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# **Northeast Turnaround through Sustainability**

Northeast Elementary School

Farmington Municipal School District

University of Virginia Partnership for Leaders in Education

## **Northeast Turnaround through Sustainability**

### **By Josie Gutierrez**

<b>School</b>	Northeast Elementary School
<b>Principal</b>	Candace Young
<b>District</b>	Farmington Municipal School District
<b>Highlight</b>	From Turnaround to Intentional Sustainable Systems

<b>Narrative</b>	<p><b>School Profile</b></p> <p>Northeast Elementary School is located in a rural part of Farmington, NM. It is a large Title I School with almost 600 students. As many states transitioned to higher standards through the new common core and new state accountability systems, many schools and districts found themselves needing a reset for higher expectations. It wasn't any different in Farmington. In this new age, more districts were having to face the unfortunate circumstances of turning around a school labeled "F" on the state's accountability grading scale, even when the district has never experienced this challenge in the past. This was just the case for Farmington Municipal Schools.</p> <p><b>District Profile</b></p> <p>The district found itself with a school rated as F for the first time. The school was Northeast Elementary School and the district, community and staff knew there was work to be done. The first thing the Superintendent did was call in the sitting principal, at which time he decided to retire. Now the district was faced with a vacancy that would be hard to fill, a turnaround principal was needed.</p> <p><b>Principal Profile</b></p> <p>As people watched the changes begin to occur, the district had a strong instructional leader running the Curriculum &amp; Instruction Department for the district. This transformational leader was Candace Young and she stepped up and asked the Superintendent if she could return to Northeast ES to conduct a needs assessment. She had been the principal at that school 6 years earlier and she knew that the school should not be F rated. She is optimistic, an encourager, and has a growth mindset and this combination of leadership skills was just what the school needed. The Superintendent agreed, but she asked Candace not to take any personal belongings because this was a temporary stay to close out the year and assess the needs.</p> <p><b>Call to Action</b></p> <p>As soon as Candace arrived, she asked the staff to get on board and promised that the results would define the school as the best school in the district and possibly the state. The teachers responded by wanting to know Candace's commitment because they also knew she had not been named Principal. That's when Candace asked for a permanent assignment to the school to be their leader, a role she would cherish for more than 5 years. It's no surprise that after one year, the school went from a rating of F to a rating of C, followed by a B, and has maintained an A grade for the following three years.</p>
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## **Clear Purpose, Vision & Mission**

One by one, they got as many teachers to believe in the mission and vision to drive their initiatives forward. Candace believes that the number one difference that turned the school in one year were the vision and mission along with clarity around the why (purpose) for the work. Clearly defining the purpose helped change adult behaviors more quickly. The staff knew that their work was bigger than an A or B rating for the state because their why was clear.

## **Urgency & Accountability**

As the staff reflects on the past, they describe Candace's arrival as shaking everyone to their core. The urgency was clear and they had a leader who was willing to do whatever it takes. The leadership message was strong, either the team was going to work together to turn the school around or the state would take over. Unlike a failed turnaround story, Candace believed in her staff and was willing to do what was necessary to help them develop and grow into great teachers. However, if all efforts to develop a staff member did not work, then she would make the tough decision and help them exit with dignity.

## **Turnaround Strategy – First Few Years**

### **✓ Resetting Culture/School-wide Behavior Plan**

Candace admits that the first year was a bit crazy. The culture was unstable with parents cursing out teachers, teachers against teachers, and just a free for all. Candace had to set out clear expectations for adult behavior first and then students. It may seem simple, but she declared that kindness was mandated. This was a clear expectation that she held staff accountable for and an expectation that she modeled. In addition to kindness, teachers were expected to behave professionally and dress the role. They also implemented a school-wide behavior management

### **✓ Common Planning/PLC**

Once the culture settled down, Candace and her team immediately started with weekly teacher collaboration that included common planning and then PLC's were implemented. She worked diligently to provide guidance for building out systems and structures that would prove to be sustainable. Candace was directive at first, but then she moved into a more collaborative style. Today she is proud to say that she is in full coaching mode. She believes in building the capacity of her team through strong support, but still holds them accountable. In fact, many staff changes were made during her few years as principal.

### **✓ ILT/Teacher Leadership**

Currently, half of her Instructional Leadership Team members did not start with her during the first year. After the first year and based upon her observations, Candace made even more bold changes such as reassigning her grade level leaders to make sure she had a school of high performing grade level teams rather than some strong and some weak.

### ✓ **Focus on Writing**

The ILT was in full swing and began to focus on writing. They continue to focus on writing today because the school staff believe that the writing focus was the lever that helped them achieve the A rating. They continue to have strong results and have been recognized as a Title I Top Performing School and their students are recognized with academic achievements, even when they compete in contests beyond the school and district level.

### **Results**

The results clearly indicate that the school made a turnaround and five years of success is a strong indicator that sustainability is well underway. Northeast is a top performing school in the district and state relative to PARCC data. Recently, their bilingual students made double-digit gains on Target Language proficiency in just one year in Math and Reading with 15.4% and 27.8% respectively.

## **Intentional Strategies To Strengthen Sustainability: Years 4-5**

### ✓ **Setting the Purpose for a Learning Launch**

The school has a strong learning team and they enjoy getting away to engage in planning intentional next steps to continue their journey for continuous school improvement. Currently the ILT is focused on building teacher leadership capacity. The team is exploring ways to identify the strengths of teachers to become strong leaders through coaching and to assume leadership roles that advance school initiatives and deepen school wide systems. The team is focused on this task because they know how challenging it has been to come this far and their scholars deserved continued excellence.

### ✓ **Learning Launch Strategy**

The school's leadership team conducted a survey of teachers to learn more about what matters most to them and to determine what structures had the most impact on student results. The leadership team also focused on refining the purpose or the why behind what and how they work day in and day out. They spent hours thinking through what needed to be abandoned because it no longer fits the needs of the school as they reset for deepening their work towards sustainable structures. They piloted a teacher led PLC project to eventually turn this system over to teacher leaders in the upcoming year. Their next efforts focused on using a tool to learn more about the strengths of the teachers to match them to teacher leadership roles.

### ✓ **Focusing on a Healthy Organizational Culture**

Although this is a continuous improvement cycle, the Principal is cognizant of possible burnout of staff. Therefore, she works relentlessly to maintain a positive organizational culture that celebrates the positive results in student learning and serves as a motivation to staff with strong alignment to their purpose-driven work. Today, it's clear that the mindset of the Northeast Elementary School staff has made a 180. They don't sit around and ask if they still need to work hard after the turnaround because they know that the systems they have built are worth it and get them the desired results.

It is clear that the flywheel has good momentum at Northeast ES. When staff can sit around a table and describe the clear mission and vision and give evidence that the leadership at the campus has good timing with instructional priorities and actions – then you know the team is on the right track for sustaining their successes. The influence of the campus leadership to get staff, student and parents to invest in the vision and mission has served as a key aspect of their success.

### **Guidance for Principals**

Principal Young believes and advises to other leaders undergoing school turnaround efforts that you must invest in your people, believe in them, help them see what's possible and show up everyday ready to do the hard work. She admits that this work takes stamina and persistence and the work has not gotten any easier, just better