A.1 EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

Philosophical Approach to Improving Achievement in Target Population

At the core of Southwest Leadership Academy's (SLA) educational philosophy is the belief that all students have strengths. All students are capable learners and capable of succeeding in school and becoming positive, contributing members of their communities. With Southwest Leadership Academy's primary focus on academic achievement, we also consider the needs of the whole child. We believe integrating education with social skills and interpersonal skills empowers each student to fulfill his or her potential and fosters success in school and in other areas of the student's life.

> *Our mission: Southwest Leadership Academy is dedicated to improving academic achievement by providing rigorous academic and social skills instruction that will lead to student success in school, within their lives, and within the community.*

Our vision for accomplishing this mission and improving achievement in the target population involves rigor, relevance, and relationships. Southwest Leadership Academy will be an academically rigorous high school that will serve a student body within a consistent, highly supportive school environment. By focusing on student strengths and following the principles of Positive Youth Development (PYD), our school culture and integrated learning environment fosters academic and social skills that will lead to targeted achievement. PYD is a comprehensive framework outlining the supports young people need in order to be successful. It is a way of viewing students by focusing on their strengths and assets rather than their problems or deficits. Positive Youth Development emphasizes the development of skills, competencies and relationships that lead students to become productive, contributing members of the student body –and society.

Southwest Leadership Academy will utilize small learning communities that will provide individualized instruction, goal setting, and instruction in social skills and leadership. Our school will invoke PYD through community collaboration and parent engagement thereby supporting and encouraging students to develop into responsible citizens.

Target Population

At SLA, the strengths-based lens central to Positive Youth Development is critical to our operations. The target population will include students who have already received "deficit" messages throughout their educational career. These students are disadvantaged and at risk of failure due to academic, social or economic factors, expelled from high school or high school dropouts, or transitioning from the juvenile justice system. We also know that many of these students will come from lower performing schools and will enter our school performing years below grade level. In many cases, these students will not have passed the state AIMS tests. Southwest Leadership Academy will reverse the trend of academic failure through our supportive Program of Instruction, our vision of treating the whole child and the tenets of PYD founded on the belief all students have strengths and all students are capable of succeeding.

Principles Fundamental to Program of Instruction

Southwest Leadership Academy developed the following principles and concepts that are fundamental to the school's program of instruction:

1. **A rigorous, relevant curriculum and appropriate instructional support are essential to high academic achievement.** The curriculum is aligned with the Arizona's Common Core Standards required by the Arizona Department of Education. Substantial time for staff development and Professional Learning Communities(PLC) will ensure learning for everyone – Teachers and students alike. Teachers and Administrators will develop summative assessments and curriculum maps using Arizona's Common Core Standards and guided by the objectives assessed through the state exams. A thoughtful implementation of Response to Intervention (RtI) in addition to staff training in research-based instructional practices, culturally relevant pedagogy and Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) will result in effective individualization and differentiation of instruction that will make learning and achievement possible for all students.

2. **School culture and climate are as important to academic success as the quality of the instructional program.** SLA's culture and climate will be built around cognitive behavioral therapeutic practices, clear standards of conduct and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) within the RtI framework. Students will receive academic as well as risk/need assessments (called a Positive Achievement Change Tool) so that SLA staff may be prescriptive in our instruction to youth related to communication skills, social skills, moral reasoning and anger management skills. Staff training in PBIS will be combined with training in multicultural competence and awareness of the needs of learners from low socioeconomic and disadvantaged backgrounds. In a climate where students feel safe and supported, motivation to do well in school can be increased.

3. **To develop internal standards for judging behavior, pro-social skills and academic performance, students need to begin by receiving a lot of feedback in a short period of time.** Students at SLA will be held to high standards and receive weekly feedback about academic performance and conduct, as well as the support needed to be successful in interactions in the classroom, at home, and in the community. SLA will utilize formative assessments and summative assessments for regular, continuous assessment of learning and for producing feedback necessary for learning to occur. In addition, we will employ a 5-to-1 ratio of positive feedback to constructive feedback, a norm established in other schools operated by Rite of Passage, our Charter Management Organization.

   In addition, SLA will hire staff, called Behavioral Mentors, who will provide students with support in the classroom, whether with academic work or behavioral support, while also modeling pro-social skills and making personal connections with students. This also includes ensuring attendance by contacting absent and tardy students. They will coach athletics after school, provide mentoring opportunities during the summer, and along with Teachers, provide instruction in pro-social communication skills and character development.

4. **Small, intimate learning communities provide the structure and personal attention that encourage learning and promote academic success.** SLA plans to create focused learning communities where students get support and build relationships with Teachers, Behavioral Mentors, and the Administration. During the Advisement period, in which the student-to-staff ratio will be 14 to 1, Teachers, Behavioral Mentors and other Advisement Instructors will monitor students' academic performance, assist with goal setting, and provide explicit instruction in socio-emotional skills. SLA will hire a Counselor who will guide students as they complete an Education Career Action Plan (ECAP). In addition, as an extension of ECAP, SLA students will create a Personal Education Plan to document short-term academic goals, short-term and long-term behavior goals and goals for health and fitness.
5. **Fostering connections with the family and community is essential for providing the broad spectrum of opportunities and supports adolescents need for development and learning.** SLA will promote parent empowerment through the formation of a Parent Advisory Council, a school advisory board consisting of parents, Teachers, and the Principal, that will meet monthly to discuss parent concerns, school initiatives and community needs. SLA will also encourage family involvement by inviting all parents to participate in a school orientation and by offering *Active Parenting*, an evidence-based program that helps parents and teens develop communication skills, self-confidence, and problem-solving skills that foster healthy relationships at home. SLA will hire bilingual staff to support parent needs. Teachers will also meet with families every quarter to discuss academic performance, classroom behavior, and the student's long-term goals. Community service and outreach will be mandatory for all students; they will be required to complete 15 hours of community service each year. During their senior year, they will develop and organize a community service project and recruit volunteers for implementation of the project.

Rationale for the Selected Approach

Southwest Leadership Academy is presenting the following research and experience to illustrate why our organization has selected its approach to working with the target population.

Research: Response to Intervention
There is growing consensus in education that RtI is based on sound instructional principles such as intervening early, using research-based interventions and instruction, monitoring student progress, and using assessment data to inform instructional decision-making. Support for RtI and the concept of early intervention can be found in the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Furthermore, according to the RtI Action Network, there is an emerging body of empirical evidence to support claims of the effectiveness of RtI.

Research: Positive Youth Development
Education leaders, Teachers and staff of schools must be informed and guided by the latest research-based theories on adolescent development to meet the diverse needs of the student population. SLA will operate within the theoretical framework of Positive Youth Development (PYD).

Positive Youth Development is a way of viewing adolescents as potential in progress and supporting their development to adulthood. Historically, society has viewed adolescence as a time of great turmoil and risk. Schools and youth programs focused on identifying and fixing problems such as school failure and dropout, unemployment, drug abuse, and unplanned pregnancy and saw these problems as labels for adolescent failure and dismal futures. This deficit-based view dominated practice and research in youth development and education.

However, in recent decades, researchers and experts in the field of adolescent development have challenged the deficit view, noting that the majority of youth develop and succeed even when facing multiple risks and adverse circumstances. These experts identified the strengths and qualities in youth that led to healthy development, and a new lens by which to view adolescence emerged – one that saw positive opportunities for youth to learn, serve and benefit from experiences with pro-social adults and communities (Benson & Pittman, 2001). This new, strength-based perspective was labeled Positive Youth Development.

PYD emphasizes the development of skills, competencies and relationships that lead to healthy adults who are productive, contributing members of society. According to the PYD perspective, to increase the likelihood of positive outcomes for adolescents, youth need a broad range of opportunities and supports. As Eceles and Goodman state, these opportunities can only come from the integration of family, school and community efforts (Eceles & Goodman, 2002). According to the researchers, opportunities and support may include:

- Challenging academic work, meaningful feedback in the classroom and tangible evidence that learning has occurred
- Learning experiences that are relevant to the youth's life
- Experiences in civic engagement and volunteer activities that directly improve one's local community
- Formation of healthy relationships at school and at home and the identification of adult role models
- Safe, positive peer group interactions
- Explicit instruction in skills that promote success in adulthood (e.g., media literacy, communication skills, job readiness skills and preparation for adult employment, research and information navigation, etc.)
- Development of practices that promote physical and mental health, including regular exercise and proper nutrition

Research: The Effectiveness of Small Learning Communities

The formation of a relationship-based culture encompassing small learning communities is rooted in the research supporting the effectiveness of small schools. The case for small schools has been based on the need for small, intimate learning environments where students are well known and can be pushed and encouraged by adults who care for and about them.

Investigations into the effects of school size and small schools have shown promising results. An analysis of 293 New Jersey schools found that school size was the best predictor of student achievement on state tests (Fowler & Walberg, 1991). While studying rural communities in multiple states, researchers found that the negative effects of poverty are reduced in smaller

schools and that students in small schools consistently outperformed their counterparts enrolled in larger schools (Keller, 2000; Johnson, Howley,& Howley, 2002). Additional studies have discovered that small schools are characterized by more positive Teacher attitudes, higher student achievement, higher attendance rates, lower dropout rates and higher academic outcomes for minority students (Lee & Loeb, 2000; Kahne, Sporte, de la Torre,& Easton, 2008; Bloom, Thompson & Unterman, 2010; Flores & Chu, 2011).

Additional Research on School Effectiveness

It is important to note that size alone will not automatically lead to the success of SLA. As Bloom, Thompson and Unterman point out in their study "Transforming the High School Experience: How New York City's New Small Schools are Boosting Student Achievement and Graduation Rates" (2010), effective small schools must:

- Be purposefully organized to promote personalized interactions among students and faculty
- Have a clear mission among all stakeholders
- Utilize expertise from new Teachers and community partnerships

Our plans for SLA meet these criteria, and our CMO (Rite of Passage) has accomplished these goals in multiple schools. We are confident in our ability to replicate these outcomes. Based on Effective Schools Research, the organization emphasizes sight-based leadership and utilizes a quantitative quality control system to measure school performance.

Experience

Rite of Passage has extensive experience in transforming the PYD philosophy into practice. This organization has 28 years of experience educating at-risk youth using PYD tenets. Their programs have proven effective in enabling over 20,000 at-risk youth in the states served by Rite of Passage to find employment and education opportunities, discover their talents and skills, and become self-confident young adults. As noted by experts in the field of juvenile justice, Rite of Passage understands "that programs must provide youth with the skills and opportunities for change, intervention must be appropriate to the developmental needs of adolescents, and young people can learn life lessons that are mutually beneficial to self and community" (Butts, Bazemore,& Saa Meroe, 2010). The organization's programs for youth coordinate family, school, and community efforts; create structure and spaces for learning positive social norms; and promote youth empowerment practices.

The following accomplishments are evidence of the program's success:

- Rite of Passage students have demonstrated their academic proficiency in reading, writing, math and science through RIT gains as indicated on the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP). In particular, Rite of Passage's Ridge View Academy (RVA) school achieves an average of 2 RIT gains a <u>quarter</u> compared to the national average of 2 RIT gains a <u>year</u>.
- All eligible students have opportunities to participate in college coursework through partnerships with junior colleges within their respective communities or enrollment in online college programs.

- Rite of Passage students have won multiple essay contests, including first place in the 2010 Colorado League of Charter Schools Essay Contest and the Grand Canyon State Games Essay Contest.
- Students at Canyon State Academy (CSA), a Rite of Passage school in Queen Creek, AZ, were awarded "Volunteer of the Year" at the Grand Canyon State Games and were awarded other volunteerism awards from Special Olympics, Arizona Interscholastic Association and American Cancer Society-Relay for Life (East Valley District).
- CSA was recognized by the Queen Creek Kiwanis Club for Outstanding Community Service.
- CSA students received Presidential Physical Fitness Awards, and CSA was recognized as the most fit school in Arizona.
- Ridge View Academy (RVA), a school operated by Rite of Passage in Colorado, won the Robotics Regional Championship and traveled to the Robotics World Championships in 2011 and 2012. The team won the Judges' Award in 2011 and became the first team from Colorado ever to win an award at the Robotics World Championships.
- In 2011, Canyon State Academy students volunteered 8,842 hours to numerous worthwhile community-based organizations.
- Rite of Passage uses curriculum for strengthening family relationships and communication skills. In 2011, RVA logged 11,637 hours teaching parents and students how to improve their communication skills and maintain appropriate behavioral expectations; CSA provided 3,199 hours.

All young people deserve opportunities such as these. Rite of Passage now intends to share their experience with the target population and their PYD expertise with Southwest Leadership Academy to serve the needs of a diverse group of students. All students deserve opportunities that will challenge them, develop competencies, nurture their confidence and promote academic success. Southwest Leadership Academy believes youth are assets to be valued rather than problems to be controlled. Positive Youth Development provides a framework for giving all youth the preparation they need not only for college or employment, but for life.

Parents will have options beyond placing their children in failing schools, having them drop out, or watching them become involved in delinquent behavior. By providing Teachers training and experience in a milieu based on cognitive behavioral practices and instruction of social-emotional skills, SLA will blur the lines traditionally drawn between educators and experts in the field of social work and adolescent development. Southwest Leadership Academy will succeed where other schools have failed, and that success will be based not only on the school's academic performance, but on its ability to meet the needs of the whole child.

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