



DARDEN SCHOOL  
of BUSINESS



**Gerry Yemen**  
*Senior Researcher*  
*Director, Darden Case Writing Research Group*

## **Nicole Lambson**

Executive Director of Curriculum, Instruction and Federal Programs, Farmington Municipal Schools

### **Rooting Out the Cause**

#### *Community Challenge*

When educating children, the stakes have always been high. When the coronavirus spread, the entire mode of delivery had to be transformed immediately. “The pieces are changing around the variables we can control,” Nicole Lambson said. “Teachers no longer control the environment—the time students have on and off each task.” The reality was that educators worldwide were dealing with a huge problem that had many possible causes.

As the governor spoke about easing school restrictions and reopening in the fall, Farmington district had each school write 90-day plans with the view that they were coming back into school in August. The 90-day plan was built around qualitative and quantitative analysis of student performance. After 30 days, metrics and evidence of progress were measured, and adjustments could be made. When New Mexico schools didn’t fully reopen in the fall, Lambson started hearing from principals and teachers around the district who had tried to implement their 90-day plans, and at the 30-day mark said, “adjustments must be made to meet student needs.” Many students were simply not engaging in the virtual environment.

#### *Action Taken*

Several years earlier, Lambson had attended the Principals Pursuing Excellence (PPE) as a district member. Her role was to take what the state was providing and align it to the systems and structures Farmington district already had in place. “I’d seen a lot of things come and go,” she said. She would approach the shift to virtual education using the framework familiar to all who had participated in the PPE—using data.

“In this instance, a survey was sent out to students,” Lambson said. The district and schools needed information: “what makes you engage in classes you want to come to each day” and “what happens in classes where you are not engaging?” That data helped narrow likely causes and identify the root cause of student disengagement. Instead of blaming students for distractions—whether they were babysitting siblings, facing difficulty at home or in the neighborhood, or simply tired of watching a screen—the data would help educators work to identify possible barriers in their online learning system at Farmington and how to improve them.

### *Key Takeaway*

“The pandemic brought out major equity issues that reflect the need for educational reform across the nation,” Lambson said. “We have been operating under the same system for the last 100 years so what does an overhaul look like?” Just as Farmington tried to figure out the root cause of engaging students, educators across the country had to figure out “the most critical piece to change right now to help kids be successful online.”