

DELAWARE CHARTER SCHOOL ANNUAL REPORT

CHARTER SCHOOL INFORMATION

Charter School Name: Las Américas ASPIRA Academy

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Margie López Waite
Head of School

November 17, 2016
Date

Lourdes Puig
Board President



November 17, 2016
Date

SUBMISSION DEADLINE: December 1st (September 30th for renewing charter schools)

All schools submit one (1) signed copy (PDF via email preferred) to the DDOE Charter School Office

I. Charter School Program

Narrative:

Las Américas ASPIRA Academy (LAAA) began as a vision among a group of advocates in the Hispanic community committed to providing an educational alternative within the public school system. In 2009, the Delaware Department of Education with the assent of the State Board of Education approved the school's charter application. The opening of our school was delayed one year due to challenges in securing a long-term facility for the school. In August 2011, LAAA celebrated their grand opening with an enrollment of 303 students (101% of goal) in its current location in Newark (326 Ruthar Drive). In our second year of operation (2012-2013), we achieved 105% of our enrollment goal with 338 students. Our enrollment was determined by lottery since our first year of operation with a waiting list that continues to increase each year. LAAA's targeted population is students residing in Delaware.

LAAA is the direct outgrowth of the mission of ASPIRA of Delaware, Inc., an associate office of the national ASPIRA Association. ASPIRA, since its start with ASPIRA New York, has had over fifty years of experience creating and implementing formal and informal education programs that build up youth self-esteem, cultural awareness, and leadership abilities. ASPIRA associate offices successfully operate eleven charter schools in 3 cities: Philadelphia, Miami and Chicago. Originally founded as a Puerto-Rican organization, ASPIRA Associate Offices in the 6 states of Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Florida and Illinois and the commonwealth of Puerto Rico now serve a diverse population of youth, with the specific mission to empower the Puerto Rican and Latino community through advocacy and the education and leadership development of its youth.

Mission

The mission of **Las Américas ASPIRA Academy (LAAA)** is to provide a world-class education that prepares students through a dual language (English/Spanish) project-based learning curriculum, to become healthy productive community members and leaders, with an *expectation* that *every* child, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic level, is college bound.

We are accomplishing this mission through the full implementation of a dual language immersion, project-based learning curriculum. Our guiding principles – Accountability * Social and Emotional Intelligence * Positive Mindset * Inquiry * Resilience * Appreciation (**ASPIRA**) – represent the foundation of our character education program. These traits are an integral part of our school-wide implementation of the Responsive Classroom Approach which embraces a fostering of community, based upon teaching socially-responsible behaviors.

Philosophy

The philosophy Las Américas ASPIRA Academy (LAAA) is that students learn best through doing (project-based learning) and that students can become fully bi-literate in English and Spanish, if students are taught early on through a dual-language approach. And because research shows that students who are healthy and active perform better in the classroom, Las Américas ASPIRA Academy (LAAA) will integrate physical fitness and good nutrition as core components of its rigorous project-based learning curriculum.

The academic, physical, social, and emotional development of our students rests on:

- ASPIRA Principles of Awareness, Analysis and Action
- Setting high expectations for each student, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity or socio-economic level, where **every** student is college-bound
- Building on the first language of English Language Learners to increase their academic performance
- Enriching the education of English speaking children by having them achieve literacy and fluency in a second language
- Making real-world connections for all learning
- Creating a healthy personalized school environment that is positive and student centered, focused on cross-cultural understanding
- Facilitating learning through investigations, interactions, and dual language instruction that is intellectually challenging and developmentally appropriate
- Providing ongoing professional development to teachers and staff in order to keep them abreast with the best research-based teaching practices
- Using systematic qualitative and quantitative student assessment to drive and strengthen instruction
- Creating a strong partnership between parents, community, private sectors, teachers and staff to increase overall educational achievement and attainment

II. Performance Reflection

Tier 1 Narrative:

Successful Academic Practices

What Are the Successful Academic Practices At Your Charter School that Other Schools Can Replicate?

The key to our academic success has been focusing on teacher effectiveness and student growth. The following is a summary of the programs/initiatives we have implemented to support our academic goals:

- **Educator Effectiveness Framework (EEF):** The 2015-2016 academic year was the first year of implementation of the EEF, an essential part of our school's strategic plan. The focus of the plan is to close the achievement gap of our students based upon a four pillar approach: Increasing Educator Effectiveness, Mastery Learning, Data-Driven Instruction, and Culture & Climate. Each of the four pillars is integral to the achievement of our goal. However, **a critical piece is increasing educator effectiveness**; without significant gains in this area, the four pillars supporting the closing of student achievement gaps will falter. On-site visits were conducted by DEDOE and it was determined that LAAA successfully met all expectations in the waiver application (Alternative Educator Assessment).
- **Standards-Based Report Card (K-5):** LAAA continued the rollout of its standards-based report card, building upon the K-2 pilot conducted the year before. Students in grades K-5 were assessed using this model.
- **Blended Learning Initiatives:** In 2014-15, iPads were introduced in all classrooms in grades 1-5. A 1:1 Chromebook initiative began in Fall 2016 for students in grades 6-8. GoogleDrive accounts were created for all team members and middle school students. These efforts coincided with the State's rollout of Schoology. A teacher leader was chosen as our Schoology Champion and began attending trainings. School leadership and members of the Board participated in a book club, reading Blended Learning by Michael Horn and Heather Staker. In Spring 2016, the Head of School, Assistant Head of School and a 2nd Grade Teacher Leader (supported by the Rodell Foundation) attended a Personalized and Blended Learning Conference in Rhode Island. Plans were made as a result of that professional development opportunity to pilot personalized learning in 4th grade during the 2016-17 school year.
- **School-wide Implementation of the Responsive Classroom Approach:** Las Américas ASPIRA Academy utilizes a school-wide approach to building community and addressing misbehaviors: Responsive Classroom. The goals of this approach are to ensure that students:
 - Feel physically and emotionally safe at school so that they may do their best learning.
 - Develop the social/emotional skills necessary for working and learning cooperatively.
 - Promote a school community based on mutual respect.

Responsive Classroom provides our school with a framework to teach social-emotional skills, embedding character traits in our focused interactions with students. We believe this is as important as teaching a rigorous academic curriculum in our classrooms.

- **Special Education:** Presently, LAAA provides the full range of services for students with disabilities. The director attends all meetings with the DOE Exceptional Children Workgroup and ensures that our school is current in practice and compliance with regulations. Additionally, we employ an Education Enrichment Coordinator who primarily handles the compliance aspects of running our special education program including meeting scheduling, coordination with contracted professionals, and maintaining special education audit files. LAAA contracts with bilingual and monolingual school psychologists as well as speech, occupational, and physical therapists for identification and service delivery. We also have 6 Special Education Teachers and 2 Special Education Paraprofessionals. We strive to provide special education services within the least restrictive environment, which for most of our students is the general education classroom. However, we recognize that some students require support in a special education classroom and we make these determinations with the IEP teams on individual student-by-student bases. We recognize the complex and varied needs of students with disabilities and so we ensure that all Individualized Education Plans are developed for eligible children individually, striving to create a plan to help all children achieve at their full potential. This year, we have created inclusion teams in which our special education teachers co-teach general education classes with para-professionals supporting additional needs. The special education teachers work closely with general education teachers to help identified students meaningfully participate in grade level curriculum with accommodations and modifications as necessary. LAAA conducts evaluations for initial special education eligibility upon parent request or school referral.

- **Response to Intervention:** For concerns with development in reading and mathematics, we implement a school-wide K-8 Response to Intervention (RTI) program which is overseen by the school's Reading Specialist. We use NWEA/MAP benchmark measures in reading and mathematics, as well as other internal measures such as Guided Reading Levels and state test data where applicable, to place students in tiers for RTI intervention and all grades have a 30 minute intervention period built into their master schedule during each school day that is used for this purpose. Tier II and III instruction is provided during this period and RTI teams meet at the conclusion of each 6-week cycle of intervention to examine data and adjust students' intervention focus, method, and/or tiers depending on the need of individual students. Based on this data, students may be referred for evaluation for special education eligibility by the school if the grade level RTI teams, including the Reading Specialist and the Education Enrichment Director, determine that students are not responding to cycles of Tier II and III Intervention and are not on a trajectory to meet grade level benchmarks.

- **English Language Learners:** Las Américas ASPIRA Academy strives to serve all English language learners (ELL students) in accordance with Delaware regulations. In an effort to include our large population of Hispanic families in school information, the majority of all school-wide communication is offered bilingually to ensure the participation of all families. Within the confines of the school day, LAAA works closely with the Delaware DOE TitleIII program director to ensure compliance with state ELL regulations. We issue a home language survey to all students upon enrollment to determine if they are exposed to or engage in a language other than English in the home environment. If they are, LAAA administers testing as prescribed by the Delaware ELL regulations, the Model or W-APT WIDA Assessments. This initial placement information is compiled with previous end of year ACCESS test scores and presented to general education teachers at the start of the school

year. Teachers meet with the dedicate teacher of English Language Learners at the start of the school year and distributes ELL files which contain information regarding students' English language proficiency levels, alignments between the Common Core State Standards and WIDA's Can-Do Descriptors, and other resources that aide staff in developing lessons for their ELL students. Because we have a large population of both English Language Learners as well as Spanish Language Learners in our immersion program, all staff receive professional development in best practices and effective strategies in ELL. The entire faculty (including new staff) was trained in Sheltered Instruction in June of 2014. These practices continually focus our immersion teachers in supporting language development in both languages which is a research-based method of effectively teaching ELL students. Our ELL teacher consults with both English and Spanish teachers to help them with their lesson plans to accommodate English language learners. In addition to the immersion program, our ELL teacher teaches small groups of ELL students who demonstrate the highest need in language development across all four domains of listening, speaking, reading and writing based on their test scores or class performance.

- **QUEST:** The enrichment program targeted at gifted learners at Las Américas ASPIRA Academy is known as the QUEST program. This acronym stands for “Quality Utilization and Enrichment of Student Talents”. Though Delaware law does not mandate the delivery of gifted services to students, LAAA recognizes that students who are academically accelerated and demonstrate elevated gifts and talents have unique needs. Since one characteristic of giftedness is the ability for students to acquire new languages quickly, we feel that promoting development of gifts and talents within an environment already structured for rich language learning could serve to enhance and challenge those individual students with the goal of helping all students to reach their full potential. The program design is one that is able to evolve to meet the needs of learners and takes the approach that gifted education should not be a one-sized fits all model; LAAA believes that education should mold to fit the child, not the other way around. QUEST is project-based and driven by students’ interests to the extent possible as the QUEST curriculum is primarily focused on developing students’ critical, creative, and logical thinking skills as well as problem-solving abilities in a variety of ways. QUEST is offered to students in grades 2-8 and both parents and teachers are able to nominate students for consideration into the QUEST program. QUEST admittance is based on multiple measures and decisions are made by a team.

Successful Organizational Practices

What Are the Successful Organizational Practices at Your Charter School that Other Schools Can Replicate?

The key to our organizational success has been establishing a delegation of responsibilities, creating a check-balance system to avoid any single points of failure, and ensuring each team member is knowledgeable and accountable for their role. The delegation of responsibilities allows each team member to have a clearly defined role in the organization. Although there are some shared responsibilities (i.e., student safety), we have separated the majority of school operations into the three categories of the Performance Framework (academic, organizational and financial). This also applies to the school governance with each member of the Board of Directors assigned to a committee under each category. Within each area of our school operations, we have created a check-balance system so there is not solely one person

responsible or knowledgeable of a specific task. This allows for shared responsibility and accountability, which strengthens our organization by eliminating any single points of failure. The following is a summary of the tasks/responsibilities associated with the organizational framework:

- Understand the Six Key Components of Organizational Framework
 - Educational Program
 - Understand all of the regulations pertaining to public education and/or charter authorization
 - Financial Management & Oversight
 - Have all board and CBOC members attend DDOE's Finance Training
 - Annual Financial Audit – Strive for “Clean” Audit, and, as necessary, correct all Findings (Deficiencies and/or Material Weaknesses)
 - Prepare Management's Discussion and Analysis to be included in Final Audit Report
 - Adhere to Internal Controls
 - Payroll
 - HR
 - Purchasing/Procurement
- Governance & Reporting
 - Adhere to school board's bylaws
 - Maintain current school website
 - Ensure required information is posted
 - Current financial report form
 - Current year financial reports Form
 - Final monthly standardized report forms for previous years of operation
 - Link to Delaware Educational Statistics
 - Checkbook link
 - Most recent audit
 - Annual Report
 - School Code of Conduct
 - Board meeting notice
 - Board agendas
 - Board minutes (written and audio versions)
 - CBOC meeting notice
 - CBOC agenda
 - CBOC minutes
- Students & Employees
 - High student and employee retention rates must be a goal
 - Teacher credentialing (Highly Qualified Teacher Requirements) must be a priority
 - Solid hiring practices must be employed, which include meeting state certification and background requirements
- School Environment
 - Maintain an inclusive environment by promoting and welcoming diversity
 - Conduct School Satisfaction Survey to measure school climate and identify opportunities for improvement
 - Build and maintain a school building that supports a safe learning environment

- During expansion planning, include all stakeholders (board members, parents, staff and students)
- Consider and plan for additional safety (not required by law)
 - Monitoring/Security
 - Access control
 - CCTV
 - Conduct monthly emergency preparedness drills; e.g., fire, intruder/lockdown, bus evacuation
- New charter schools should look to other successful and tenured charters for sharing of best practices (DE Charter Schools Network)
- Ethical leadership and board governance/oversight are essential components for success

Successful Financial Management & Stewardship Practices

What Are the Successful Financial Management & Stewardship Practices At Your Charter School that Other Schools Can Replicate?

The key to our financial management and stewardship has been balancing the needs of the school with its financial viability. At LAAA, we pride ourselves on being good stewards of our funding by being conservative in our budget projections and maintaining spending limits. The following is a summary of the practices and guidelines we have implemented to support our financial goals:

- Adhere to a budget model for budget planning
 - Revenue
 - Conservative (state and local projections always less than 100% enrollment target) for preliminary budgets
 - Minimal projections for donations
 - Ensure all staff members (credentials) are up to date in DEEDS for maximum state funding
 - Apply for private grants to provide additional revenue to support capital needs; e.g., school expansion, equipment or furniture
 - Expenses
 - Budget Operating Expenses on New Revenue only
 - Salaries & OECs = 65-75%
 - Mortgage/Rent = <15%
 - Transportation = 8-10%
 - Remainder = 10-15%
 - Avoid Deficit Spending – if Capital Expenditures; e.g., classroom expansion, equipment and/or furniture cannot be covered by donations/private grants or other local revenue, this might require funding with previous year carryover (cash reserve). Doing so will require an explanation in the financial framework as your ratios will be negatively impacted
- Understand the Financial Framework and how the Indicators within the framework reflect and evaluate your school’s near term and long term sustainability. Charter Schools do not receive Capital Funds, so these Indicators, as well as the Annual Financial Audit, Organizational and Academic Performance are pivotal in obtaining outside financing.

- **Financial Reporting**
 - Develop and use a Monthly Financial Report that includes detailed information on all revenue and expenses to include an explanation of variances
 - Reconcile to State FSF Reports
 - Daily Validity Report (DGL060) – review each day, as it provides a YTD Balance of all Funds
- **Stewardship Practices**
 - Ethical leadership
 - Accountability
 - Oversight and strategic planning (Board of Directors and CBOC)
 - Transparency

