

We LEAD Academy Charter School Prospectus

Hollie Russell-West, Founder

In today's world, children are inundated with various forms of media. Media has become how our children gain insight into the world around them, socialize with friends and families, develop identity, creatively express themselves, and advocate for change. Students must be given opportunities to develop the acumen to be creators of content, as well as informed consumers. Given its centrality in our lives and the power it has to shape the future, We LEAD Academy utilizes media studies to anchor students in rigorous academics, a sense of community, and ownership of their learning.

Mission: We LEAD Academy leverages media studies and information technology to equip students with the agency to author their own futures and make meaningful contributions in their communities.

Vision: We LEAD Academy nurtures a generation of leaders who bring a critical eye to the world around them, uplift important and diverse stories, and chart their own course.

To fulfill our mission, our model develops graduates who are characterized as:

- **Self-Directed Scholars** - Students are self-aware and curious. They think critically and creatively to solve problems and achieve goals. Students perform, achieve, and excel academically.
- **Effective Collaborators** - With a high degree of self-efficacy, students build relationships and work across lines of difference to accomplish tasks with a high degree of efficiency and quality.
- **Powerful Communicators** - Students are engaging storytellers who challenge and influence the perspectives of others through meaningful, relevant, and engaging stories.
- **Compassionate Changemakers** - With empathy and deep understanding, students create change through personal efforts as well as empowering others.

Our model is grounded in our beliefs about the mindsets, habits and conditions that must exist to produce student success. We believe that:

1. **Students must matter.** Students feel a sense of belonging and a connection to their school through their relationships with members of their learning community. Students have the support of their learning community as they discover their identity, confront social and academic challenges, and persevere through obstacles.
2. **Students must own their learning.** Through progressive learner autonomy, students take ownership of their education and significant outcomes as they discover and define themselves.
3. **Students must tell their stories.** Students have a voice and use it for advocacy. They also recognize that their voices have the power to influence perspectives and move others to action. Students use different mediums to convey their compelling, diverse stories with compassion and intentionality.
4. **Adults make the difference.** Adult interactions with each other, students, families, and the community are marked by a positive tone and tenor. We leverage the capacity of staff to empower students to reach their highest potential. We invest in our staff's development so they can powerfully articulate our mission and deepen their commitment to fulfilling it in a culture of high expectations.
5. **Learning must be active.** Learning experiences engage students as active participants. Students ask and research answers to their own questions, grapple with complex thinking and tasks, evaluate different approaches and solutions, and reflect on their learning.
6. **Learning must be relevant.** Learning experiences are tied to students' cultural experiences and exemplify student interests and aspirations. As students confront real-world issues and solve real-world problems, they begin to see themselves in the context of the world around them.

TARGETED POPULATION

Based on over 50+ community empathy interviews, a groundswell of families in St. Louis aspire to have schools that equip students to understand the world around them, compete academically, and define and achieve a personal vision of success. Our families believe that their children must have a strong academic and social-emotional foundation and be well-prepared to pursue their academic and career ambitions.

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These outcomes are only available in a setting where the focus is centered on the whole child, leading to high levels of student engagement, and children who feel a connection to what and how they are learning.

Our targeted population resides in North St. Louis and the families are distributed across multiple neighborhoods. Because of the population in individual zip codes, We LEAD Academy will draw from several adjoining zip codes (63113, 63112, and 63107). Currently there are approximately 2,217 children between the ages of 5-9. In these zip codes, more than 90% of the population identifies as African American and about 95% identify as people of color. That percentage is lower in 63112, where approximately 70% of families are African American and about 80% identify as a person of color.¹ Using FRL data from surrounding schools, nearly 100% of students will qualify for FRL. We anticipate a small population of students that may be identified as gifted and talented in various areas or identified as students with special needs, as well as a high population of students who may be at-risk for academic failure. Based on the demographics of surrounding elementary schools, approximately 8%-12% of our population may be identified as students with disabilities.

We LEAD Academy proposes to educate students in K - 8th grade. We will open in the fall of 2022 with 125 students in grades K-1. Each following year, we will add a grade and approximately 94 new students until we reach full capacity at 784 students in the fall of 2029. The projections reflect 10% attrition annually and additional recruitment for students entering grade 6, beginning year 6.

SCHOOL DESIGN

Student success in the We LEAD educational model is driven by constructivist pedagogical approaches that incorporate high levels of cognitive engagement, relevance, peer interaction, and personal reflection. The instructional approaches ensure that students construct their own meanings and lead their learning. Through problem-solving and use of technology, student's learning extends beyond the classroom and into their communities and the world.

- **Real-World Inquiry:** Students answer essential questions related to major concepts and interdisciplinary themes at each grade level. The core curriculum will be integrated with authentic projects that solve real-world problems. During these learning experiences, students make connections to their own lives and complete independent inquiry projects, often working alongside their peers as leaders and learners. As a result of deep study, collaboration and reflection, students can apply what they learn to new and different circumstances and contexts.
- **Cooperative Learning:** As students develop independent accountability, they work cooperatively with their peers to acquire new knowledge and improve social skills. The use of cooperative groupings in instruction is rooted in the principle of constructivism, which suggests that individuals learn best by acquiring new knowledge, making sense of it through their schema, connecting to existing ideas and exploring their connections with others. This process leads to students being able to synthesize information and enhance how they encounter and interact with new information and experiences.
- **Student Presentations/Portfolios** serve as assessments of students' skills, abilities, and knowledge, as well as opportunities for feedback on their performance in constructivist learning. We LEAD Academy embraces a culture where all students present their work. This occurs informally during circles and instructional blocks. Formally, students share their best work with their families, class and members of the school community at the end of each year. Students' best work samples are collected for their electronic portfolio. Eighth grade scholars develop a capstone, which is a year-long project reflecting their learning journey at We LEAD Academy and a research project that includes a response to a problem their community faces.

¹ Bellwether Education Partners. [Comprehensive Landscape Analysis](#). March 2020.

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INNOVATION

Media represents We LEAD Academy’s novel approach to learning in the K-8 setting. Our media curriculum will focus on the use of mass media and technology studies, teaching students to develop a critical eye for the information and images they consume and become responsible content creators. In Mass Media, students learn the fundamentals of using media to create, edit and produce content for different genres, including documentaries and narratives. These hands-on experiences emphasize creative and critical thinking, written and oral communication, problem-solving, and collaboration. Media Literacy develops students’ understanding of the tools and techniques used to influence the thinking and behavior of others. It reaches into pop culture as students think critically about images, fads, and information consumed through digital media. Journalism, as an important component of media studies, allows students to strengthen essential literacy skills as they communicate their perspectives, capture their narratives, and prepare content for digital publication.

A DAY IN THE LIFE

Schedule	We LEAD Experience
Arrival	Dylan is greeted with one of the 3 H’s (handshake, high-five or hug) at the doors by caring adults. He knows that he is welcomed, and he belongs.
8:30 – 8:50 Breakfast/Choice Time	During choice time, Dylan chooses to draw in his journal. <i>Before he transitions, Dylan tunes into the morning broadcast, which is prepared and produced by students, and streamed into his classroom.</i>
8:50 – 9:10 Class Meeting	Class meeting is designed to help students center themselves, share openly, and affirm others as a way of building a powerful community. <i>Today, it was Dylan’s opportunity to share a story of courage. He talked about admitting to his mother that he had accidentally broken a bowl and how this taught him that courage comes in small moments.</i>
9:10 – 10:40 Literacy	At the start of the literacy block, <i>Dylan meets with members of his book club. They are doing a deep dive into Anansi Tales and thinking about how people use stories to communicate wisdom across cultures.</i> The ELA portion of the literacy block builds the foundation of skills needed for strong reading, writing, and communication. Each unit grounds in a guiding question and set of power skills. The time is structured for a mini-lesson, independent personalized practice and feedback, and then deeper work time on a broader project. Once a week, this ELA time is replaced with a full writer’s workshop.
10:40 – 11:40 Math	In Mathematics, Dylan engages in problem-based and visual learning to develop his conceptual understanding of math. Instruction grounds him in math fluency while integrating math ideas across multiple contexts and applying math skills in real-world situations. His instruction is divided into three blocks: small group instruction, problem-solving, and self-directed learning.
11:40 – 12:20 Lunch & Recess	After lunch, Dylan heads out to recess. It is one of his favorite times of the day because he gets to play soccer with his friends.

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12:20 – 1:20 Specials (Art, PE, Technology)	In Technology, one of his three specials, <i>Dylan is learning to manipulate content using presentation software. He is adding images and changing fonts to emphasize his message.</i>
1:20 –1:50 Personalized Learning	Personalized Learning inverts the classroom hierarchy, putting Dylan in charge of his learning. <i>Dylan opens his learning plan and realizes he needs practice solving word problems adding multiple 2-digit numbers. He logs into Khan Academy to watch a short video and has an opportunity to practice several problems before checking in with his teacher.</i>
2:20 – 3:20 Media and Inquiry	“You are what you eat!” Earlier this week, Dylan watched videos and captured notes about healthy and unhealthy foods and why junk is unhealthy. <i>Dylan’s group will produce a PSA at the end of the week to share their learning. The teacher shows the class various models and leads the class in developing a checklist of the features of a good PSA. Dylan breaks into a small group and works with his team to use the writing process to craft a message that has a powerful impact.</i> Over the next few days, Dylan's group will share their work with peers for multiple reviews. He is learning that thinking is iterative. Friday, his group will record their PSA and share during the morning broadcast.
3:20 – 3:35 Passion Finding	Dylan unplugs and explores his passions and interests. He wants to be a Chess Master, so today is reading about some of the greatest in the world.
3:35 – 3:45 Reflection	As Dylan’s day comes to an end, <i>he journals to reflect on his experiences and what he learned today. He makes some notes for goals he will pick back up tomorrow.</i>
3:45 – 4:00 Closing Circle	Dylan shares how showed courage when he participated in a class discussion. After listening to other examples of courage, Dylan believes it is okay to take risks. His teacher celebrates him for his acts of courage.
Dismissal	As Dylan heads to his dismissal area, he is excited because this is the day that he goes to soccer practice after school.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES:

We LEAD Academy will measure its success using the following measures:

- **Goal 1:** Students grow academically in reading, writing, and math at a rate that ensures they are at or above grade level by 3rd grade and remain at or above grade level through 8th grade.
- **Goal 2:** Students meet or exceed state standards for mastery in reading, writing, and math. 50% of students who attend for two or more years will score Proficient/Advanced on annual Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) in grades 3rd through 8th.
- **Goal 3:** Students will demonstrate proficiency in written and oral expressions of complex thought, differing ideas, and real or imagined experiences with logic, clarity, coherence, and originality as measured by a school-developed rubric.
- **Goal 4:** We LEAD is fully enrolled and demonstrates high levels of attendance and student retention as measured by 90% of students attending 90% of the time and maximum of 10% attrition.
- **Goal 5:** We LEAD demonstrates fiduciary and financial responsibility as measured by balanced budgets and meeting or exceeding professional standards on external, annual audit reports.

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- **Goal 6:** Parents and students demonstrate high satisfaction with the school culture, academic program and school leadership of We LEAD Academy as measured by a rating of “satisfied” or “highly satisfied” on related questions on the Panorama Survey.

EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

To ensure that all We Lead’s students demonstrate growth and achievement, ELA and math curriculum selections reflect the highest standards according to [Ed Reports](#) and our research of outcomes for students when implemented in schools with similar demographics.

In mathematics, we are leveraging the work of the Achievement First network of charter schools. [Achievement First’s](#) schools have consistently outperformed their host district based on student proficiency and outpaced growth for their city and state. Since 2015, its Connecticut students improved their proficiency rates by 21% points in math. Additionally, more students score advanced than any other levels on state assessments, raising the bar for proficiency. In Rhode Island, its schools are outperforming neighboring, high-performing districts by 5%. The Achievement First network also delivers positive [results](#) for its partner schools around the country. We are utilizing [EL Language Arts Curriculum](#) for ELA, which has also yielded positive results. Students who have used the EL Education for 2 years have shown a learning growth of an extra 5 months. After 3 years, the growth increased to 1.7 months. In an independent study focused on K-2 in Shelby County, TN, schools implementing EL modules and skills blocks tested at the 52%ile compared to 39%ile for the comparison group as measured by the NWEA MAP.

Our SEL program, [Competent Kids, Caring Communities](#) (CKCC), is highly rated by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL). CASEL’s SEL framework identifies 5 competencies ([CASEL5](#)) for SEL programs: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making which are applicable at various development stages and across multiple contexts. CKCC is scored highly based on the opportunities for students to practice social and emotional skills and its ability to coordinate practices across the classwide, schoolwide, and family contexts. In addition to considering our high academic and behavioral expectations, curriculum is also aligned to our expanded definition of success which includes students who have a strong sense of self, discover their passions, and become compelling storytellers. We are learning from the [NewSchools Innovative Public Schools](#) where 69% of their schools outperform their local districts in math proficiency; 63% in reading.

FOUNDING TEAM

Hollie Russell-West, EdD is a native of St. Louis, MO. After graduating from St. Louis Public Schools, Hollie earned a BA from the University of Missouri-St. Louis, MA in Education from Fontbonne University, MA in Educational Leadership from Lindenwood University, EdS from the University of Missouri – Columbia, and EdD in Educational Leadership from Maryville University. For over two decades, she has been working with families in St. Louis Public Schools. Her roles included teacher, school leader, and member of various committees.

Founding Board Members

LaTonya Jackson, MBA, is in her 7th year of banking, having served as a BankCentre Leader, the VP of Community Development, and currently as a Lender with Bank of America. Her focus was/is building and expanding relationships between Banks and communities within the St. Louis Metropolitan Area.

Anna-Stacia Allen, Executive Director of Navigate STL is originally from Toledo, Ohio and a graduate of The Ohio State University. Anna-Stacia has spent her career working in non-profit and education-based organizations. She returned to the St. Louis area extremely passionate about helping to provide equitable access to education for all families.