

School Support and Readiness Assessment Summary Report

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| School: ACE Leadership High School | LEA: Albuquerque Public Schools |
| School Leader: Justin Trager | LEA Leader: Scott Elder |
| SSRA Team Leader: Celeste Murray | Date: October 10, 2023 |
| School Description | |
| <p>ACE Leadership High School is not your typical high school. Located in an industrial part of the city, the campus's colorful exterior hints at the school's unexpected interior. Inside, the Director of Student Support greets students and families from a glass room affectionately called "the fishbowl." This room is the office of the Student Support Director, and its prominence speaks to the importance of the school's work for students who have historically not been successful in comprehensive high schools. Beyond the fishbowl is one giant space that uses dividers to create pod spaces for project-based learning. The school currently has 236 students. Nineteen percent of the student population are English learners, and students receiving special education services make up about 30%. Most of the students come to the school "over-age and under-credited."</p> <p>The school's website states, "Education should prepare students for success in life and work. Unfortunately, traditional school experiences don't always measure up. At ACE, we make Education work for students. We believe that school should improve young people's lives, not create one more challenge to overcome. We partner with leaders in New Mexico's architecture, construction, and engineering industries to set students up to get ahead in a changing world. Together we are building a better future — for New Mexico's students, families, educators, industry, and communities."</p> | |
| School Successes and Celebrations | |
| <p>ACE Leadership High School has a lot to celebrate. The school has worked on rebranding itself from the school of last chance to one of innovation leading to student choice. Because of the focus on social-emotional learning, the importance of relationships, and hands-on, differentiated learning, the school has become a place students choose to be. The number of eighth graders who choose to enroll at the school has grown for the last three years, with 43 picking the school as their high school this year. Six gifted students chose ACE Leadership over traditional high school this year. Daily attendance is improving; the school was asked to present at this year's state conference on attendance to share what they are doing. Additionally, around 90% of students enrolled at the school choose to return after winter and summer breaks.</p> | |

ACE is working towards and prioritizing systems and sustainability. Efforts include creating anchor projects and developing a literacy framework to use dynamic texts within projects to support student growth in ELA.

The celebration that is perhaps the most readily apparent is the impact of the school's focus on social-emotional learning (SEL) and building relationships with students and families. Students feel seen, understood, and valued, as is shown in their willingness to take academic risks, their treatment of each other, staff, and visitors, and how they and their families speak about the school. Many consider the school "life-changing."

DOMAIN 1: CULTURE & EQUITY

To what degree has the school established equitable practices that ensure ALL students and staff have an opportunity to reach their full potential?

Promising Practices:

The Director of Student Support is in the fishbowl, a window-encased room at the front of the school with an open-door policy. Students know they come first and have his permission to interrupt at any time if they need his support. During the site visit, observers experienced this firsthand during an interview when a student came in for emotional support. Additionally, his staff (including social workers) is located at desks parallel to the pods (class spaces), making them readily available to students and staff. Due to their proximity, they also hear and see instruction and student behaviors in real-time, allowing them to support the academics and students' emotional safety and consistency.

The commitment to SEL also includes time in the students' day to participate in a morning meeting and advisement. This work promotes student regulation while simultaneously allowing teachers to take a temperature check of students' emotional wellness and get ahead of any potential issues. It also serves to orient students to the day's work.

Opportunities for Growth:

Two opportunities for growth surfaced during the site visit. First, a need for more family involvement was identified based on interviews. The school strives to keep families informed of student progress and struggles, including regular, informal calls and texts between staff and families, and several family members interviewed spoke to the detailed updates they get when they meet with teachers each trimester. There are also numerous opportunities for families to volunteer at the school, including as reviewers of student projects at the end of each trimester. However, the interviews indicate that the timing of the volunteer opportunities rarely works for working parents, and the request is not presented early enough for parents to make schedule changes to be involved. There was a request for ways to support the school and their student(s) that offered more flexibility in timing.

Next, while the large, open room for learning certainly had benefits and visually reinforced that

this was not a traditional high school, it regularly appeared in interviews and observations as having significant limitations on learning. The lack of walls leads to distractions and students taking an interest in arguments and conversations in other spaces. Student interviews indicated students often sneak out of one area into another when a fight or interesting conversation is overheard; likewise, student interviews revealed the difficulty of focusing if noise from another pod was overpowering.

Potential Next Steps:

The learning environment indicates to students what is of importance and the focus. Learning is inhibited if students cannot concentrate on their teacher's instruction. There could be a significant impact if school leaders created protected spaces to optimize learning. Three portables are available for teachers to support focused instruction. A rotation or schedule could be designed to have critical lessons delivered in the portable, allowing time for the project development to occur in the shared space. As a faculty, teachers could identify ways to use the shared spaces more effectively and regularly. The school also has plans (funding dependent) to acquire the property next door to allow for discrete, separate project spaces, but immediately enhancing the learning environment is essential.

DOMAIN 2: LEADERSHIP

To what degree does school leadership establish, communicate, support, and monitor schoolwide priorities?

Promising Practices:

Many interviews mentioned transitioning from "old ACE" to "new ACE." SEL has always been a strength of the school and, for many years, was the primary focus. Recently, leadership has worked towards balancing SEL with an intentional focus on academics. This renewed focus includes professional development (PD) before each trimester to ensure projects meet industry requirements while addressing the state's learning standards. The school is also working towards creating anchor projects and a scope and sequence so new teachers will not have to develop projects while learning to teach in a project-based environment. This alignment will also help students master the content needed to earn credits toward graduation.

Opportunities for Growth:

The most significant opportunity for growth that emerged during the site visit is the need to shift student and staff mindsets around ELA (reading and writing) as foundational skills for most careers, trade schools, and higher education opportunities. Most interviews spoke explicitly about how math is embedded and assessed in projects. Student interviews elicited, "We focus on math because we'll need it more in our careers." ELA did not come up in several interviews, and students' interviews suggested, "It's not as important."

Students were not observed reading and writing, and they seemed to be capturing data/findings

mainly. A former focus on vocabulary appears to have slid from the school focus. Interviews indicated many students read at a fifth-grade level but did not indicate how this was being addressed in projects. Observers did not hear or see evidence of teachers collecting data on student reading/writing and reteaching skills as needed.

Potential Next Steps:

The school has implemented phase one of the ACE Literacy Framework, which includes an annotation template. There is a movement towards an increased literacy focus, including hiring a literacy interventionist and developing an order of operations framework. The following steps will support teachers' instruction planning for using the texts. The staff is exploring and learning about providing comprehensive literacy, using dynamic texts embedded in projects, by visiting two schools in the Bay Area of California. Many career paths will require employees to read informational text. This would be a critical place to start within project-based learning. Annotation is a solid start to accessing and analyzing a text, and then what is the expectation to use their understanding of the text. Starting learning sessions with a Do Now would be a simple, bite-sized routine for text analysis.

DOMAIN 3: INSTRUCTIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

To what degree is the school's instructional infrastructure in place, understood, and utilized by school leaders and teachers?

Promising Practices:

The school has committed itself to aligning projects with grade-level standards. They are also working to support teachers in planning each project by using design sheets and learning outcome trackers to identify standards being met and assessment opportunities. While daily lesson plans are not required, there is an expectation that teachers will have weekly plans, and the Curriculum and Instruction Director meets with teachers weekly to share where they are in the project and projected outcomes for the following week. She is then also able to provide feedback on their weekly plan.

Opportunities for Growth:

Interviewees could not explain how staff and students know what students have learned. There are no expectations around daily or weekly formative assessments. This lack of assessment means that gaps in understanding are not necessarily being addressed regularly. When teachers use daily checks for understanding, they can see where students are struggling and offer mini-lessons or one-on-one support to close the gaps in time for students to implement learning as the project progresses.

The site team did hear that math has more regular checks for understanding, which interviewees indicated was due to the nature of the subject. Few interviews spoke of ELA or how teachers knew students were mastering ELA concepts; student interviews also indicated they were rarely

assessed on reading or writing and that both were less important to their future than math.

Interviewees also spoke to a lack of rigor in lessons, and observers heard language indicating staff used more remediation practices than acceleration ones. The student focus group told what was expected of them in class was often easy and completed by most students well before the end of the class time, leaving an hour or more of unstructured time with nothing required of them academically. Most felt they would be better supported by shorter class periods with more classes in the day. Comments included things like, "I feel like a lot of what we do is what we did in fifth grade or middle school," and "My freshman year at my first high school was a lot harder than what we do here." The parent focus group stated that homework was rare, with a few adding their child had said they didn't feel challenged.

Potential Next Steps:

Leadership, particularly Mr. Trager (Executive Director) and Ms. Mason (Curriculum & Instruction), felt they needed time to sit with this feedback and investigate it further.

DOMAIN 5: SUPPORT & ACCOUNTABILITY

To what degree do school leaders establish and communicate expectations, monitor progress, provide support, and hold staff accountable?

Promising Practices:

The school has hired math and reading interventionists to support teachers and students. The reading interventionist is new, but the math interventionist talked about the variety of ways in which she supports math content within projects, including directly teaching some high-order math concepts.

Opportunities for Growth:

A possible opportunity for growth at ACE High School is using backward design to plan activities and lessons within the projects. Interviews regularly indicated the planning process starts with the project rather than the standards. When backward planning is used, the teacher begins with the standards, crafts learning objectives for the project as a whole, identifies what mastery looks like and how it is assessed, and then creates learning opportunities for lessons. This intentionality increases the likelihood that the standards, broken into learning objectives, are the priority rather than the activity. The school struggles to balance industry needs and expectations with grade-level standards for ELA, math, science, and social studies. Purposeful planning can mitigate this challenge. More frequent checks for understanding can help teachers respond while projects are still in process rather than after the fact.

Potential Next Steps:

ACE must address industry standards as well as state learning standards. The next step at ACE is having another retreat to think about how they archive projects well so others can access them. They want to have specific learning outcomes that they have agreed to and systematized. They want to tell students, "In year one at our school, these are the standards/learning outcomes you will pursue/achieve."