



**Case Study: Farmington
Municipal School District
Farmington, New Mexico**



A New Mexico district uses
continuous improvement practices
to drive a common sense of purpose

“Farmington has been here for more than 100 years, but in partnering with Cognia, Farmington is moving more quickly and with more focus on its continuous improvement journey. There’s a clarity and a sense of purpose, and [staff] are vested in student engagement.”

Since 2010, the educational philosophy in the Farmington Municipal School District, which serves about 11,000 students in one of New Mexico's most diverse communities, has been known as the "Farmington Way."

The Farmington Municipal School District is located in northwestern New Mexico, in a midsize city of about 45,000 people that is the commercial hub of the Four Corners region. Ringed by Native American reservations, the district logged more than one million bus miles in its sprawling 807 square mile service area during the 2017–18 school year.

It serves its 11,000 students in two pre-K, 10 elementary, four middle, and four high schools.

Farmington's students are roughly one-third white, one-third Hispanic, and one-third Native American. About half are eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch. Fifteen languages are spoken by students, a characteristic that district leaders consider a strength.

"We have a commitment to celebrate that diversity," says Nate Pierantoni, Farmington's director of school improvement. "It's emblematic of what the future of America looks like."

"We have a commitment to celebrate that diversity," says Nate Pierantoni, Farmington's director of school improvement. "It's emblematic of what the future of America looks like."



The Farmington Way

The district's longstanding commitment to high-leverage classroom practices is encapsulated in the Farmington Way. Based on frameworks developed by Robert Marzano and Charlotte Danielson, the Farmington Way leverages "two complementary systems of instructional and leadership expectations, through the Farmington model of instruction and the one-to-one performance coaching that all principals receive around observation and feedback, school improvement planning, and data analysis," Pierantoni says. This has helped create common language and leadership expectations.

Since 2013, the district has been coaching principals to focus primarily on instructional leadership. Farmington principals are expected to oversee data-driven instruction and inquiry (DDI), lead observations, and make intentional efforts to improve their schools' culture. "Our shift to instructional leadership has not been accidental," says Pierantoni. "We hold leaders' feet to the fire to ensure they get into their teachers' business and get down to the student level. That's where we've seen the greatest gains."

When Dr. Eugene Schmidt was named Farmington superintendent in 2014, one of his goals was "a recommitment to the process," to affirm the instructional model and build a common vision, particularly in the face of ongoing staff turnover.

"The Farmington Way was a concept introduced more than 10 years ago," he says. "Over time, in a district of 1,900 employees, people can forget, and new hires may not fully understand the importance of the Farmington Way."

Schmidt was familiar with Cognia™ accreditation services, having served on Cognia Accreditation Engagement Review teams before coming to Farmington. He saw in the district's 2018 Cognia Systems Accreditation Review an opportunity to ensure that the expectations embedded in the Farmington Way were actively driving instruction throughout the district.

For a 2018 Systems Accreditation Engagement Review conducted by Cognia, district leaders focused on assessing the extent to which the Farmington Way translated into effective classroom practices. Feedback gathered for the review from a variety of sources including site visits, survey responses, and stakeholder interviews led Farmington leaders to integrate elements of Cognia's school quality reviews and assessment systems into the district's ongoing continuous improvement activities. "We're connecting the dots between student achievement and the adult behavior that drives student achievement," says Schmidt.

For a 2018 Systems Accreditation Engagement Review conducted by Cognia, district leaders focused on assessing the extent to which the Farmington Way translated into effective classroom practices.

Outcomes of the Accreditation Process

The Cognia review process “gave us a chance to reaffirm that Cognia saw our expectations put into action,” Schmidt says. “Cognia verified that practices we identify as high-leverage are embedded throughout the district.” Recognizing the opportunity to learn about its instructional practices, the district also contracted with Measured Progress, now Cognia’s Assessment Services team, to evaluate the alignment of district-developed interim assessments with state standards.

Feedback gained from the Systems Accreditation Engagement Review identified five insights that were pinpointed as specific needs: improved community connection and external communications, centralized district services, data-informed decision making, and professional learning.

First, Farmington began cultivating connections with the community through improved responsiveness to perceived needs and better communications. Then they looked at how the public interacted with the district. The district’s central office functions and staff, previously scattered in a half-dozen different buildings throughout Farmington, were consolidated into a newly acquired four-story building. “Our central office is now literally a central office,” says Schmidt. “People used to have to go to Title I in one building, technology in another. Cognia helped us identify this as an inefficiency.” As a result, “now we have a one-stop shop.”

Cognia’s Accreditation Systems Engagement Review process also encouraged improved communications strategies and a renewed

emphasis on safety following an incident at a school in a neighboring district. The district became more aware of the importance of community messaging. The website was refreshed. The district introduced a new catch phrase “Rising to excellence in every pursuit,” and more recently Schmidt created a “From the Superintendent” Facebook blog and a folksy digital chat platform called FMS Rising, which serves as a quick ten-minute YouTube conversation about issues important to the district.

Data analysis helped school leaders recognize the need to further pinpoint needed supports in order to spark achievement growth for students who were making progress but still not showing proficiency.

Finally, Farmington’s work with Cognia also reinforced the district’s commitment to instructional and leadership growth, according to Deputy Superintendent Phil Valdez. “The process puts you on the continuous improvement pathway,” he says.



A “Playbook” for Continuous Improvement

Many of the continuous improvement practices embedded in the Cognia Accreditation Engagement Review process and feedback from Assessment Services are visible today within the district’s ongoing practices—both at the central office and in individual schools and classrooms.

“Instructionally, we are different than we were four years ago,” says Schmidt. “We now understand that continuous improvement really means being reflective every day.”

A key, says Valdez, has been the creation of a rubric that helps district leaders and principals track improvement systems and structures. “It’s not for compliance, but for monitoring and identifying the support schools need and how those transition to the work we do at the district level,” he says. “We started using the word ‘playbook’ with building administrators to show at the building level the systems we have put into place from an instructional and leadership standpoint.”

Farmington’s playbook includes five key elements:

- Focused team visits
- Assessment and data
- School improvement cycles
- Leadership development
- Reinforcing common language

Focused Team Visits

Twice a year, Farmington district leaders conduct “focused team visits” at each of the district’s 19 schools. Modeled after Cognia’s information-gathering protocols including onsite review visits, a team of between 15 and 20 central office personnel visit each school to conduct classroom observations and in-person interviews with students and parents.

Observations are based on the district’s instructional model snapshot, which identifies key components of the instructional practices that make up the Farmington Way. In-person interviews with students and staff during the team visits are used to validate Cognia surveys, aligned to the leading indicators in Marzano’s High-Reliability Schools framework, which are sent to members of each school’s community on an ongoing basis. Aggregate survey results are discussed during follow-up conversations with each school’s leadership team.

Farmington’s observation and survey instruments reflect lessons learned from the Cognia Accreditation Review process. “We can go into the schools to collect the Cognia data through the lens of our own district,” says Schmidt. “It’s such a powerful model.”

“We now understand that continuous improvement really means being reflective every day.”

Assessment and Data

Until school year 2020–21, Farmington used customized Cognia interim assessments based on the district’s instructional sequence in math, reading, and science. In a bold commitment to equity, the New Mexico Department of Public Instruction began partnering with Cognia to offer access to Cognia assessments free of charge to all the state’s district schools. To ensure that students are mastering what they learn, Farmington now uses interim assessments and formative assessment resources in math and reading, developed and delivered by Cognia, to track student progress. Teachers supplement assessment data with their own more frequent checks for understanding. Doing so, says Valdez, “has allowed us to drill down, understand student performance, and take action.”

Weekly data-team meetings in schools are driven around common formative assessments, and teachers take a full day to review data each quarter. Teachers also use formative assessment data to create data walls on which they place colored notes next to coded names of students based on their level of proficiency in different skills.

“Data is shared between teachers and buildings, and out to the community as well,” says Pierantoni. “There’s an expectation as a parent that every teacher in grades K–8 can tell any family member exactly which standards their kids are or are not mastering.”

School Improvement Cycles

In schools, the district has implemented 90-day planning cycles. A school-based leadership team in each building develops annual goals for student achievement and identifies the root causes inhibiting progress. The team meets regularly through the year to plan critical actions and desired outcomes, scheduling opportunities to reflect and adjust plans in 30-, 60-, and 90-day cycles.

Given the model’s aggressive, “in your face” approach to continuous improvement, as Schmidt puts it, district leaders are emphasizing to administrators that the model is intended as a building-level coaching model, not an evaluation tool.

“It really identifies the work and keeps it in front of people,” says Schmidt. “We have 30, 60, and 90 [-day cycles]—let’s roll it over and keep moving, or let’s focus on what we’ve not done well.”

“There’s an expectation as a parent that every teacher in grades K–8 can tell any family member exactly which standards their kids are or are not mastering.”

Leadership Development and Creating Common Understanding

Cognia's practices helped inform the creation of more refined mechanisms to support the district's vision of leadership development, including regularly scheduled check-ins and reviews against the district's model of leadership competencies.

These are the turnaround leadership competencies:

- Commitment to student learning
- Engages the team
- Focuses on sustainable results
- Holds people accountable for school performance
- Impact and influence
- Conceptual thinking
- Analytical thinking

The leadership coaches seek to grow principals through this lens, as part of a common language and understanding. District leaders also have connected these competencies to principals' professional development plans and evaluations.

The district has implemented professional learning communities (PLCs) for its principals at each level—high school, middle school, and elementary school. The PLCs meet monthly and conduct classroom observations together and in one another's schools to refine common understanding of instructional expectations.

Farmington leaders used feedback from Cognia's Systems Accreditation Engagement Review as the impetus to create a single districtwide handbook, replacing the different handbooks

formerly created by each of the 19 schools. This helped ensure that attendance and homework expectations were consistent across the district, and reinforced standardized language around disciplinary referrals.

Together, these systems are working to reinforce the district's longstanding vision of instruction and school leadership. This has helped the district take a longer-term view of instructional improvement, to the benefit of students.

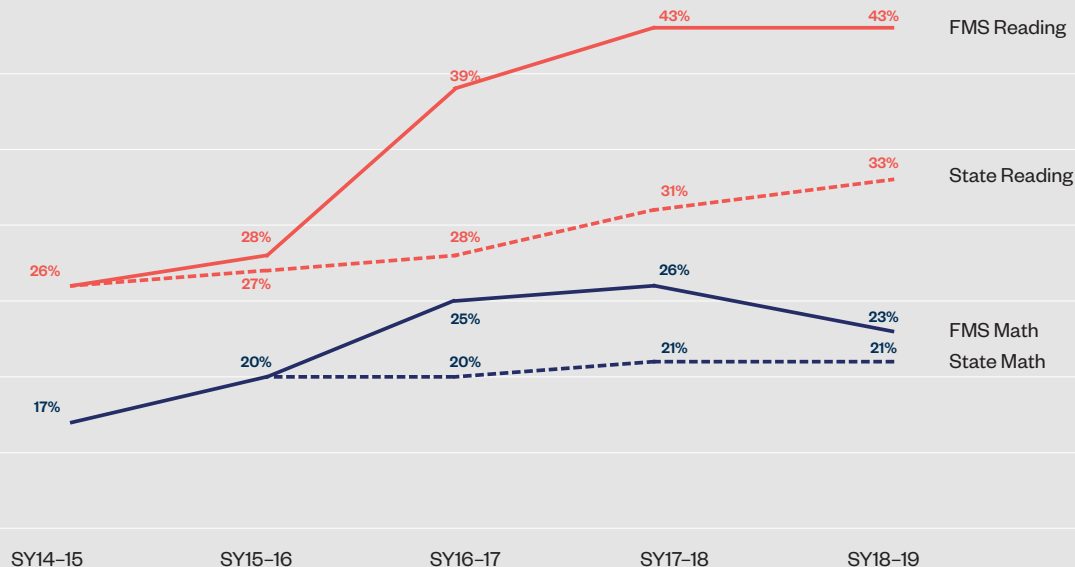
"The continuous improvement model is not new in education, and it's not new to people in our district," says Pierantoni. "What is fresh in Farmington is the consistency with which we've strengthened our systems instead of looking for a silver bullet each year."

What's Next?

Farmington has seen both improved student achievement and national recognition for its efforts. In fall 2019, Ladera Del Norte Elementary School was named a National Blue Ribbon School, the only school in the state—and only one of 41 nationwide—recognized for its work closing achievement gaps. In 2016, the district's Northeast Elementary School was named a National Title I Distinguished School for its own efforts to close the achievement gap.

Districtwide, Farmington has seen considerable growth in proficiency levels on its annual state assessments—over the past four years, the percentage of students proficient in English language arts increased from 26 to 43 percent, while the percentage of those proficient in math rose from 17 to 23 percent. When New Mexico switched to the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessment in 2015, "the state said scores were going to drop," Schmidt says. "Our scores actually went up."

Farmington and State PARCC/Transition Assessment Proficiency SY15–SY18



Farmington Municipal Schools (FMS) had been at or above state average between 2010–2016; it was below state average in 2017. The district is closing achievement gaps more quickly than comparable districts in the state, and in March 2019 leaders learned that 2018 high school graduation rates exceeded statewide averages. For students with disabilities, the graduation rate nearly doubled from 32.9 percent to 60.8 percent in 2018, the last year for which data was available.

“There’s not a magic formula,” says Pierantoni. “We’re committing to teaching every kid every standard, and having systems where we check if they’re learning them and intervening when they haven’t.”

Looking ahead, Farmington is in the process of updating its strategic plan, incorporating the continuous improvement 90-day planning cycle to create “a more robust” process, says Pierantoni. The district’s goal also is to have school staff more closely reflect the diversity of Farmington’s students.

“Farmington has been here for more than 100 years, but in partnering with Cognia, Farmington is moving more quickly and with more focus on its continuous improvement journey,” Schmidt says. “There’s a clarity and a sense of purpose, and [staff] are vested in student engagement.”

More than a mark of distinction and recognition of school quality, the Cognia Accreditation process has delivered the most value in helping FMS better engage with its staff, students and community through more efficient operations, improved data-based decision making, and an investment in ongoing improvements at a systems level. Teachers are empowered to drive instruction and supported in their professional development, students are engaged in their learning, and community members feel connected to their school. Systemic improvement efforts reflect the schools’ commitment to continuous improvement that is evident in the way the schools approach teaching and learning, and in the results they are achieving.

About Cognia

Cognia is a global nonprofit that has the knowledge to help schools improve. Cognia offers accreditation and certification, assessment, professional learning, and improvement services. The result of the merger of AdvancED and Measured Progress, Cognia was formed to bridge the gap between school evaluation and student assessment. We are the largest education improvement organization in the world and an undeniable force for enhancing schools, engaging students, and driving better outcomes for all. In 2020, the entities that came together to form Cognia mark 125 years of service to education.

Find out more at cognia.org.



AdvancED and
Measured Progress
are now



cognia.org