A1. Educational Philosophy

Background

Informed by current research on positive youth development, Every Voice in Action Foundation (EViA) has awarded grants to schools and non-profit organizations in Tucson, AZ since 1994 to achieve its mission: to ignite and support youth voice, infusing the community with the unique perspectives of young people. The foundation is committed to all Tucson youth, yet gives considerable attention and resources to programs that provide leadership training and opportunities to lower-income and minority youth. EVIA is now working closely with the Institute for Transformative Education (ITE) to form a new charter high school, the Western Institute for Leadership Development (Western Institute). The school will provide Tucson with an inclusive, community research and development center where students, teachers, parents and supporters continuously improve the practices of leadership and learning.

Dual goals: academic excellence and leadership development

The Western Institute is a small, rigorous, college preparatory high school formed to prepare students for college, career, civic engagement and leadership. Students enter a single track, project-based, core curriculum aligned with Arizona Standards and the entrance requirements of Arizona's two- and four-year colleges and universities. The Western Institute will intentionally cultivate a "college-going culture," which is the most reliable predictor of students' academic success (*Innovations in Education: Successful Charter Schools*, USDE, 2004). Important aspects of this culture include a community-wide "learning mindset" (Dweck, 2006), plus continuous student exposure to knowledge about post-secondary education through class projects, advising, college visits, opportunities to earn college credits, and regular interaction with college students.

Beyond high academic expectations, the Western Institute is equally committed to helping students' succeed on their own terms as they explore their identity and place in the world, which involves developing their unique voice and talents and taking leadership roles in their school and community. The school will serve a diverse student body from throughout greater Tucson and, by locating in a lower-income and underserved neighborhood, will welcome youth that might not otherwise experience a leadership-oriented education. Aspiring to live the words of student leaders at the Bay Area School of Enterprise in Alameda, CA, the school is a community of learners that "know what they think, know what they feel, know what they believe, and act on their beliefs."

Foundational principles: Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships

Rigor – Considerable research has shown that today's students can expect to have at least 6-8 different careers, and that today's content knowledge will soon be obsolete. In this context, academic rigor involves the extent to which a curriculum challenges students to *learn how to learn*, derive meaning, and produce new knowledge that informs effective action. The Western Institute shares the educational approach of High Tech High (HTH) in San Diego, CA in adopting a project-based curriculum based on big questions, real-world issues, and ample opportunity for student choice and decision-making. In this exciting learning environment, intellectual rigor is obviously connected to real-world results. Learning-informed action, infused with personal meaning, can then become enjoyable and intrinsically motivating.

HTH has demonstrated the effectiveness of a constructivist educational approach with a diverse, urban student population similar to the Western Institute's. Research on HTH indicates that, in a project-based learning environment, students successfully develop the 21st century skills essential to future careers: 1) critical thinking and real-world problem-solving, 2) a strong personal voice based on effective oral, written, and presentation skills, including use of digital media and design, and 3) creative leadership skills, including collaborating with others in diverse, multicultural teams.

At the Western Institute, students'mastery of performance objectives may be demonstrated through performance assessments as well as via more traditional means including essays and tests. A "performance" may include exhibition of science projects, artwork, or media screenings—any public sharing of students work with the community. Performance assessments provide an excellent vehicle for students to demonstrate rigorous work using multiple intelligences, talents, and styles of expression (Gardner). Performance assessment becomes objective, and not merely subjective opinion, when a pre-set, mutually understood rubric exists that clearly defines levels of students' task performance as a basis for evaluation. For the year-long senior project, incoming seniors select teacher- and community mentors, develop goals and rubrics for the project, and spend an entire year in rigorous inquiry and application of knowledge, culminating in a year-end exhibition.

At the Western Institute, all students' develop digital portfolios that document their performances over four years. Students, parents, and teachers review portfolios each semester to acknowledge students' work and progress and set new learning goals. Grades are awarded based on students' production of quality products and performances, including evidence of thoughtful self-assessment. Student portfolios are reviewed by students' advisory group and at a parent-student-teacher conference each semester.

Relevance: By design, Western Institute provides an intellectual and social context that maximizes positive youth development. The mid-teen years involve an intense socio-emotional developmental focus. While discovering one's own talents, learning how to work with others, and developing a career plan, youth are developing a sense of self as they navigate new types of relationships with everyone they know. At the same time, they are developing a greater capacity to analyze problems and explore questions about moral and ethical issues. At Western Institute, caring relationships with adults, working in diverse teams, having opportunities for self- and group reflection, and engaging in real-world projects with real-world results are conditions that provide a developmentally appropriate foundation for intellectual inquiry and achievement.

A recent survey of over 7,000 7th and 11th graders throughout Tucson indicated that improving their school and education in general is a top issue for students likely to attend the Western Institute, second only in importance to jobs for teens (Voices for Education, 2010). At Western Institute, students have authentic opportunities to participate at every level of school governance and shape the life of their learning community, including making school policy, evaluating teacher candidates, and organizing regular community meetings. Students also work with teachers, non-profit organizations, and community leaders to develop after-school programming that meets students' needs and interests, likely including arts and community action projects, as well as clubs, sports, tutoring and academic support.

The Western Institute is in the desert and on the border, uniquely placed for student research and action projects to impact the issues relevant to youth, including sustainability, social justice, education, and youth representation in community governance, media and the arts. Students are provided with many opportunities to direct their projects and make their work important and relevant to their passions and personal goals. By senior year, well-placed and well-structured internships in business, government, and the non-profit sector connect students with adult mentors that provide insight into potential careers.

Relationships

To meet students' developmental needs, a safe school climate is of paramount importance, free from bullying, putdowns, all the "isms," and even the loneliness of invisibility. Research has shown that students experience more respect and belongingness, and feel safer to express themselves in small schools like the Western Institute, which at capacity will have a maximum of 300 students. At Western Institute, skill-building in teamwork, diversity issues, and conflict resolution are part of the summer orientation, in-school classes, and community meetings. All students experience non-controlling relationships with caring adult mentors and role models, in a variety of ways. All students are members of a cohort advising group of no more than 15 students per teacher-advisor. Students attend weekly individual and/or group advisory meetings, and benefit from the close support of a caring adult that knows them well and a "team" of supportive peers.

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