LIBERTY HIGH SCHOOL

Beginnings

CTDS 048750-201

Liberty High School, originally chartered as Gila County Transitional School, was founded in 1997 by then Gila County School Superintendent, Armida Bittner and Detention Educator, Mark Wilkerson, for students transitioning back into education from correctional settings. Bittner observed that regular public education does not fit every student, yet every student needs access to education. Thus, the charter school opportunity made available in the 1990s became a way to respond more effectively to students facing social and behavioral stressors while trying to complete high school. Liberty operated in its first few years with a "shoe string" staff, budget and student body, regularly graduating a small number of students annually.

Mission

In response to changing economic, social and educational challenges, including a standards-driven curriculum, Liberty High School's face and focus have expanded to serve a greater variety of "at risk" students in its 14 years of operation, yet it still maintains its original mission:

" …to meet the educational needs of an ever changing and complex student body; to develop, to the greatest extent possible, the innate human potential of all students; to meet the unique needs of a select student body; to act as a liaison between the student and community at large; and to function as a positive change agent in the lives of the children we serve."

Liberty accomplishes its mission through the commitment of an experienced and highly qualified staff, with an emphasis on educating the whole student--academically, socially and behaviorally-- and by forming regular connections, interaction and accountability to the community.

Demographics

Liberty High, accredited by NCA in 2000, is the only charter high school in the small rural mining towns of Globe-Miami, Arizona, about 70 miles northeast of the Phoenix valley. There are two public high schools of about 400 students each within the two towns, both with their own alternative schools, and a third on the adjacent San Carlos Apache Indian Reservation, which has an alternative school as well. In 2006, Liberty applied for and received alternative school status because its population size (75 student cap) did not allow the statistical evaluation required of larger schools and districts, particularly in Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) determination. Despite the availability of other alternative schools in the area, Liberty has consistently maintained an average of 65 students a year, particularly over the last five years. It has seen numbers increase to 75 at times this school year, evidence of the community's continued and growing desire for school choice. The most common reason for enrollment by students and parents at Liberty is its size and its commitment to a safe and well supervised school environment. The second commonly cited reason is its opportunity for credit recovery and timely graduation, no matter a student's circumstances.

Snapshot ***"…it's bigger on the inside than it is on the outside…" --Dr. Who***

Liberty's "ever changing and complex student body", as referred to in the mission statement, can be examined using the 2010-11 student population data as a snapshot of students' economic, educational, ethnic and social backgrounds. Specific numbers vary slightly from year to year, but are similar enough to represent our demographic makeup and the subsequent challenges in educating a small yet very complex group. Research from New York University ("The Impact of Homelessness on Children"; Yvonne Rafferty & Marybeth Shinn; American Psychologist: Nov. 1991) notes the negative impact of poverty and homelessness upon reading levels and emotional health. The College of William and Mary has also studied how any move or other interruption in education can set students back from three to six months in academic growth (mentioned in an ADE training; unable to find citation).

Of 104 total Liberty High School students enrolled this year:

- 74% qualify for Free and Reduced Lunch
- 68% are juniors, seniors or above
- 57% have experienced an interruption of education of ***at least*** one school quarter of 9 weeks
- 55% were below grade level in reading and/or math when enrollment began
- 49% qualify as homeless according to state and ADE definitions
- 47% began the school year at Liberty
- 31% are Native American, 23% Hispanic, 2% African American, 44% White
- 27% have moved, enrolled elsewhere, or otherwise withdrawn during the course of the year
- 25% will graduate in May of 2011
- 20% participate in ESS programs
- 20% are *parents* of one or more children
- 21% are currently on probation or have been on probation during the year
- 18% work 15 to 40 hours at jobs
- 12.5% have been in drug or alcohol related rehabilitation or regular counseling during or previous to this school year.
- 5% are early graduates
  (Data compiled from LHS student information system)

Methods

To meet the educational demands of our student body, we employ a director who also teaches as needed and six highly qualified and certified teachers: four in core areas of science, math, English and social studies, one in Special Education, and one in culinary and life skills. Science and culinary in particular are project-based curriculum and have included underwater robot building and testing, bridge design and construction, collaborative solar oven building, testing and cooking, Chinese new year community meal and other hands-on, skill building activities. Our teacher to student ratio is 1:15 when we are at our 75 student cap.

Curriculum is driven by the Arizona State Standards through a process of correlating curriculum to the standards, creating curriculum maps by subject and teacher, and team review of student progress through pre and post testing each quarter or semester. We have begun "L to J" testing in addition this year in a selection of classes to encourage student ownership of subject material. Classes are taught through direct instruction, small group tutoring, and to allow for ongoing credit recovery, teacher-monitored Plato online curriculum.

In addition to academic instruction, we emphasize, monitor and encourage the development of interpersonal and employment skills, including the habits of respectful interaction with peers and staff, regular, on-time attendance, and a consistently productive work ethic. Each new student is interviewed before enrollment and, as an introduction to the school's focus, is coached in the above expectations for students. In 2009-11, teachers have worked to identify and correct inappropriate student behaviors and reward signs of growth through "RAH" (signifying Respect, Attendance, and Hard work) cards, which are redeemed for prizes. Liberty's Safe Online reporting includes only two drug-related reports in the past four years. We have had no weapons incidents and a total of two fights in five years. Consistency in expectation and training of student behavior allows for less "academic down time" caused by student conflicts and helps create a community climate.

AIMS Performance

Since 2006, when Liberty applied for and received Alternative status, we have carefully worked on building students' AIMS performance. Reading and Writing AIMS scores have continually been strong; the result of an excellent English teacher working for six years for student mastery of the standards using Buckle Down materials, online support curriculum and carefully benchmarked and assessed progress through the reading and writing standards in the 9th and 10th grade curriculum.

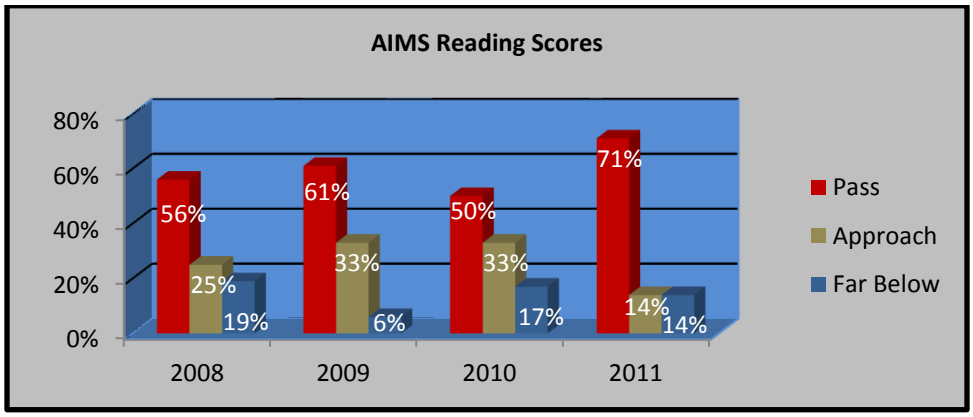
Before 2006, our Math scores did not exceed 18% sophomore passing rate. A team of two teachers studied and fully aligned math curriculum according to then state standards during the summer of 2006. After restructuring traditional Algebra I and Geometry curriculum, they paced and designated standards components to be taught in each class. The teachers responsible for rebuilding the math program, both English teachers, built continuity from the first to second year by sharing and teaching the same math vocabulary as well as problem solving approaches and achieved improved scores in 2006 and onwards.

When math standards were revised in 2008 and a new test released in 2010, performance dropped below the state average. New staff shared the math teaching and some of the continuity was lost. Test preparation materials were not available until just a few months before the test. We have worked to realign math curriculum again, procure pertinent test practice materials and expect improved performance in the 2010-11 testing. For 2011-12, we have recruited a full time math teacher. Since we have never employed more than a part time math teacher or have had teachers share math teaching, we hope this measure will provide even greater focus on student math performance. Our performance management plan focuses on rebuilding, realigning and refocusing the math curriculum with the expertise of the new math instructor. Historically, our students enroll with lower than grade average math skills so we offer two math classes to freshmen: Algebra I and basic math for skill building. We

require two math classes for sophomores: Geometry and Integrated math, a computer based Algebra and math skills review. We offer Discrete/ Modeling math and Algebra II to juniors & seniors.

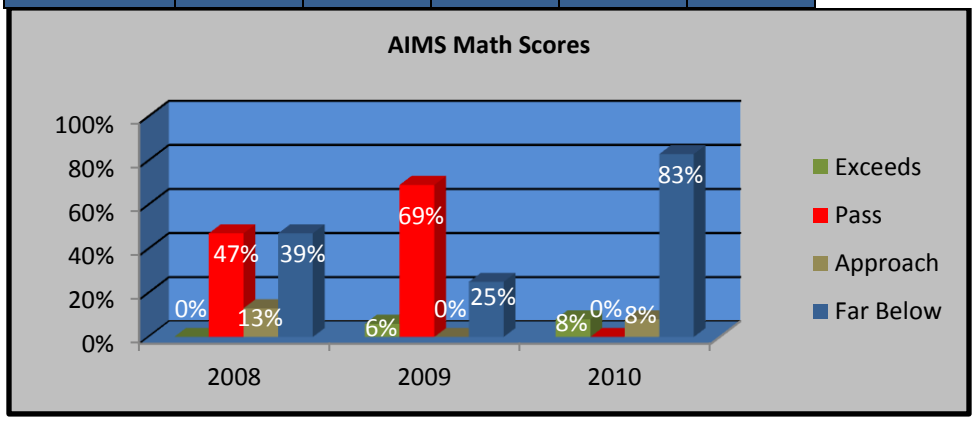
AIMS Reading Scores 2008-11

Reading		2008	2009	2010	2011
Pass		56%	61%	50%	71%
Approach		25%	33%	33%	14%
Far Below		19%	6%	17%	14%



AIMS Math Scores 2008-11

Math		2008	2009	2010	2011
Exceeds		0%	6%	8%	TBA
Pass		47%	69%	0%	TBA
Approach		13%	0%	8%	TBA
Far Below		39%	25%	83%	TBA



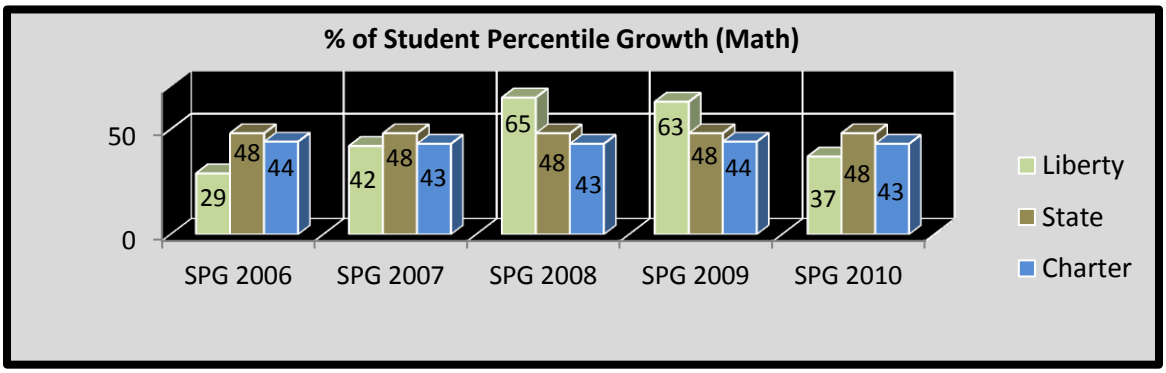
(Data compiled from LHS State AIMS records by C. DeRose and J. Guinsler, LHS staff)

Student Percentile Growth

Perhaps a better measure of our students' academic growth is percentile growth. Growth between 34 and 66 is considered typical growth rate state wide (AZ Charter Schools Association). As the charts below depict, our five year percentile growth compares favorably with state and charter performance, particularly considering the challenges our student population faces. Overall reading and math growth has been steady, with a dip in the 2010 performance in both subjects. When compared to the AIMS 2010 math performance, it is pertinent that students achieved 37% growth even though they did not meet AIMS math standards. This speaks to how low the particular class was upon entering high school. Data shown is the average percentile growth of all students for whom figures could be calculated.

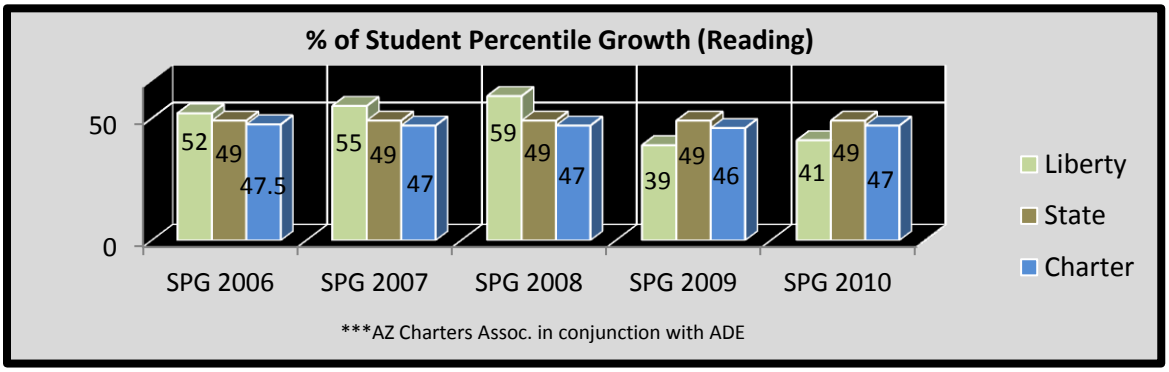
Percentile Growth Math:

% of Student Percentile Growth (Math)			
	LHS	State	Charter
SPG 2006	29	48	44
SPG 2007	42	48	43
SPG 2008	65	48	43
SPG 2009	63	48	44
SPG 2010	37	48	43



Percentile Growth Reading:

% of Student Percentile Growth (Reading)			
	LHS	State	Charter
SPG 2006	52	49	47.5
SPG 2007	55	49	47
SPG 2008	59	49	47
SPG 2009	39	49	46
SPG 2010	41	49	47



(Percentile growth data compiled by AZ Charter Association in conjunction with ADE & prepared by J.Guinsler)

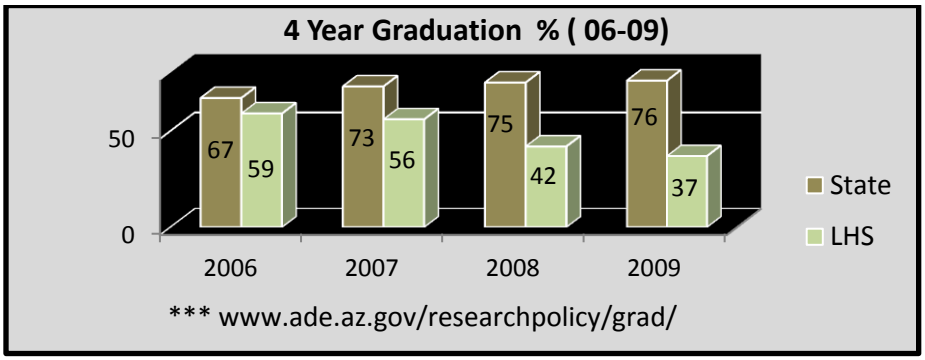
We have been pleased with our student percentile growth over the last five years and attribute growth largely to effective student/ teacher interaction and well developed curriculum, but recognize the need to continue examining our approach and our methods. In our last three years particularly, we have begun to more consistently gather and analyze data about our students and our performance, involving our entire staff in training and development in data-based responses to student challenges.

To continue to grow in math expertise and in response to the upcoming fourth year of math requirement by ADE for cohort 2013 graduates, three members of our staff in 2009-10 worked on a year- long, multi-county project as part of a team of 55 teachers who developed a fourth year math class for all Arizona students. Discrete and Modeling Math is one of three classes developed for schools to use for the 2013 cohort. Our current science/math teacher piloted the class at Liberty in the 2010-11 school year, one of just a handful of teachers state wide to do so. We believe the Discrete and Modeling Math class will be effective career readiness preparation as well as a continuing means of preparing students for AIMS math retakes. Our new hire math teacher was also part of the team developing the new material.

Graduation Rate ***"Be careful how you interpret the world: It is like that."—Erich Heller***

In the last five years, our AYP AIMS attendance and performance have been met, but because of lower graduation rate than required by the state, we have not met AYP requirements. Though we are a performing school, we find it unacceptable not to meet the graduation rate requirement. In an effort to better understand why our rate is low, especially when we often graduate an average of 25% of our population, we have studied the last five years' rates and begun to dissect the makeup of each class we designate as seniors. Again, a snapshot of the present year's "senior" class is valuable in generalizing about previous years because our intake procedures and educational methods have remained somewhat static until the current year.

The following chart shows four years' graduation rates ending in 2009 as compared with the state's rate, suggesting a declining number of graduates each year.



In reality, the actual number of Liberty students graduating has increased, but the number of students who have enrolled but did not continue to attend school causes the overall rate to diminish. In addition, we admit students beyond their cohort graduation year and graduate them, but after the 5th cohort year, they do not count towards our graduation rate though we consider them equally graduated.

Liberty High School Graduation Data 2006-2011 compiled from OSCAR student information system

School Year	Total student enrollment	Total Graduates	Early Graduates
2010-11	104	25	5
2009-10	113	25	5
2008-09	127	11	6
2007-08	105	12	1
2006-07	117	13	4
2005-06	98	14	3

The above figures summarize neither the number of dropouts out of total enrollment, nor the size of the senior cohort class. The tendency is towards a higher number of graduates, double the previous four year average of 12.5, given about the same number of enrolled students. Early graduates have also increased in the last three years, so we are acting responsibly to move students to graduation.

Though we are not held responsible to calculate our own graduation rate, we have considered what we can do to keep a better account of students for whom we are held responsible. The state graduation rate ratio is the number of students who graduate in a cohort divided by the number of students who have remained in the cohort for four to five years. The data to supply the ratio numbers is somewhat difficult to track accurately at the school level, particularly withdrawal numbers. When a student withdraws, he/she remains in our cohort until enrolled in another school as evidenced by transcript data or other documentation. It is our goal to arrange our student information data to show a cohort class through its entry into high school until graduation in order to more thoroughly understand the dynamics of changes in each class.

In addition, we consider it important to understand how our student intake reflects our educational mission to decide how and whether student intake and other parameters should be modified to improve graduation rate. Because of ADE provision for educating high school students until the end of their 21st year, we allow students beyond their fourth year to enroll and attempt to complete their high school requirements. These students are most likely to have been out of school for some time but have the desire or need to have a high school diploma. Again, our mission is to educate all who come to us, particularly those at a disadvantage because of economic, social or behavioral stressors. A free high school education is a tremendous help to these students. They have rarely received four years' worth of free education, and even though it is to the school's disadvantage in terms of graduation rate, we feel the obligation to our community to take such students as far as we can academically. We thus improve their chance at economic and social stability for the future, contributing to our community stability as well. We have examined trends within our senior cohorts to understand whether our practice of accepting students beyond the graduation rate window is an effective use of school time and resources. The parameters we have examined to evaluate our graduation rate consist of:

- Number of students who still drop out (charted as "withdraws")
- High school credits student arrives with (20 credits needed for graduation through 2012)
- Significant gaps (semesters to years) in education that slow down academic recovery
- Original cohort year (i.e. age)

The cohorts 2009 through 2011 represent what the school considers 2011 seniors, i.e. anyone who is a senior or above.

Senior Cohort Parameters

Year	Students in Cohort	Student Withdraws
2009	5	2
2010	9	2
2011	15	0

Year	Students in Cohort	Students entering Senior Year With <15 Credits
2009	5	5
2010	9	4
2011	15	5

Year	Students in Cohort	Students with Gap in Education
2009	5	5
2010	9	4
2011	15	3

Year	Students in Cohort	Students Graduating in 2011
2009	5	2
2010	9	5
2011	15	11

Percentages Only				
Year	% of Student Withdraws	% of Students entering Senior Year With <15 Credits	% of Students with Gap in Education	% of Students Graduating in 2011
2009	40%	100%	100%	40%
2010	22%	44%	44%	56%
2011	0%	33%	2%	73%

(Data gathered from LHS student files and compiled by J. Guinsler and K. Maxfield)

As evidenced by the data, the greater the age (cohort), the greater the likelihood of withdrawal --to a GED or other program, or “aging- out” (withdrawn by school because of age limit), or simply as a drop out--none of which qualify as graduation. In addition, the further behind a student is in credits and the existence of educational gaps both are associated with higher withdrawals (drop out). However, we still feel the value of “recapturing” students, overrides the benefit of a specific graduation rate.

To address the needs of the later cohort students, we have split our student body into two groups: grades 9-12 in direct instruction classes during the day, and a few 11 and 12th graders in a separate evening school that allows for individually paced, teacher directed study, and gives students greater freedom to care for children or hold down jobs. Up until this year, we employed one teacher to cover the evening school classes. To provide more specific attention in different subjects, we incorporated an extended day for each of our core teachers to staff the evening school one day a week. Our intent was to allow students to focus on certain subjects with that subject's teacher and receive more one-on-one help where needed. The results of this change thus far have been somewhat higher AIMS retake performance than we have seen previously and slightly higher credit recovery rate, though it is still early to draw conclusions.

For students in the appropriate graduation cohort, four year seniors in 2011, the number of students graduating is commendable. These students represent the larger proportion of our students who have come to us at some time during their high school careers and who have finished as AIMS graduates on time. Almost 40% of these were behind in credits and were able to recover them in a timely fashion. Many were also below grade level in reading and math, and were able to improve skills considerably. In addition, Liberty historically graduates from 4 to 6 students up to a year early, i.e. as juniors. That should act to balance our numbers, but unfortunately does not seem to have as great an impact as that of students who withdraw or graduate beyond the 5 year deadline established by the state.

After considering the parameters that impact graduation rates, we have created a performance management plan that includes assigning a mentor teacher to each of our 9th through 12th grade classes and one exclusively for our evening students. We will implement a goal setting meeting upon enrollment to establish student and school expectations with individual students and their parents/guardians. This agreement will become the basis for quarterly conferencing between individual students and their mentor teacher. Academic progress, credit recovery, behavioral or other issues will be discussed and the student encouraged and held accountable for their own progress. It is our belief that this type of relationship building and individual follow up will be one more connection established between students and school, and will encourage a commitment to continue through to graduation.

Conclusion

Liberty High school has taken seriously its 14 year commitment to educating Arizona's children through innovative means but with complete dedication to standards and effective methods. We have remained open to change and to improvement. We have initiated many methods and practices in our area that local district schools have begun to imitate: shortened school weeks, rewards programs for Aims performance, fall and spring breaks, and others. We have been fiscally responsible, debt free and economically efficient in our use of resources made available to us. It is our goal and hope to continue in this effort for the next twenty years and we have created a stable school climate, community network and organization to that end. Our commitment is to students and their education and success, individually and collectively, and we hope to be considered always worthy of that trust.