School Improvement and Transformation Monitoring Visit Summary Report
Beginning of Year
(SITM–BOY)

School: New Mexico Connections Academy   **LEA**: New Mexico Connections Academy

School Leader: Sandy Beery   **LEA Leader**: Sandy Beery

SITM Team Leader: Lizette Ridgeway   **Date**: October 9, 2024

School Description

New Mexico Connections Academy (NMCA), established in 2013, is a public virtual school that offers free online education to students in grades 4-12. The school is committed to providing flexible, personalized learning experiences, allowing students to progress at their own pace while receiving the support they need. Certified teachers lead students through digital tools and physical resources, ensuring a high-quality education backed by Pearson's customized curriculum. NMCA's focus on personalized support and flexible scheduling allows students to thrive in a non-traditional learning environment tailored to their needs.

Serving approximately 1,500 students, NMCA has a diverse student body. Roughly 1,000 students are in grades 9-12, and the school plans to expand its enrollment to 2,000 students in the coming years. The student population comprises 56.2% Hispanic or Latino, 34% White, and 5.6% American Indian or Alaskan Native students. Additionally, the school serves a variety of student needs, with 21% of students receiving special education services, 4% on 504 plans, and 4% identified as gifted. NMCA is also home to 179 English learners (ELs), reflecting its commitment to supporting various student backgrounds and learning profiles.

The school's mission is to help students who seek an alternative to traditional classroom settings to maximize their potential and meet high-performance standards. This is achieved through individualized learning programs, access to New Mexico-certified teachers, and a strong emphasis on parental involvement. NMCA's vision is to be an innovative, cutting-edge school that fosters student success through an engaged and supportive community.

School Successes and Celebrations

New Mexico Connections Academy (NMCA) has significantly improved graduation rates and supported student performance outcomes. A key highlight has been the improvement in the 5-year cohort graduation rate. For the 2022 cohort, NMCA reached a 57% graduation rate, an increase from the typical 48-49% range. This improvement is attributed to the school's commitment to refining its data and focusing on extended graduation timelines for students who need additional time to complete their high school education. The overall graduation rate for the 4-year cohort in 2023 stood at 63.2%, showcasing steady progress in supporting students toward on-time completion, which will continue to be a focus.

In the 2024 school year, NMCA had a senior class of approximately 192 students. Of this

group, 190 graduated, with only three students not meeting the requirements. This high graduation success rate showcases the effectiveness of the school's strategies and interventions to keep students on track for completion.

NMCA's commitment to student success is also evident in the strategic actions outlined in the DASH Plan. The school implemented an advisory strategy focused on supporting off-cohort students. As the number of off-cohort students has declined, NMCA has adjusted its approach to focus more on 9th to 11th graders, ensuring early intervention for students who may be at risk of falling behind. Additionally, the school has introduced targeted support for 12th-grade students to ensure they have the resources and guidance to graduate successfully.

NM DASH Development and Implementation

New Mexico Connections Academy (NMCA) developed its Annual and 90-Day Plan as part of its Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) designation, primarily aiming to improve graduation outcomes. Since this was the first year the school was required to create a DASH Plan, much of the initial focus was on cleaning up and analyzing the available data to ensure it was accurate and actionable. This process was led by the school's leadership team, which included the principal, assistant principal, and counseling staff members. The team worked closely to identify critical areas of concern and opportunities for growth based on student performance data, particularly focusing on SAT results and course completion rates for 11th-grade students.

NMCA regularly collaborated with the New Mexico Public Education Department (PED) during the plan development to ensure alignment with state guidelines. A central outcome of this collaboration was the decision to increase the school's graduation goal by 5% instead of just 3% growth, to push for higher student outcomes. The leadership team analyzed quantitative and qualitative data to determine what made sense for growth and adjusted their strategies accordingly.

The DASH Plan also addressed student attendance and engagement, recognizing that these factors differ in an online school environment. Instead of traditional attendance metrics, NMCA focuses on student participation and course engagement as key progress indicators. The team used 11th-grade data to develop targeted strategies for improving course completion and student engagement to increase the percentage of students on track for graduation.

Goals
NMCA set ambitious goals across several key areas to drive student success:

- **Graduation Rate:** The school aims to increase the 4-year graduation rate by 5% over the 2023 rate of 63.2%, aiming for a steady improvement in graduation outcomes.
- **English Language Arts (ELA)**: The goal is to increase the percentage of 11th-grade students scoring 480 or higher on the SAT ELA section by 5%.
- **Mathematics:** NMCA aims to boost the percentage of 11th graders scoring 530 or above on the SAT Math section by 5%.
- **Science:** The target is to increase the percentage of students achieving proficiency on the

NM-ASR by 5%.
- **English Language Proficiency:** The school aims to increase the percentage of ELs who meet their individual growth targets on the ACCESS test by 5%.

Root Causes

During the data analysis process, NMCA identified several root causes that contributed to their performance challenges:

- **Low Engagement:** The data revealed that low levels of student engagement were a key factor affecting both course completion and credit recovery outcomes. In a virtual school setting, engagement metrics such as time on task, lesson completion rates, and communication with teachers are critical indicators of student success.
- **Credit Recovery Challenges:** Students who fall behind in their coursework struggle to complete credit recovery courses, negatively impacting their ability to graduate on time. The school identified a need for more targeted support for these students.
- **Graduation Data Inaccuracy:** Issues with accurately tracking and coding withdrawn students in the state system (STARS/NOVA) also emerged as a significant root cause for discrepancies in the school's reported graduation rates.

Strategies

In response to these identified challenges, NMCA has implemented several key strategies to support student achievement and ensure accurate reporting:

- **Targeted Support for Struggling Students**: NMCA has developed a system to monitor and support students struggling with course completion and engagement. This includes assigning advisors to work with students at different grade levels, focusing on both on-track and off-track students. The advisory model has shifted to prioritize early intervention for 9th through 11th graders while providing dedicated support for 12th-grade students close to graduation.
- **Credit Recovery Enhancements**: The school is working to improve its credit recovery program by offering more individualized support for students who have fallen behind in their courses. This includes assigning specialized staff to help students navigate the challenges of credit recovery and get back on track.
- **Data Cleanup and Graduation Tracking**: NMCA has committed to improving its withdrawal tracking systems to ensure accurate coding of students who leave the school. This system revision will help eliminate inaccuracies in the reported graduation rates and provide a clearer picture of student progress.
- **Attendance and Engagement Monitoring**: Instead of traditional attendance metrics, NMCA monitors student participation and engagement, using data such as time on task and lesson completion rates. This data is reviewed regularly to identify students at risk of disengagement, allowing for timely interventions.

School Progress

Three-year Data Trends

Graduation
- **4-year**
  2021-2022 – 57%
  2022-2023 – 63.2%
  2023-2024 – **%
- **5-year**
  2021-2022 – 63.6%
  2022-2023 – **%
  2023-2024 – **%

Graduation by Cohort
- **4-year**
  Cohort of 2019 – 39.9%
  Cohort of 2020 – 41.3%
  Cohort of 2021 – 42.6%
  Cohort of 2022 – 56%
- **5-year**
  Cohort of 2019 – 45.7%
  Cohort of 2020 – 45.1%
  Cohort of 2021 – 49%
  Cohort of 2022 – **%
- **6-year**
  Cohort of 2019 – 47.1%
  Cohort of 2020 – 47%

New Mexico Connections Academy (NMCA) is making strides toward meeting its improvement goals, focusing on increasing course completion rates, improving credit recovery outcomes, and enhancing overall student engagement. The school's progress is aligned with the NM Vistas Indicators to address their area of designation. It is closely monitored through comprehensive data tracking and their commitment to providing students with multiple layers of support.

Course Completion
A key area of focus for NMCA is ensuring students complete their courses successfully. Over the past two years, the high school has maintained a course completion rate of over 90%, reflecting the effectiveness of the school's system for tracking and supporting student progress. To achieve this, NMCA has developed a layered approach that includes advisors, teachers, and grade-level counselors who work together to monitor students' engagement and academic performance. This comprehensive system tracks escalation rates, overdue lessons, and time spent on assignments, allowing the school to intervene early when students show signs of falling behind.

When students are identified as struggling, NMCA initiates an Academic Support Meeting (ASM) where advisors, teachers, and counselors collaborate to create a student-specific academic improvement plan. This plan includes regular check-ins with students and their

families and tailored academic interventions. The school's communication tracking system further reinforces the support system, which allows teachers and advisors to provide feedback and monitor student progress collectively. These multi-layered supports ultimately feed into the school's Multi-layered Systems of Support (MLSS) process, ensuring students receive the individualized assistance needed to complete their courses.

Credit Recovery
NMCA has also focused on improving its credit recovery program, which is linked to the school's asynchronous platform. Credit recovery is available for students who have failed a course, and the school has recognized that these students often struggle to stay on track. To address this challenge, NMCA has assigned a dedicated support person who provides personalized contact and instructional support to students enrolled in credit recovery, particularly in subjects such as ELA, math, and social studies. This additional support has made a noticeable difference in keeping students on track to complete their courses and move toward graduation.

Tracking Progress and Cohort Data
NMCA is actively working to improve its ability to track student progress at a cohort level. The school has partnered with Pearson to tag students based on their cohort year, which allows for more precise monitoring of their progress. For example, the school is focused on tracking students who started their high school education behind and working to get them back on track with their original cohort. This historical data will help NMCA identify trends and provide targeted support to struggling students.

In addition, the school has developed a system to monitor students at risk of falling into the "alarm stage," where overdue lessons, low course completion, and low engagement trigger academic interventions. Progress data is tracked regularly, with advisors and teachers setting metrics for keeping students on track or addressing early signs of struggle. NMCA also tracks the percentage of students at various stages of being on track or approaching alarm levels by grade.

Disaggregating Data and Identifying Subgroups
As part of its continuous improvement efforts, NMCA recognizes the need to disaggregate its data by student group to understand better which subgroups may be struggling. The school plans to analyze course completion and engagement data to identify specific student populations, such as ELs or students with special education needs, who may require additional support. This data will help NMCA tailor its interventions more effectively and ensure that all students receive the support they need to succeed regardless of their background.

School Leader's Next Steps
The school leader will collect data throughout the year in the areas above to support meeting her benchmark goals. Additionally, she plans to have cohort data, disaggregated subgroup data, and targets for students on track for course completion.

Benchmarks
NMCA will monitor progress closely and has identified the following benchmark goals:

- **Graduation Rate:** The number of unresolved cohort students regarding their withdrawal code in STARS/NOVA will decrease each state reporting period.
- **English Language Arts (ELA)**: 85% or more of 11th-grade students will complete their ELA courses each semester.
- **Mathematics:** 92% or more of 11th-grade students will complete their math courses each semester.
- **Science:** 92% or more of 11th-grade students will complete their science courses each semester.

NMCA monitors its progress through tracking systems, regular academic support meetings, and ongoing data analysis. The school is confident that its multi-layered approach to student support will lead to higher graduation rates and better overall student outcomes.