even accomplished teachers can’t realistically do in multi-grade classrooms with reading levels that cover the entire spectrum. It remediates to a level of specificity that you need for successful instructional intervention. It does the heavy lifting for you.”

MindPlay also offers a level of training in reading instruction helpful to all teachers but especially those at secondary levels, many of whom are unlikely to have any background in such instruction. “More than just a good tool to employ in academic intervention, MindPlay also has a built-in component of professional development, because using it well requires teachers to simultaneously be learning about the technicalities and nuances of what effective reading instruction intervention looks like,” says Wiley.  It further promotes natural and beneficial collaboration and collegiality among teachers who are using it.”

**Tips and Advice for Similar Districts**

Asked what advice he would impart to colleagues in districts facing similar challenges, Mr. Wiley said, “First, keep it simple. If you keep doing what you’ve been doing, you’ll have the same results. If the kids aren’t making progress, change what you’re doing.”

His next tip is to institutionalize a culture of success and celebrate that success frequently. Acknowledge kids’ progress and let them enjoy their achievements.

Wiley also says to look at the intervention as a learning journey and not to expect that improvement will just somehow “magically happen without a lot of extra time and effort.”

“You, as a principal or a teacher, have to think and act in a positive way toward the intervention. Don’t let a negative mentality invade. It’s not easy. It’s going to be work. Are you willing to do that work? Are you willing to take time and to talk to others about it in a disciplined and objective way during professional collaboration meetings? It’s a teacher-driven thing.”

The metaphor Wiley uses is that of a hammer. “A hammer is a tool. It can’t do the work for you, but you can’t do the job without the tool. A *good*hammer is a goodtool and will help you do the job *better*than trying to work with a low-quality tool, such as a hammer that breaks frequently or is not designed for the rigor of the job.  Mindplay is a good tool, and in the hands of teachers who use it well, great results are absolutely attainable.”