

# Recruiting and Staffing in a Rural School



## A Crucial Search

Nye County School District (Nevada) Superintendent Dale Norton knew he had a massive challenge ahead of him in hiring the right leader for Amargosa Valley School. As chronicled in *Episode 1*, many people spent a great deal of time crafting the ambitious turnaround plan for Amargosa, and the local school board was excited about the prospects for change in a school that desperately needed a fresh start. The next leader of Amargosa would have to be

“Amargosa is not a school that can easily attract staff because of its rural remoteness.””

—Dale Norton, Superintendent,  
Nye County School District

somebody capable of executing the plan and sticking to it through tough times. Susan Moulden-Horton, School Improvement Grant (SIG) Coordinator from the Nevada Department of Education (NDE), pointed out early in the recruitment process that it took a special kind of individual to be able to lead a school turnaround, especially in an extremely rural school like Amargosa. But how could the district recruit an excellent leader to a remote, rural school in the middle of the desert?

Initially, Norton and his staff looked at principals throughout Nye County School District (NCSD). However, he and the staff quickly came to the conclusion that current assignments were best left alone, and they chose not to move anyone around. Norton then spread his net wide and hoped to leverage the opportunity of a school turnaround effort to lure a

## The Journeys Project

School improvement efforts are often described after the turnaround has already occurred. In the Journeys project, the Center on School Turnaround at WestEd (CST) documents schools in the early stages of a turnaround process. What are the early challenges, decisions, and results? How do schools handle roadblocks? To whom do they turn for advice and support? The Journeys project will also employ social media and other online tools to engage educators from around the country to create a sense of community and interaction around the work of these schools beginning their turnaround efforts.

In this episode, we learn how Amargosa Valley School handles the challenges of recruiting and staffing in a remote, rural setting. Read our latest [blog](#) post for more on recruitment and retention issues.

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“I felt that it would have been great to interview somebody outside of the district, but there’s nothing you can do about that, given the circumstances.”

—Susan Moulden-Horton,  
SIG Coordinator,  
Nevada Department of Education

large number of applicants from a wide geographic area. Moulden-Horton echoed this sentiment in pointing out the importance of trying to get candidates from outside the district “...to get a different viewpoint.” However, both Norton and Moulden-Horton were very aware that the school’s *remote-ness* would create colossal challenges in drawing a large number of qualified applicants.

The district’s human resources director quickly went to work and advertised the position in a number of places, including Nevada, Arizona, Utah, and California, and nationally through *Education Week*. The district did not offer a signing bonus (as had been done in other rural areas of the country), instead hoping to find an individual who truly wanted to lead a turnaround effort

“I didn’t want to give a false sense of hope for anyone in bringing them all the way out to Nye just to shake their hand.”

—Dale Norton, Superintendent,  
Nye County School District

and was motivated by the comprehensive, multi-year Amargosa plan. The position requirements included a list of core competencies, drafted in part from *Public Impact’s Turnaround Leader Competencies*. The end result was a pool of nine applicants, with four from within the district, two from outside the district, and three from out of state.

While Norton was hoping for more candidates, it was a better response than many other rural districts receive for principal job openings. Norton formed a seven-member screening and hiring committee of district staff, the school board president, and NDE’s Moulden-Horton (see the State Support sidebar for further information), and the group began to meticulously evaluate the applications. Using various criteria, including an *applicant-screening grid* with the aforementioned Turnaround Leader Competencies, the committee chose three top candidates. Two were from within the district, while the third was from out of state. However, on the evening before the interview, the only outside candidate withdrew his application; he had accepted a position with another school. Perhaps having to relocate to rural Nye County contributed to this decision.

### The Obvious Choice

After speaking with both of the remaining candidates, it was clear to Norton and everyone on the hiring committee that the right leader for the job was Robert Williams —

## State Support



Susan Moulden-Horton from the Nevada Department of Education helped district staff think through the recruitment and hiring process for the Amargosa principal position. During the interview process, Moulden-Horton represented the closest thing to a trainer that the district had in terms of working with Public Impact’s *Turnaround Leader Competencies* and *Behavior Event Interview* (BEI) process. Moulden-Horton helped focus the team on what each competency actually meant and how to listen for evidence of the competencies. By helping the staff drill down into what the competencies really looked like and whether the team was hearing evidence of these competencies in the candidates’ answers, the interview committee gained clarity on the candidates’ qualifications. As a result, the human resources director embarked on a process to more closely connect future administrative interviews to the competencies and BEI process.



**Robert Williams, Principal, Amargosa Valley School**

a man intimately familiar with Amargosa and the district's turnaround plan for the school. Williams was already serving in the function of a "head teacher" at Amargosa after the prior principal was reassigned to another school partway through the 2012–2013 school year. As head teacher, Williams was the district's representative at the school, but he did not have the authority of a principal.

Norton saw Williams as a leader with a lot of potential and somebody who already knew the community, the children, the school staff, and the district. Norton also appreciated that Williams had two crucial characteristics necessary to be a school leader — he was not afraid to make decisions, and he was not afraid to ask for help.

Moulden-Horton added that the school community had already embraced Williams in his role as a head teacher because of his very personable demeanor. Additionally, she was impressed with his thorough understanding of the SIG plan. She was, however, concerned about placing a first-time principal as the head of a major turnaround effort. Recognizing Williams' lack of administrative experience, Norton altered the Amargosa plan to insert himself as a mentor for the new principal.

Williams entered the teaching profession through a non-traditional avenue. He was an English major and never wanted to become a teacher until working with the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) sometime after college. Part of his assignment with the BSA was to work in the local summer camps as a

program director. During this time he realized that he enjoyed working with children, and he quickly shifted gears to get into teaching. Through an alternative licensure program (the Urban Teaching Partnership at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas), Williams was placed with a mentor teacher for a year — an experience he described as incredibly valuable. After teaching at a middle school and high schools in Las Vegas and Pahrump for 11 years, Williams accepted an assignment as a teacher on special assignment (TOSA) with NCSd and handled data training for the district. It was during his tenure as a district TOSA that he was appointed "head teacher" at Amargosa School.

During the second half of the 2012–2013 school year, as the head teacher at Amargosa, Williams had some administrative duties, but he largely

“Robert walks into teachers' classrooms, he talks to kids, he talks to parents, he's just very personable. Parents encouraged him to apply for this position.”

*Susan Moulden-Horton,  
SIG Coordinator,  
Nevada Department of Education*

“I did a lot of communicating while I was head teacher. I wrote something to the teachers every Sunday night. I invited parents to participate and volunteer. This was a change, and people felt more included.”

—Robert Williams, Principal,  
Amargosa Valley School

served as the district conduit to maintain operations as effectively as possible in the absence of a principal.

While tasked with maintaining basic functions as head teacher, Williams tried to take some ownership of what was happening at Amargosa. He quickly

recognized that staff were confused about the school’s priorities and direction. His response was to get into classrooms every day, provide feedback, and communicate effectively with the teaching staff about what instruction should look like. Oftentimes it would just be a short observation where he would leave a sticky note of what he saw happening in the classroom, but this low-pressure, increased presence was a well-received approach.

Williams also began efforts to improve the overall school culture by working collaboratively with stakeholders at all levels — staff, students, families, and the greater Amargosa community. (BLOG UPDATE: [Improving Amargosa’s Culture](#)) This improvement strategy helped him transition to his role as principal in the 2013–2014

school year. As principal he assumed even greater responsibility for building a positive school culture. What was his first order of business? Building the right team.

## Completing the Team

As discussed in [Episode 1](#), in the course of planning for and announcing the changes associated with SIG funding, many teachers left Amargosa — some because of other opportunities and others because of an unwillingness to support the tough actions necessary to change Amargosa. When Williams was officially made the principal at the end of June 2013, he was told that recruiting and hiring new teachers and staff were his first responsibilities. He knew that putting together the right team would be crucial to the successful implementation of their ambitious SIG plan.

Williams needed to fill eight out of the fourteen certified positions at Amargosa, including the critical positions of counselor, reading specialist, and special education teacher. He also needed to hire three aides and a custodian/bus driver. He had just eight weeks to fill a total of seventeen positions in a remote, rural district.

Again, the district’s rural sprawl of 18,000 square miles would turn an already challenging job



Nye County School District staff meeting



**Evangelyn Visser, School Intervention Director, Amargosa Valley School**

into a near monumental task. Williams could try to recruit a teacher from another school in the district, but that person might still live over an hour away. To make things even more difficult, NCSD is divided into seven attendance areas. The negotiated agreement between the Nye County Classroom Teachers Association and the NCSD contains language that changes a teacher's attendance area if they transfer to a school outside of their original attendance area. This means that they would lose certain rights to return to their original school should they wish to in cases of a workforce reduction or displacement.

Williams' main strategy was to start early, hoping to get some staff on board while other principals were on vacation. In early July he started going through stacks of files in the human

resources office to look for potential candidates. Once he got people in to meet with him, he engaged them with his, the district's, and the board's vision for Amargosa Valley School. He told them that this work would be challenging, but that Amargosa Valley School had a multi-year, comprehensive plan for helping students learn and thrive. He told them this was going to be a school where "We work as a team, and as a team we make everybody better." The district's human resources director pointed out that this two-pronged strategy — starting early and looking for vision-aligned candidates — really played to Williams' advantage in securing appropriate staffing for Amargosa.

By the second week in August, Amargosa was almost 100 percent staffed. The only position

Williams struggled to fill was the reading specialist. He knew that one of the TOSAs at the district office would be great for job, but she was hesitant to leave her position. After Williams repeatedly shared his vision for the school and her role in that vision, she decided to join the Amargosa team.

Nye's SIG application provided for the district to hire a School Intervention Director (SID) to work in partnership with the superintendent and Amargosa principal. So, while Williams was rounding out his team, Superintendent Norton set to work on hiring the SID. The SID's primary duties would be to provide data to the School Governance Council, oversee the development and successful implementation of units of study and common assessments connected to the Common Core State Standards, analyze student and teacher data, oversee professional learning, and mentor the principal — a challenging list of assignments.

Norton had a very strong candidate in mind for this position. As principal of another elementary school in the district, Evangelyn Visser had successfully helped her teachers begin Professional Learning Communities and develop units of study, along with focusing on and improving school culture. Visser also contributed to the SIG application



process for Amargosa, so she knew the elements of the plan well. When Norton approached her, Visser thought this would be a good fit for her because she would have the chance to focus more on curriculum and instruction and worry less about the management aspects of being a principal — an appealing prospect for her.

## The Season Ahead

Now that the team is assembled, they will need to come together as a staff to implement the ambitious plans laid out in the SIG. What will be the early successes? Challenges? Where will they find support along the way? Keep following the journey to find out.

## Blog Update

Read about [Williams' first few days on the job](#) — how being a principal is different than his previous role as head teacher.

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