Prepared for Launch:
How New Mexico Virtual Academy Embarked as the State’s First Virtual Charter School and Reached Success
WHAT DOES SUCCESS LOOK LIKE AT NMVA?

A new virtual school needs to effectively build a strong foundation in order to be successful. This means having strong leadership, robust community support and engagement, a culture of high expectations, innovation in the classroom, and emphasis on pathways after graduation.

At its inception, NMVA prepared for success by setting high standards within the school and through the wider school community. NMVA welcomed several administrators and teachers with prior experience in online schooling, setting NMVA apart with an established knowledge base of best practices for launching a new online public school.

In 2012, the first statewide virtual charter school, New Mexico Virtual Academy (NMVA) was authorized by Farmington Municipal Schools. The school opened in fall 2012 for students in grades 6–11. It has since expanded to 12th grade in the 2013–2014 school year.

School Launch

Students residing anywhere in New Mexico are eligible to enroll in NMVA; therefore, school staff sought methods to directly reach students in every corner of the state to bring awareness to the innovative opportunity. To form a cohesive school community, NMVA staff set up multiple face-to-face meetings in various locations across New Mexico. The primary goal of the meetings was to establish an early relationship between the school and the family, while familiarizing new students to online learning. These sessions were held in a variety of accessible public locations, such as coffee shops, bowling alleys, and libraries, and were open to interested and enrolled families seeking information.

NMVA also announced the opening of the Learning Center in Farmington, which draws students from several communities seeking face-to-face support. The Learning Center includes a computer lab with lounge areas as well as collaborative meeting spaces for drop-in sessions and additional instructional support.

From the start, NMVA drove high expectations through targeted teacher hiring practices and the creation of a school community with a focus on results. To help improve learning outcomes, NMVA introduced Socratic seminars in the online setting, which set the school apart from other online programs.
**Teacher Hiring Practices**

Nationally, online schooling is relatively new to the K–12 teaching profession, and many teacher candidates seeking the role have little prior experience in the virtual school setting. Standard teacher hiring practices for NMVA included screening of prior experience and qualifications, behavioral teacher questionnaires to gauge interest and better align candidates with the school’s mission, and panel interviews with NMVA leadership to thoroughly vet candidates and deliver highly qualified candidates. The NMVA governing council and administrators decided to implement a new teacher hiring strategy during the launch of the new school: Teaching auditions.

Many NMVA leaders and staff had prior teaching experience in online public schooling and knew firsthand the challenges of hiring new teachers that would be best suited for the innovative role. As applicants poured in and went through a rigorous screening and interview process, they were also asked to teach an online class.

NMVA created an interactive online classroom, and applicants were asked to respond to real-life teaching and classroom situations in the virtual setting. Teacher candidates taught 10-minute lessons, and NMVA leadership was able to identify instructors for who the online teaching role was a good fit.

**NMVA Culture and Community**

NMVA prides itself in setting and maintaining high expectations—it’s the school’s culture, which is reflected at all levels within the school and throughout the wider NMVA community. Director of Operations Lynn Barr joined NMVA in 2013 with a strong background in charter school leadership. Barr works with teachers, staff, and families and guides the school on initiatives that are focused on improving learning experiences and outcomes.

As NMVA expanded to serve grade 12 in the 2013–2014 school year, school leadership put increased emphasis on Individualized Learning Plans—customized programs to fit each student’s unique strengths, learning styles, and aptitudes. These post-secondary-focused initiatives have been established to guide upcoming seniors on paths toward college and universities using career counseling and future planning.

Additionally, NMVA has begun working on a blended implementation plan that would enhance support for students and Learning Coaches through creating more face-to-face learning opportunities aimed at increasing proficiency on state assessments and student-to-student interactions through collaborative, project-based, experiential learning. The school plans to host statewide community events centered on service and project-based learning. The program supports NMVA by providing face-to-face opportunities focused on a common service project. Learning projects include blanket drives to serve the homeless and animal education and rescue. Each session includes breakouts or small group sessions facilitated by teachers with students and Learning Coaches.

**Innovative Instruction**

Socratic seminars are structured to focus on the power of asking questions and emphasize inquiry over information and discussion over debate. While these seminars have been a common instructional practice in traditional brick-and-mortar schools and institutions for years, there are very few that practice Socratic seminars in the online public school model.

Ruth Weaver, a language arts instructor at NMVA, uses Socratic seminars to foster collaboration and increase learning engagement. Students complete reading assignments prior to joining an online class session with their peers and prepare questions for wider discussion. The session is offered as an extra-credit incentive to students seeking increased focus on course content and remediation. The instructor opens microphones in the online classroom for students to ask questions, share ideas, and interact with one another. Conversations typically unfold between students with one individual (the instructor but, oftentimes, a student) guiding the entire session.

NMVA discovered that Socratic seminars in the virtual setting impacted participation and engagement through improved attendance in the Socratic seminar format and increased student-to-student collaboration.

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NMVA School Profile

For its inaugural 2012–2013 school year, NMVA’s overall school accountability rating was a B grade, which the school maintained through the 2013–2014 school year as well.

Publically available test data for NMVA are limited to Full Academic Year (FAY)—students who were enrolled on or before a cutoff date typically very close to the beginning of the school year. In the following sections, the limited FAY data are presented—but most NMVA data are derived from K12’s Academic Performance Database, capturing all NMVA students who were tested and for whom valid test results for 2013–2014 are available. In what follows, specific sections that present FAY data only are identified.

The overall percentage of NMVA students at or above proficiency in Mathematics increased 9 percentage points from 32% in 2012–2013 to 41% in 2013–2014. In Reading, the percentage of NMVA students at or above proficiency increased in grade 8 and declined in grades 6 and 7, dropping overall proficiency 3 percentage points from 60% to 57%.

In both Reading and Mathematics, NMVA students who took the state assessment in grade 11 outperformed those who took the test in grade 10 in both SY2012–2013 and SY 2013–2014. In Reading, a gap of 39 percentage points separates grade 11 students (with 73% at or above proficiency) from grades 10 students (with only 34% at or above proficiency). In Mathematics, 16 percentage points separate grade 10 students (21% at or above proficiency) from those in grade 11 (37% at or above proficiency).

### 2013–2014 High School Performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Mathematics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade 10</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 11</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Grades 6–8 State Comparisons (FAY Data Only)

In 2013–2014, NMVA students scored higher than the state average in grades 6 and 8 by 2 to 13 percentage points and equaled the state in grade 7 in overall Reading proficiency.

In 2013–2014, NMVA students scored higher than the state average in grades 6 and 8 by 14 and 4 percentage points and below the state in grade 7 in overall Mathematics proficiency.²

### Persistence

Historically, in K¹² partner schools, students who persist (who are continuously enrolled longer) tend to do better than those who are enrolled for shorter periods of time. Results at NMVA demonstrate that persistence matters. In Reading, NMVA students who have been enrolled longer have higher proficiency percentages. In Mathematics, students enrolled 1 year but less than 2 outperform others.

#### 2013–2014 PERFORMANCE BY PERSISTENCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Persistence</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Mathematics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Percentage At or Above Proficiency</td>
<td>Total Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less Than 1 Year</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Year but Less Than 2</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Years but Less Than 3</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>53</td>
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²NM Public Education Department http://www.ped.state.nm.us/AssessmentAccountability/AcademicGrowth/NMSBA.html
First Graduating Class

In May 2014, NMVA’s celebrated its first graduating class by holding a commencement ceremony at Unser Facing Museum in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Seniors walked across the stage making school history as NMVA’s first group of alumni. Graduates went on to study at universities and post-secondary institutions such as: New Mexico Military Institute, San Juan College, Central New Mexico Community College, Grand Canyon University, and The University of New Mexico.

Kylie Moran, a 2014 NMVA graduate, was previously enrolled in Nevada Virtual Academy—a full-time online public school in Nevada—from eighth to eleventh grade, and moved to NMVA during her senior year of high school. Moran was involved in competitive gymnastics and enrolled in online schooling for a stress-free and focused education that could accommodate her training schedule.

Moran currently attends The University of New Mexico with a declared major in athletic training but remains connected with NMVA. Moran was given the opportunity to participate in Blackboard Collaborate sessions to regularly interact with upcoming NMVA seniors as they begin to make post-secondary plans.

Conclusion

Established in 2012 as the first statewide online charter school, NMVA has utilized its strong background in online K–12 education, leadership, and vision to launch into a successful school with a robust community and a culture that is evident at every level. NMVA continues to evolve with innovations targeted at student–teacher engagement and learning outcomes.

From recruiting seasoned school leaders, implementing targeted teacher hiring and innovative instruction practices using Socratic seminars, to fostering a strong school community, NMVA has demonstrated the ability to successfully launch an effective online school program in New Mexico.