

ACE Academy
2010-11 Performance Evaluation Report
Executive Summary

“I have confidence in what I do. I’ve seen what I can do.” These words shared in a senior address during the ACE Academy second graduation ceremony sums up the confidence and pride students have after two years participating in the school’s unique hands-on, project-based, proficiency model of education. Graduating seniors reflected on their ACE experience: “I’ve done more in two years than most have done in four.” “This school is the best decision in my high school career.” “It’s a lot better than a regular high school, a thousand times better.” At the end of its third year, students who choose ACE are clear how it improves learning by engaging them through their interest in the design build industry.

Overall, stakeholders report that ACE is meeting its mission of providing a contextual educational experience within the design build industries while preparing students for post-secondary education. Students’ ratings of the overall educational experience as well as the career preparation at ACE increased slightly from the first two years, and they report the rigor of the ACE program is somewhat higher compared to their home high school. Parents rated the school slightly higher than the previous year and equal to ratings from the first year. Students and parents appear to better understand and embrace the ACE structure and program, and no longer wish to push ACE into the familiar traditional high school model.

After a challenging second year during which ACE experienced changes in home high school schedules, budget and salary decreases, and implementation of the senior curriculum, ACE staff used its third year to successfully refine program curriculum and activities. Mentor and advisor roles were revised in the Capstone Project, a menu of field trips were offered versus once size fits all, hands-on opportunities were increased, and teaching of academic core competencies in math, science and language arts within the design build context became more transparent for students. Although schedules and budget challenges remain, ACE continues to hold true to its mission and provides a hands-on, project- and proficiency-based school where academic subjects are taught and learned within the architecture, construction and engineering career pathways.

Even though the structure and strategies upon which ACE Academy is founded are based on effective, research-based strategies, and students tell us they are learning more than at their previous schools, student achievement results dipped in several areas this year. It is probably not a measure of this year’s overall student body, as incoming GPA has remained essentially the same for three years. It may be an attribute of this year’s senior class, who struggled to transition to the ACE structure as juniors, and whose senior GPA is lower than the previous two senior classes’. It’s also worth consideration that it may be a normal implementation dip; as Michael Fullan states in *Leading in a Culture of Change*: “all successful schools experience implementation dips as they move forward.”

Included in this report are findings, analysis, commendations and recommendations from the third annual evaluation of the ACE Academy, a charter school in northeast Portland, Oregon. Data collections for this performance evaluation report included observations, focus groups, online and phone surveys, student transcripts, and enrollment, attendance and GPA reports. Data was collected between March and June 2011.

Findings and Recommendations

Achievement

Student achievement results were mixed this year as average GPA rose slightly, increasing from 2.30 to 2.42, but the graduation rate dipped alarmingly from 95% to 81%. This may be an attribute of this year's senior class, who struggled to achieve and fit within the ACE model when they were juniors and who have the lowest senior GPA in three years. Other achievement results also show negative trends: 18% less students completing the Capstone Project, 20% more students per class receiving an incomplete on a standard, and 12% less students per class demonstrating proficiency on course standards. However, it should be noted that 62% of students per class demonstrate proficiency on 80% of the standards, and 70% of students have a C or better average at ACE.

Students in the construction pathway have the least amount of students with honor roll level GPAs, but have the lowest percentage of students below a 2.0 GPA compared to the other pathways. Additionally, they continue to report satisfaction with their overall education experience at ACE at a high level.

Recommendation: Meet with students and parents to gain feedback and identify strategies to motivate students to complete work in a timely manner, assess current techniques used to hold students accountable for work accomplished according to standards, and determine methods to more efficiently communicate deficient work to parents. Continue to refine marketing vocabulary to emphasize the work expectations at ACE.

Staff

The culture of teacher collaboration, with teachers involved in key decisions, has continued and has grown stronger as teachers developed and implemented refinements to the curriculum and activities. Teachers met weekly to develop and refine curriculum and daily schedules, plan field trips, work with industry partners, and discuss individual student progress. Reflecting on the lower student achievement results, staff expressed dissatisfaction with student academic performance, similar to parent survey respondents. Comparison charter schools are even less satisfied at their schools. Staff is more satisfied, however, with student behavior and discipline this year than last year.

Recommendation: Continue to implement and monitor recently implemented strategies that positively affected student behavior and discipline, such as clearer marketing tools regarding work and behavior expectation at the school, and more effective junior induction to the school schedule and expectations. Follow the previous *Achievement Recommendation* to collaborate with parents and students to address student motivation and work completion.

Staff report continued dissatisfaction with the salary level, but also acknowledge that the school has inadequate resources. In fact, 63% of staff indicated a need for technical

assistance in the area of school finance and budgeting. They also report a greater number of them having non-instructional duties than do comparison charter schools.

Recommendation: Recruiting and retaining the right staff is the key to success, and will be even more critical with a change in director. Survey or interview staff to determine what non-monetary benefits support long-term retention. Contact a charter-knowledgeable consultant to train staff in methods to positively affect school finances and budget (such as grant writing, sharing wish lists with parents and community, etc.) Investigate ways to develop more opportunities (school-based enterprises) to provide student products and/or services that can bring resources *into* the school.

Students

Graduates are proud of what they have learned, and how their self-confidence has grown. “I have confidence to hit the architecture career head on.” “The environment encourages me to be more bold and brave.” Students rated their overall education at ACE a 4.3 on a 5-point scale, and their career education a 4.4, both higher than the previous two years. 92% of juniors will be returning to ACE next year, a 9% increase of returnees compared to last year, and a 14% increase from the first year.

Seniors showed a remarkable change from when they were juniors in their understanding and support of the school schedule, curriculum and teaching strategies. Juniors embraced the schools unique structure and qualities much earlier, and were better able to articulate them, than previous entering classes. Both juniors and seniors have learned to identify the math, science and language arts components in their projects, and were eager to explain how each was an example of an authentic application in the pathway industry.

Concerns by students in focus groups included:

- ✓ Seniors are frustrated with the amount of time put into the Capstone Project research paper and recommend it be spent on constructing the product.
- ✓ Seniors were surprised by how much time was needed to complete their Capstone Project successfully and recommend sharing the expectations about the Capstone at the end of the junior year.
- ✓ Students recommend adjusting the length of Anchor, making AM Anchor longer and PM shorter.

Most of the concerns expressed by last year’s focus groups have been resolved as staff implemented ideas brainstormed at the end of the year. Only the concerns about the Capstone research paper continue. At the end-of-this-year staff meeting, staff discussed this year’s concerns and brainstormed methods for addressing and resolving each.

Recommendations:

- ✓ Share work expectations and timelines regarding Capstone Project at the end of the junior year.
- ✓ Investigate Google and/or Moodle forums to help students log their Capstone activities so mentors, advisors and instructors can all provide support and motivation.
- ✓ Address student lack of understanding of the type of research needed.
- ✓ Help students identify Capstone-related questions needing research.
- ✓ Identify areas to scaffold the decision-making process that is needed in Capstone.

- ✓ Develop a checklist for teachers to use to assess and support student Capstone process and status.
- ✓ Develop a list of effective mentors.
- ✓ Develop and communicate benchmarks to guide mentors when working with students.

Program and Instruction

What's working well

- ✓ Hands-on, project-based activities
- ✓ Three design-build career pathways
- ✓ “Interesting classes,” unique opportunities
- ✓ Intentionally showing students where and when math, science and language arts is applied to professional technical projects
- ✓ Math, science, and language arts concept integration and application replicate application in the industry
- ✓ Expecting students to integrate math, science, and language arts in the Capstone Project
- ✓ Use of mentors and advisors in the Capstone Project
- ✓ Level of student responsibility for learning without teacher supervision*
- ✓ Student respect for others and their property*
- ✓ Student discipline as reported by staff as hindering learning is less of an issue
- ✓ Staffs willingness and ability to resolve issues raised by students or parents through the annual evaluation
- ✓ School environment is viewed as safe
- ✓ Computer availability
- ✓ Use of small size

What isn't working

- ✓ Level of student responsibility for learning without teacher supervision*
- ✓ Student respect for others and their property*
- ✓ End of day Anchor
- ✓ Capstone Project research paper
- ✓ Communication between schools about school calendar and schedule changes and related student absences

**Note that concepts that are listed on both What's Working as well as What Isn't Working showed a positive increase this year, but results are still lower than comparison school results in the same area.*

Recommendations

- ✓ Teach, re-teach and emphasize workplace standards related to professionalism and respect
- ✓ Share work expectations and timelines regarding Capstone Project at the end of junior year
- ✓ Review proposed outcome for Capstone Project research paper and clarify expectations as well as adjust length of paper, if appropriate

- ✓ Use results from ODE Charter School Survey regarding *Reasons for Choosing the School* to inform the development and refinement of marketing tools
- ✓ Review/adjust Anchor time period
- ✓ Continue to work with partner high schools regarding communication of school calendars, schedule changes and related student absences

Parents

Parents gave ACE a higher rating (+0.5) this year, giving it an 8.4 on a 10-point scale. The increase in rating reflects how well staff resolved behavior and junior perception issues from last year. The focus on the design build industry and the hands-on teaching strategy, with their resulting student engagement, continue to be the top reasons for parent advocacy. “He really, really enjoyed it.” “It’s just good education.” “It is a fantastic school!” “I give it a thumbs up!” “The staff are really good, pleasant, friendly, and easy to deal with.”

Parent recommendations for improvement this year primarily touched on teaching, instruction and communication. Parents recommend: finding ways to grade individual student work when students work in a team, teaching students what they don’t know versus just telling them what they need to do, explaining in more detail what student expectations are for each project, and being available after school to meet/tutor students. *Recommendation:* Continually assess how and when skills needed in projects are previously taught. Assess grading rubrics to delineate progress on teamwork and individual student achievement

Communication continues to be the number one parent concern. Parents are successfully accessing the online grading system, but still would like direct communication via email or phone when their student is doing poorly or falling behind. They express a willingness to partner with the school to help students adjust to the unique environment, high expectations and accountability and although they appreciate the availability of online system, they still believe a little 1-1 communication could increase student achievement. *Recommendation:* Use 1-1 communication with parents when students begin to fall behind.

In summary, ACE Academy has developed and implemented a strong two-year curriculum aligned with its mission. Improved communication about the school’s unique program and related student work requirements are beginning to drive the “right” students to the school, and parents are accessing the online grading system to monitor student progress. Industry partnerships remain strong, and the facility continues to receive strong ratings from parents. The staff is skilled and experienced in resolving issues and concerns as they are raised, and thus are poised to address concerns and improve student achievement next year.