



**RTI**  
**AT WORK™**

Evidence of Excellence

DVUSD faculty pause for smiles with PLC associate John Hannigan

## Deer Valley Unified School District

PHOENIX, ARIZONA

Deer Valley Unified School District strengthened student behavior and school culture by implementing *Behavior Solutions*, leading to fewer suspensions, improved staff satisfaction, and increased academic achievement across all grade levels.



Solution Tree

# Deer Valley Unified School District

## PHOENIX, ARIZONA



### ► 42 SCHOOLS

- 15 K–6 schools
- 16 K–8 schools
- 3 middle schools
- 5 high schools
- 2 alternative schools
- 1 online academy

### ► DEMOGRAPHICS

- 32,131 students
- 34% free or reduced lunch
- 4.4 % English learners
- 13% students with special needs

### ► RACIAL/ETHNIC PERCENTAGES

- 61.45% White
- 22.91% Hispanic/Latino
- 5.57% Multiracial
- 5.2% Asian
- 3.52% Black
- 1% American Indian
- 0.39% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander

*Deer Valley Unified School District, located in Phoenix, Arizona, serves preK–12 students with 42 schools across 367 square miles. It serves communities including Phoenix, Glendale, Peoria, Anthem, New River, and surrounding unincorporated areas of northwest Maricopa County. The district's vision is to graduate lifelong learners who will successfully compete, lead, and positively impact the world. Their mission is to provide extraordinary educational opportunities to every learner, according to the district's website.*

<https://www.dvUSD.org/>

Please note that all data and people mentioned in this story represent solely the time frame in which Solution Tree actively worked with the school or district and the time frame in which the school or district committed to implementing processes and practices set forth by Solution Tree. Building and district leaders and staff featured in Evidence of Excellence stories may have changed since the stories were published.

### ► CHALLENGE

While academic multitiered system of supports (MTSS) structures were in place at Deer Valley Unified School District (DVUSD), the need for a more systematic approach to behavioral support became apparent. Administrators observed an increase in behavioral incidents post-COVID, a trend supported by rising suspension rates and anecdotal reports from educators, including Jessica Tucker, MTSS behavior specialist, regarding students' difficulties with emotional regulation.

Adding to these challenges was the changing composition of the teaching staff, with many new educators entering the profession through alternative pathways, often lacking experience in behavior management. The fluidity of staffing due to substitute rotations and increased class sizes added further strain, highlighting the urgent need to reinforce proactive behavioral supports throughout DVUSD.

### ► IMPLEMENTATION

In 2021, DVUSD embarked on a multiyear implementation plan, spearheaded by Jessica Tucker and Gary Diaz Zehrbach, PhD, deputy superintendent of administrative leadership and services, to address student behavior.

The shift began when an MTSS specialist from DVUSD, attending the Summit on RTI at Work™ in Austin, Texas, came across *Behavior Solutions* by John Hannigan, Jessica Djabrayan Hannigan, Mike Mattos, and Austin Buffum. Inspired by the book, Dr. Gary Diaz Zehrbach championed a districtwide book study in the 2021–2022 school year, involving leaders from all departments. This initiative laid the foundation for a shared understanding and commitment to change.

During the 2022–2023 school year, district and pilot teams participated in the Behavior Solutions: A Practical Road Map for SEL Success in All Tiers virtual workshop, deepening their understanding and laying the foundation for active implementation.

Soon after, the DVUSD team held a pivotal professional development meeting with John and Jessica Hannigan to officially launch a multiyear coaching plan. This meeting was instrumental in clarifying the district's vision, outlining expected outcomes, and reinforcing the depth of its long-term commitment.

To further support their efforts, district and pilot school teams attended the RTI at Work Institute in Phoenix, Arizona, where school leadership teams began formalizing their implementation strategies. This collaborative work with the Hannigans helped establish the framework for a K–12 districtwide rollout of Behavior Solutions, ensuring alignment and consistency across all sites.

In the 2023–2024 school year, DVUSD reinforced its commitment by integrating essential academic and social behaviors into its five-year strategic plan and Portrait of a Graduate initiative. This period also marked the start of ongoing districtwide training on Tier 1 behavioral prevention strategies, involving all school behavior teams and direct support from central office leaders in collaboration with the Hannigans.



What's most powerful is hearing assistant principals say this work has truly transformed their role. Where they once spent the majority of their day managing discipline, they now spend their time building relationships, supporting instruction, and doing the work they're passionate about. That transformation is happening across the board, and it's making a real difference in our schools."

—Gary Diaz Zehrbach, PhD, Deputy Superintendent of Administrative Leadership and Services, Deer Valley Unified School District

## ► RESULTS

Three years into implementing Behavior Solutions, DVUSD is seeing measurable success. A consistent, proactive approach to student behavior has helped foster a more positive school culture where students feel supported and emotionally equipped to learn.

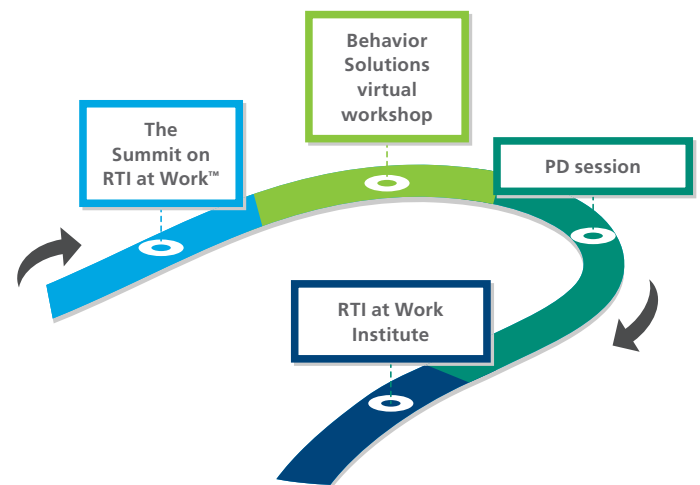
The district has also achieved remarkable academic success.

- 27 schools earned an "A" rating from the Arizona State Board of Education in the 2023–24 school year
- 28 schools received the prestigious A+ School of Excellence award. Students consistently outperformed the state average on FY 2024 assessments by 13 points in math, 11 in English language arts, and 18 in science.
- 9 schools were recognized by the state of Arizona for effective schoolwide Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports Systems in Tier 1, and one school was recognized for PBIS implementation in Tiers 1, 2, and 3.

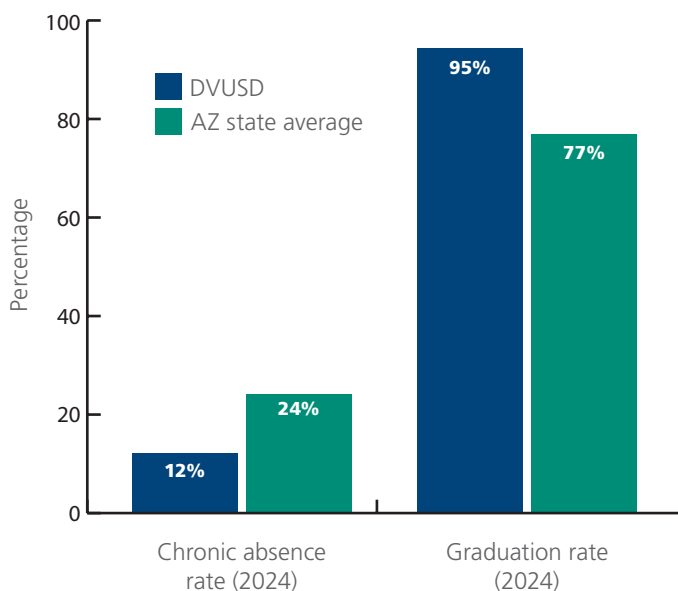


### Other notable successes include:

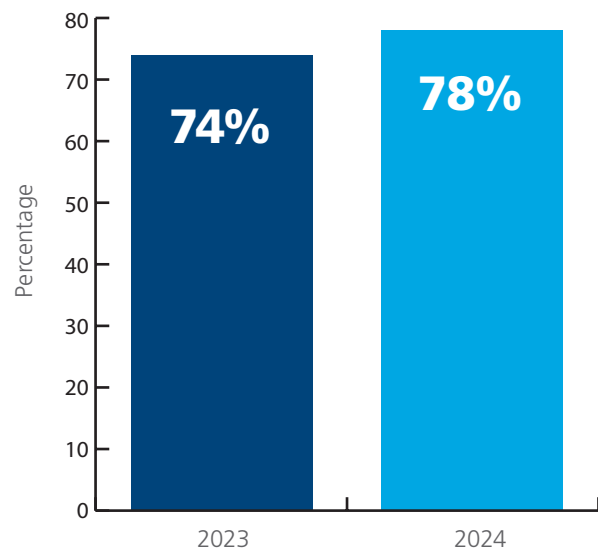
- Chronic absences for all students in DVUSD stand at 12% in 2024, significantly lower than the Arizona state average of 24%.
- The 4-year graduation rate also increased to 94.6%, 17.6 points above the state average.
- The Districtwide Employee Satisfaction Survey, which measures whether students are generally orderly and well-behaved, showed an increase from 74% in 2023 to 78% in 2024.



### Student Behavior & Performance Metrics



### Employees Reporting Orderly, Well-Behaved Students







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