Tahoe-Truckee Joint Unified School District
California

Superintendent: Dennis K. Williams
Primary contact: Jessamy Lasher, director of curriculum*
School studied: North Tahoe Middle School
4,400 students, K-12, rural

District and School Descriptions
The Tahoe-Truckee Joint Unified School District is a rural district in the Sierra Nevada mountains of California, approximately 100 miles northeast of Sacramento and 35 miles west of Reno, Nevada. The district includes the north shore of Lake Tahoe as well as some of the western shore and encompasses more than 720 square miles. Its 4,400 students come from three counties: Nevada, Placer, and El Dorado. The students served by the district’s five Title I targeted-assistance schools have had more difficulty passing state tests than students in the other schools. One of the Title I elementary schools is in year 2 of school improvement. Its students feed into North Tahoe Middle School, which is in restructuring under No Child Left Behind. This targeted-assistance Title I middle school serves approximately 350 students, 38% of whom are low-income and 32% of whom are Latino.

Key Findings
● Since enactment of NCLB, the general population at Tahoe-Truckee has typically made large gains in student achievement each year and met adequate yearly progress targets. But the district is in improvement because its subgroups, particularly English language learners, Latino students, and low-income students, have had more difficulty meeting targets. Changes in curriculum and instruction have been directed toward schools with larger percentages of these subgroups.

● The district has one school, North Tahoe Middle School, in restructuring under NCLB. The school is in the planning phase for governance changes this year. Additional changes at the school include grouping students by skill level, changing the schedule so that students who are behind can add extra periods of reading and math, giving teachers a half day each Wednesday for professional development, implementing Achievement Via Individual Determination (AVID), a program aimed at motivating students, and adding coaches in reading, math, and English as a second language.

● Schedule changes at North Tahoe Middle School mean that students who can take extra periods of math and reading do not get science, social studies, or other electives. While staff said they realized not getting these subjects was controversial, they said they believed missing a semester or two of these subjects was worth getting students closer to grade level in reading and math.

*Other contacts for this case study include Dave Curry, principal, North Tahoe Middle School; and Debby Spohr, 7th grade teacher and English/language arts coach.
• Few students have participated in school choice or supplemental educational services. District officials reported that this may be due to long commutes.

• New teachers who are highly qualified according to the state’s definition are hard to come by in Tahoe-Truckee, where 85% of teachers meet the state’s definition. Salaries in this rural district are lower than in nearby districts, but the cost of living is slightly higher because the area caters to tourists. Also, NCLB requirements that middle school teachers have subject matter expertise, rather than simply grade-level certification, has made finding highly qualified middle school teachers more difficult. The district has been providing professional development to help teachers meet requirements, but has difficulty getting trainers to come to the rural area. When training requires teachers to miss class time, the district has difficulty hiring substitutes.

Overall Impact of NCLB

Because of Tahoe-Truckee’s rural location, some NCLB sanctions have not had a large effect on the district, according to district and school administrators. For example, few students have taken advantage of school choice, because it entails longer bus rides, and few providers were interested in offering on-site tutoring under NCLB. Instead, district and school officials said they have focused on changes in curriculum and instruction to improve student achievement. Staff described this focus as painful at times, but ultimately effective. As North Tahoe Middle School teacher Debby Spohr said of NCLB, “It’s been the best bad thing.”

NCLB and Student Achievement

Tahoe-Truckee has made gains in student achievement since the inception of NCLB, although it has never met all AYP targets. In English/language arts, the percentage of students passing state tests rose by about 11 points from 2002-03 to 2004-05. In math during the same period, the percentage passing rose by about 14 points.

The percentage of students in all subgroups passing state tests has also increased. For math, these increases were all lower but within 4 percentage points of the overall increase of 14 percentage points. For English/language arts, subgroup increases were more varied. White students, low-income students, and students with disabilities all increased passing rates by at least 8 percentage points. Increases for Latino students and for English language learners were lower, about 5 percentage points from 2002-03 to 2004-05.

At North Tahoe Middle School, increases have outstripped those of the district as a whole, despite the fact that this is the district’s only school in restructuring, the last sanction for schools failing to meet AYP targets. From 2002-03 to 2004-05, passing rates in English/language arts have increased by about 22 percentage points. In math during the same period, the percentage passing rose by about 20 points. At this middle school, however, subgroups have not kept pace with the general population, except for white students. For example, Latino students increased their achievement by about 16 percentage points in English/language arts and about 6 percentage points in math.

Despite gains on tests, staff at North Tahoe Middle School emphasized that the state test was just one measure of achievement. “It’s just one test on one day. It’s just one little piece of the puzzle,” said Spohr, 7th grade English/language arts teacher and English/language arts coach. She explained that teachers are learning to work mini-assessments into daily lessons so that they can track students’ learning more closely and have a better idea of what students know and don’t know.
Adequate Yearly Progress and School Improvement

DISTRICT AND SCHOOL AYP STATUS
While the general population has typically met AYP targets in Tahoe-Truckee, subgroups have never met all AYP targets, and the district has been identified for improvement. In 2002-03, the district did not make AYP due to low test participation of English language learners. In 2003-04, a sufficient number of ELLs participated in testing but failed to meet English/language arts targets. This past year, in 2004-05, both Latino students and ELLs failed to meet English/language arts targets. Still, these groups improved and came close to passing, said Jessamy Lasher, the district’s director of curriculum. In fact, had the state targets not increased for 2004-05, Latinos and ELLs would have passed and the district would have made AYP.

The five schools in Tahoe-Truckee that receive Title I funds all failed to meet AYP targets in 2004-05. For three of these schools, 2004-05 was the first time they failed to make AYP. One school, Kings Beach Elementary, which has the highest percentage of ELLs among the district’s elementary schools, is in year 2 of school improvement. North Tahoe Middle School, which Kings Beach students attend for middle school, is in restructuring. While the general population at North Tahoe Middle School met targets, Latino students and ELLs failed to meet targets. At this school, as with the district as a whole, these subgroups would have made AYP if targets had not increased.

DISTRICT IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES
District improvement efforts associated with NCLB have affected all schools but have focused on Kings Beach Elementary and North Tahoe Middle School, district officials said. In conjunction with state policy, all district schools offer at least 90 minutes of uninterrupted time for reading instruction. Kings Beach and North Tahoe Middle School have been extending that time for students who are behind in reading. In addition, the district has hired an English/language arts coach for 2004-05. This coach, who splits her time between these two schools, provides professional development and models lessons for teachers.

CORRECTIVE ACTION AND RESTRUCTURING STRATEGIES
The district’s efforts to improve student achievement at North Tahoe Middle School have seen “intermittent success,” according to Principal Dave Curry. “The problem has been that we’ve never implemented a program with all the elements for success,” he explained. “One thing would get better and another would get worse.” Instead of focusing on a single new initiative, this year Curry said the staff is “putting it all together.” These changes include those begun in 2002-03 and 2003-04: grouping students by ability level, changing the schedule so that students who are behind can add extra periods of reading and math, and reserving a half day each Wednesday for professional development for teachers. For 2004-05, two additional reforms are in place. These include implementing Achievement Via Individual Determination and adding coaches in reading, math, and English as a second language. Consistent with the options for restructuring in NCLB, the school will also plan this year to implement governance changes the following year.

Prior to 2002-03, students were purposely not grouped by skill level. Instead, students of varying skills were placed together, on the assumption that students with weaker skills would benefit from working with students with stronger skills. Social skills were supposed to improve for both groups, but teachers had difficulty meeting the academic needs of all students, Curry said.

Now students are grouped by skill level, and these groups change as needed. Also, students who are behind in math or reading can take up to three periods of reading and up to two periods of math. Some students, as a result, do not get science, social studies, or other electives. While they realized that not getting these subjects was controversial, North Tahoe Middle School staff said missing a semester or two of these subjects was worth getting students closer to grade level in reading and math so that they were more prepared to learn other subjects easily. Every nine weeks, students’ schedules are reevaluated, so that students who improve in reading and math can add courses to their schedules.
In addition, during 2003-04 Curry got permission from the school board to end the school day about two and a half hours early on Wednesdays, so that teachers could collaborate and attend professional development. Although the half day on Wednesday means fewer hours of instruction per year, Curry said, “The hours are better spent when kids are in school.” To make the change more palatable for parents, Curry said he got outside grant funding to offer after-school services at the Tahoe City Recreation Department and at Kings Beach Boys and Girls Club.

At first, parents and students did not like the new schedule or the half-day Wednesdays. “The first year, everybody was up in arms,” Curry recalled. “We lost 20 to 25 kids to other middle schools.” After the initial shock, however, parents and students like the new schedule, he said. Some students returned to the school, and in 2004-05 no students transferred out.

Of the scheduling changes that regroup students by skill level, Curry said, “It’s really worked well for the kids on the lowest end. They are no longer afraid to raise their hand in class.” He also said he believed instruction had improved in the school due to the added time for professional development and collaboration on Wednesdays.

But these schedule changes did not improve the performance of all students. Recalling the 2003-04 school year, Curry said they struggled with the middle group of the achievement range. These students had the ability to do the work, but were unmotivated. Some he described as “class clowns,” and others simply came from backgrounds in which older relatives hadn’t succeeded in school or hadn’t had the opportunity to attend. If some of these students graduated from high school, they would be the first in their family to do so. For these students, the school is implementing AVID. The program emphasizes study habits, note taking, and commitment to learning. Students get an extra period emphasizing study skills and motivational activities. Guest speakers talk to students about the value of graduating from high school and college and give advice on how to do it. “It seems to be working,” Curry observed. In addition, the notebook and note-taking procedures used in AVID have been adopted by all the teachers in the school. He noted that the program has helped the staff be more consistent in classroom procedures, and classes are running more smoothly.

In addition to these initiatives, the school will plan for changes in governance this year. To do this, Curry said he and key teachers are currently working on the “Worksheet for Considering Alternative Governance Option 5,” developed by the California Department of Education. This worksheet focuses on the “any other major restructuring” option of the federal law. It asks staff to gather data on and answer the follow six questions:

- How does the proposed restructuring plan identify significant changes in school governance across at least one grade span (elementary, middle, or high)?
- How will the proposed restructuring plan improve teaching and learning in multiple academic subject areas?
- As a result of implementing this plan, how will students be more involved and engaged in the learning process?
- How does the proposed plan align a variety of instructional strategies, tools, and academic subjects to form a cohesive, focused, restructuring effort?
- How will the proposed program result in a tangible restructuring and refocus of the school’s governance processes and procedures?
- What evidence supports the conclusion that this option is or is not a relevant option for this school?
While North Tahoe Middle School has not yet decided how it will restructure the governance of the school, the California Department of Education gives examples of possible alternative governance arrangements. These results include creating smaller learning communities or schools within schools that would change governance and decision-making practices, selecting an alternative governance board or management team that would oversee the school, and implementing a comprehensive whole-school reform model that would include a change in how the school is governed.

The district has not asked North Tahoe Middle School to consider other restructuring options, such as getting rid of teachers or becoming a charter school, said Jessamy Lasher, because the school appears to be on the right track, especially in terms of raising test scores. “If our scores grow this year as much as last year,” Curry noted, “we’ll definitely be above the bar.” He said he is unsure what governance changes will be in store for North Tahoe Middle School, but he and Spohr both said they wanted to make sure that any changes will support the things that are already working well in the school.

**Impact of NCLB on Curriculum and Instruction**

**Changes in Curriculum and Instruction for Subgroups**
Changes in scheduling at North Tahoe Middle School have had an extra benefit for students with disabilities, Curry said. Although the school still has two self-contained classes that were not affected by the schedule change, staff has placed students slated to receive support from resource teachers in classes with non-disabled students who need to work on similar academic skills. As a result, these students with disabilities often keep up with their classmates and need much less support academically, he said. This positive progress has made staff wonder whether these students were correctly identified in the first place, and as a result some students have moved out of special education, he explained.

**English Language Learners**
About 18% of students in the district are English language learners. These students are mostly Spanish speaking and many are low income, district officials said. Percentages of ELLs at schools that have traditionally had difficulty meeting AYP targets are higher. North Tahoe Middle School is about 18% ELL students, while its feeder school, Kings Beach Elementary, is about 67% ELL.

District officials said they would like to have more bilingual teachers, but that these teachers are in high demand and difficult to attract. In response, during 2004-05 seven currently employed teachers attended extra training in teaching ELLs and will work toward certification in teaching English language learners. North Tahoe Middle School has also employed a full-time coach who will model lessons and provide professional development for all teachers on how to teach ELLs. This coach is in addition to the English/language arts coach and the math coach that North Tahoe Middle School shares with Kings Beach.

**NCLB School Choice**
Few students have been interested in choice in Tahoe-Truckee, Lasher reported, explaining that the district is “geographically challenged.” Even when elementary schools appear to be close together as the crow flies, lakes and highways often lengthen the commute. Also, the district has only two middle schools, and students transferring from one to the other would have travel times of 45 minutes to an hour. “Some parents don’t want their children on the bus that long,” she said. In 2005-06, only 17 of the 400 elementary students eligible for choice are changing schools, and none of the 300 eligible middle school students is switching.
In 2003-04, however, Curry recalled that about 20 to 25 students from North Tahoe transferred out due to NCLB school choice. These transfers, he said, were primarily due to parents’ concerns about changes in the middle school’s schedule. This year, with the new schedule running smoothly, he reported that several students are back at North Tahoe Middle School, and that he knew of no additional students who transferred out.

Supplemental Educational Services

In 2003-04, only 65 students at North Tahoe Middle School were eligible for supplemental educational services. Participation was low. Four students signed up for services through the Boys and Girls Club near Kings Beach, but only one student followed through with the tutoring, Curry said. In 2004-05, about the same number of students were eligible and about 12 participated.

Curry said he thought students often had other activities after school, like sports or jobs. He also speculated that the school’s own after-school tutoring program drew students away from official supplemental educational services. Because Tahoe-Truckee has been identified for improvement, the school cannot use the Title I set-aside to pay for this tutoring. Instead, teachers volunteer to stay after school and offer 45 minutes of tutoring to students three days a week on-site. This after-school tutoring started four years ago. At that time, the school compensated teachers by allowing them to purchase additional materials for the school or their classrooms, Curry said. As of 2004-05, the school no longer had this materials fund in its budget. Even so, four to five teachers continue to tutor after school, Curry explained. Students take the high school bus home after their tutoring sessions.

Teacher Qualifications, Support, and Professional Development

HIGHLY QUALIFIED TEACHERS

About 82% of the district’s 200 teachers were “highly qualified” by state definition as of June 2005. Teachers who didn’t meet the state definition were asked to come up with a plan for coursework and professional development that the district could support, Lasher said. Since putting these plans into action, the percentage of those who are highly qualified has risen to about 85%, Lasher added.

In general, Tahoe-Truckee has had difficulty attracting and keeping highly qualified teachers, Lasher said, because of a combination of lower wages and a higher cost of living, since the area includes some Lake Tahoe ski resorts and caters to tourists. “We hired a math teacher for the high school, but she was there only two weeks before she quit,” she said, explaining that the teacher got a better job offer from another district.

North Tahoe Middle School has special problems finding highly qualified teachers, Curry said. “NCLB has forced us into hiring single-subject teachers,” he explained, noting that before NCLB he could hire elementary school teachers with general certification for most classes. Now teachers in the middle grades must be highly qualified in the specific subject they teach. “The pool of applicants is just so low. The good ones are usually taken by the high school,” he observed.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Professional development has been important to raising student achievement in Tahoe-Truckee, district and school officials said. For example, at North Tahoe Middle School, Curry attributed improved teaching to the fact that all but one of his teachers completed the state’s Assembly Bill (AB) 466 training. This program provides 40 hours of intensive training in the state’s adopted curriculum and 80 hours of follow-up training. The teacher who has yet to complete the training is new to the school this year.
Getting providers to come to Tahoe-Truckee to provide training has been difficult, because the district is small and somewhat isolated, Lasher said. To combat this problem, Lasher herself became a state-approved AB 466 trainer. To cut down on costs, the district has offered this training on rotation. This solution doesn’t always work, though, because substitutes are hard to come by, Lasher explained. “It’s just one hurdle after another,” she said. “I can’t imagine what providing training is like for even smaller districts.”

**Paraprofessional Qualifications and Support**

Tahoe-Truckee has 10 Title I paraprofessionals, 50% of whom are highly qualified according to state definitions. All five of the paraprofessionals who do not currently meet state definitions are actively pursuing qualification, Lasher said. She is providing the professional development for these paraprofessionals and anticipates that all will become highly qualified by NCLB’s June 2006 deadline.

**Funding and Costs**

Tahoe-Truckee has declining enrollment and declining Title I funding. Many families move to Carson City or Reno, Lasher said. Title I funding for 2003-04 was about $409,000, but only about $335,000 for 2004-05. Some cuts have been made at the central office by combining jobs. For example, Lasher is the director of curriculum but also oversees state and federal programs, as well as textbooks and assessment.

Schools have also experienced reductions in funds. For example, North Tahoe Middle School had about $70,000 in Title I funding last year, but this year has about $30,000, Principal Curry reported. Personnel costs that had been Title I expenses at the school were picked up by general funds, Curry said, but few Title I funds remained for materials or other expenses. Because the district was identified for program improvement for 2005-06 and because an additional school must offer supplemental educational services this year, more of the district’s Title I funds must be set aside in 2005-06 than had to be set aside previously.

**Data File—Tahoe-Truckee Joint Unified School District**

**Location:** California

**Type:** Rural

**Number of Schools**

- Total: 11
- Elementary: 5
- Middle/junior high: 2
- High schools: 3
- Other: 2 (alternative education)

**Number of Title I schools:** 5

**Student Enrollment and Demographics**

- Total enrollment: 4,400
  - White: 72%
  - Latino: 26%
  - Asian: 1%
  - American Indian: 1%
Low-income students: 31%
English language learners: 18%
Students with disabilities: 12%

**Teachers**
- Total number of teachers: 200
- Percentage meeting NCLB “highly qualified” requirements: 85%

**Paraprofessionals**
- Total number of Title I instructional paraprofessionals: 10
- Percentage meeting NCLB “highly qualified” requirements: 50%

**Total Number That Did Not Make AYP Based on 2004-05 Testing**
Title I and non-Title I schools that did not make AYP, including those in improvement, restructuring, or corrective action: 5

**Number of Title I Schools in Improvement, Restructuring, or Corrective Action**

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**Number of Schools Offering Choice and/or SES**

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