In EDU 201 (Introduction to Elementary Education), one of the earliest field experiences, candidates complete a 30 hour field experience in an elementary classroom. In a personal essay about their philosophy of education, candidates discuss their beliefs about the role of teachers, the beliefs about students and how they learn best, and the purpose of schooling. Candidates plan and teach a lesson to students in an elementary classroom, including an assessment of the students. In collaboration with the lead teacher, candidates determine what and when to teach. The lesson plan must be approved by the lead teacher and course instructor in advance of teaching it. After the lesson is taught, candidates reflect on (a) what went well, (b) what didn’t go well, (c) what they would do differently if they were to teach this lesson again and (d) how did the students do on their assessment. Webcampus support includes a lesson plan format and more details on what to incorporate in the candidate’s reflection.

In subsequent field experiences, candidates must determine students’ present levels of performance so that they may plan appropriately challenging lessons. All lessons must address standards and include an assessment of student learning outcomes. Then after teaching the lesson, candidates reflect on their own performance and the students’ performance. For example in EDEL 433 (Teaching and Learning Elementary Math), candidates create four lesson plans that integrate research, common core and state standards, and district curriculum. Candidates gain experience in effectively developing “a lesson plan that builds on the students’ background knowledge and abilities.” Each lesson includes an assessment of what students learned and a reflection on the candidate’s teaching and this drives the development of subsequent lessons. Candidates also develop a math unit plan that includes the “big picture” of concepts they want students to learn, standards, student learning outcomes, a “concept map about how concepts are connected to each other” and pre and post assessments of students.

Interestingly, the WCSD mission is: “To create an education system where all students achieve academic success, develop personal and civic responsibility, and achieve career and college readiness for the 21st Century.” Furthermore, the title of the superintendent’s action plan is “every child, by name and face, to graduation”. Among many things, this action plan calls for closing the achievement gap, increasing the graduation rate, and differentiated learning. All school personnel actively participate in site based professional learning communities in which they collect, analyze and reflect on individual and school-wide student performance data and make comparisons with district-wide student performance data. The unit’s candidates and interns not only learn about but are actually required participate in these activities during their field experiences and internships.

Supporting learning for all students is an important cornerstone of internship too. Student achievement in Nevada schools is among the lowest in the nation though the local school district is ranked among the highest in this state. Student achievement is slowly climbing statewide. The internship responded to this development by engaging interns in data driven instruction on a daily basis as part of the internship teaching-learning-assessment cycle (3b2.1 pg 35). Interns participate in the professional learning communities at their schools where they are immersed in performance data, curriculum mapping, collaborative planning and assessments. In their bi-weekly reflections journal entries, interns reflect on topics such as: informal assessment (students’ observable behaviors or lack thereof) that indicate the effectiveness and appropriateness of their lesson; appropriately challenging lessons (how to determine the difficulty of a lesson and where this information comes from, and student characteristics that influence this); instructional decisions such as why adjustments are made in the moment, when re-teaching is necessary; student performance (students’ progress at different rates, whose fault is that, how student performance might cause you to adjust future lessons); class discussions (strategies used to encourage student participation and encourage desirable behaviors); knowing your students (student rapport, interpersonal behaviors); outreach (communication and community and family engagement); and differentiation (strategies to meet the different needs of students).