

Site Visit Report American Academy Charter School

The Site Visit to the three campuses of American Academy Charter School took place on Tuesday, October 4. The initial stop was the Castle Pines campus, the second stop was the Motsenbocker campus, and the final visit was at the Lincoln Meadows site, located just off Twenty Mile Road in Parker.

At the heart of any school's educational program, culture and philosophy are the school's mission and vision statements. American Academy's mission and vision are as follows:

American Academy will achieve academic excellence through a challenging, sequenced curriculum that emphasizes science, technology, engineering, arts, and math to provide our children with the tools to become the leaders of tomorrow. Together, our students, faculty, parents, and community will cultivate character, civic responsibility, and intellectual development.

Mission statements and material related to the mission can often be seen in schools, hanging from the halls and the walls throughout the facility. What is unique about American Academy is that while the school is full of posters emphasizing expectations and positive messages, the words on the posters come to life in the classrooms and hallways of the school.

The values and expectations of the school are likewise observed in the pedagogy of the classroom, whether a STEM classroom of 7th grade students or an ability grouped classroom of second graders who are working on reading skills. The mission of the school and the values of character, civic responsibility and intellectual development is also observed in unstructured time, such as transitions from classroom to classroom or in the cafeteria during lunch. It should also be noted that the expectations of students are met whether in a classroom of 6 or an interactive classroom of 27.

Classroom Observations: Instruction

In the classroom observations I made at each of the campuses, there was ample evidence that students were highly engaged throughout the lesson and made repeated, material observations and contributions to the instruction. Teachers pace their lessons to meet students' diverse learning speeds and styles. This was particularly evident in an art class observation which, at first glance, appeared a bit chaotic, but, after a few minutes of careful observation a quick-paced, active and individualized instructional model was playing out, while still working with the class at large. The ability grouping classes demonstrate a

commitment to meet the needs of individual students, however, this was also observed in other classes. In an English literature classroom, for example, as the students listened to an audio book, they were also engaged by the teacher, who made it a point to call on virtually every student, while at the same time monitor their work.

The site visit did not permit the opportunity to review specific data used to inform instruction, however, the classroom observations repeatedly revealed differentiation and appropriate intervention and pacing of instruction. This was particularly true in the art class observed and the English literature class.

Engaging Students in Learning	3/3
Curriculum	3/3
Academic Intervention and Acceleration	3/3
English Language Acquisition (did not observe/not applicable)	
Special Education Instruction	3/3
Summative Evaluation:	Exemplary

Classroom Observations: School Culture

In the observations at all three campuses, whether during transition time, lunch time, recess or in the classroom, there was a pronounced culture of interaction between students and between students and teachers, as well as students and staff, that personified genuine warmth and caring toward individuals. It was even evident at the otherwise routine check-in process at each school. The focus in those brief moments was not in completing the correct form or sharing the correct information of nature of business; rather, the primary effort was to welcome a guest.

American Academy campuses are either K-8 or pre-K-8. While it is not unusual for elementary students to be gregarious and welcoming, open and trusting and relatively civil, the same cannot always be said of the middle level student. However, at all three campuses, the norm in all situations embodied civility toward one another.

Similarly, students were observed assisting each other, whether in an art class or in an ability grouped reading class. I did not observe any student-on-student monitoring of behavior because there was never an instance where it was required.

Classroom Observations School Culture

Creating an Environment of Respect	3/3
---	------------

Establishing a Culture for Learning 3/3

Managing Behavior 3/3

Board Legal Obligations

I was able to have an extended conversation with the Vice President of the Board of Directors, Jodi Losinger. In that conversation, and through conversation with administrative leadership, I was able to confirm that the Board of Directors meets each of the following standards:

Bylaws in place that outline board role and legal obligation

Articles of incorporation in place that indicate current nonprofit status

Board handbook in place that outlines board member expectations

Financial transparency compliance

Financial reporting compliance

Board complies with open meetings requirements

Board holds meetings (at least quarterly)—American Academy meets monthly

Regular revision and approval of key policies (employment, enrollment, etc.)

Approval of annual audit

Approval of annual budget

Board meets authorizer deadlines and requirements

The charter school has adopted and implemented conflict of interest policies that prevent real or apparent conflicts of interest.

The charter school administration provides monthly financial reports to its governing board for review and approval.

In these conversations, I was also able to confirm that the American Academy Board has members who have expertise in E-12 education, that board members are familiar with and thoroughly understand student achievement data, and that the board, through the administrative leadership, regularly reviews academic performance.

Similarly, three members of the board have experience with finance, and are very involved in budget and in the annual audit process. The board monitors all financial data that impact both short-term and long-term financial health..

Board members are also well versed in and have experience in operational data and uses that to create, revise as needed and revisit the strategic plan of the school.

Leadership succession is a priority, and the structure of the board, requiring service on a PTO before being eligible to sit on the board, as well as the structure of appointed and elected board members ensure smooth transitions. The school grows their leaders, but maintains the ability to ensure a diverse board in terms of experiences, areas of expertise and opinions.

Board Governance

Exemplary

15/15

Summary

In the preliminary material submitted prior to the site visit, the school provided the following information with respect to mission and design elements:

For literacy and math, our flexible ability group model from grades K-8 is one of American Academy’s “calling cards.” This model entails employing additional teachers for those content areas in each of the grades to allow our students to grow and progress in a more individualized environment with the goal of, at minimum, having every child at grade level before the end of the school year. This model also allows students who are advanced in these subject areas to continue advancing at a healthy pace.

Ability groups are not permanent -- they are designed to change as students themselves grow and change, so students may move from one ability group to another from year to year.

Sometimes they are ready for more challenges. Sometimes they are ready for more challenges in one subject, while still requiring support in another, and sometimes we discover through multiple assessments and evaluations that they need more support in multiple subjects.

Though changes to ability grouping are not typically made mid-school

year, we do use a continuing schedule of and other evaluation data points throughout the year to validate student ability group assessments placement.

Our character and manners programming also provides a significant layer of learning for each student. Students are recognized on a weekly and trimester basis for showing strong character; eg, compassion, responsibility, and integrity. In addition, we also are very out loud about building resiliency with our students and ensuring that, for example, bullying is not only a disciplinary matter for the student who is doing the bullying but can be appropriately dealt with and overcome by the student being bullied.

The Site Visit conducted verified these words; all of the elements expressed were directly observed either in a classroom, during transition time, at recess and even in the lunchroom

In conversations with a student focus group, the students demonstrated the extent to which they have bought into the culture of the school. When asked what 2-3 things they would never want to see changed at the school, they responded with:

1. Uniforms
2. Programs like student council
3. Extra-Curricular opportunities
4. Band
5. Field Trips
6. STEM Trips

When asked what 2-3 things they would like to see changed (not eliminated, just changed), they offered:

1. Foreign language throughout the year at all grades
2. Addition of a Reading Club

The students all said they felt both physically and emotionally safe at the school and that the transition from the pandemic was relatively smooth and that students are adjusting, happy to interact with peers on a daily basis again.

In conversations with staff, they, too, lauded the school and its culture and educational values. When asked what makes the school “work,” the responses included:

1. The ability grouping of students and the fluidity of the groups
2. “Failure” is OK; it just means you try again, maybe with a different strategy.
3. Structure of the specialized service departments

4. Exceptional communication
5. Leadership focuses on problem solving, not problem identification
6. Parental support and collaboration
7. Leadership regularly acts in a manner that lets faculty and staff know that they (administration) want to know what help looks like.

The only “blind spot” (my term in the conversation) was the observation that the parent stakeholder group is the primary, most important group, which at times causes a disconnect because what the stakeholder group desires is not always what is best for the students, in the opinion of those with whom I visited.

The American Academy Charter School—all three of its campuses—is an inspiring model for what is possible when a focused passion for educational excellence meets extraordinary professional competence to turn a vision and a mission into a reality. The school, replete with a wide diversity of teachers in terms of experience, ability and philosophy, are unified with respect to the overall mission of the school and its values. This is seen in leadership, in staff, faculty and even at the board of directors’ level.

As mentioned at the outset, a school can be filled with posters encouraging and motivating students, lauding proper values and character. But slogans without culture are of little value and have even less impact. At American Academy, the publications do not encourage culture; rather they affirm and reinforce culture, and the protocols embedded in the school day, from classroom behavior to decorum in the halls, in the lunchroom, and even at recess.