A.1 Educational Philosophy

A. Philosophical Approach

The Vista College Preparatory ("Vista College Prep") philosophical approach to improving pupil achievement in South Phoenix is rooted in three foundational beliefs.

1. Demographics do not determine destiny and all children can achieve at high levels.
2. College preparation starts in kindergarten.
3. Character and leadership development can and must be taught.

1. Demographics do not determine destiny and all children can achieve at high levels.

We believe that all students can be prepared to enter and succeed in college, and that every child should have access to a high quality public education with a focus on college preparation beginning in kindergarten. Yet many urban schools often struggle with the challenges students bring with them that can ultimately cause students to quickly fall behind. However, there are schools that exist, serving economically and socially disadvantaged students, which prove all students can achieve at the levels required for college and life success. Like these college preparatory schools, we believe that through a rigorous curriculum and a culture of urgency, accountability, and high expectations, the achievement gap can be closed.[1] It is upon this model of success that Vista College Prep is designed. Students will meet whatever academic bar is set for them if provided with the structure and support to get there. It is our responsibility to ensure we set the highest of expectations and support nothing less than our students meeting that bar. It is this steadfast belief in the ability of our students that will set the stage for outstanding student academic performance that directly supports the purpose of the Arizona Charter School law which is to "improve pupil achievement" as outlined in **A.R.S. § 15-181**.

2. College preparation starts in kindergarten

Only 1 in 10 students from low-income communities will graduate from college.[2] We believe that all children deserve the opportunity to be prepared to succeed academically in college. This success should not be predicated on receiving a private school education, nor should it be limited to public schools within affluent neighborhoods. All public schools, especially those serving the most disadvantaged students, must prepare students to compete academically in a world in which college completion is an increasing necessity. The reality is that far too often disadvantaged children are left out of the college education picture, even as early as in the elementary grades. Attempts to remediate deficits and inspire aspirations occur much later, in middle and high school programs, when it becomes far more difficult to convince students that college is possible and to close the achievement gap that makes that reality attainable. A recent report from Arizona State University states that "Arizona hasn't made much progress in closing the educational-achievement gap for Latinos in the past decade, and it predicts dire consequences to the state's economy if nothing changes…. [I]n the past 10 years the percentage of Latinos ages 25 to 34 who had a bachelor's degree or higher increased only 1 percentage point to a total of 9 percent, compared with 32 percent for Whites." [3]

All students at Vista College Prep will have a clear and convincing understanding that they are college-

[1] Through the Building Excellent Schools Fellowship, Ms. Meyerson has visited and studied high performing urban charter schools that demonstrate the ability of typically underserved students to achieve at high levels. The Lead Founder and proposed Executive Director also completed an extended school leadership residency at Capitol Collegiate Academy in Sacramento, CA.
[2] Mortenson, Tom. "Family Income and Higher Education Opportunity," *Postsecondary Education Opportunity*, 2005.
[3] Ryman, Ann. "Report Sounds Warning on Latino Education Gap." Arizona Republic. 27 April 2012. http://www.azcentral.com/news/articles/2012/04/27/20120427latino-education-gap-report-sounds-warning.html#ixzz1uLPGMPYN

bound. This expectation will be infused in the school's culture and teacher-student interactions and teacher-family interactions. Visual aids will support this culture such as college banners and bulletin boards displaying pictures of college campuses. Through the use of chants and common language students will also reinforce this expectation within themselves. Listed below are additional ways through which the expectation that our students will attend college will be set:

- All students and parents will know and understand our college preparatory mission.
- All staff will reinforce and link college expectations to lessons and student interactions.
- School chants and expressions will reflect college matriculation and graduation expectations.
- Classes will be addressed by their year of college graduation.
- Rooms will bear the names of colleges and universities.
- Classrooms will adopt the mascots of colleges and universities.
- Students will attend trips to colleges and universities.
- Parents will be strongly encouraged to begin investing early for their child's college education, even if minimally, and will receive information on steps they can take.[4]

Building on the college preparatory structure for young students, Vista College Prep also proposes a slow growth model. The slow growth model allows us to grow strategically, increasing complexity and size only after firmly establishing our demanding culture of academic achievement.[5] Formalizing and growing one grade level at a time allows us to address the specific needs of our students and families. We will add one grade level each year, until the school reaches full enrollment in grade five. We will open the school with a cohort of 54 kindergarten and 72 first grade students[6] and we will add a grade each year. By year five, we will serve kindergarten through grade five. We recognize we are proposing a model that digresses from the traditional charter school growth plan, but through research of effective models and the community need, the combination of utilizing a K-5 grade span with a slow growth model allows for the strongest implementation of our academic program.

We believe that college preparation must start on a child's first day of primary education. Elementary school-aged children should be able to readily identify the link between strong academic outcomes now and success facilitated with a college education in the future. The concept is clear for more advantaged students, and one we must instill in all students as early as possible. With a mindset and goal of college, it is our responsibility as a school to ensure that students are prepared to execute on this promise.

3. Character and leadership development can and must be taught.

For a school to maintain a long-term track record of academic excellence, it must build a positive school culture around character and leadership development as well as behavioral expectations and performance. Within a small, safe and structured environment, we will establish clear behavioral expectations, develop and reinforce strong character traits, and always sweat the details.

We believe that a rigorous academic program must be executed in a manner that maximizes student enthusiasm and engagement. At Vista College Prep, we will explicitly teach and model clear behavioral expectations to create a positive, enthusiastic learning environment with no distractions. Within this structured framework, our students will develop character and leadership through our REACH[7] values:

---

[4] We have already begun conversations with the staff at College Depot (at the Burton Barr Library) about the possible partnerships and ways we can tap into their resources. We have also received a letter of support from the Director.

[5] Multiple founders of the high-performing charter schools we have studied through the Building Excellent Schools Fellowship believe that adding one grade level each year approach maximizes a new school's ability to "get it right." Successful school models and leaders of high performing charter schools utilize this slow growth model.

[6] We are starting with K and 1 in our first year to address the funding gap that occurs as a result of our full-day kindergarten program.

[7] Adapted from Edward Brooke Charter School – Boston, MA. For more detail, see www.ebrooke.org.

Respect: Be kind and supportive, to yourself and others.
Enthusiasm: Show excitement for learning.
Achievement: Keep your eye on the goal – college!
Community: Do the right thing, even if nobody is watching.
Hard work: Know that hard work makes anything possible

Inspired by the work of Edward Brooke Charter School, one of the highest performing elementary schools in the state of Massachusetts, we believe that in addition to teaching academics, public schools must also teach their students the values they will need to succeed in life. We will teach and model these values within the framework of the academic curriculum, daily school-wide Morning Motivation, as well as through a weekly character and leadership development class. Our values will be broken down into sub-values so that we can focus on specific, detailed values and messages each month. Each sub-value will be taught in several ways over a four-week period. For example, in week one we will focus on what the value means; in week two, what it looks like; in week three, how to demonstrate it; and in week four, we would bring in an outside speaker to discuss what that particular value means to them. We believe that all public schools should place an explicit focus on preparing students to become leaders in their community. As students advance from third grade to fifth grade, there is a greater focus on civic initiatives, community engagement, and, particularly by fifth grade, speech and debate. Through leadership and character development classes and practical application, students acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitude to impact their classroom, school, and community.

B. Principles Fundamental to Program of Instruction Including Research and Rationale

Vista College Prep proposes a high quality, college preparatory elementary school designed specifically to address the learning needs of an underserved and underperforming student population. Through an intensive focus on literacy and the implementation of strategic academic support structures we ensure mastery of essential skills and content knowledge, accelerate student achievement, support student success in middle and high school, and build the critical early foundation for every child to excel in and graduate from college.

With a strong commitment to upholding the highest academic expectations for all students, Vista College Prep proposes an elementary school model built on research and best practices of high performing, no excuses charter schools nationwide. These schools have demonstrated that demographics do not determine destiny and that students from low-income communities can be successful in school. Vista College Prep prepares all K-5 students with the foundation necessary for success at the middle school level, readiness for college preparatory work at the high school level and graduation from competitive and demanding colleges. Future school success is dependent upon the strength of the elementary foundation. At Vista College Prep, that foundation is built upon seven central tenets.

Literacy is Everything: Literacy proficiency is vital to accessing an excellent education. "Three out of every four 4th graders in Arizona cannot read proficiently"[8] and "75% of students who are poor readers in third grade will remain poor readers in high school."[9] Students from low-income families hear two-thirds fewer words than students from more affluent backgrounds. This means that by the time these students enter school in kindergarten, the student from a low-income family has been exposed to approximately 30 million fewer spoken words than a more affluent student.[10] This gap in language exposure of students from low-income backgrounds creates a large achievement gap, even before starting the early grades of formal education.

[8] For more information, please see the website for the Children's Action Alliance: http://azchildren.org/display.asp?pageId=66&parentId=12 .
[9] U.S. Department of Education, America Reads Challenge. (July 1999). Start Early, Finish Strong: How to Help Every Child Become a Reader.
[10] Hart, Betty, and Todd R. Risely, "The Early Catastrophe: The 30 Million Word Gap by Age 3," *American Educator*, (Spring 2003).

Learning from these data points, high performing schools that educate predominantly low-income students have a clear, strong, and overwhelming focus on literacy. Building Excellent Schools Fellow, Lead Founder and proposed Executive Director, Julia Meyerson, has deep access to some of the best trained and highest performing charter schools and leadership in the country. She completed a leadership residency at Capitol Collegiate Charter School in Sacramento, CA, founded and led by Building Excellent Schools Fellow Penny Schwinn, where literacy is the driving force behind all instructional decision-making. As of January 2012, all Capitol Collegiate kindergarten students (97% are eligible for free or reduced price lunch) are on grade level in reading, with 25% already reading on a first grade level. With open access to the Building Excellent Schools network of high performing charter schools, Ms. Meyerson is also studying Cornerstone Preparatory, an elementary school in Memphis, TN, founded and led by Building Excellent Schools Emerging Leaders Drew Sippel and Lisa Settle. Cornerstone Preparatory is educating a low-income student population, and after just six weeks at the school, "the Kindergarten class average reading level increased by more than three months, meaning the reading gap has been reduced by more than 50% in just 6 weeks."[11] At the end of one year, students who came in with significant deficits are now, in the greatest majority, scoring in the upper quartile on nationally normed assessments in reading and mathematics. As part of her ongoing training, Ms. Meyerson continues to have strong professional access to Phoenix Collegiate Academy Charter School, a well-respected and achieving charter school serving low income students, and its Building Excellent Schools leader Rachel Yanof.

Vista College Prep's literacy model is influenced by the best practices of schools like Capitol Collegiate and Phoenix Collegiate Academy, as well as research from respected organizations. According to the National Research Council, "academic success, as defined by high school graduation, can be predicted with reasonable accuracy by knowing someone's reading skill at the end of 3rd grade. A person who is not at least a modestly skilled reader by that time is unlikely to graduate from high school."[12] In order to address the need for a focus on literacy, Vista College Prep will devote a significant amount of the school day to different forms of literacy instruction.

- During a typical school day, Vista College Prep will have more than 215 minutes (43% of the school day[13]) of daily literacy instruction in kindergarten through grade two and more than 155 minutes (31% of the school day) of daily literacy in grades three through five.

- Research-based practices for literacy instruction with a focus on phonics in the early grades and comprehension and critical thinking in the upper elementary grades.

- Small group literacy instruction in kindergarten through grade two, with an 18 to 1 student teacher ratio, to provide more personal instruction and a deeper understanding of individual students' needs.[14]

- Increased focus on vocabulary development during all aspects of the literacy block, but specifically during the read-aloud and supported in reading comprehension every day.

---

[11] For more information on Cornerstone Prep, please visit their website: http://www.cornerstoneprepmemphis.org/kindergartenclasslearningtoread.

[12] National Research Council, 1998 (http://www.ed.gov/inits/americareads/ReadDiff/ accessed on 10/29/11). In addition, in his review of high performing, high poverty schools, Samuel Casey Carter concludes that a laser focus on basic literacy and math in the early years was a central commonality among high-performing elementary schools (p. 21).

[13] Our typical school day runs from 7:40 to 4:00 pm (500 minutes). On Wednesday, Vista College Prep has an early dismissal at 2:30 for staff professional development.

[14] Boss, Susie, "Tapping the Benefits of Smaller Classes," *The Northwestern Education Magazine*, (Winter, 2000).

- Students read grade-level books independently during the academic year and over the summer break. Independent reading is assigned as homework each night and a summer book list and corresponding expectation sheet is provided over the summer.

- Drop Everything And Read (DEAR) program instituted starting in grade 3 (students will read independently during the guided reading block in grades K-2).[15] DEAR books are carried by students at all times and students are taught and supported to read from these books whenever there is space in the day (for example, when students finish an in-class assignment early or arrive to school before the official day begins). Vista College Prep is working to form a partnership with the South Mountain Community Library to facilitate easy access to independent reading books.

Exceptional Teachers: The quality of Vista College Prep's teachers drives the academic success of our students; therefore, high quality teaching will be Vista College Prep's hallmark. Research shows that teacher quality is the most significant indicator of a student's academic performance.[16] "Students with great teachers learn three times as much material in one year as students with ineffective teachers."[17] We will recruit the brightest, most committed, most capable teachers, attracting them with the promise of an environment that welcomes their contributions and seeks their input in refining and perpetuating the school, as well as with tools to empower them in their work (classroom supplies and professional development). In the hiring process, we will set clear expectations for the high level of professionalism and commitment that we expect of our teachers.

In addition to instructional excellence, Vista College Prep is looking for teachers with the willingness to have frequent and honest discussions about which children are learning, which are not, and what can be done about it. Then, the final stage is execution—we are looking for teachers with the ability to take action consistent with the insights that the process yields. Believing that all students can learn, our teachers are relentlessly and productively self-critical when students are not reaching mastery.[18] Through exhaustive and highly selective recruitment efforts, extensive summer training, weekly professional development, and regular observations with feedback, Vista College Prep teachers are part of a professional learning environment that facilitates growth.

- Our staff recruitment efforts will be national, exhaustive, and selective. Vista College Prep has budgeted $9,000 dollars in our planning year to ensure we have the resources to identify only the best instructors. In year one, we expect a staff of 10, including two leadership team members (Executive Director and Manager of Business and Operations), seven teachers, and one office assistant. We will recruit the most committed and most capable teachers, offer competitive salaries[19], a mission-oriented and achievement-focused team environment, and provide comprehensive professional development. With Teach For America's Director of Alumni Affairs on our founding board, we will utilize this expertise in helping us expand our network to ensure we are able to attract the highest caliber of educators.

- To ensure our instructional leaders are prepared and ready to deliver rigorous standards-based instruction on a daily basis, we have 17 days of staff development during the summer. This

[15] D.E.A.R. programs have been successfully implemented by the highest performing schools visited through the Building Excellent Schools Fellowship, including Excel Academy and Roxbury Prep in Boston, and KIPP in Lynn, MA.
[16] Saunders, William L. and June C. Rivers, *Cumulative and Residual Effects of Teachers on Future Student Academic Achievement,* University of Tennessee Value-Added Research and Assessment Center, 1996, p. 6.
[17] Gates, Bill. "National Urban League Remarks." 2011. http://www.gatesfoundation.org/speeches-commentary/Pages/bill-gates-2011-urban-league.aspx
[18] School leaders at North Star (Newark, NJ) and Edward Brooke (Boston, MA) Charter Schools stated the importance of reflectiveness among teachers as being critical to the success of their students (Lead Founder, Julia Meyerson, visited these schools in October 2011).
[19] Due to our high expectations, longer hours, and the quality teachers we intend to employ, all beginning teachers will earn a higher salary than that provided to beginning teachers in the Phoenix Metro school districts (approximately 3%). With fundraising at the Board level, we intend to increase this percentage difference to better demonstrate our appreciation of our teachers' work.

includes intensive curriculum planning, culture building and norming, and understanding every system from how students enter the building to how they sharpen pencils.

- As a staff we will travel to at least one of the schools studied by the school leader during her Fellowship year with Building Excellent Schools.[20] This will serve as a model for the entire staff and orient our own discussions around excellence; this trip may take place during summer professional development if another school is in session, but most likely will take place during the first few months of the school year.

- Teachers participate in weekly professional development. For 2.5 hours per week, teachers and the leadership team plan and discuss curriculum, analyze student data to modify or adjust lesson planning and continuously seek ways to improve the quality of instruction we deliver to students. We provide ten dedicated professional development days during the year, allowing us to contract external professional development as needed, and offer teachers opportunities to visit high-performing schools to observe best practices. Five of those ten days are devoted to data evaluation following our six-week assessments where teachers and instructional leaders evaluate students' small group levels, determine lesson modifications and evaluate whether any skills or concepts need to be retaught.

- Ensuring each teacher's professional and instructional growth throughout the year is a critical component of Vista College Prep's model. Proposed Executive Director, Julia Meyerson, has received extensive training on supporting teacher growth and development as part of the Building Excellent Schools Fellowship. In addition, she participated in a leadership residency at a no-excuses charter elementary school, Capitol Collegiate in Sacramento, CA, where she focused on teacher evaluation and development, and has continued to support and learn from Phoenix Collegiate Academy and its BES-trained leader Rachel Yanof. The Executive Director has a set schedule of observation where every teacher is receiving feedback at least once per week and twice per week for brand new teachers. By continually providing opportunities to demonstrate leadership, observe best practices, and participate in customized training sessions, teachers become part of a school culture where they are challenged and valued.

More Time = More Learning: To accomplish our mission, our extended school day and school year provide increased opportunities for teachers to individualize student instruction, ensure that all students meet rigorous learning standards, and overcome the chronic achievement gap that exists between our target population and their more affluent peers. All of the high performing schools upon which Vista College Prep is designed have an extended day: increased learning time is essential to enabling students who enter school with skills and knowledge deficiencies, those with disabilities, and those with limited English language proficiency to achieve at the highest levels.

- Vista College Prep offers a longer school year (188 days) and extended school day (7:40 am to 4:00 pm). This schedule provides over 295 more instructional hours annually than the average South Phoenix district school, and amounts to 35 additional instructional days each year. [21] As summarized in **Figure A.1.1**, during the course of a student's K-5 education at Vista College Prep, s/he receives a total of 7,740 hours of instructional time, which equates to 1,770 more hours, 253 additional school days, or over an entire K-5 experience at Vista College Prep, an additional school year of instruction in comparison to traditional elementary public schools.

[20] Through her Building Excellent Schools Fellowship, Lead Founder Julia Meyerson observed over 39 high performing charter schools across the country. For the purposes of this visit with staff, she will choose a school based on proximity and grade-level appropriateness.
[21] These numbers are based on local schools starting at 7:30 am and ending at 2:30 pm (seven-hour school day).

- Teachers are able to use this extended time for individualized student instruction during the morning extra intervention block as well as during all literacy and math instructional periods.

Figure A.1.1: Increased Instructional Time[22]

Increased Instructional Time: Extended School Day and Year			
Grades	Standard Public School Annual Instructional Hours	Vista College Prep Annual Instructional Hours	# of Additional Annual Hours at Vista College Prep
K-5	995	1,290	295
Total over 6 years (K-5)	5,970	7,740	1,770 hours= 253 days= 1.4 school years

Strategic Use of Data: With an uncompromising attention to data-driven instruction, Vista College Prep uses a sophisticated system to collect a variety of data on a daily basis. Utilizing interim assessments, data is quickly analyzed for targeted intervention. Our data collection and analysis allow for individualized instruction and drives highly effective teaching.

- Vista College Prep uses Kickboard[23] to allow teachers and leadership staff the ability to monitor each student's academic progress on a daily basis. The Kickboard system is designed so that teachers can input everything from homework assignments, discipline issues, and daily/weekly tests and quizzes. The system also allows for easy analysis of long-term student growth as demonstrated through our six-week assessments.

- Quick input and analysis of data allows teachers to provide remediation to individual students in need of support and the ability to modify instruction when larger numbers of students evidence the lack of mastery.

- Interim assessments are critical to monitoring the progress of each individual student, and take place every six weeks. While teachers review the results of these assessments with students and use them to drive instruction, teachers also meet with supervisory staff to review these assessments, as the school leadership uses them to drive professional development. Students, teachers, and administrators all benefit from the transparency and excellence of strategic data-driven instruction.

- Vista College Prep uses the STEP Assessment to test and analyze student reading performance. The program is used at countless high performing schools across the country including Capitol Collegiate in Sacramento and the high achieving Uncommon Network (including North Star Academy in Newark) on the east coast. The structure of the assessment allows for quick analysis of individual student reading proficiency as well as trends across classes and grades.

- We also carefully monitor student attendance through PowerSchool, a system used by many high performing schools to track and record attendance. This system will also allow us to track any additional state and/or federal reporting requirements.

[22] We have taken into account our half-day schedule on Wednesdays (where we dismiss students at 2:30 pm) and assume local district schools have approximately 26 half-days in their schedule (where they dismiss at 12:30 pm). We also assume an average of 73 minutes for lunch and recess each full day and 60 minutes for lunch and recess each half day.

[23] Kickboard is an affordable data collection tool that was created by a Teach For America alum to easily track and analyze student data. Several of the schools we have studied utilize the system and find it to be very user-friendly and customizable.

Leadership Development: Vista College Prep believes that it is our job as educators to enforce the ideals of the community and teach our students how to behave, make good decisions and act as leaders in classrooms and community. We recognize that "[c]hildren first develop values, attitudes, and skills as a result of their experience in the families that raised them. But those values, attitudes, and skills continue to be shaped by children's interaction with their peers, teachers, neighbors, and other aspects of their environment."[24] Therefore, we prepare students for academic success in middle, high school and college and also teach our students to be leaders in their classrooms, school, local community and the world. By building academic scholars and community leaders, we build a brighter future for them and for us.

- In order to fulfill our long-term goal of having students become leaders in their community, Vista College Prep dedicates 40 minutes per week to leadership and character development using a proven and research-based curriculum like *Second Step* (students in grades 3-5 receive 45 minutes of this instruction). The skills and knowledge gained during this period are reinforced throughout the day by teachers and staff.

- Students in grades K-2 have 20 minutes of Choice Time four days per week and 30 minutes of daily recess where they are able to utilize the skills they have learned during leadership development classes as they engage in more informal interactions with their peers. [25] Similarly, students in grades 3-5 have 30 minutes of recess with 25 minutes of PREP time four days per week, where their interactions with other students are less structured, allowing for practical application of the character building skills taught in leadership development.

Structured and Supportive School Culture: Dr. Lorraine Monroe writes in *Nothing's Impossible* that order and stability facilitate learning by reducing the amount of teaching time misplaced to non-academic matters.[26] At Vista College Prep, we work hard to ensure that we are creating a highly structured and joyful school environment through consistency, "sweating the small stuff," and enthusiasm. Research on high-performing urban schools shows that (a) an incredibly high bar for behavior and academic work and (b) clearly communicated expectations directed at producing the best effort and work from students are essential for mastery of academic material.[27] Vista College Prep's high standards for behavior will be consistently enforced, creating a structured environment that maximizes learning time.

Coupled with high structure is an enthusiastic and supportive school culture. Our REACH values of Respect, Enthusiasm, Achievement, Community and Hard work guide students and teachers in all aspects of school life. Beginning with morning motivation in grades K-2 and weekly character education in grades K-5, our core values are reinforced throughout our highly structured and joyful school day. Additionally, every class ends the day with a community circle in grades K-2, and grades 3-5 have a weekly community circle (that replaces PREP time on Fridays), where teachers lead the class (and as students reach higher grades, they become more and more involved in leading the circle) in an analysis of the day (or week), what went well, what can they improve, and have both teachers and students offer shout outs for great behavior aligned with our REACH core values. When provided with a highly structured, disciplined and supportive learning environment, with quality, targeted instruction, all students will achieve to the highest academic standards.

---

[24] Thernstrom, Abigail, and Stephan Thernstrom. *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003.
[25] This attitude was expressed by Samantha Tweedy, Founding Co-Director for Operations at Excellence Girls Charter School in Brooklyn, NY when she said, "Choice time is character development in action." (Site visit by Lead Founder, 10/20/11).
[26] Monroe, Lorraine, *Nothing's Impossible*, New York: Public Affairs, 1997.
[27] See Samuel Casey Carter, *No Excuses: Lessons from 21 High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools*, The Heritage Foundation (2000); U.S. Department of Education, *Successful Charter Schools* (2004); and Abigail and Stephen Thernstrom, *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning* (2003).

- Students wear a common school uniform. This policy ensures that no instructional time is lost to discussion over student attire. A clear and appropriate dress code is an important component of the Vista College Prep school culture. Central to this dress code is the school uniform, consisting of a neat collared shirt and a pair of slacks (or skirt for girls).

- Building on the philosophy of successful charter schools like North Star Elementary in Newark, NJ, and BES School Achievement Preparatory Academy in Washington, D.C., we approach behavior just as we do academics: it must be taught and modeled by faculty, learned and practiced by students, and consistently and rigorously expected and reinforced throughout the school. We are obsessive about high standards for student behavior, and with an unrelenting focus on details, our entire school staff always "sweats the small stuff" by not allowing smaller infractions to grow into larger ones. This philosophy, embraced by many high performing urban charter schools, is inspired by Wilson and Kelling's "Broken Windows" theory: [28] "[I]f the first broken window in a building is not repaired, then people who like breaking windows will assume that no one cares about the building and more windows will be broken. Soon the building will have no windows."[29] Staff addresses the slightest infractions to make certain that they do not transform into much larger problems.

- We also believe that a rigorous academic program developmentally appropriate for elementary students and a highly structured school environment must be executed in a manner that maximizes student enthusiasm and engagement while setting clear expectations for behavior and values. At Vista College Prep, we explicitly teach and model clear behavioral expectations to create a positive, enthusiastic learning environment imbued with respect and burdened with no distractions. Within this structured framework, our students develop leadership and character traits through our core values: Respect, Enthusiasm, Achievement, Community and Hard work (REACH). The goal is for Vista College Prep students to not merely do "well," but also to do "good." Our school culture makes it "cool" to do well – and to help others. Through clear rules, our system of merits and demerits, and constant positive reinforcement, all Vista College Prep students learn to take responsibility for themselves, their school, and their community.

Family Engagement: Vista College Prep works closely with families as their children begin the path to college in elementary school. If parents and teachers have high expectations for the student's academic performance, then the student generally exceeds expectations.[30] Our partnership and constant communication with families is critical especially in the early grades. While we do not believe that students without this support are unable to achieve, we do recognize the incredible value that a family has in the education of children.[31] Beginning with home visits for each and every child and a mandatory annual family orientation, Vista College Prep offers extensive support to families as they, in turn, work to support the academic achievement of their children.

- At the start of each school year, Vista College Prep staff visits the homes of every new student.

- We hold two mandatory annual family orientations (one in April after student acceptance and the other in July immediately before school starts) for both parents and students.

---

[28] The "broken window" theory is a prominent community policing theory stating that the prevention of larger crimes begins with stopping small ones. James Wilson and George Kelling, "Broken Windows," *The Atlantic Monthly*, March 1982.
[29] Wilson, James Q. and George E. Kelling, "Broken Windows: The Police and Neighborhood Safety," *Atlantic Monthly*, March 1982.
[30] Benner, A. & R. Mistry. (2007). "Congruence of mother and teacher educational expectations and low-income youth's academic competence." *Journal of Educational Psychology*. Volume 99, No. 1.
[31] Fan, Xitao and Michael Chen, *Parental Involvement and Student's Academic Achievement: A Meta-Analysis*, National Science Foundation (1999). Another study found that benefits of increased parental involvement include higher test scores and grades, higher graduation rates, and higher enrollment rates in post-secondary education. See A. Henderson, *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family is Crucial to Student Achievement*, The National Committee for Citizens in Education, (1994).

- Additionally, Vista College Prep:
  - Requires a Contract of Commitment annually which lets families know what they can count on from the school and clarifies the school's expectations of students and families
  - Provides a parent and student handbook annually
  - Sends home a weekly newsletter of classroom and school-wide news and information
  - Meets with families for at least three formal conferences each year to discuss their child's progress (more conferences are held for students we identify as needing additional assistance either in the morning intervention block or during the school day)
  - Sends home behavioral updates daily
  - Has dedicated staff working to build strong relationships with families regularly
  - Sends parents six-week progress reports four times per year (and additionally sends home a weekly report on student reading and math growth)
  - Provides evening or weekend workshops designed to help families hone the skills they need to be effective teachers for their children periodically
  - Sends home annual parental surveys to ensure we are meeting all family expectations
  - Creates events in which families are invited into the school to celebrate student achievement regularly