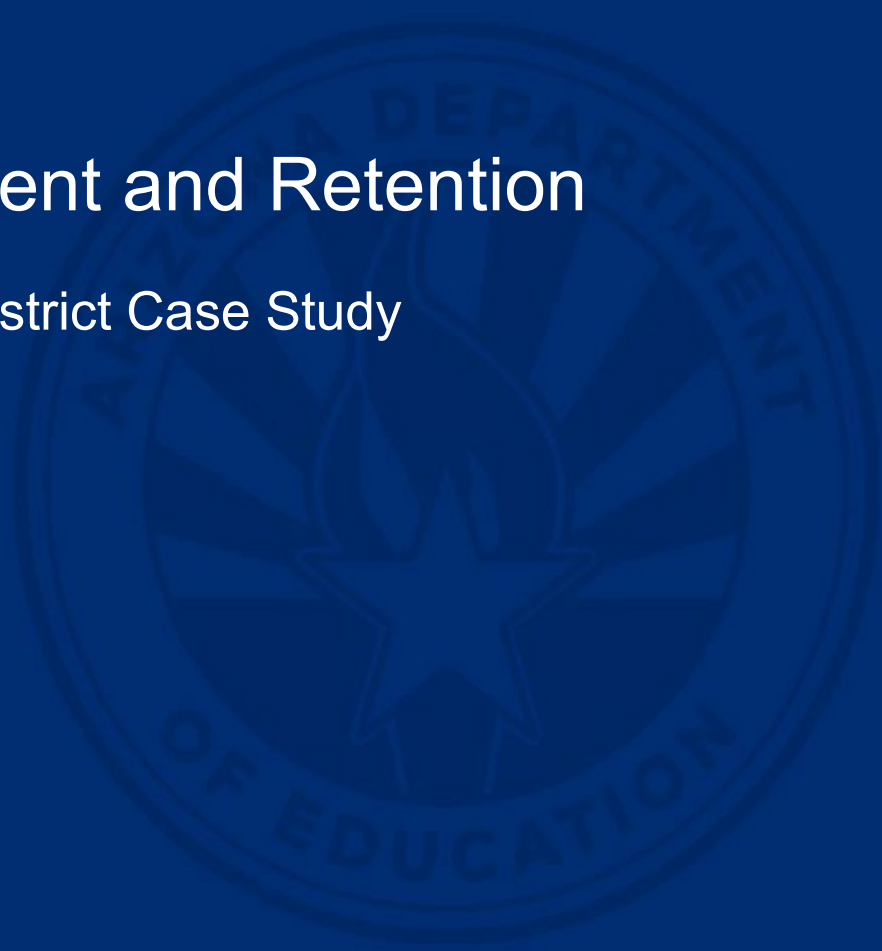




ARIZONA DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION

Educator Recruitment and Retention

Nogales Unified School District Case Study



It Takes a Village

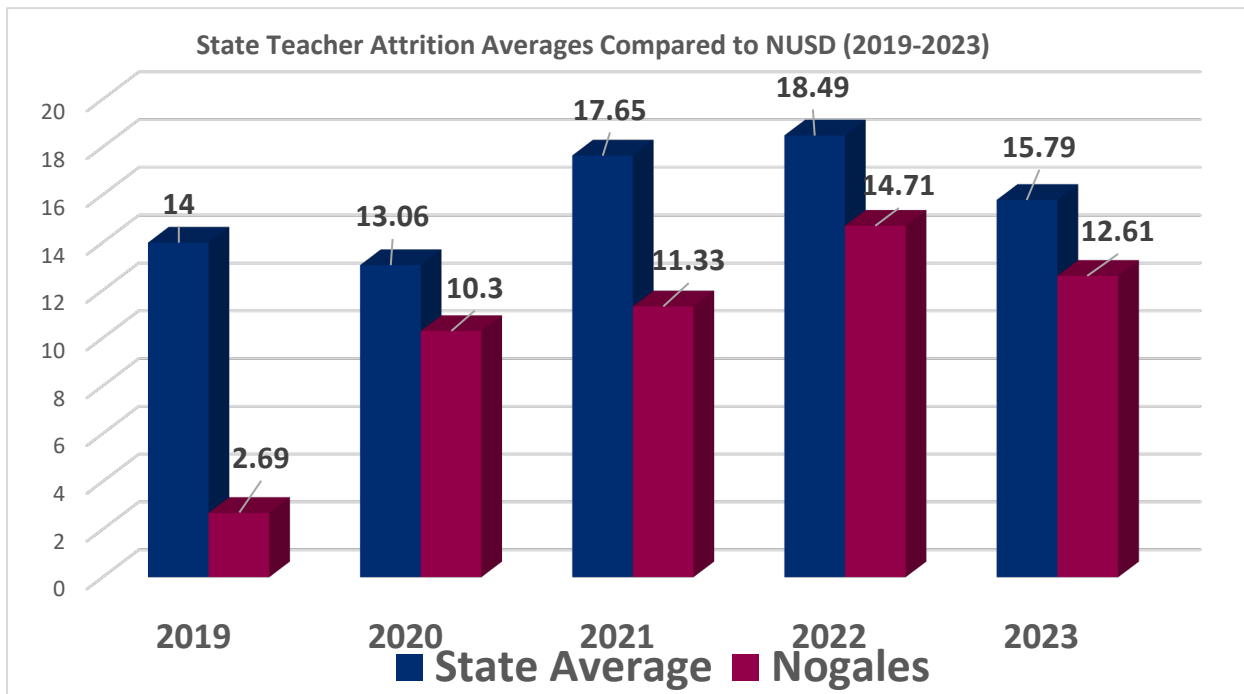
“For the SY2025, of the 248 teacher contracts issued, 238 were returned or 96%. Overall, 97% of all teachers, classified and administrator contracts and wage notices were returned. We have an override recruitment and retention stipend (\$2,000) that we paid to those teachers who returned their contracts within 7 days of issue. The amount is paid as part of the base pay,” stated Nogales Unified School District’s (NUSD) Director of Human Resources, Mayra Zuniga. This is not new to this district, as evidenced by the Arizona Department of Education’s Classroom Teacher Attrition and Retention Dashboard data. NUSD’s attrition rates have been consistently below the Arizona state average, as depicted below on the State Teacher Attrition Averages graph, which shows the trends from 2019 to 2023. Trends indicate that Arizona’s attrition trends have ranged from 14% to almost 19%

over the five-year period. As noted, Nogales Unified School District is 3% or more below the state average.



Nogales Unified School District, District Office

State Teacher Attrition Averages Graph: Arizona Attrition Averages Compared to Nogales Unified School District (NUSD) 2019-2023



Background

Nogales Unified School District by the Numbers

Number of Students: Approximately 5,750

Number of Schools: 11

Elementary Schools: 6 AJ Mitchell Elementary School
 Challenger Elementary School
 Francisco Vasquez de Coronado Elementary School
 Lincoln Elementary School, Mary Welty Elementary School
 RM Bracker Elementary School

Middle Schools: 2 Wade Carpenter Middle School, Desert Shadows Middle School

High Schools: 2 Nogales High School. Pierson High School

Online School: 1 Digital learning platform for diverse learners

Number of Teachers: Approximately 275

Type of District: Rural/Remote



Mary Welty Elementary

Nogales Leadership

Superintendent: Angelina Canto

Assistant Superintendent: Aissa Bonillas

Human Resources Director: Mayra Zuniga

Grants Director: Elizabeth Lopez

Finance Director: Sandra Licet Jimenez

Student Services Director: Judith Mendoza-Jimenez

Information Technology Director: Alejandro Lopez

Support Services Director: Oscar Islas Jr.

CTE Director: Irma Fontes

Why Nogales Unified School District?

The Arizona Department of Education (ADE) Educator Recruitment and Retention (ERR) Unit published several Arizona workforce data dashboards in 2023. All dashboards can be found on the ERR [repository website](#). Workforce data is collected from the [Teacher Input Application \(TIA\) system](#), which is completed annually by local education agencies (LEA’s). As this information is collected, it allows the Educator Recruitment and Retention unit to focus efforts on specific LEAs, and areas of need, and to make Arizona workforce data public knowledge.

The [Classroom Teacher Attrition and Retention dashboard](#) is one of the newest dashboards published which allows LEAs to see trends of their attrition and retention comparatively to other LEAs in the state of Arizona, as well by county and over time. Nogales Unified School District has consistently had attrition rates well below the Arizona state average. Due to the notable retention rates NUSD, a site visit was requested to discuss their processes, procedures, systems, and programs.

Process and Product

The ADE Recruitment and Retention unit made two site visits to NUSD; once to demonstrate the new data dashboards that were published and to discuss the unit’s essential *question ‘How do we get educators to stay past 3 years?’* Conversations and information continued to transfer between the agency and NUSD. The ERR unit was provided an opportunity to visit the Nogales Unified District for a second time for this case study. What followed was a day of conversations, school visits, classroom visits, and interviews with several distinct groups of individuals centering on teacher retention. The groups of individuals included but were not limited to the following: *District Leadership Team members, Site-based administrators, Mentor Coordinators, On-Site Mentors, and teachers new to the profession.*

A meeting was scheduled that included the following district members:

- Superintendent-** Angelina Canto
- Assistant Superintendent-** Aissa Celeste Bonillas
- Human Resources Director-** Mayra Zuniga
- Finance Director-** Sandra Licet Jimenez
- Mentor Coordinators-** Penelope Munguia (Elementary), Aneela Pradhan (Middle School), Santosh Kumar (High School)

The following question was asked of the whole group as the process began:

“Regarding teacher attrition and retention and the current level of attention to detail: Was there a specific moment of reckoning or was it an evolutionary process that moved you into your current direction regarding teacher retention?”

The answers varied among the members of the group, but Superintendent Canto summed it up, as *“There has always been an awareness of attrition and retention, but it has been heightened the last few years for many reasons. We have continued to build relationships and provide support where it is needed. That takes conversation, feedback, and appropriate planning based upon evidence.”* Superintendent Canto expresses and applauds the ability of all involved to *“roll up their sleeves.”* **It takes a village.**

Talent Management – Retention is the New Recruitment

Mayra Zuniga is the Human Resources Director who has been in the position for 13 years. She has seen many changes over the years, but she has come to few conclusions about personnel: *build relationships, provide Red Carpet Service, identify future talent*

quickly and provide pathways, utilize international teachers, develop leadership pathways, and ultimately create a situation where the district is considered an 'employer of choice'.

During interviews and conversations, Ms. Zuniga explains the scope and depth of what this district does to invite candidates and provide the necessary support to create a culture that encourages teachers to stay. Early in the day, it was stated that Ms. Zuniga knows the name of every single employee in the district, a fact that was put to the test and evidenced at each site visit. It is part of the Red Carpet Service, which is the focus of the Nogales Unified School District Human Resources Department.

One major component for recruitment that NUSD has in place is a “grow your own” mentality. Grow your own comes in two different forms for NUSD. First, a partnership exists with the University of Arizona’s Pathways to Teaching. Currently, they have 2 candidates who are active in the program, and since 2021, they have hired 8 teachers through that program. Another active feature that includes “growing your own” is developing interest from within the community and throughout the district to join the teaching profession. Paraprofessionals who demonstrate the ability and interest, as well as recruiting from the community in career and technical education (CTE) is another “grow your own” strategy used. Identifying CTE candidates and assisting them in getting the appropriate [CTE teaching certification](#) has proven to be a positive strategy.

Historically, people who went to school in Nogales have returned to join the NUSD team. The district leadership team has several who have begun their career as a student and now are leaders for the district. They know and share the culture. There is certainly competition in the area for talent, but Nogales Unified School District feels as though, through years of demonstrated quality service and support, ‘word of mouth’ advertising is a very strong, recognizable asset. Ms. Zuniga explains that more than a few have left the district only to return a year later, essentially finding out that *‘the grass isn’t always greener.’* Those returning employees are welcomed back with open arms, and they can become assets in the field to further the message and help strengthen the culture.

As mentioned in the opening quote of this study from Ms. Zuniga, they offer an additional stipend to teachers for returning their contracts early, but that is only one facet of the plan of retaining teachers. As evidenced by numerous sources around the country, compensation will always be a component of hiring and retaining teachers, but other strategies are used to assist in the recruitment and retention of teachers in Nogales Unified School District.

Another area of recruitment and retention for Nogales (and many other LEA’s in Arizona) is the hiring of [international teachers](#). Currently, NUSD has 38 teachers on visas. Of those 38 teachers with visas, 16 are H1B’s, or permanent visas. This means that NUSD is the sponsor and absorbing the cost of the sponsorship. Ms. Zuniga explained *“that the cost and risk were worth it. Over the years, our*

experience with international teachers has been successful, as only one has not made it through the required/expected time while on the J1 visa.”



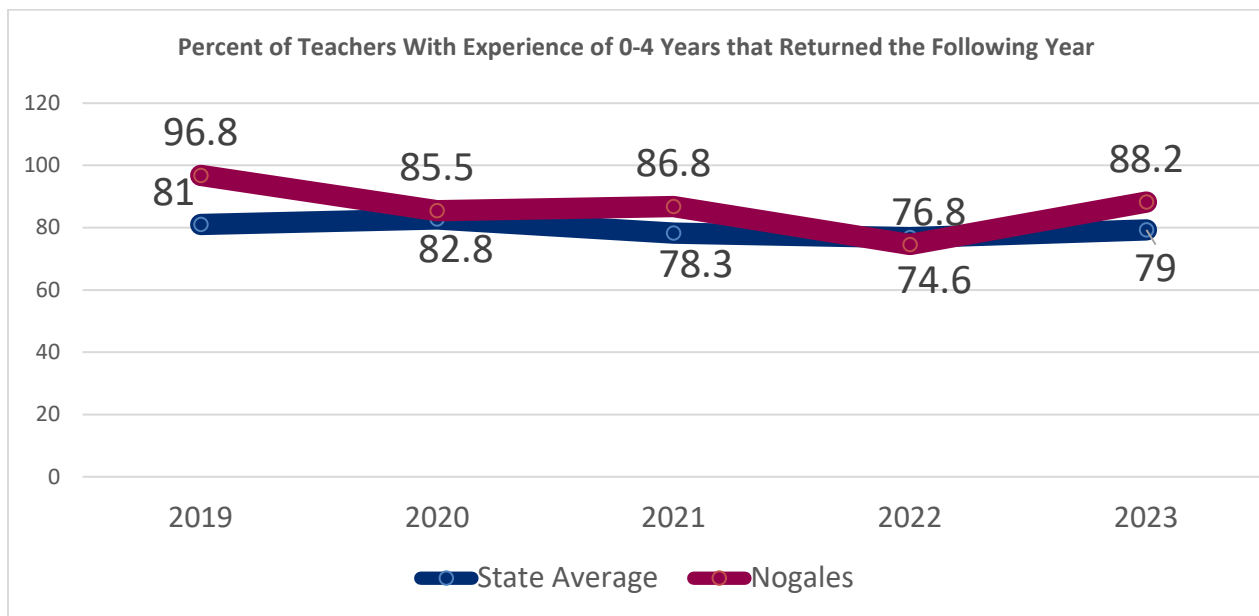
Support, Opportunities for Growth, Culture

The ability to pivot is at the forefront of talent management, not following the latest and greatest trends but recognizing them. Building relationships, making onboarding thorough yet concise, providing ongoing support through induction and mentoring, listening to teachers, and providing relevant professional development are just a few of the areas that Nogales Unified School District focuses on as part of their support systems for staff.

Professional development includes growing and supporting teacher leaders and administrators. Additionally, community involvement opportunities for all stakeholders to better understand and connect with the community are encouraged, and information is regularly provided. NUSD has many of these components firmly in place. According to Ms. Zuniga, “NUSD experiences an average of approximately 30 teachers new to the district each year, with 10 to 12 of those teachers that are new to the profession.” Through continuous improvement cycles, they continue to build their systems of support.

The term ‘pivot’ is used regularly in an educational context. However, the leadership in NUSD uses the term ‘flexibility.’ That flexibility, in the words of Ms. Zuniga, creates “stability in employment.” The numbers in the State Teacher Attrition Averages demonstrate that there is stability as they outperform state averages. Support, professional growth opportunities, and community connections help build the culture.

Percent of Teachers With Experience of 0-4 Years that Returned the Following Year



The graph for Percent of Teachers with Experience of 0-4 Years that Returned the Following Year aligns with the earlier graph showing the NUSD attrition trends, with the only exception being the year 2022. Overall, Nogales Unified School District has remained consistent with teachers returning with experience in years 0-4, while the trend in Arizona, and nationwide continues to be a high attrition rate.

New Teacher Induction & Mentoring

The induction and mentoring program in Nogales Unified School District continues to evolve. It is currently a two-year program that utilizes on-site mentors who work under the direction of the mentor coordinators and communicate with site-based administrators. Mentors and mentees meet regularly, and the mentor coordinators perform surveys intermittently to monitor practices and look for continuous growth opportunities.

As evidenced by [Arizona attrition numbers](#), teachers in years 0-4 are leaving the profession at an alarming rate. NUSD continues to invest time, energy, and resources into teacher retention.

Under the direction of three mentor coordinators, the induction and mentoring program is growing to meet the needs of those who need continued support and guidance.

- Mentor Coordinator-** Penelope Munguia (Elementary)
- Mentor Coordinator-** Aneela Pradhan (Middle School)
- Mentor Coordinator-** Santosh Kumar (High School)

How is the Program Funded?

- Coordinators paid for out of Title 1 funds
- Site-based Mentors are paid for out of Classroom Site Funds

These three individuals are full-time instructors, working additionally for a stipend. They report directly to Superintendent Canto and the District Leadership Team. They oversee site-based mentors who also work within a stipend framework for their services. According to the [Arizona Beginning Teacher Induction Program Standards](#), a recommended practice is having partial or full-release mentors. That is not the case in NUSD, as they cannot adopt that format due to funding and staffing concerns. However, the standards also recommend a 15:1 mentee-to-mentor ratio, which is more than being met as evidenced by the 2023-2024 school year mentor assignments in NUSD. A total of 27 teachers participated in the NUSD induction program, including those who are in year two of the program. The breakdown of participating teachers is as follows:

- Elementary -17
- Middle School – 6
- HS – 4

Each teacher had a specific site-based mentor, and they met regularly. The number of meetings and times of meetings varied based on grade levels. Elementary mentees met with their mentors daily as they shared planning

times. Secondary mentees and mentors arranged their schedules to make sure that time commitments and discussions about practices were moving forward and occurring regularly.

The work that is being done by these individuals (mentors) is timely and focused, and they work with a great deal of urgency, pride, and efficiency. The induction and mentoring program at NUSD includes a clear

mission statement as well as goals, and objectives.

Nogales Unified School District provides a Mentoring Handbook, checklists, electronic collaborative logs, a flow chart of support systems, feedback forms, and the basic roles of the mentors and mentees. All of these are suggested components in the [Arizona Beginning Teacher Induction Program Standards](#).

School Visits

Four school visits took place, each with a mentor coordinator leading the visit. Site visits included various grade levels, and recurring themes were observed throughout each one: the work, the teachers, and the impact on students.

Leadership team members were involved in each site visit. Based on the interactions and comfort level of each set of interactions, it was very apparent that visits from leadership are a priority.

Mary Welty Elementary- Principal: Mariebeth Silva, On-Site Mentors: Mariebelle Silva, Roxanna Yanez Mentor Coordinator: Penelope Munguia (additional members of Leadership team), Classroom Teachers (1st year) – Nida Perez Mosri, Stephanie Rodriguez

Two classrooms were selected that had teachers new to the profession. The teachers were instructors at the 1st and 2nd grade level.

Teachers and on-site mentors were asked similar questions: *What value does the induction/mentoring program bring? If difficulties arise, do you know where to go for appropriate assistance? What role does the administrator play in this process?*



Mary Welty Elementary - 1st Grade

During the Welty Elementary School visit, the answers from both the mentees and the site-based mentors were similar. They expressed that the relationship that has been built brings comfort and value, and the proximity and availability of mentors assist in moving teaching practices forward. Each participant in the interview describes their administrator as supportive, available, and committed to their success.

Desert Shadows Middle School- Principal: Christopher Miranda, On-Site Mentors: Suneetha Yalnaty, Roxanne Bell, Mentor Coordinator: Aneela Pradhan (additional members of Leadership team), Classroom Teachers: (1st year) Jessica Kandikatla and Annielinine Arante

Both Mentors and mentees who were interviewed shared very similar feelings, especially that support is available and nearby and mentors are accessible. They both would like to do more peer observations, and one of the mentors suggested that providing training centered on classroom management would bring additional value.

Nogales High School- Principal (Interim): Aissa Bonillas, On-Site Mentors – Karen Bowie, Melissa Dembowski, Mentor Coordinator, Santosh Kumar (additional members of Leadership Team) Classroom Teachers (1st Year) Nikki Adruschak-Neal and Joshua Jetton

Both teachers visited felt that the time spent in the induction program has value and that their mentor has provided guidance. They also shared that the campus staff, in general, has been very helpful and is approachable for any additional assistance. Mentors and mentees reported that finding time that is amenable/manageable to both sides would be beneficial.

Moving Forward and Next Steps

During conversations with Superintendent Canto and Human Resource Director Mayra Zuniga, continuous improvement is part of their processes, particularly in the area of teacher retention. One thing that stood out during the conversations was an ongoing effort to codify more information on the current programs and those that will be born as part of continuous improvement. Documenting more processes and procedures for all to see, being transparent, and delivering the “why” before the “how” are part of NUSD leadership’s goals. Clearer job descriptions and responsibilities were also noted as areas for continuous improvement to advance the outcomes and expectations for staff.

In the area of new teacher induction, the leadership team is looking at two crucial factors moving forward. One is having more connective, vertical alignment from year one to year two, and the other is designing systems to identify more teachers who may need mentoring support beyond just the early years of teaching.



Nogales High School sign

Closing

Nogales Unified School District has continually developed its abilities to locate, grow, and retain candidates. It truly takes a village, and this district's culture produces a backdrop of consistency for both staff and students. One school building sign states, “*ENGAGE, INVEST, BELIEVE,*” and this is exactly what NUSD does... engages with its staff, invests in them, and believes in them.



*Photo taken at Desert Shadows Middle School: **Principal-** Christopher Miranda, **Finance Director-** Sandra Licet Jimenez, **Mentor Coordinator-** Santosh Kumar, **Human Resources Director-** Mayra Zuniga, **Mentor Coordinator-** Aneela Pradhan, **Superintendent-** Angelina Canto, **Assistant Superintendent-** Aissa Celeste Bonillas*