A.1 Educational Philosophy

This document details CASA Academy's philosophical approach to increasing student achievement in the target population. The educational philosophy forms the foundation for CASA Academy's operating principles, also described in this document. Both the educational philosophy and operating principles underlie our Program of Instruction and are created strategically to meet the needs of students in the target population.

A. Philosophical Approach to Improving Pupil Achievement

Foundational Beliefs

CASA Academy's educational philosophy stems from the following four core beliefs:

1. All students, regardless of background, deserve the opportunity to receive an excellent education that prepares them for the demands of college, life, and society.
2. The primary grades set the foundation for student success in college, life and society; and, school must include daily opportunities for students to think critically and apply their learning in authentic ways.
3. An excellent education includes both academics and character development; together these elements enable students to persevere throughout their educational experiences and lives, thus setting them up for a better life path.
4. Providing students with an excellent education, in turn, strengthens society as a whole.

1. All Students Deserve an Excellent Education

We believe that students from low-income communities deserve a high quality education comparable to that of their more affluent peers. Currently, the majority of students from low-income backgrounds in Phoenix do not have access to this high-quality education; of the 12 public schools in CASA Academy's target zip codes, only one school achieved over 85% mastery on the 2012 AIMS test for reading and zero schools achieved over 85% mastery on the 2012 AIMS test for math. Research from the TC Media Center at Colombia University shows that by the end of fourth grade, low-income students of all races, including African American and Latino students, are two years behind their more affluent peers in both reading and math.[1] This gap continues to widen as students become older, and by twelfth grade these students are an average of four years behind.[2]

To close this achievement gap that exists, we must start building student knowledge from a young age to ensure that students do not fall behind as they progress throughout school. An excellent education involves providing students opportunities to learn and apply information in a variety of ways; it is not simply about teaching students to perform well on standardized tests. We believe that all students deserve opportunities to think critically, solve real-world problems, and apply their learning to a variety of authentic situations. These educational components are critical to provide students a learning foundation for career readiness curriculum in higher grades and the demands of college.

[1] TC Media Center from the Office of External Affairs. *The Academic Achievement Gap: Facts & Figures*. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 Sept. 2012 <http://www.tc.columbia.edu/news.htm?articleID=5183>.
[2] Ibid

2. Primary Grades Set the Foundation for Success in College, Life and Society

Kindergarten builds a critical foundation for a child's future success. Consider these facts:

- Even in grade zero, the harsh reality is that kindergarteners from low-income backgrounds are already significantly behind their more affluent peers.[3]
- By age three, children of parents in higher income areas will already have vocabularies that are nearly 50 percent greater than those of low-income children.[4]
- Before entering kindergarten, the average cognitive scores of preschool-age children in the highest socioeconomic group are 60 percent above the average scores of children in the lowest socioeconomic group.[5]
- At age four, children who live below the poverty line are already 18 months below their more affluent peers.[6]

Given these facts, the founders of CASA Academy believe that kindergarten is crucial to close the achievement gap. We expect many of our students will come to us significantly below grade level and anticipate our first priority will be remediating the skills that many of their more affluent peers have already developed. Given that our target population is primarily Hispanic and that many students will come from non-English-speaking homes, we also anticipate a large percentage of our students will be English Language Learners (ELL). Our model is particularly focused on the needs of our ELL students, providing full-day kindergarten to ensure our students rapidly develop English reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills.

The kindergarten through third grade years are extremely important for building a child's foundation in early literacy skills and essential math concepts. Research shows students who are not reading on grade level by third grade will continue to fall behind as they progress through school:

> "Results of a longitudinal study of nearly 4,000 students find that those who do not read proficiently by third grade are four times more likely to leave school without a diploma than proficient readers. For the worst readers, those who could not master even the basic skills by third grade, the rate is nearly six times greater. While these struggling readers account for about a third of the students, they represent more than three-fifths of those who eventually drop out or fail to graduate on time. What's more, the study shows that poverty has a powerful influence on graduation rates. The combined effect of reading poorly and living in poverty puts these children in double jeopardy."[7]

CASA Academy's decision to serve kindergarten through third grade students is intentional. By starting in kindergarten, we will ensure our students develop the foundational literacy and math skills that will enable them to be successful throughout their education, in life, and in society.

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[3] Klein, Lisa. "Promoting Effective Early Learning." *NCCP*. National Center for Children in Poverty, 2007. Web. 18 Sept. 2012. http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_695.html

[4] TC Media Center from the Office of External Affairs. *The Academic Achievement Gap: Facts & Figures*. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 Sept. 2012 <http://www.tc.columbia.edu/news.htm?articleID=5183>.

[5] Klein, Lisa. "Promoting Effective Early Learning." *NCCP*. National Center for Children in Poverty, 2007. Web. 18 Sept. 2012. http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_695.html

[6] Ibid

[7] Hernandez, D.J. *Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation.* The Annie E. Casey Foundation; Center for Demographic Analysis, University at Albany, State of New York; Foundation for Child Development.

3. Excellent Academics and Character Education Set Students Up For A Better Life Path

College should be an opportunity provided to all students regardless of background. Ensuring that students are on a path to success in upper elementary, middle, high school, and college will make a significant difference in a child's future income and quality of life. Consider these facts:

- In 2009, the unemployment rate was more than three times as high for people without a high school diploma than for those with a Bachelor's degree.[8]
- In 2003, the typical full-time year-round worker in the United States with a four-year college degree earned 62 percent more than an individual with only a high school diploma.[9]
- Only one third of high school graduates enjoy health benefits nationally, as compared to two thirds of college graduates.[10]

In addition to strong academics, student character development is essential in preparing students for success in college, life, and society. This emphasis on character rests on the notion that it is not enough for students to simply be intelligent; they must also know how to use their intelligence for the greater good. As John Phillips wrote, "Goodness without knowledge is weak and feeble, yet knowledge without goodness is dangerous." Character development is so important to student success that KIPP schools, a highly-performing network of charter schools in the U.S., has spent several years actively researching character development and has even gone so far as to suggest assigning students a character grade.[11] Additionally, several research studies including the Seattle Social Development Project and the Child Development Project show the lasting effects of elementary school character education on students through middle school, high school, and in cases, adulthood.[12]

CASA Academy will set students up for college and a better life path by empowering students to take ownership of their own education. Students will begin to develop this sense of empowerment at a young age as they are taught explicitly to make choices that reflect what is best for their learning. Throughout their education at CASA Academy, students will learn the values of respect, responsibility, perseverance, integrity, and empowerment as the guiding forces that shape their everyday actions.

> *Respect.* Honoring the beliefs of others and treating others with kindness.
>
> *Responsibility.* Being accountable for your actions and work.
>
> *Perseverance.* Working relentlessly to accomplish goals.
>
> *Integrity.* Operating with honesty; doing the right thing even if no one is watching.
>
> *Empowerment*. Taking ownership of decisions, successes, and setbacks; making choices that reflect your own best interests as a person and as a member of your community.

CASA Academy's core values are chosen purposefully to guide students' character development and to ensure they are on the path to college. This character education and empowerment will ensure that CASA Academy graduates, who will predominantly come from at-risk communities, will enter society with the

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[8] "The Importance and Value of a College Degree." *The Importance and Value of a College Degree*. N.p., n.d. Web. 20 Oct. 2012. <http://www.rasmussen.edu/student-life/blogs/main/importance-and-value-of-a-college-degree/>.

[9] Ibid

[10] National Center for Education Statistics (2005c). Youth Indicators, 2005: Trends in the Well-Being of American Youth. http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2005050.

[11] Tough, P. (2011). What if the secret to success is failure?. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/18/magazine/what-if-the-secret-to-success-is-failure.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

[12] Berkowitz, M., & Bier, M. (2005). What works in character education: A research-driven guide for educators. Retrieved from http://www.rucharacter.org/file/practitioners_518.pdf

academic and social skills necessary to succeed in life.

4. Educating Students Strengthens Society

Preparing all students for college will in turn strengthen society. A college degree will allow students to contribute more financially in taxes. The typical college graduate pays over 100 percent more in federal income taxes and 82 percent more in total federal, state, and local taxes than the typical high school graduate.[13] Additionally, a college degree promotes a higher level of involvement in a citizen's right to vote. In the 2004 presidential election, 76 percent of college graduates voted, as compared to only 49 percent of high school graduates.[14] When students who attend CASA Academy return to their local communities upon graduation from college, they will be able to contribute in a substantial way to their communities through their jobs, taxes, and civic responsibilities.

As a result of this core philosophy, CASA Academy is driven by a compelling mission.

Mission

CASA Academy exists to create empowered citizens of integrity ready for success in college, life, and society by providing a transformative education using authentic approaches that prepare students to overcome challenges, think critically, excel in academics, and become role models for their community.

By fulfilling our mission we will transform the educational and life opportunities of the students in our community, and in so doing, we will transform the community itself.

Currently, students in the target area do not have the opportunity to attend a high performing lower elementary school that provides a foundation of learning for the demands of college and career readiness curriculum in higher grades. CASA Academy seeks to fill that void and dramatically change the life trajectory for the community's youngest students by providing a foundation of learning for the demands of college and career readiness curriculum in higher grades. By ensuring that students are academically proficient or excelling, are critical thinkers, and possess strong character traits, CASA Academy will set students on the path to success in upper elementary, middle school, high school, and college, and will ensure that they become citizens who contribute to their communities in positive and transformational ways.

B. Principles Fundamental to Program of Instruction

CASA Academy's operating principles are designed to ensure our vision becomes a reality in central Phoenix. The five core principles that have been identified as central to CASA Academy's success are listed and described in further detail below.

1. Critical Thinking and College Bound
2. Data-Driven Instruction
3. Hiring, Developing, and Retaining Effective Teachers
4. Sense of Community and Family Engagement
5. Student Ownership of Learning

[13] National Center for Education Statistics (2005c). Youth Indicators, 2005: Trends in the Well-Being of American Youth. http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2005050.
[14] Ibid

1. Critical Thinking and College Bound

CASA Academy will maintain rigorous academic standards, which will ensure that students develop problem solving skills, critical thinking skills, and higher levels of metacognition. CASA Academy recognizes that without these critical thinking skills, college cannot be a real possibility for students; therefore, these concepts go hand in hand.

To ensure that students develop these critical thinking skills and are able to apply their knowledge in a wide variety of situations, CASA Academy will adopt components of two curricular models—direct instruction and authentic approaches. Direct instruction is "a clear and systematic presentation of knowledge,"[15] and will be used for all subjects including reading comprehension, phonics, science, social studies, writing, and math. Direct instruction involves a teacher explicitly teaching or modeling new content or skills, practicing those skills with students during a guided lesson, and then having students practice the new skills on their own at the end of the lesson. Authentic approaches involve setting a purpose for learning that connects to the real world and utilize materials that exist outside of the learning environment. Authentic approaches also promote critical thinking skills similar to a constructivist model, where students build off of prior knowledge to come to their own understanding of the content.

Direct instruction is commonly used to fill remedial gaps in schools in low socioeconomic status populations while authentic approaches are often used in more affluent community schools. We believe it is absolutely critical to provide all students with authentic learning experiences that offer opportunities for critical thinking and problem-solving skills to ensure that our students have the same access to a high-quality education as more affluent students. At the same time, direct instruction will enable students to master basic concepts so that students develop a firm grasp of all academic content.

2. Data-Driven Instruction

Data-driven instruction involves utilizing data to guide instruction. This includes analyzing standards and task-analyzing objectives aligned to assessments, collecting various data points throughout instruction, and informing instruction based on data. There is a clear link between data-driven instruction and student achievement. In a study of four districts, significant increases in standardized test scores were linked closely with data-driven instruction.[16] Further, each of the four districts in this research served at-risk students, highlighting the importance of data driven instruction with CASA Academy's target population.

Data will inform instruction at CASA Academy in the following ways:

- Data from daily checks for understanding will drive the instruction in every lesson
- Data from common formative assessments will determine intervention and enrichment groups
- Common formative assessments and benchmark assessments will determine major revisions in curriculum and instruction
- Coaching conversations will assist teachers in improving their minute-to-minute instruction
- Common formative assessments will be analyzed in grade level teams with the Academic Director
- Benchmark data analysis will be conducted in school-wide professional development

[15] Kim, T. (2005). Direct Instruction: An educators' guide and plea for action, *The Behavior Analyst Today*, 6.2.
[16] Protheroe, N. (2001). *Improving teaching and learning with data-based decisions: asking the right questions and acting on the answers*. Educational Research Service. Retrieved from http://santacruzmonterey.edleadersforequityandexcellence.com/docs /f09/improving_teaching_and_learning_with_databased_decisions.pdf

Knowing where students are academically ensures that instruction meets student needs at all times. Data analysis will lead to immediate changes to instruction that ensure students' needs are being addressed. Improvement efforts will be based on data analysis and reflection and will align with the authentic approaches and direct instruction methods central to the mission at CASA Academy.

3. Hiring, Developing, and Retaining Effective Teachers

CASA Academy believes in creating an environment where teacher effectiveness is essential, teacher growth is a priority, and teachers truly love their work. Multiple studies show the correlation between teacher effectiveness and student achievement.[17] Additionally, "in low-SES schools, it matters more *which* teacher a child receives than it does in high-SES schools,"[18] so with CASA Academy's target population, finding the most effective teachers possible will be critical. To support this further, longitudinal studies suggest that increases in student achievement occur when schools recruit and retain experienced teachers,[19] which indicates the importance of retaining teachers so they can continuously increase their effectiveness. Through a variety of conversations with school leaders and current and former teachers, we have also determined that teachers are likely to stay at a school only if they feel supported in their professional growth, valued, and respected. At CASA Academy, we will take the following steps to ensure we hire effective teachers and that our atmosphere promotes teacher effectiveness, growth, and retention:

- **Hiring Effective Teachers.** CASA Academy seeks to hire effective teachers who are committed to improving their instruction to increase student learning. CASA Academy has developed a comprehensive recruitment plan and hiring process to ensure that a wide variety of quality applicants are reached during initial and ongoing recruitment. Beginning in January of 2014, the Academic Director and Director of Students and Operations will focus heavily on teacher recruitment. CASA Academy will utilize the following four main avenues for teacher recruitment which are expanded upon further in C.3, Personnel:

    - Attending a variety of recruitment fairs and events
    - Networking with teachers and school administrators
    - Advertising through various forms of media
    - Building from connections with Teach For America

    Additionally, CASA Academy has developed a thorough and rigorous hiring process that includes submitting a cover letter and resume, a response to written application questions, an in-person demo lesson with feedback, responses to sample case studies, an invitation to interact in a casual environment, a second in-person interview, and a reference check. These are further detailed in section C.3, Personnel.

- **Fostering Teacher Effectiveness and Growth.** Fostering teacher effectiveness and professional growth are critical in ensuring that CASA Academy fulfills its mission. Professional development and growth will be facilitated through observations and coaching conversations, formal evaluations, and professional development sessions as described below.

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[17] Mueller, R., Carr-Stewart, S., & Steeves, L. Teacher recruitment and retention in select first nation schools. *In Education,* N.p., n.d . Retrieved from http://ineducation.ca/article/teacher-recruitment-and-retention-select-first-nations-schools

[18] Nye, B., Konstantonopoulos, S., & Hedges, L. (2004, Fall). How large are teacher effects?. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *26*(3), 237.

[19] Mueller, R., Carr-Stewart, S., & Steeves, L. Teacher recruitment and retention in select first nation schools. *In Education,* N.p., n.d . Retrieved from http://ineducation.ca/article/teacher-recruitment-and-retention-select-first-nations-schools

- **Regular Feedback to Increase Teacher Performance.** As a part of ongoing professional development, the Academic Director and Director of Students and Operations will visit teachers' classrooms on a weekly basis to provide feedback on instruction. This feedback will be targeted to specific teacher needs as determined based on a combination of student data, classroom climate observations, and overall teacher effectiveness. The Directors will utilize an observation rubric for these visits that ensures that both direct instruction and authentic approaches are being implemented. The rubric will be modeled after rubrics used at top performing schools.

- **Formal Evaluations.** In addition to the weekly informal observations, every teacher will be evaluated on a formal basis two times per year. This will offer a time to set professional development goals for upcoming instruction.

- **Professional Development Sessions.** Teachers will participate in a nine day initial professional development and orientation experience upon hire. Additional professional development will occur on an ongoing basis throughout the school year. The Academic Director will plan professional development sessions based on need, as determined by classroom observations, student data, and self-identified teacher needs. The time for these sessions will be built into the school calendar in advance; however, the content of sessions will be determined one month to one week preceding the professional development sessions to ensure that current student and teacher needs are being addressed in every session.

- **Teacher Retention.** To fulfill our mission, CASA Academy must not only hire and grow its teachers; it must also retain its most effective teachers. We will take the following actions to ensure teacher retention:

  - Dedicate a large portion of our time during initial professional development experiences for community building and developing personal relationships
  - Be transparent by clearly communicating expectations and following through with our actions
  - Have initial and on-going conversations with staff members about their work style(s) and the most effective ways to assist them
  - Administer teacher satisfaction surveys, analyze data, and make adjustments to our actions twice per year
  - Host fun events for our teachers (staff breakfasts/lunches, staff parties, etc.)
  - Provide small tokens of our appreciation on a monthly basis (snacks during meetings, morning coffee, gift cards, small treats)
  - Conduct additional fundraising to provide teacher bonuses when possible
  - Provide individualized and targeted teacher professional development

4. Sense of Community and Family Engagement

CASA Academy's culture will reflect a strong sense of community that ensures that students and staff feel safe, respected, and loved on a daily basis. Additionally, families will play an integral role in their children's success and will feel welcomed and valued on campus.

- **Fostering a Strong Sense of School Community.** At CASA Academy, students and teachers will act with *respect*, *responsibility*, *perseverance*, *integrity*, and *empowerment*. There will be a palpable sense of urgency that is shown in the empowered choices students make during instruction. To foster these core values and a sense of community, students and staff will participate in community building

and character development at the beginning and end of every school day, through Morning Meeting and Community Circle.

- *Morning Meeting.* "Morning Meeting is a microcosm of the way we wish our schools to be—communities full of learning, safe and respectful and challenging for all."[20] Morning Meeting will set the tone for the day and ensure that every student feels welcome, safe, respected, and loved. Additionally, teachers will use this time to model and practice positive character development.

- *Community Circle.* Community Circle is critical to CASA Academy's learning environment; it will be held daily in individual classrooms. During this time, students will have the opportunity to recognize positive character traits or behaviors through shout-outs. Additionally, students will be able to share their feelings about the day through appreciations and concerns.

- **Fostering Parent Engagement.** Researchers have shown that rates of parental involvement are lower in low-income communities than in higher income schools.[21] Therefore, low-income children with less involved parents often experience fewer of the academic benefits than children coming from higher income homes. It follows that children of higher income families are receiving more of the academic and attitudinal benefits of parental involvement than low-income children. Children of low socioeconomic status are at risk for lower academic achievement.[22] For these children, rather than acting as a benefit, the lack of involvement by their parents only leaves them farther behind their higher income counterparts.[23]

  In order to increase parent participation, the founders of CASA Academy will create strong ties to the community and parents in the following ways:

  - During the planning year, the Director of Students and Operations will be heavily involved in community events, grassroots marketing, and non-profit and religious services throughout the target area.
  - Two weeks before the beginning of the 2014 school year, teachers and school directors will conduct home visits to each student's home to set expectations and get to know students and families on a more personal level. A second home visit will be conducted in January of 2015. Teachers and school directors will continue to conduct two home visits for each new student enrolled on an annual basis, and one home visit per year for re-enrolled students.
  - APTT (Academic Parent-Teacher Team) meetings will be conducted bi-monthly. These meetings will replace the traditional model of Parent-Teacher Conferences, offering the opportunity for all parents and teachers from a single classroom to come together as a learning team. Teachers and parents will discuss student learning and data, and teachers will model strategies for parents to implement with their students to increase learning at home. A study for how APTTs affect parental involvement is in progress; however, surveys, anecdotes, and analysis of data suggest that APTTs have important benefits for families

[20] Kriete, Roxann (2002). *The Morning Meeting Book*, Turners Fall, MA: Northeast Foundations for Children, Inc.
[21] Smith, Jane. "Parental Involvement in Education Among Low-Income Families: a Case Study." *The School Community Journal* 16.1 (2002): N. page. Web. <http://www.adi.org/journal/ss06/SmithSpring2006.pdf>.
[22] McLoyd, V. (1990). The impact of economic hardship on black families and children: Psychological distress, parenting, and socioemotional development. *Child Development, 61*, 311-346.
[23] Smith, Jane. "Parental Involvement in Education Among Low-Income Families: a Case Study." *The School Community Journal* 16.1 (2002): N. page. Web. <http://www.adi.org/journal/ss06/SmithSpring2006.pdf>.

including increasing social networks for parents, increasing father involvement, high parent attendance, and empowered parents.[24]

- Teachers will send home one personalized note each week to parents, call parents every other week to update them on their child's progress, and are encouraged to attend family and community events throughout the year. The Directors will work with teachers to assist with creating personalized plans for this communication as needed. This will be discussed in further detail during initial professional development prior to the start of the school year.
- Each family will be responsible for volunteering for the school at least once a year, whether this means cutting out materials at home, volunteering in the classroom, working as a lunch or recess aide, or running a Parent Teacher Organization meeting for the school. While we feel that parent participation is vital to student success, we also recognize the constraints some parents may face due to working multiple jobs and/or perceived or real language barriers. CASA Academy will work with families on an individual basis to ensure parents can contribute in a way that is feasible and productive for them.

5. Student Ownership of Learning.

In order to ensure students are on the path to success in college, life, and society, it is imperative that students take ownership of their learning. Students will be able to restate what they are learning about during each lesson and understand the importance of what they are learning and its connections to their own lives. Because students will understand the importance of their learning, there will be a palpable sense of urgency felt in every classroom at CASA Academy. Students will be on task and highly engaged in what they are learning on a daily basis.

CASA Academy will promote student ownership of learning by:

- Investing students in their individual, class, and school goals
- Connecting all lessons to learning goals so that students make connections between their work and the outcomes
- Modeling and discussing examples of failure and success
- Teaching students to ask questions when they are confused or curious
- Providing opportunities for students to make structured choices during learning (for example, to choose an option during the Daily 5, discussed further in A.3, Program of Instruction)

C. Rationale for Target Population

According to AIMS, Arizona's standardized state test, currently only 69% of students within the target area are reading on grade level while only 56% of students are on-grade level in math. Further, 78% of the students we will serve qualify for free and reduced price lunch, an indicator of low-socioeconomic status. This data and further analysis presented in section A.2, Target Population, clearly indicate that more highly effective primary schools are necessary to improve student achievement within our target population. Our beliefs and school model are entirely built around the low-income population that we intend to serve based on the research presented throughout this section.

[24] Paredes, M. (2010). Academic parent-teacher teams: Reorganizing parent teacher conferences around data. *FINE Newsletter, II*(3), . Retrieved from http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/academic-parent-teacher-teams-reorganizing-parent-teacher-conferences-around-data