



A Report to Southeast Missouri State University

On Lift for Life Academy



Submitted by LDR AdmServices, LLC
December 3, 2019



Background

The LDR team was selected based upon successful school leadership experience. Janet LeSage, Ed.D. served as the team leader; she has extensive experience with elementary school leadership and consults with various charter schools in St. Louis. Laurie Juergensen's expertise is affecting school change at the secondary level, while Janice Brooks's strength is special education administration.

The purpose of the review is to provide the sponsor with constructive feedback regarding the vision, academic achievement, curriculum, school culture, leadership, teaching, student support systems, governance, and parent/community engagement. These results will be shared with the board of directors and school leadership as determined by the sponsor liaison and the team leader

This Quality Review was conducted on November 13-14, and 20, 2019. A number of documents were made available prior to the site visit. Among these were: charter, performance contract with SEMO, title one school-wide plans, scope and sequence, etc.

The site visit included a total of thirty-seven classroom observations of approximately twenty minutes conducted at the elementary, middle, and high schools. We interviewed board members (3), administration (6), teachers (7), and parents (2); in addition, input was gained from two student focus (7) and four teacher groups (14). The team leader selected faculty participants to represent various grade levels, disciplines, levels of education and experience, as well as, diversity. The deputy director arranged for students, parents, and board members.

In all the site visit provided a snapshot of curriculum, instruction, leadership, and values at Lift for Life Academy. It would take a more in-depth experience to capture all that occurs on a daily basis.

I. Vision

Educate, Empower, Uplift was articulated directly or indirectly by all stakeholders. This is observed most directly in statements from the high school student focus group about their experiences:

“Lets me find me.”

“I didn't realize how smart I was and then they raised the expectation and I met that as well.”

“We all learn differently.”

“Teacher pushes students beyond where they thought they could go.”

They also reported that Lift for Life was more rigorous than schools they had attended previously. There is a waiting list of applicants at every grade level.

“Students are the top priority of the director and deputy director, then the staff,” stated one administrator. Another remarked, “Smart is a good thing here.” Staff are in the early stages of implementing project-based learning with the goal of increasing relevance, rigor, and life skills. Teachers greet students by name and appear to have a good understanding of how each is advancing in

class; teachers communicate with other team members regarding concerns. Numerous supports are in place (see section VII) to strengthen academic and social skills.

Building a sense of agency, begins in kindergarten. “Mistakes help us learn.” Students in elementary school are encouraged “not to steal [another student’s] struggle”. Middle and high school students were able to tell multiple ways they could seek help for a personal problem, get help with an assignment, or learn about assignments that were given while they were absent.

Stakeholders at all levels were able to identify ways that success is celebrated. Among these are: awards ceremonies, shout outs, posting of ACT scores, newsletters, positive phone calls home, photos texted to their parents, etc. Staff talent is recognized through increased responsibility—academic coaching, leading professional development, participating with leadership in walk throughs, and promotions to administrative roles. Faculty appreciate the freedom they have to collaborate and develop curriculum, to have timely data-driven change, and the ability to write grants and/or participate in the Summer Institute.

Strengths:

- The vision is observed in student, staff, and administrator interactions.
- Students are developing a sense of agency.
- Students want rigorous work.
- Teachers know students’ strengths and appear invested in their growth.

Areas for Growth

- Continue to develop project-based learning with an emphasis on rigor and relevance.

II. Student Achievement

Missouri requires 24 credits for graduation; the LFLA high school requires 26. On the Missouri Assessment Program math test in 2019, they surpassed all other secondary charter schools in St. Louis and all of the non-magnet high schools in the city. With a combined proficient/advanced score of 61.7% they ranked fourth, just behind Metro (74.7%), Collegiate (74%), and McKinley Classical Leadership Academy (73.2%). However, in English Language Arts only 38.3% scored proficient/advanced. These scores were still above the non-magnet SLPS schools and third among the secondary charter schools. The graduation rate for 2019 is 93.05%, virtually unchanged from 2018.

The middle school performed less well in both subjects. LFLA scored 13.6% proficient/advanced in mathematics, but was above the range for non-magnet SLPS schools such as Fanning Middle (4.9%) and Yeatman-Liddell Middle (3.8). LFLA middle students were slightly more successful in English Language Arts with 18.7% proficient/advanced. Non-magnet SLPS were much weaker with Fanning Middle at 5.6% and Yeatman-Liddle at 5%.

The elementary school uses the Fountas and Pinnell, an individually administered reading assessment. Three out of sixty students were more than two years below expectancy upon entry. Sixty-five per cent are below level C. Students at C know letters, can match/letters to sounds, blend some combinations into short words, and know about 50 sight words. Once students get to level C, intensive intervention

(RISE) can move them along quickly. Three students have already placed out of this program. The classroom teachers are learning to give the assessment which will be repeated before the end of the first semester.

The school uses NWEA to measure performance during the year; incentives have been effective in student performance on this measure. This assessment is aligned to Missouri standards. The deputy director stated that students tend to perform better on NWEA, than MAP. However, she believes that longitudinal growth per student is a more valid measure. These figures were not available to our team. She also added that student performance on daily work does not always measure up to NWEA.

Consistent attendance is critical to school success. Missouri looks at students with 90% attendance 90% of the time. In 2019 the high school had a rate of 77.2% and the middle school was at 86.2%. Bus transportation supports attendance.

Strengths:

- High school math performance on the 2019 MAP
- Middle school attendance for 2019
- Elementary reading intervention using RISE
- Bus transportation and the late bus twice weekly

Areas for Growth

- Literacy at all levels
- Continue to work on developing agency.
- The incentives offered for NWEA are effective, but not all students feel the same urgency about completing daily assignments.

III. Curriculum

There is a recently created Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Kirsten Tidwell. She has created a Missouri standards-based scope and sequence, K-12, for English Language Arts and Mathematics. She is also developing a comprehensive plan for curriculum revision. She analyzes data with teachers, identifies trends, and develops strategies to improve performance. When observing classrooms, she looks for fidelity to the curriculum in addition to other teacher assets. She is cognizant of appropriate look-fors in elementary reading and instructional techniques.

The curriculum is standards-based at all grades. Teachers in non-core subjects referred to standards for business and athletics. Standards were clearly evident in classrooms and are used on report cards. The parents interviewed reported that they understood their child(ren)'s ratings.

During the site visit we observed content specific vocabulary being used in English, math, reading, social studies, science, Spanish, fashion, etc. Some classrooms also had more generic vocabulary posted: inference, compare, analyze, et. al.

Teachers circulated, monitoring student work, and offering assistance, however, for the most part assignments were homogenous for all of the students in the class. These were displayed on the LCD

projector or available in print. In some classes, students had choices: partner selection, topic, math menus (choose 2 of 4 problems). Algebra classes had differentiated assignments based on the learning standard that each student needed to master next; grouping was flexible and students could advance to the next tier as they were ready.

Project-based learning is new within the past year. Examples of essential questions observed are: “How have inventions shaped our world?” and “What are the effects of rapid urbanization?” Teachers stated that they liked developing curriculum with colleagues. One said that the school was a “perfect playground” for him. Teachers may opt to participate in the Summer Institute to work on curriculum design.

LFLA has a partnership with Washington University to implement MySci, a hands-on, investigative science program. Kindergarten students had brainstormed “What is science?” and “What is a Scientist?”

The reading specialist at the elementary school has implemented RISE to help struggling readers. They are already experiencing success with this approach, however there are limited leveled books to support guided reading groups and/or independent reading.

A double literacy period for upper grade students attempts to address reading deficiencies. Teachers and administrators report that significant numbers of students are reading below grade level; this appears to be reflected in MAP and ACT scores. A literacy plan is under development. In the meantime, teachers read aloud or have students read, so that content knowledge is not compromised.

At the elementary school, kindergarten students were tracing 0-9 on a worksheet labeled *numbers*; the correct terminology is *numerals*. During the lesson they were struggling with the concept of *one more* and beginning to talk about *more/less*. While this was in line with kindergarten at another school, it lagged behind a school the team leader visited the following day. In the latter students had finished these topics and were starting to talk about *composing/decomposing ten*. Both schools, shared a demographic with LFLA.

In another classroom math vocabulary *equals* on the word wall was identified as *sum*. *Equals* can be used in many contexts and a better definition might be *the same as*. Students in first grade were introduced to addition and subtraction word problems separately; they did not see mixed problems until the unit test.

In one first grade class person conducting the reading group began a leveled reading group without doing a picture walk or introducing sight words. As a result, the students had to stop many times to figure out words that might have been evident from picture context or framed for them in advance. This affected fluency and perhaps comprehension.

Other than art, student work was seldom displayed in halls or classrooms at any level.

Technology use was prevalent among teachers and students at all levels (assignments, digital timer, student response system, Classroom Dojo, science experiment simulation, etc.). There is a process for students to borrow a Chrome Book overnight.

Strengths:

- Standards-based curriculum
- Summer Institute to develop curriculum
- Scope and sequence for English Language Arts and mathematics
- Teachers using content vocabulary
- Regular data analysis by Curriculum Director, administrators, faculty
- Project RISE for elementary reading
- Appropriate use of technology

Areas for Growth:

- Develop literacy plan for middle/high school students that assesses specific individual needs and interventions, provide teachers with the skills to address these effectively.
- Include more differentiation in content areas.
- Continue to develop problem-based learning with an emphasis on rigor and relevance.
- Acquire additional leveled reading books to support K-2.
- Display student work (possibly 85% or better assignments).
- Continue to develop scope and sequence for other subjects.
- Develop curriculum revision plan, long-term.
- Devise a plan to monitor elementary rigor and pacing, particularly in kindergarten. (Consultant? Visits by principal, curriculum coordinator, and/or teachers to other schools?)

To Think About:

- To what effect does the lack of vocabulary impair reading comprehension? Are teachers routinely and systematically including high impact words, such as those in *Teaching the Critical Vocabulary of the Common Core*?
- Do some elementary teachers need more professional development in math (terminology, how to support students' math reasoning, etc.) and guided reading?

IV. Culture of Achievement

An emphasis on proactivity, building relationships with students and families, and positive communication was observed in conversations with faculty, students, and parents. Expectations are posted in classrooms and corridors. Faculty, including administrators, are visible during passing times. Breakfast and lunch were orderly. During our visit, we observed no aggressive behavior and only one brief episode of horseplay. Students and parents report that the school is safe.

Students have co-curricular opportunities such as ambassadors, student council, class officers, Metro League, Camp Wyman, sports, etc. Those in good standing can earn additional privileges.

A counselor and a social worker are available for the upper grade students. There is a grief group and

several groups that teach coping skills. When asked, “If you had a personal crisis, who would you feeling comfortable going to at school?” The students interviewed were all able to name a counselor or other staff member. In fact, they stated we could go to anyone on staff.

There is a social/emotional learning specialist and social worker for elementary students; they are learning about zones of regulation. During morning meeting, they took turns telling how they were going to take responsibility for having a good day: “listen”, “help a friend who falls down”, “do my work”, etc.

Classroom DoJo was used in a number of classes to track behavior and provide feedback to students regarding classroom expectations. Kickboard allows students to earn points, lose, and then regain them.

Many of the staff referred to restorative practices. The restore and reflect room at middle school has decreased the need for suspensions, while helping students to generate alternative behaviors and make amends. As a result, students seldom miss more than 1 or 2 class periods. There is a well-defined process in place for referrals. Success Academy operates as a suspension center for serious offenses at the high-school. Suspensions have decreased when compared with first quarter last year. The deputy director reported that there was one expulsion in accordance with Missouri law.

Strengths:

- Restorative practices
- Co-curricular opportunities
- Decline in suspensions, alterative settings
- Social emotional learning
- Grief and coping groups

Weaknesses:

- The physical layout of the campus makes security more challenging.

V. School Leadership

Marshall Cohen, the director, conveys the mission and vision to the board, faculty, students, families, and the community. He was described as “low key” and someone “who lets people do their jobs”. This year the school has added secondary classrooms, expanded to a sixth-grade center, and opened an elementary school. In addition to these physical changes, faculty with seniority spoke about the way the culture has changed to be: more proactive, more collegial, and more adaptable to students’ needs.

He reviews data: achievement, attendance, staff retention, enrollment, financials, etc.; these are also shared with the board. The director consults with the deputy director and leadership team. Teachers and principals related that if they needed something (PD conference, materials, technology), he would help them find a way to obtain it.

The school has a calendar, schedules including assessment and professional development, handbooks for parents/students with appropriate policies, staff handbook, organizational chart, and a system for staff evaluation. Staff background checks are on file; our team did not see Missouri Family Registry checks.

The director recognizes and supports leadership opportunities for the staff. The deputy director, all three principals, and the Curriculum Director were teachers and/or instructional coaches prior to assuming their current roles.

The school works with the board to identify committee members with needed skills; some of them eventually join the board.

Strengths:

- Collaborative culture based on trust
- Proactivity
- Data driven change
- Procedures and policies
- Growing leaders, celebrating good teachers, and giving them opportunities
- Visible in the charter school community

VI. Teachers

Instruction is standards-based. Rubrics are scaled 1-4. All of the grade 6-12 classes we observed began with a “Do Now” and concluded with an exit-slip. Teachers reported that the latter helps them gauge which students, if any, will need reteaching during the next class. Teachers are in their first year of implementing project-based learning.

Upper level teachers noted the difficulty of finding substitutes qualified to teach in the content area. One teacher planned to email lesson plans daily while on family leave.

Teachers helped students acquire and retain learning by: using anchor charts (elementary), creating study guides, encouraging notetaking, using technology (Kahoot, Jeopardy) to review, and providing one-on-one and/or small group assistance. Students are expected to write daily in class, speak in full sentences, and take responsibility for their work. Parents and students reported that teachers provide additional practice for homework.

Engagement was facilitated by think/pair/share, data response systems, and group responses.

Middle and high school faculties have early release time weekly. During this time, they work with their department or grade team to analyze data, plan lessons together, collaborate, develop assessments and jointly grade them, or to participate in professional development. Extended time is available during Summer Institute for similar work. Elementary teachers meet in grade teams with the Director of Curriculum and principal during their plan time; whole faculty PD for them occurs before school on Wednesday mornings. The teachers we interviewed at all levels could articulate the PD focus; they were enthusiastic about collaborative opportunities. Administrators and teachers related that the PD focus was part of administrative look-fors during walk through observations.

Teachers spoke about building strong relationships with students, monitoring progress throughout the

lesson, and communicating positive news to families. This was also reflected in student focus group sessions. While some students reported that some teachers pushed them to excel, other students voiced that their work could be more challenging.

Every teacher has an instructional coach. Teachers receive timely feedback from weekly walk-through observations. There is a process for formative and summative evaluation; teachers stated they had individual professional goals.

Strengths:

- Consistent language and expectations
- Culture of collegiality and trust
- Early release time to collaborate and learn

Weaknesses:

- As in all schools, some teachers are stronger than others.
- Coaches should continue to stress positive talk, classroom management, and consistent expectations particularly with newer members of the faculty.
- To the extent possible, hire substitutes with appropriate content knowledge and skills.

VII. Student Support System

There are numerous support systems to address academic and social/emotional growth. Teachers and administrators look at data results and trends regularly. This helps to identify students that need additional support.

The school uses a Response to Intervention model and care teams to determine a student's need for a special education evaluation or a 504 plan. Special education services available are: class-within-a-class, push-in, or pull out. Caseloads were high for sixth grade and high school special education teachers. A compliance monitor added in 2019 ensures that procedures are implemented.

A reading specialist for K-2 has conducted individual Fountas and Pinnell reading assessments. Students are flexibly grouped by reading level. Once a student has met a threshold of C), s/he can participate in RISE. This program works intensely on word work, sight words, reading strategies, and comprehension. Students have demonstrated marked progress in the first quarter.

Upper level students can obtain additional teacher assistance during Success Hour (middle school), elective periods, lunch, or twice weekly after school (made possible by an additional bus run). Students are able to retake tests to improve their grades. We observed students taking the initiative to make up missed assessments.

High School students can take advanced placement courses through SEMO and St. Louis University. The counselor arranges for field trips to colleges. Top scores on the ACT are posted in the front hall. Transition plans are developed for special education students who need support moving to post-secondary placements.

Board members report that they have adopted policies to address homelessness and students who are English language learners. Buses can be routed to pick up homeless students who are temporarily living in the county.

Restorative justice is observed at all levels with the goal of changing, not punishing behavior. Elementary pupils were learning zones of regulation. All students are encouraged to reflect and think of a better choice to use next time and to make amends. Teachers were observed sending student(s) out in the hall for a minute or less to reboot. This appeared to be effective in all cases. With Kickboard, students can earn points; when points are lost, they can re-earn them. Classroom DoJo also provided instant feedback. Some special education students have behavior contracts.

Teachers reported that there are some trauma informed practices in place. The counselor has coping groups, as well as, a grief group. There is a social/emotional learning specialist and play therapy at the elementary school.

The counselor and social worker also help families, for example after a fire. A partnership with Affinia resulted in a clinic bi-weekly on campus. They have provided eyeglasses for 30 students. Community organizations also contribute winter outerwear and grant Christmas wishes. BJC has provided some workshops on bullying.

Students reported that the meals served at the school are the best of any school they have attended. “We have a *chef*.”

Strengths:

- Teacher commitment to helping students succeed
- Restorative practices
- Coping and grief groups, play therapy, social/emotional support
- Partnerships with community organizations
- Food service

Weaknesses:

- Special education caseloads are high, particularly for the high school.
- Need for literacy intervention for upper level students.

VIII. Governance

The board members interviewed (separately) shared the mission and vision of the school. Oversight includes: financials, achievement data, attendance, enrollment, discipline, and staffing. They provide support so that students can become self-directed, lifelong learners, and good citizens. During their tenure the school has evolved to include a 6th grade center, additional high school classrooms, and the new elementary school. The charter was revised to include the latter. These changes were made in the best interest of students and the community. It was reported that board members take advantage of frequent opportunities to visit the school while classes are in session.

Committees for operations, finance, and education include citizens with appropriate skills, as well as, board members. The committees set and review goals. Some committee members are eventually invited to sit on the board. There are many board members who have served in excess of 7 years. They attribute this longevity to the director's passion.

Board members reported that the board conducts business in accordance with the Sunshine Law. Board members have Missouri Highway Patrol and Missouri Family Registry checks on file in the SEMO compliance folder. They speak with one voice once a decision has been reached.

Members stated that the sponsor's review last year indicated a lack of education policies and the need for policy review. Policies consistent with Missouri Law were acquired through LDR and adopted. There is a systematic plan in place to review policy at every board meeting.

Board training occurs during each board meeting.

The board president meets twice yearly with the director to evaluate progress.

Strengths:

- The board has efficient processes in place: dashboard, consent agenda.
- The committee structure taps into additional community resources.
- The board has added policy review and board training to every meeting.

IX. Financial Operation

This was reviewed by LDR in Spring, 2019.

X. Engaged Parents and Community

The counselor stated that the parent is the expert on their child and the deputy director described the school as family oriented. Teachers and administrators strive to make positive phone calls home. There are opportunities to network with families at athletic events, open house, and parent teacher conferences. The director has a quarterly newsletter.

Middle and high school parents can access grades online. Teachers and administrators use email, Classroom DoJo, Facebook, texts (photos and/or verbiage), and School Messenger to connect with families.

Elementary teachers conducted home visits with 60% of the families prior to the beginning of school; an elementary parent described communication as “*so good*”. A full week for parent teacher conferences led to 100% family participation. Elementary teachers also send home weekly class news. Some elementary parents attended LFLA as former students.

The school provides bus service throughout St. Louis city, including twice weekly after tutoring. Access to reliable transportation has a positive effect on promptness and attendance, as well as stability when families move within the city.

The school has strong relationships with organizations and funding sources in the community. The Affinia clinic located on campus provided 30 students with corrective eyewear. BJC has given anti-bullying workshops. Some students have outside counselors who come to the school to work with them. There are organizations that help to provide coats and other necessities. Cops to Kids come by to play ball and visit with students.

Strengths:

- Variety and frequency of positive communication with families
- Successful network of community organizations and donors
- Relationship with law enforcement

Weaknesses:

- Continue to determine reasons parents/students decide to transfer elsewhere.

Overall Strengths

- Vision – shared by all stakeholders and is evidenced in values and actions.
- Academic Achievement – high school math performance on MAP
- Curriculum – standards-based and data-driven
- Culture of Achievement – restorative practices
- Leadership – encouraged at all levels
- Teachers – know their students and support them to the best of their ability
- Student Support Systems – many and varied
- Governance – efficient, recruits qualified members
- Finances – not addressed
- Engaged Parents and Community – emphasis on positive and timely feedback

Overall Areas for Growth

- Vision - continue to work on agency at all levels
- Academic Achievement – improve literacy at all levels
- Curriculum – continue to develop project-based learning with an emphasis on rigor and relevance, acquire more leveled books to support elementary reading, monitor pacing
- Culture of Achievement – the physical layout of the campus makes security challenging
- Leadership – continue to grow leaders among staff and students
- Teachers – coaches need to ensure that new hires acquire good classroom management and skills
- Student Support System – special education caseloads are high; there may be a need for reading specialist to work with upper grade teachers and students.
- Governance – continue to use committee structure as a means to growing the board
- Finances – not addressed
- Engaged Parents and Community – continue to ascertain reasons that parents/students transfer to other schools