

## Site Visit Report Academy Charter School

The Site Visit to Academy Charter School took place on Wednesday, October 12. At the heart of any's school's educational program, culture and philosophy is the school's mission statement. Academy's mission and visions statements.

### **Mission Statement Academy Charter School:**

Through the cooperation of parents, teachers and students, Academy Charter School will create a learning environment that fosters growth in character, high academic achievement, and the love of learning resulting in responsible, productive citizens.

### **Vision Statement Academy Charter School:**

Academy Charter School provides a challenging academic program based on the Core Knowledge curriculum that promotes academic excellence, character development, and educational enthusiasm for its students

In conversations with leadership and staff, the emphasis on a collaborative learning environment was evident. Several staff and school leaders used the word "family" to describe the school. The students were similarly referred to as part of the Academy Charter family. As the school has grown, this has come to fruition by evidence that a handful of former students are now teachers at the school, and several teachers have had (and have) students who attend and have attended the school.

The school has been in existence nearly 30 years, which speaks to a legacy of success in attracting and maintaining a strong enrollment with a significant waitlist for admission. Academy Charter is committed to the CORE Knowledge curriculum. They know who they are; they know what they believe philosophically, and they are clear about instructional pedagogy that works, while acknowledging that teaching is also a craft, and latitude within the established framework is encouraged.

### **Classroom Observations: Instruction**

During the course of the site visit, I had the opportunity to stop by several classrooms with principal McMillion. Without exception, students were engaged in their learning, whether the lesson was primarily student-directed or a more teacher-directed moment. The level of engagement suggested that the pacing of instruction was appropriate for students. CORE/CAS curriculum is evident in both material and pedagogical choices.

In classroom observations and in conversations with staff, it is clear that, as one staff member said, “You cannot live on an island here. You are never alone; help is all over. Students are the top priority and staff input is likewise highly valued. The intent is to see that students thrive socially, emotionally and academically. These values are shared by the community of the Academy Charter School community.

As noted below, I did not specifically observe either ELA classrooms or ESS classrooms, but the values of ensuring that students thrive socially, emotionally, and academically is one that is school-wide, regardless of academic ability.

Similarly, the staff was clear that administration/leadership allows grade level teams to assess groups and plan curriculum accordingly, which speaks to attention given to students of all abilities.

Staff also spoke about their great success-10-year track record—with RTI and MTSS. While a classroom visit was not made, the school is very well attuned to and gives great attention to students with special needs, as evidenced below:

At ACS, students have access to quality specialized instruction inside and outside of the general education classroom as outlined in the IEP and in alignment with best practices for the specific disability area. The school's specialized instruction is aligned with the students' root cause of their disability. Service Providers are licensed, trained, and skilled at designing specially designed instruction for students with IEPs. Providers know their students' strengths and needs and leverage this information to plan high-quality, strengths-based instruction. Students receive specialized instruction within a low teacher: student ratio which increases students' repeated practice and faster skill mastery.

ACS is authorized to serve students with Mild/Moderate disabilities. Students shall be considered for admission into Academy Charter School without regard to race, creed, color, gender, national origin, religion, ancestry, disability or need for special education.

At ACS, students have access to quality support services inside general education classrooms as outlined in the ELD plan. The school's ELD instruction is aligned with the specifics of a student's plan. Our English Language Development Teacher is licensed, trained, and skilled at designing specially designed instruction for students on the caseload. Our ELD teacher collaborates with the student's general education teachers to provide an optimal learning environment at all times of the day and collaborates with parents to ensure a strong home-school connection. ACS uses the WIDA assessment to help identify English learners and uses the Access assessment to determine the English language proficiency levels and progress of ELs in the domains of speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

<b>Engaging Students in Learning</b>	<b>3/3</b>
<b>Curriculum</b>	<b>3/3</b>
<b>Academic Intervention and Acceleration</b>	<b>3/3</b>
<b>English Language Acquisition (did not observe/not applicable)</b>	
<b>Special Education Instruction</b>	<b>3/3</b>

**Summative Evaluation:** **Exemplary**

### **Classroom Observations: School Culture**

In the observations of all classrooms, it was clear that the culture of the school promotes constant interaction between all members of the Academy Charter family that exuded warmth and caring. Teachers and leadership know the names of students. Students have no hesitation to warmly greet their classroom teachers, as well as other teachers in the building and the principal. Students are clearly not intimidated by school leaders or by teachers and staff. While there was consistent evidence of appropriate respect, the culture of warmth and inclusion was obvious.

Students could routinely be seen assisting each other, whether in a classroom, at recess, in the lunchroom, or even during a passing period. I noted several instances of students reinforcing each other. In a classroom, a student telling another, “Good point!” was often heard.

Culture is also revealed by how staff describes the school. As mentioned earlier, the terms “family” and “community” are used interchangeably and frequently by staff when describing the school. The comment that the principal is a curriculum expert (based on her experience as an exceptional classroom teacher) speaks to the credibility principal McMillion has among her staff and illustrates the culture she has built and continue to build.

A key part of the Academy Charter’s culture is the value placed on communication, something that was mentioned several times in interviews conducted. Staff said they felt particularly valued, appreciated the consistency in expectations communicated by administration, as well as the fact that there is “no judgment” in the words of several teachers and no micromanaging.

A further value that defines the culture is the constant learning, the ongoing professional development, and the belief that everyone can always be more effective.

**Classroom Observations**  
**School Culture**

<b>Creating an Environment of Respect</b>	<b>3/3</b>
<b>Establishing a Culture for Learning</b>	<b>3/3</b>
<b>Managing Behavior</b>	<b>3/3</b>

**Exemplary**

**Board Legal Obligations**

I was able to have an extended conversation with the President of the Board of Directors, Chris Dunbar. He noted that the school succeeds in large part due to the high academic standards, the feeling of family that permeates the campus, the engaged governing board and the fact that half or more of the teachers in the school have 20 or more years' experience. He also noted, as previously mentioned, that 4 teachers on staff are alumni.

Mr. Dunbar spoke about the consistent Classical Education focus—that Academy Charter is a “book learning” school. He also mentioned that their educational progress is tailored to student needs, that differentiated instruction is a hallmark of the school. This speaks to the earlier standard of meeting the needs of special needs students.

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 that Academy Charter Board has members who have expertise in K-8 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, several 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.

The board is elected via community vote, and if a vacancy occurs, the board has the option to fill the position to meet specific areas of expertise that need to be filled.

<b>Board Legal Obligations</b>	<b>Exemplary</b>	<b>14/14</b>
<b>Board Governance</b>	<b>Exemplary</b>	<b>15/15</b>

**Summary**

The only “blind spot” (my term in the conversation) was the observation that the parent stakeholder group at times splits into those whose students are in the K-6 group, and those who have 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students, which at times can cause some mile dissonance.

It was also noted that occasionally, a board member will have difficulty separating his/her “board hat” from his/her “parent’s hat.”

The Academy Charter School is an impressive model for with respect to what can be established and maintained for nearly three decades when a focused, passionate pursuit of excellence on the part of parents, teachers, staff, and leaderships creates a vision and a mission that is realized and results in consistent success.