



The New America School

Success 2012

Report

Message from Chair

In my second year as Chair of the New America School Board of Directors, I am honored to represent this important nonprofit organization and its three Colorado high schools that provide essential support and educational services to English Language Learners and the young people who are part of the immigrant community in the Denver Metro area. New America Schools' more than 1,200 Colorado high school students work diligently to learn English and acclimate to American culture while earning a high school diploma. Over my many years of working with the New America School community, I have come across so many inspirational and powerful stories of our students who want to learn, to succeed and to live a productive and meaningful life in the United States. These young students take nothing for granted; they are mature, focused and responsible young adults. I am so proud of their



NAS Board Chair Gina Nocera and the 2012 Colorado Educational Opportunity Scholarship Recipients.

dedication to their learning and their growth. I am so proud of our schools' principals, teachers and counselors who work tirelessly to support them.

The NAS Board of Directors and leadership staff are so thankful for the many groups who have supported the mission of the schools throughout this past year. In total, the New America School has received more than \$3,000,000 in funding commitments over the next five years from public government grants, private foundations,

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NAS Board members

- **Gina Nocera** (Board Chair), Executive Director, Jared Polis Foundation
- **Vincent Badolato** (Vice Chair), Vice President of Public Affairs, Colorado League of Charter Schools
- **Trinidad Rodriguez** (Treasurer), First Vice President, George K. Baum & Co.
- **Polly Baca**, Former State Senator and community leader
- **Gracie Carr**, Educator, singer, actor, and board member of the Challenge Foundation
- **Paula Gomez Farrell, Ph.D.**, Director, SkillBuild Colorado
- **Mary Hanewall**, Executive Director, Colorado I Have a Dream Foundation
- **Sarah Kurz**, Director of Strategic Marketing at City and County of Denver
- **Dianne Lefly**, Director, Research and Evaluation, Colorado Department of Education
- **Tomas Mejia**, Principal Consultant, Colorado Department of Education
- **Dominic DiFelice**, Superintendent, non-voting
- **Craig Cook**, CBO, non-voting

NAS students achieve greater academic growth than similar students attending other schools nationwide

The New America utilizes the nationally recognized Northwest Evaluation Association's (NWEA) Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) to gauge our relative performance as a school system. Each NAS student is MAP tested in the fall and spring. These tests tell NAS how much the student has grown over the year.

NWEA researchers have developed a research methodology called Virtual Comparison Groups, or VCGs which allows a school to use its students' growth statistics to measure how well the school is teaching students. Rather than compare one school to another, VCGs compare similar students. For example, each NAS

student is categorized by his or her demographic characteristics and fall MAP score. NWEA then compares each NAS student's individual growth—fall to spring—to all students across the country who are similar demographically and at a similar beginning academic level.

VCG data released by NWEA in July of this year show that NAS students perform substantially better than their Virtual Comparison Group. The VCG data show that:

- NAS students average greater growth than similar students at other schools: the NAS student population advance more grade levels fall to spring than demographically similar students who

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Mission

The mission of The New America School is to empower new immigrants and English Language Learners with the educational tools and support they need to maximize their potential, succeed, and live the American dream.

[GROWTH continued from page 1]

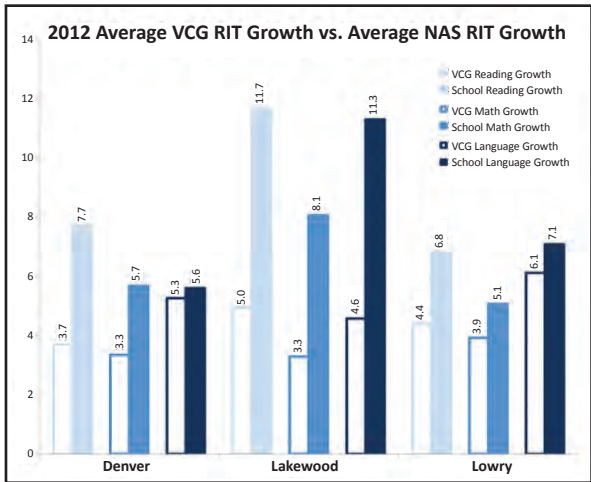
start the year at the same academic level.

- A greater percentage of students achieve growth at NAS than similar students. To clarify, if 10 NAS students and 10 similar random students were tested, a greater number of the ten NAS students would grow academically than the 10 similar students.
- NAS students achieve greater growth than similar students regardless of the students' skill levels upon entering NAS: Both the students entering NAS with the

lowest skill levels and the students at higher skill levels are exhibiting greater growth than similar students.

- On average, **students in every subject at every NAS Colorado campus grew academically.**

"Comparing students who 'look like us' as opposed to 'schools that look like us' is a far better way of gauging student success," explains NAS superintendent Dominic DiFelice. "I'm proud of the growth our students are achieving in spite of the difficult personal circumstances they come to us with."



"New America Schools Network" promotes replication of NAS educational model

A new era for the New America Schools began on May 21, 2012 when Dominic DiFelice called to order the first meeting of the New America Schools Network board of directors.



Las Cruces Mayor Ken Miyagashima explains the benefits of opening a New America School. "I like to think of the New America School as hitting a triple double. Not only did you bring so many great jobs to the city of Las Cruces, but you renovated an eyesore [located] in the downtown area, and most important, you provide an opportunity to transform lives... by allowing so many of our students to go back and finish high school."

Over the past nine years, the New America School has grown from two Denver-area schools to three schools in Colorado, two in New Mexico and a school scheduled to open in Las Vegas within the next two years. With this growth, NAS leadership has recognized the need to ensure fidelity to the NAS instructional model, to bring schools and boards from different communities together to learn from and help one another, and to provide expert staff to support the development of local school financial and human resources, policies and academic programs. The NAS Network will serve this function.

A primary activity of the Network will be to oversee replication of the NAS educational model. The Network will research school districts in the southwest which would benefit from opening a New America School and then help locate a school in those districts. The Network's responsibility is to ensure that expansion efforts are measured and guided by strong research. The Network board will analyze community need, support and the availability of strong, engaged community partners as well as the local and state charter school environment.

As NAS Network board chair Polly Baca explains, "There is a real need in this country for schools that help kids and young adults learn English while getting their high school diploma and then participate in the fabric of America."

In turn, the outcomes of locating a New America School in a community are extremely positive. Baca continues, "A New America School produces good workers, an educated populace, and productive citizens for a community."

The NAS Network board is comprised of representatives from each NAS school's board or governing council and includes nationally recognized educational leaders:

- Polly Baca (Chair), Former State Senator and community leader, Denver, Colorado
- Richard Jose Bela, Esq. (Vice Chair), Nonprofit Consultant, Placitas, New Mexico
- Sarah Kurz (Secretary), Director of Strategic Marketing, City and County of Denver
- Larry P. Mason, Interim Vice President, Office of Diversity and Cultural Affairs, Community College of Southern Nevada; former Chair of Clark County School District Board, Las Vegas, Nevada
- Gina Nocera, Executive Director, Jared Polis Foundation, Boulder, Colorado
- Domonic R. Silva, Partner, Kimble & Associates, Las Cruces, New Mexico

[CHAIR continued from page 1]

corporations and individuals. It's a good investment as well: New America School continues to demonstrate its ability to educate its students effectively. NAS administers NWEA's Measures of Academic Progress test multiple times during the school year; teachers assess and evaluate our students' literacy and numeracy skills each time, and each time they see student growth. In fact, when one compares NAS students to similar students at other high schools NAS students grow more than other students nationally.

As a member of the New America School National Board, I am looking forward to focusing on the mission of this board to open New America Schools in communities where we can support the needs of English Language Learners and a diverse student population. New America Schools have two high schools in New Mexico: Albuquerque is in its fourth year of operation and has more than 450 students enrolled this year. It was voted the best charter school in the state of New Mexico in 2011. New America School—Las Cruces opened in August 2012 with approximately 250 students. Both of these schools have a strong and dedicated board of directors and staff and loyal student and parent communities. New America School also received approval by the state of Nevada for a charter high school in Las Vegas. The New America School Board of Directors in Las Vegas has formed and is meeting regularly to plan during the research and development phase.

Every year that I am part of the New America School community I am thankful for the opportunity to meet and work with such positive and strong individuals. Thank you to my fellow board members, the NAS leadership, NAS staff and, the heart of this organization, NAS students. I love the journey we are on together.

External funding supports Comprehensive Graduation Initiative

Three multi-year major grants awarded by the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) will enable each NAS-Colorado school to establish a comprehensive student retention and graduation program, and operate this program for the next five years.

The five-year, two million dollar 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant will allow each campus to establish a series of after-school academic and enrichment programs for all NAS students. Through the grant, each campus will offer tutoring, Friday and summer school, and project-based, cross-curricular learning opportunities. Recognizing that student involvement in extra curricular activities promotes retention, the Community Learning Centers (CLC) will also house student athletic, leadership and recreational clubs. In addition, acting on the fact that students whose parents are involved in their school are more likely to graduate, each NAS campus will offer ESL classes to parents, delivered by the New America College. Also, in partnership with the Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning, each campus will offer adult education topical classes for our students' families.

As Lakewood's CLC coordinator Anna Unger explains, "Through the 21st CCLC we are building a community of learners



Behavior Interventionist Ryan Guzman works with a student in the NAS-Lowry after-school tutoring program.

that includes not only the students, but their parents and community partners. I believe that participation in 21st CCLC activities will enrich the lives of all those who are involved."

In addition to state support, NAS has been able to leverage the CDE grant and secure an additional fulltime staff member at the Lakewood and Lowry CLCs through an in-kind donation from the AmeriCorp Community Building Partnership for Youth in Transition.

The Expelled and At-Risk Student Services program, created through a four-year \$500,000 CDE grant, will focus on students at-risk of being suspended or expelled. Each campus will identify the NAS students that are most at risk and assign a behavior interventionist to work closely with them, monitoring their behavior and academic progress, but more importantly providing them with personal

support and attention. For students that have already been suspended or expelled, NAS will establish alternative routes through which these students can remain engaged academically.

"Our goal is to help students successfully navigate their high school experience at NAS," explains Denver's EARSS Behavior Interventionist, Joe Roybal. "We will provide guidance, support, and advocacy for students and encourage students to exemplify strong character for themselves and their peers."

The five-year, \$450,000 Colorado Graduation Pathways Program began last year, and targets students at the NAS-Lowry and Denver campuses that are most at-risk of dropping out. This program also provides intensive monitoring and support for the most at-risk students, and established tutoring, credit recovery and academic and enrichment programming.

The first year of the program demonstrated tremendous success and even greater promise for the future.

"Evidence based interventions were used with students identified as high risk for dropping out. Students were connected with community resources to help them cope with issues such as gang involvement and drug addictions. We visited parents. We took groups of students to visit post-secondary institutions and apprenticeship programs," explains Success Counselor Brian Yoder. "Our data shows that students at both schools who received these interventions had a higher retention rate than the rest of the student body."

NAS student named Daniels Scholar

On April 23, 2012, Kareem Roberts, a senior at New America School-Lowry, was announced as the first NAS student to be named a Daniels Scholar. This prestigious award, bestowed by the Daniels Fund, grants awardees funding to attend the college or university of their choice.

Linda Childears, president and CEO of the Daniels Fund explains, "These are promising and motivated students who have demonstrated strong character, leadership, and a commitment to



community service. They are outstanding young people and the Daniels Fund is proud to partner with them as they fulfill their dreams of attending college."

Though he experienced difficulties early in his academic career, in part due to insecurities from a stuttering problem, Kareem was driven to graduate from

high school. As a junior, this impressive young man started school at noon and left at 10:00 p.m. On the days he wasn't in school, he worked from 4 p.m.

until 1 a.m. As a senior, he divided his time between NAS, work, and Pickens Technical College. As he notes, "It took an incredible amount of discipline to stay focused and have the determination to come in every day and keep going."

His NAS English teacher, Joni Noel concurs, describing Kareem as "one of the most determined, hard-working and dedicated students I have ever met in 40 years."

Kareem graduated in May and plans to attend Colorado State University, the first in his family to attend college. He plans to become a History teacher.

School *Updates*

New America School-Lakewood holds grand opening

The entire student body, faculty and staff of New America School-Lakewood gathered in the Martischand multipurpose room on November 1, 2011 to celebrate the grand opening of the school's new state of the art campus.

The event was also attended by NAS board members and local dignitaries such as Lakewood mayor Bob Murphy and Lakewood city councilwoman, Sue King. Joining in were dozens of representatives from the Lakewood police and fire departments.

Highlighting the day's activities were speeches by former NAS-Lakewood student and present lead secretary at NAS-Lakewood, Salima Caballero, and students Ricardo Luna, Kenia Rascon, and Stephany Medina. NAS senior Thla Tang, an English language learner, opened the event with a beautiful rendition of the national anthem.

Ms. Caballero told students how her hard work as an NAS-Lakewood student led to her hire as NAS staff. She also credited much of her success to attending the New America School. "I believe miracles happen, you just have to be in

the right place at the right moment. The New America School is my miracle!" said Caballero.

"I can't tell you how excited I am for our students," Principal Jon Berninzi summarized the celebration. "NAS serves a diverse population of recent immigrants and at-risk students. Traditional schools



do not always seem to provide the level of support needed by these kids. This new site shows students that we value them and, in turn, they will learn to value their education."



Cross-curricular instruction creates connections

The curriculum at The New America School-Lowry is taking on a different look from years past. Many Lowry students are now participating in cross-curricular classes, which means they no longer follow a traditional schedule of: math class, followed by history class, followed by language arts class, etc. Now they may find themselves immersed in a group project addressing some (or all) of those subjects at once.

Cross-curricular instruction (CCI) involves teaching a number of subjects using a central theme or topic. For example, the study of the Holocaust may include scientific investigations, various types of writing (English), mathematical analysis, and visual representation (art). This is opposed to the subject approach, which focuses on specific subject matters, often in isolation from other disciplines.

The AM and PM programs at Lowry



Students learn geography and math while studying resource distribution during WWI.

will both participate in CCI during the 2012-13 school year, but the systems look a bit different. The AM program is crossing Language Arts and Social Studies to create a "Humanities Block." Language arts teacher Christine Loven-Santos explained why this is relevant to the NAS

students: "We feel that by teaching a specific skill through more than one subject, the kids have a more solid opportunity to focus on what interests them, helping them make more immediate connections."

The PM program is working to combine ALL subject areas to create a system that is completely cross-curricular. This includes an initiative to make all of the work project-based, meaning that while each skill is addressed through each subject area, the mastery of that skill is demonstrated through what is often a team-based project – which may mean a poster, presentation, skit, or other means of measurable output.

"I feel the students are more engaged now," said Diana Myers, PM social studies teacher. "It's so much easier for them to find meaning in what we're teaching and that helps them stay connected."

Denver campus celebrates success

During 2011-12, NAS-Denver had many causes for celebration. Our students experienced great academic success. Results from the spring MAP tests were outstanding, demonstrating how much students at the school learned and achieved throughout the year (see article p. 1). The biggest reward of all came at the end of the year when Principal Mike Epke was able to shake the hands of the Denver campus' 57 proud graduates.

The school's MESA club, a program designed to promote interest in science, took first and second place in competitions held at the University of Colorado Denver which were attended by high school students from across the state. One NAS student's efforts earned a \$1,000 scholarship and a new lap top computer. The school had two strong boys' basketball teams that competed against other charter schools from metro Denver. One NAS team won first place in a tournament hosted annually at the Pepsi Center.



The NAS-Denver "Court of Dreams Charter League Tournament" champion team

The Denver campus is also excited about the prospects of moving into a new location and establishing a 21st Century Community Learning Center for our students. To do so, NAS Denver has been investigating changing authorization for the school

from Mapleton School District to the Colorado Charter School Institute. Changing to a state authorizer, emphasizing our regional enrollment characteristics, will enable NAS-Denver to move to a building that better meets our students needs.

NATIONAL BRIEFS

NAS to establish new school in Las Vegas, Nevada

On March 23, 2012 the Nevada State Public Charter School Authority provisionally approved New America School-Las Vegas, projected to open in either August 2013 or 2014. The school will receive a full charter once a facility is established. NAS-Las Vegas is projected to serve 185 students in its first year, growing to 450 students within five years.

The NAS-Las Vegas Board is comprised of many current and former leaders of the city's and state's educational community, including Larry P. Mason, former Chair of the Clark County School District Board; Maurice Flores, Ed.D., former Superintendent of the Kingman Unified School District, Kingman, Arizona; Walt Rulfes, Ph.D., former Superintendent of the Clark County School District; and Javier Trujillo, Chair of the Las Vegas Latin Chamber of Commerce.

NAS Las Cruces, NM begins operations

The New America School has recently opened its doors in Las Cruces, New Mexico. On August 20, 2012, more than 250 students enrolled at the new location. 83% are over the age of 18, reflecting the great need in this community of adults needing to complete their credits for a diploma and acquire the English needed to succeed. Our students range

from the ages of 14-66. At this moment, approximately 25 seniors are set to graduate in June 2013.

NAS-Albuquerque honored

Last October, at their Annual Charter School Conference, the New Mexico Coalition for Charter Schools named the New America School-New Mexico (Albuquerque) as the New Mexico's Charter School of the Year.

Growing to 450 students in just four years, and with a 99% economically disadvantaged rate and a 93% ELL population, the work being done by NAS-NM is amazing. In June NAS-NM graduated 81 seniors, roughly a third above the age of 23. For the upcoming 2012-2013 school year, it is expected that that number will increase.

This year, NAS-NM will be adding a new Student Multi-Purpose Facility to its campus. The new structure includes a weight room, kitchen area, showers, and a large gym area.



Principal Margarita Porter, students, faculty and board are joined by the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce at the NAS-LC ribbon cutting ceremony.

NAS Board Chair-emeritus honored as PeaceJam hero

In November 2011, NAS Board Chair emeritus Polly Baca, along with Mary Lou Makepeace, Executive Director of the Gay & Lesbian Fund for Colorado, were chosen by PeaceJam to be Hero Award Honorees. The award was presented to Polly at the third annual PeaceJam Hero Awards Luncheon, which also celebrated PeaceJam's 15th Anniversary. More than 500 people attended the event, keynoted by Nobel Peace Laureate Jody Williams.

PeaceJam is an international education program whose mission is to create young leaders committed to positive change in themselves, their

communities and the world through the inspiration of Nobel Peace Laureates who pass on the spirit, skills, and wisdom they embody.

Each year at the Hero Awards Luncheon, PeaceJam celebrates

"All of us at NAS congratulate Polly Baca on this well-deserved honor."

individuals who have made extraordinary contributions and given a lifetime of service to their community and to the world.

"Polly Baca was honored because of her groundbreaking work to break down the barriers of racism and sexism throughout her exceptional career of service to her community and her country. We were honored to be able



NAS founding chair Polly Baca accepts PeaceJam's Hero Award from Nobel Prize Laureate Jody Williams

to present the 2011 "Hero" Award to Polly Baca!" explains Dawn Engle, Co-Founder and Executive Director of The PeaceJam Foundation.

CONTRIBUTORS BACK NAS INITIATIVES

The continued support of public, private and individual funders validates both the work that NAS is doing and the mission that drives that work. In total, gifts from public and private sources, corporations and individuals exclusive of in-kind contributions totaled in excess of \$267,000 for the year, with additional commitments over the next five years of more than \$3,000,000.

In addition to the state and local assistance provided to the New America School's Comprehensive Graduation Initiative (see article p. 3), the following private and individual donors contributed to NAS efforts in 2012:

The **Laura Bush Foundation for America's Libraries** granted NAS-Lakewood \$5,000 to help establish the new campus' library.

With a grant of \$25,000, the **Temple Hoynes Buell Foundation** renewed its support of the Lakewood campus' *¡Cuidate!* program, a research-based, proven-effective teen pregnancy and HIV prevention curricula.

This year, **The Denver Foundation** also supported NAS through a \$7,000 grant for general operating expenses.

The Polis-Schutz Family Foundation donated \$26,600 to the Colorado Educational Opportunity Scholarship fund. As a result of this gift, five new NAS graduates will receive \$10,000 towards their post-secondary studies. This year's awardees include:

- **Giannina Castillo**, who spoke no English when she arrived at NAS from Peru. During her two years at NAS she was quickly able to transition

from beginning English language acquisition classes, to mainstream courses where she excelled, earning a 4.0 GPA. Giannina plans to finish a Pickens Technical College Business and Computer Technical program she began while attending NAS and then seek a degree in mathematics.

- **Bridget Marquez**, who, in the words of her teachers, takes her responsibilities as a student, a friend, and a community member quite seriously. She led the Lakewood campus' Teens for Jeans drive to collect clothes for homeless teens across Colorado. Bridget is planning to study Criminal Justice and become a probation officer.
- **Aye Mu**, a Karen refugee from Burma, who spoke no English prior to attending NAS but received a Principal's Honor Roll Award in each of her four years at NAS and will be the first in her family to earn her high school diploma.

- **Brigette Mendoza and Lilian Ramos** round out this year's scholarship recipient list (see article p. 8)

In addition to its contribution to support student scholarships, **The Polis-Schutz Family Foundation** donated \$50,000 to support efforts to replicate the NAS educational model in other communities throughout the southwest.

To honor Stephen and Susan Polis-Schutz, author **Marjorie Hansen Shaevitz** for the second consecutive year donated 60 copies of her book **adMISSION POSSIBLE: Getting Into the College of Your Choice** to NAS.

NAS Board Members continued to demonstrate their leadership and commitment to the school's mission, not only through the extensive work members do on behalf of NAS, but through their financial support. Once again, 100% of the board contributed to NAS during fiscal year 2011-2012.

FUNDING CONTRIBUTIONS

SUPPORT NAS

Your support will enable the New America School to continue to provide high quality education to English Language Learners and non-traditional students. If you would like to visit our school or hear more about our programs and how your generosity can make a huge difference in the lives of NAS students, contact David Rein, drein@newamericaschool.org, 303.894.3160.

[RAMOS continued from page 8]

picked up an English dictionary and forced myself to understand a foreign language. I did not give up; I could not give up.

I attended that school for a semester and transferred to the New America School in Lakewood. I only attended that school for a semester as well, because I had to work to pay back the money that was needed to come to the United States. A year later, I decided to go back to school and attended The New America School in Denver. I did not know it at the time, but that decision would save my life. I began to feel safe at school and my PTSD began to surface. The staff at NAS-Denver began to notice my sadness and the scars on my wrists. They began to ask questions and I knew they genuinely cared about me. I began to talk about my story. I knew it was time to get help and the counselors found outside counseling resources for me. I began to receive therapy. I was finally beginning to see the world in a positive way. I have good and bad days; however, I am happy to say that I have more good days than bad days now.

I have come a long way; however there is still a long road ahead of me. The strength I have found in myself was unimaginable to me a few years ago. I never thought I would be able to survive and overcome the hurtful and unforgettable events that have happened to me. I am a survivor and I will never give up my dreams.

[MENDOZA continued from page 8]

places, the weather, and every single thing that sometimes made me feel happy and sad as well. But now I have decided to start this long journey in order to graduate from college and then from university, and I will not give me up, no matter how difficult it might get.

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school, we were a lot closer and we supported each other, no matter what our challenges... Whether it was caring for a baby or learning another language or learning how to avoid at risk situations... Through my experience at New America, I have made some strong friendships and I have felt comfortable about what I was learning, the people that were around me, and the building I was learning it in.

At our school, you feel like more than a number; sometimes, we even felt famous because the teachers knew all of us by name. The students did not judge you on how well you spoke English or Spanish, all they cared about was loyal friendship and respect. The teachers were incredibly funny, but still made sure we got our work done. Being at our school was like a second home full of laughter and safe space, and I know

many of us felt this way...

I am proud to stand up here and say I'm graduating with A's and B's! To some that may not be much, but to me it means everything...

My future is bright and clear. I plan on going to college for nursing. I love working with others and New America and my years in High School have taught me that I can do anything, and helping others is my passion...

My future as a parent is clear as well. Seeing the other mothers at NAS has opened my eyes to new ways of fun and healthier parenting. I know I am a good mother and that this day is the beginning of the next stage of my life with my daughter and it is the next stage for all of our lives as graduates. Those of us that are graduating tonight have a lot of dreams and visions about our future and today is proof that we can achieve them!

NAS Students Inspire Faculty – Contribute to Rising Staff Morale

"My students are the most inspiring and intriguing people to work for and have heavily impacted my way of life and the way I view the world." This teacher comment, submitted in the annual NAS staff satisfaction survey illustrates one of the main reasons New America School staff return to the school year after year. NAS teachers feel privileged to work with our student population.

NAS teachers' morale is also positively impacted by their impressions of their co-workers. As counselor Matthew Johnson, an eight year Lowry staff member says, "I have stayed at NAS all these years for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the collegiality amongst the staff. Working alongside people with whom you share a common mission is good, but working with people you sincerely enjoy is even better."

In early 2012, the independent research firm, Corona Insights, was retained by NAS to conduct an extensive staff survey with the aim of better understanding internal perceptions of the organization and identifying areas for improvement. NAS has administered this same survey each year since 2010 to gauge improvement over time.

"The information gained through this process helps NAS to make informed decisions that will move the organization forward," explains NAS Superintendent Dominic DiFelice.

Corona found that overall ratings of staff morale, ratings of each individual school and NAS as a whole improved significantly over the past two years. Moreover, ratings improved the most substantially in student related areas, such as student learning.

Learn More about the New America School on YouTube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-17h4plo6E>



THE ROAD TO GRADUATION: Personal stories of perseverance, hard work, and finding a home at NAS

On June 1, 2012 200 proud NAS students walked across the stage of the beautiful Buell Theater and were handed their well deserved diplomas. Each NAS student overcame obstacles along the way but kept their graduation goal in sight. Here are three of their stories:

Lilian Ramos – After the age of 12, I was no longer able to attend school. In my country [Guatemala], one has to pay for their education after elementary school.



My parents could not afford to pay and we made the decision to stop my schooling. The only option I was left with was to immigrate to the United States. I was 17 when I made the decision to leave the

ones I loved and pursue my happiness.

At that point in my life I did not know that my pursuit of happiness would turn into a nightmare. I was 17 and traveling with a person whom I had never met. I did not know that this person's actions would haunt me for the rest of my life. After crossing the border between Guatemala and Mexico many dangerous events occurred. I was not only alone in a different country, but also surrounded by people who wanted to take advantage of me. It did not end there. After crossing the border between Mexico and the United States I was once again in danger. I was detained by US immigration and held in jail for over four months. During my time in jail I also suffered because I was continuously threatened by the guards. I was eventually released because I was underage and a citizen friend signed off for me.

I came to Denver and began searching for schools because I knew I could not be successful in this country without knowing English and having an education. I felt unprotected because almost all of my family was in Guatemala... I did not know it then, but I was suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). I did not become aware of that until I came to The New America School.

Before attending The New America School I was a student at a school in Brighton. My first days back in school were very difficult. I was made fun of because I did not speak English. There was an incident at that school where students were fighting and I was accidentally punched by one of them. When a teacher told him to apologize because he had hit me, his response was "It doesn't matter, she doesn't even know English." I turned their hateful words into my motivation. I

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Shantay Whitten – When I started High School, I was exposed to a lot of high risk situations that I didn't know how to avoid. I made some bad decisions and my path could have been very different than graduating high school today. And with these situations, the hardest difficulty of all through these past four years was to not give up.



Before I attended the

New America School I went to Thomas Jefferson High School. There, I felt out of place, I couldn't focus on my school work and I was worried about fitting in with the other students. Yes, their school was bigger. Yes, their prom was bigger, but that wasn't what I was looking for. I just wanted to go to class and feel comfortable and get my diploma in a way that I felt good about.

One of the other challenges that I faced was getting pregnant in my sophomore year. I had to really face some important decisions about my future and while I wasn't quite ready for it, I am grateful to share that I am the proud mother of a beautiful baby girl that was born on January 14th, 2011.

Becoming pregnant and becoming Nahamani's mother was a pretty big turning point for me. This was when I moved over to New America. And the challenges weren't over. I had so much on my mind... I had to get all of my school work done, find child care, and often take my baby with me on the bus to and from school. I was up at many hours of the night to feed or change Nahamani and I learned that sleep is much more valuable than you can imagine!

But the good news is, even though it was a challenge, I didn't give up... It was my most difficult challenge... to stay on track. To get up every day, to do my work, to keep moving forward, and I know that one of the reasons I kept going is because of our school.

In the halls at New America, our school felt good. It was not like walking in the halls of a bigger public high school, where all you feel like is a number, where no one knows you by your name or they might not even notice you. At our

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Brigitte Mendoza – I'm twenty years old and my birthplace is Lima, Peru. I came to The United States almost two years ago with all my family to find work. I left my



home, my friends and my school; I knew that my life would be different and harder because my first language is Spanish. I established my goals before I left Peru, and my first step was to start working in order to help

my family. We came to Denver because my grandmother lives here and she helped us. So I started working two months later... It was my first job and I have kept it for two years.

Next I started looking for places where I could learn English and earn a GED or a high school diploma. I discovered that getting a GED would be easier than a high school diploma. For the GED I would only have to study a book and take the test instead of taking classes for a year or more to earn a diploma. I chose the diploma because I knew I would learn more English and that was one of my goals. I also wanted to learn English in different areas like math, science, and social studies. So I decided to work for a diploma even knowing that this would be harder.

At The New America School-Lowry, I learned and am still learning new things every day... At NAS I found a second family, I found the help I needed to be successful, and my teachers are patient and are helpful. I am learning English and still able to work... I will miss this school so much but I will come back and help when I can because I like helping my teachers, learning new things and meeting new people who could need my help.

My dream is to be in a big room teaching math with thirty or forty students, and making students believe and prove that math is not that hard. I wish to speak educated and professional English. I know I will have reached that level when one day I can read, understand and enjoy one of my favorite books, "Crime and Punishment" by Feodor Dostoyevsky, as well as I did in Spanish. I will make my dream come true and I know this is not going to be easy... I miss being in Peru, the food, the people, the warm feeling, the

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