

2024

Strengthen our Community (SoC) 2024 Report



Strengthen our Community

The Mission: Strengthen our Community (SoC) is a non-profit (501c3) committed to developing cooperative, caring solutions to regional needs, with a special emphasis on education, families, good governance, and environmental sustainability.

The overall goal is to “Strengthen our Community” by confronting the important but complex issues in the region that have been difficult or impossible to resolve, thus making our community even better for the next generation.

Why a Starfish? “One day, a man was strolling along the beach when he spotted a boy tossing a starfish back into the ocean. The man asked, “What are you doing?” The boy responded, “If I don’t throw them back, they’ll die.” The man said, don’t you realize there are thousands of starfish on the beach? You can’t make a difference!” The boy stooped down, picked up another starfish, and flung it back into the surf. Then, he said... **“I made a difference for that one.”**

Now Imagine those starfish as our kids in school or those parents who can’t find childcare, and instead of one boy, the entire community is on the beach, united in the effort to throw starfish back into the sea. We can make a real difference together on these issues that will “Strengthen our Community.”

-Inspired by the story of the starfish, penned by Loren Eiseley.

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Letter from Mike Kazmierski, Executive Director

Dear Community Partners,

As the Executive Director of Strengthen our Community (SoC), I am honored to share our incredible progress and impact during our inaugural year. Our mission to enhance the lives of children, families, and communities in Northern Nevada is more than just words; it is a promise to create substantial change. This effort would not have been possible without the counsel and support of our many partners ([see Annex D](#)) and our founder, Michael Dermody, Chairman and CEO of Dermody Properties. We're forging a new future for our community with the partnership and support of these dedicated and passionate organizations, groups, and individuals.



Our strategic vision, established in February 2024, outlined our focus on critical issues such as education, family well-being, good governance, and environmental sustainability. We refined our priorities and identified the most pressing challenges in our community. These initiatives, outlined in [Annex A](#), are the foundation of our work.

Our research and partnerships, particularly with the Washoe County School District, non-profits, and government entities—exposed the complexity of issues like chronic absenteeism and the scarcity of quality/affordable childcare while identifying potential solutions. With education as a focus, we are also promoting universal pre-K, identifying and supporting solutions to retain teachers, and working to add almost 600 new early education teachers in the region over the next several years.

Other initiatives include advancing the success of the Brain Health Initiative, raising awareness and providing solutions to the 15% of our children with dyslexia, supporting refugee resettlement, advocating for arts integration throughout the classrooms and the community, expanding Family Resource Centers, and expanding healthcare access for schoolchildren.

Our success in 2024 is a testament to the community's collaborative spirit. These accomplishments and the ongoing support of our partners inspire us to continue our collective efforts. Our heartfelt thanks go out to these organizations, groups, and individuals as we work together to ***strengthen our community***.

Sincerely,

Mike Kazmierski
Executive Director,
Strengthen our Community

Establish And Prioritize Projects to Address

Research to determine the status and potential partners in each project area was conducted over the first few months, from February to May ([see list of key events and activities in Annex E](#)). SoC engaged with the Washoe County School District and many other non-profit and government organizations to better understand the challenges associated with several project areas. SoC selected chronic absenteeism as the top priority and set up a community working group to understand why nearly 15,000 students in the WCSD were absent for over 10% of the school year, 33 days on average. SoC engaged on many other important projects, as detailed below, and goals were set for several priority projects.

Prioritized Overview of SoC's Key Project Area Successes

A. Chronic Absenteeism (CA) - Goal: To get to pre-pandemic level by 2027 - 15k to 7.5k

SoC set up and ran a community working group (over six months) that analyzed the problem and identified fourteen areas that adversely impacted students' ability to attend school. Eight of these initiatives were set as action items and task force members were identified to work on each of these issues. ***This is the only community plan developed to address chronic absenteeism in the U.S.***

1. The top priority in the plan was to have a site coordinator or engagement specialist in every middle school to assist individual students and help them overcome their barriers to attendance.
2. SoC led the effort to raise over \$500,000 to more than double the number of site coordinators in the middle schools from six to thirteen out of the seventeen middle schools.
3. For the list of the initiatives identified to address chronic absenteeism ([see Annex B](#)).

B. Education – Universal Pre-K - Goal: 100% of WCSD four-year-olds in pre-school by 2028

1. SoC detailed the benefits of universal pre-K in an opinion piece in the Reno Gazette Journal.
2. Several trips to key leaders in the state were conducted to promote the need to fund this effort.
3. SoC commissioned a poll and worked with the Guinn Center to conduct research.
4. ***There is now legislation being proposed for this session to support universal pre-K in Nevada.***
5. WCSD is working to develop a plan to implement as soon as 2025.

C. Workforce Development (WFD) Teacher Training

1. The shortage of teachers, more than 1,500 statewide, makes expanding childcare and preschool difficult. On average, one early education teacher or assistant is needed for every ten kids.
2. UNLV has a paraprofessional-to-teacher program that can get paraprofessionals already in the district certified as teachers in one year at no cost to the student.
3. While the UNR College of Education is not participating in this program, SoC worked with UNLV, WCSD, and TMCC to set it up in Northern Nevada with a goal of adding up to 150 new teachers per year. With the planned increase in childcare spaces (4,000) and universal pre-K (2,500), the region will need more than 600 new early education teachers in the next three years.
4. SoC has launched a separate initiative, “Teachers Appreciation & Retention,” to show appreciation to educators and to help attract and retain teachers.

D. Increase Quality/Affordable Childcare Spaces - Goal: From 11,000 to 15,000 spaces by 2028

1. Recent studies show Nevada as a childcare desert, and the Children's Cabinet assesses the region's need for 25,000 childcare slots; unfortunately, we currently have less than 11,000.
2. SoC has developed a plan, in concert with the Children's Cabinet, to address this issue in three ways: support in-home childcare, incentivize the construction of new childcare facilities, and make it easy for employers to add childcare spaces in or around their facilities.
3. SoC is working to develop a model to build a childcare facility on donated land in partnership with a childcare provider who will operate the center while gaining equity in the facility over time.
4. In partnership with the Children's Cabinet, SoC is developing a plan to help employers add on-site childcare while protecting the employer from day-to-day childcare operations or liability.

E. Legislative Agenda

1. A legislative agenda was developed to achieve long-term, sustainable success in these initiatives ([*see Annex C, Legislative Agenda*](#)).
2. The legislative agenda was developed in concert with our partners statewide and will be monitored and promoted by our lobbyist, Mendy Elliott, with the firm of Flynn Giudici.

F. Other Project Area Successes

1. Support and market the Brain Health Initiative, headquartered in Reno, Nevada. Their data has demonstrated success, with more than 80% of patients reporting positive outcomes. Electromagnetic Brain Pulse (EMBP) therapy treats fatigue, sleep disorders, depression, anxiety, PTSD, autism, substance abuse, and many other conditions.
2. The Teacher Appreciation and Retention Initiative, in partnership with WCSD, the Reno-Sparks Chamber, and local media, aims to promote educator recognition activities throughout May and reach every educator in the region.
3. Increase in Family Resource Centers, as identified as a need in the chronic absenteeism plan. SoC will lead a fundraising effort to maintain our current five centers and establish two additional centers in the region to support economically disadvantaged families.
4. Establish a Ukraine Refugee Program to assist families relocating to Reno-Sparks after being displaced from their homes in Ukraine.
5. Promoting and supporting the arts in the community is vital to the region's long-term success. Several SoC initiatives include growing the Reno Tahoe International Art Show, developing a building murals program, and expanding art in the classrooms.
6. Healthcare for Kids in School is a new SoC initiative focused on finding innovative ways to offer more healthcare services and assist families in accessing various healthcare options, addressing a major reason for chronic absenteeism.
7. Raise funds to pay off the school lunch debt acquired by WCSD students unable to pay for their school lunches. Ensure that every child in WCSD will have access to lunch regardless of their ability to pay now and in the future.
8. SoC advocated for and supported the WCSD in its decision to ban phones in the classrooms.

Annual Report Summary 2024

The snapshot of the 2024-year touches on the SoC's first years' work and success, which would not have been possible without the support of countless organizations and individuals, many listed in [Annex D, Key Partners](#).

Of special note is the commitment and excellence of the SoC team, including Katy Simon Holland, the strategic advisor and WCSD Liaison, Pam Matteoni, and Lindsey Rowles, the executive assistants who contributed immeasurably to the organization's success.

Finally, our thanks go to John Thayer and the Team at Thayer Green for their diligent support and assistance in handling our 501c3 application process, managing our financial operations, and maintaining our building.

Attachments

[Annex A: Strengthen our Community Project Summary January 2025](#)

[Annex B: Community Task Force - Initiatives to Address Chronic Absenteeism](#)

[Annex C: Strengthen our Community Legislative Agenda](#)

[Annex D: Key Partners](#)

[Annex E: SoC Executive Director Key Events and Activities Report 2024](#)

Annex A

Project Summary 2025

<u>1. Chronic Absenteeism (CA) Crisis</u> <u>Goal: To pre-pandemic level by 2027 - 15k to 7.5K</u> a. PR Campaign on Attendance b. Look at Helping Smithridge Elementary – Follow up c. Funding Request – Incline Village d. Initiate fundraising campaign for 2025	<u>7. Teacher Appreciation & Retention</u> a. Develop Community Plan for Teacher Appreciation b. Work with WCSD c. Set May as Teacher Appreciation Month d. Work with Camber to get Businesses involved
<u>2. Education – Preschool / Pre- K</u> <u>Goal: 100% of WCSD kids in pre-school by 2028</u> a. Work with Children’s Advocacy for Statewide effort b. Expansion Needs for teachers – WCSD / UNLV c. Meet with Guinn Center – Early Ed studies	<u>8. Dyslexia Recognition and Response</u> a. Understand WCSD response to Dyslexia. b. Find out how to educate teachers 1 st Grade c. Connect Fit Learning with Dep of ED & UNLV d. Meet WCSD to expand services 12/11
<u>3. Workforce Development (WFD) Teacher Training</u> a. Develop a program that targets MS/HS kids b. Work with WCSD to expand in schools – Ann c. Develop a teacher training program TMCC & UNLV	<u>9. Children’s Cabinet</u> a. Work with CC on efforts to reduce CA. b. Engage on no phone in classroom policy c. Meet Kim C - support is needed for businesses d. Work to grow from 5 FRCs to 7 in 2025
<u>4. Childcare</u> <u>Goal: Increase 11,000 to 15,000 by 2028</u> a. Follow-up meeting– Small Strides Mike b. Draft Plan to get from 11,000 to 15,000 c. Develop a template for employer ease -Kim Cullen	<u>10. Arts and Culture</u> a. Support Awards event RTI Arts Show – Sep b. Encourage Arts in every school – RGJ c. Get RTIA support from RSCVA d. Support Art murals on buildings effort
<u>5. Ukraine Refugee Program</u> a. Work with UNR Carina, Status on “pause” b. Meet with Local Ukrainian Rep Svitlana Rady c. Set up a program for 4 families - Call this week. d. Have Lana meet Tammy – Jan 23rd	<u>11. Other / Hawkins House</u> a. Meet Remaining Hawkins brother - photos. b. Sarah Frantz – NMA Box of Records c. Engrid Burnette – Set up next meeting – Feb 4th
<u>6. Mental Health and Homeless – Brain Health</u> a. Work with County STAR Program b. Identify potential for Latino clinic at Oddie – Oscar c. Engage WCSD Mental Health – Julia Ratti d. Get update on Cares Campus	<u>12. Healthcare for Kids</u> a. Meet with Renown to see how to get them involved b. Help get vans for principals c. Work with CHA to get medical support in schools d. WCSD Researching options

Annex B

Community Task Force and Independent Initiatives

Community Task Force - Initiatives to Address Chronic Absenteeism

1	On Site Coordinators	Dedicate at least One Site Coordinator (CIS) or Prevention Specialist (WCSD) at every school.
2	Access to Basic Needs	Expanding Family Resource Centers AND provide access to basic needs for families.
3	Transportation Innovation	Develop innovative approaches to transportation (to school & for before/after school programs).
4	Childcare	Expand Before and After School Childcare.
5	Academic Struggle	Work to prevent students from falling behind in academics.
6	Parental Community Resources	Engage and Educate parents on the community resources available and the importance of attendance and education.
7	Community Awareness	Launch a community awareness campaign on rising absenteeism and the long -term impacts on the community.
8	Reduced Subs	Ensure that every student has a teacher (Reduce use of subs).

Additional Issues - Addressed Independent of the Task Force

9. Expand Before & After Programming to Include Access to Extracurricular Activities
10. Increase Mental Health support for students
11. Consider Additional Alternative Academic Sites – HS Priority
12. Consider later start times, 8:30 versus 7:30 am
13. Establish a No-Phones in Teaching Areas or in Schools
14. Engage Mentors

Annex C

Strengthen our Community - Legislative Initiatives 2025

A. Universal Pre-K (Every Nevada 4-Year-Old Will Have Universal Pre-K by 2028)

- a. Fully invest in universal pre-K for all Nevada 4-year-olds.
- b. Develop programs to expand the number of early childhood education teachers.
- c. Provide funding for school district efforts to achieve this goal.

B. Childcare

- a. Expand access to quality, affordable childcare with state general fund investments in the Child Care Development Fund.
- b. Limit HOA's ability to restrict home-based childcare services.
- c. Streamline processes and reduce fees for all childcare provider start-up costs.
- d. Provide incentives for employers to add on-site childcare for their employees. The program must add spaces, or it will not help address the state's childcare shortage.
- e. Develop programs to expand the number of early childhood education teachers needed to staff the increased childcare spaces added.
- f. Donate land or lease government facilities at no cost to certified childcare providers or non-profits working to add quality childcare and lower childcare costs.

C. Chronic Absenteeism

- a. Fund a site coordinator or engagement specialist in every middle school to engage one-on-one with chronically absent students and to get them the services they or their families need to reduce their barriers to attendance.
- b. Increase the number of family resource centers and fully fund them.

D. Make Nevada More Attractive to Teachers

- a. Accept reciprocal licensure if issuing state requirements are equal to or more restrictive than Nevada's.
- b. Pay all costs associated with the teacher application process, including, but not limited to, Praxis tests, fingerprints, and background checks. Do not require a substitute teacher who has met all the requirements to reapply.
- c. Provide teachers with six weeks of paid parental leave and up to six more weeks of unpaid parental leave, as most young teachers do not have the time to accrue the necessary vacation hours to use for parental leave.
- d. Provide teachers with on-site or near-site quality childcare at significantly reduced costs. One-third of new teachers quit in the first five years.

E. On-Site Health Care for Students and Families at School

- a. Support having an advanced practice registered nurse (APRN) or PA at every school who is available (in person or through video conferencing) at least one day every week. To provide initial screening and some prescription drug support. Health issues often result in chronic absenteeism.

F. Reduce Classroom Sizes – Get to the National Average by 2030

- a. Work with partners to achieve classroom size reductions.

G. Eliminate Minimum Credit Requirements for High School Seniors

- a. Do not require the unneeded credits to graduate or provide exceptions for seniors with a job.
- b. Pursuant to Nevada Revised Statutes (NRS 387.123), students are required to take a minimum academic load equal to the number of classes (or periods) in their home high school, which counts as meeting the minimum daily minute requirement (NAC 387.131) per semester during each year (classes). In the Washoe County School District, most high schools have 6-8 periods in their academic schedule. The only exception to this is a student who is college and career-ready or has an exemption for good cause.
- c. Students with an approved exemption for merit or cause will be enrolled in at least 2/3 of the academic load (rounding up to the nearest whole class) in their senior year. Students who do not have an approved exemption for merit or cause ***must be enrolled in a full academic load*** in their senior year.

H. Consider Adjusting Start Times for High School and Middle School

- a. Anne Arundel County **shifted school start times** to 9:15 a.m. for middle school and 8:30 a.m. for high school in the 2022-2023 school year.
- b. A report from the Abell Foundation proposes shifting middle and high school start times to no earlier than 8:30 a.m.
- c. Research suggests that the best school start times for high school students are no earlier than 8:30 AM. This recommendation is based on studies showing that adolescents naturally have later sleep-wake cycles due to biological changes during puberty, making it difficult for them to fall asleep and wake up early.

Annex D

Strengthen our Community – Key Partners

- Boys & Girls Club
- Brain Health Foundation
- Brookings Institute
- Communities in Schools of Nevada (CIS)
- Community Foundation of Western Nevada
- Cordillera Film Festival
- Children’s Cabinet
- City of Reno
- City of Sparks
- Community Health Alliance
- Council for a Better Nevada
- Dermody Properties and Dermody Properties Foundation
- Desert Resource Institute
- Educate Nevada Now
- Education Alliance
- Economic Development Authority of Western Nevada (EDAWN)
- Fit Learners
- Flynn Giudici Government Affairs
- International Center
- KPS 3
- Nevada Department of Education
- Nevada Museum of Art
- November Inc
- OnStrategy
- PBS - KNPB (Channel 5), branded PBS Reno
- Public Education Foundation
- Reno-Sparks Chamber of Commerce
- Reno Gazette-Journal (RGJ)
- Reno Tahoe International Art Show
- Small Strides
- The Blueprint Collaborative
- The Guinn Center
- Truckee Meadows Community College
- United Construction
- United Way of Western Nevada
- University of Nevada Las Vegas College of Education
- Washoe Education Association
- Washoe County
- Washoe County School District (WCSD)

Annex E

SoC Executive Director Key Events and Activities Report 2024

Executive Team: Mike Kazmierski, Pam Matteoni, and Lindsey Rowles

Press Interviews & Media Coverage

03/27	Video Interview for Katy Simon Holland - Hall of Fame
06/13	RGJ Interview RE: "New Nonprofit to Take on Region's Greatest Challenges"
07/17	RGJ - Editorial "Washoe's Chronic Absenteeism Crisis — What We Can Do About It"
08/04	RGJ - Editorial on "It's Time We Support Universal Pre-K"
09/20	RGJ - Editorial on "You Can Fix Our Broken Election System!"
09/24	KOLO Interview RE: Chronic Absenteeism
09/26	KOLO Interview RE: "WCSD and SoC Addresses Chronic Absenteeism"
09/26	KOLO Interview RE: "SoC and the School District Collaborate on Chronic Absenteeism"
09/27	KTVN Interview RE: "WCSD Partners with Nonprofit to Address Chronic Absenteeism"
10/24	RGJ - Editorial on "It's Time to Treat the Brain Like the Organ It Is"
11/08	Interview with Jessica Carcia - Nevada Appeal Chronic Absenteeism
11/20	RGJ - Editorial on "It Is Time for WCSD To Ban Cell Phone Use in The Classroom"
11/21	Interview with JLynn – Reno Media Group Chronic Absenteeism
11/25	KOLO Interview RE: "WCSD Partners with SoC to Tackle Chronic Absenteeism"
11/25	Nevada Appeal - "Nonprofit Tackles Absenteeism"
11/25	KOLO Interview RE: Chronic Absenteeism
11/26	Facebook Nevada Appeal - Interview with "Former EDAWN CEO Mike Kazmierski Never Was Afraid of the Demands Confronting Northern Nevada's Workforce"
11/26	KOLO Interview RE: "New Details on Multi-Year Plan to Reduce Chronic Absenteeism"
12/04	KOLO Interview RE: "Chronic Absenteeism Burdens WCSD Student Proficiency"
12/05	KOLO Interview RE: "WCSD Chronic Absenteeism"
12/10	YouTube Interview: "Interview with Mike Kazmierski, Executive Director of SoC"

Speaking Engagements/Presentations

06/11	Master of Ceremonies for the Brain Health promotion event
07/09	Presentation at Children's Cabinet Board Meeting
09/26	Chronic Absenteeism Task Force Plan Rollout to the Community
09/24	Presentation to the Community Foundation Staff on Chronic Absenteeism
10/16	Presentation to the Woman's Giving Circle
11/19	Speaking at the Student Advisory Council Meeting at Galena

Travel

03/12	CBN Board of Director Meeting (UNLV Blackfire Innovation, Las Vegas)
05/07	Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health Lunch and Tour (Las Vegas)
05/07	Larry lunch with tour and presentation (Las Vegas)
05/13	Meeting with Tami Hance-Lehr (Communities in Schools, Las Vegas)
05/13	Meeting with Bradley Mayer (Argentum Partners, Las Vegas)
05/14	CBN Bi-Monthly Board of Director Meeting (Las Vegas)
05/14	Meeting with Tina Quigley (LVGEA, Las Vegas)
05/15	Coffee with Amanda Morgan (Savor Coffee, Las Vegas)
06/11	CBN Board of Director Meeting (UNLV Blackfire Innovation, Las Vegas)
07/16	Board Meeting (SNV Training Room, Las Vegas)
09/09	Meeting with Tom Kaplan (Las Vegas)
09/09	Meeting with Patti Oya (NV Department of Education, Las Vegas)
09/10	CBN Board of Director Meeting (UNLV Blackfire Innovation, Las Vegas)
09/10	Coffee with Shannon Bilbray Axelrod (Starbucks, Las Vegas)
09/10	Meeting with Tina Quigley (LVGEA, Las Vegas)
09/10	Cocktails with Brett Burke (Piero's Italian Cuisine, Las Vegas)
09/11	Meeting with Ed C., Tami, Marketing and Development (Las Vegas)
10/15	Board Meeting (SNV Training Room, Las Vegas)
11/06	2024 CBN Annual Meeting (Investment Counsel Company, Las Vegas)

Community Boards

- Council for a Better Nevada
- Communities in Schools of Nevada (CIS)