

The Nevada Independent

Indy Q+A: An exit interview with outgoing Washoe County schools leader

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Next month, she is stepping down as the Washoe County School District's leader, a position she took in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic after serving as interim superintendent in 2019 after the district's school board fired former [Superintendent Traci Davis](#).

McNeill [announced her retirement](#) last September. Her last day will be June 30. Last month, the district's Board of Trustees selected [Susan Enfield](#), a Seattle-area superintendent, to succeed McNeill.

The pandemic presented unique challenges during McNeill's time as superintendent of the state's second-largest school district. As the district's leader, McNeill had to steer it through the campus closures, remote learning, school reopenings, COVID mitigation strategies and a readjustment period for students and staff as they reacclimated to school life.

Though McNeill was only superintendent for about two years, her career within the district spanned more than two decades. She started her district career in the classroom, teaching second through sixth grade, before moving up the leadership ranks. *The Nevada Independent* interviewed McNeill about her time with the district, and what she'd like to see in the district's future.

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This conversation has been shortened for clarity and length.

What made you want to become an educator, and what were your favorite memories from being directly in the classroom?

My bachelor's degree is actually in hotel administration. However, both of my parents and the majority of my family are educators. I wanted to have that same type of fulfillment that they were having, and so I went back (and) received my teaching credential, then I moved to Reno all those years ago. I was a third grade teacher at Smithridge Elementary School. I was there for a couple of years. And then I moved over to Libby Booth Elementary.

Some of my fondest memories are obviously with my students and just setting up. It's always that excitement when you're a new teacher, right? You're setting up your classroom, you have your bulletin board, you're getting your lesson plans, which were actually in a lesson plan book back then. I'll always remember that.

What has kept you in the district for so long?

Both of my children graduated from the Washoe County School District. I believe in (the) Washoe County School District. I am Washoe County blue and yellow through and through. We've made some course corrections and mistakes over the years, and in all of the different positions that I had, obviously, and that's how you learn, and then you move on, but I'm exceptionally proud to be an employee of the Washoe County School District.

Your appointment as superintendent became official right at the beginning of the pandemic. What do you consider your biggest challenge? Your biggest accomplishment?

It's been a team effort. It is not about one person. It is absolutely a team effort. So I think one of our proudest accomplishments as the Washoe County School District was keeping our elementary schools open five days a week, and our middle and our high schools open on a hybrid schedule. And then those particular populations that may have needed additional time – whether it was children in transition, our homeless students, foster (students), special education, gifted and talented, English language learners – to give those populations the opportunity to come in five days a week, but then also having a full distance learning model.

During that very first year, it was really difficult for our schools, and they rose to the challenge. We had some teachers who were teaching distance learning, teaching hybrid and teaching in person.

I've said it before, and I'll say it again: Hybrid looks really good on paper. It's quite another thing to put that into action. But our principals and our teachers, our support staff, they just knocked it out of the park.

Our students, we were concerned about them. We still are, obviously, with mental health, and so just to make sure going forward that we have all of those mechanisms in place to support our students for their mental health, and then also the supports in place for our staff as well.

The decision to reopen Washoe County schools last school year was met with some backlash and criticism. How did that personally affect you as a superintendent, and do you feel that was the right call to make?

To this day, I absolutely honor the board that made that decision to open our schools. I have no questions, no second guesses that that was the right thing to do — to open up our schools for all the right reasons.

A couple of weeks ago, the district's Board of Trustees selected a new superintendent, [Susan Enfield](#). What advice do you have for her, especially as she's coming from Washington state?

Well, I'm thrilled with the board's decision for Dr. Enfield, and I'm very, very excited for her to kind of take the reins and take us for the next steps forward. I would just say it's always important when you come into a community to get to know that community, and I think she's absolutely done her homework. We'll have a transition plan and what that will look like. I imagine there's going to be some opportunities for listening sessions, with our staff, with our employees, our families, and, importantly, our students. She's a strong believer, as is our district, in student voice, and so I know she's going to be spending a lot of time with our students and getting to know where they're at and where do they want to go. It's their futures. I think that's really important to sit back and kind of listen first.

This will be the district's fifth superintendent in the past decade, Why do you think it's been challenging for the district to retain a superintendent?

It is an absolute difficult job, and the national average is actually three years for a superintendent. I think that the position has only gotten more complex. Our district is a member of the Council of Great City Schools, and so we meet on a weekly basis, and during COVID, it was tremendously important for me to be able to spend time with other urban districts, and listen to the leaders in those districts and what they were going through.

But the dynamics of the position (have) changed. There are influencers and influences. You have your students, you have your parents, you have your community, you have your legislators, you

have your board, and so all these constituencies, they need to be listened to, they need to be heard, and that takes a lot of patience and grace. But that's a lot on a leader of a district.

School districts have received an avalanche of federal COVID relief funds to mitigate academic challenges or provide support for students, including with their mental health. How is your district investing those dollars?

(Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) funding really came in three tranches, and ESSER I was really around the COVID safety protocols, right so additional staff, PPE, obviously, facilities, HVAC units and those types of things. There are filters. And then moving forward, what was going to keep our schools open, so nursing, additional staff and additional nurses, counselors, social workers for our students and our staff, and then also summer school. We had a very robust summer school program last year.

This year we're being very targeted with our students. We have learning facilitators in each one of our elementary schools, and they provide direct support to our students and to our teachers, and English language arts and mathematics. We've used the funding to help us out with textbooks. We've also received some federal funding from the (Federal Communications Commission), so we were able to get more computer devices for students as well as staff.

What do you see on the local level as the biggest threat to public education right now?

When I think about challenges and moving forward, it's definitely funding. We've been very clear about that, and especially for Washoe County School District, we have the lowest per-pupil (funding) — doesn't mean that we are not grateful for the additional funding from our Legislature and our governor. And then, obviously, (we need to) continue the work around staffing vacancies, whether that's in our support staff, bus drivers, nutrition services, aides and assistants, and then for our teachers as well.

And then, you know, morale. Our staff has been through a lot. They have been through a global pandemic. So I think we just need to continually to (have) grace and patience with one another as well, too.

If you had a magic wand, what would you do to improve education?

I think we need to definitely take a look at making salaries and wages marketable. We need to take a look at the cost of living here in the Truckee Meadows and provide livable wages for our staff. We're doing that work right now so I'm hoping we'll be able to move forward with some of that work before I exit on June 30. I'm confident that we will.

Well, on the issue of teacher pay, do you have a number in mind that you think would be a better starting salary for teachers, for instance?

I don't really want to get into numbers ... because it's going to differ, right? What Washoe County is able to pay and have the market is very different (from) what Esmerelda or Lyon or Clark would be able to. But we need to talk at the state level (about) additional funding for

public education just overall so that Nevada is not always ranked at the bottom of that list. We really need to look at that and fund what is the optimal level of funding for the state of education for our students.

Do you have any plans to stay involved in Washoe County or Nevada education after you retire?

This is my home. I have no plans on leaving. This is where my kids, and my family (are), so I will be around. I've already been asked to volunteer on the first day of school so I'll be helping out over at the new Hug High School with traffic. I will always be available to help volunteer in classrooms. But you know, probably the first couple of days I'll probably sleep — a big thing on my list.