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AMERICAN ACADEMY FOR LIBERAL EDUCATION



CHARACTERISTICS OF EXEMPLARY CHARTER SCHOOLS

Preface

The burgeoning charter school movement has already, in its infancy, demonstrated the power of diversity in education. For many decades, American public schools seemed to be cut from the same mold. Most differences came from student demography-income level, ethnicity-not from curriculum or teaching methods. Today charter schools give evidence of unprecedented variety, even as they work with hugely different student populations.

For example, some charter schools have been founded to address social problems, to teach respect, discipline, and orderliness, in communities ravaged by pathologies of violence and crime. Others aim to provide opportunities for high school drop-outs to enter a purposeful program and train for occupations, with links to local businesses.

Yet other charter schools maintain the traditional curriculum but with an emphasis on "experiential" education that takes students outside the classroom and connects their learning to the wider world. Still other charter schools embrace a mission to center K-8 education on the mastery of basic knowledge and cultural background-or to make high school far more academically demanding than it typically has been. In this inventive environment, of course, many charter schools combine elements of all these models.

The Charter School Accreditation program of the American Academy for Liberal Education does not aim to be all things to all charter schools, but rather to accredit those that embrace a strong liberal arts mission-the last profile noted above. It is our conviction, based on reason and the evidence of research, that rigorous academics promote exceptional levels of achievement among all students. This is especially true among those who have long been left behind by mainstream schools-the poor and minorities. Making school intellectually challenging, we believe, will help reinvigate American public education and restore it to its democratic mission.

But what makes a charter school academically rigorous? What exactly should a student, a parent, a community leader, be looking for to indicate a school's commitment to high liberal arts standards? What should principals and faculty be doing-in detail?

In the pages that follow, we offer an overview of the four areas that AALE evaluates in its accreditation process: Curriculum, Assessment/Testing, Teacher Quality, and Finance and Governance. Those who apply to us for our "seal of approval" must be in substantial compliance with the standards and recommendations we make here.

We hasten to add, however, that our observations and recommendations are not meant to be exhaustive. There are exemplary charter schools that differ in small and even large ways from the general and particular features we point to here. But they will also have much in common with what you read here.

PART I: CURRICULUM

Overview

AALE curriculum standards require charter schools to demonstrate that all their students benefit from intensive instruction and academic rigor in the liberal arts, and to link instruction to assessment so that there is solid evidence of learning. AALE recognizes that students' backgrounds and preparation may vary greatly; but even so, such variations must not be used to deprive "weak" students of a strong curriculum, a practice that has historically proved regressive.

AALE accreditation stipulates certain foundation subjects in which charter schools will offer-and generally require-instruction in every school year, from elementary and middle (K-8) through high school (9-12)¹. These include:

Physical Sciences:

Astronomy, Biology, Chemistry, and/or Physics,
preferably with 2nd-year courses available

Mathematics:

Arithmetic, Algebra, Geometry, Trigonometry
(preferably with Calculus and Statistics available for stronger students)

Foreign and/or Classical Languages:

(two years required for high school diploma, but preferably beginning earlier)

Reading (including phonics), Speech, and Writing
(all requiring mastery of Standard English)

Literature in English and in Translation

World History and Geography

American History and Government

The Arts:

Drama, Dance, Music History and Performance, Art History and Studio

¹The subjects here are listed under comprehensive names. AALE recognizes that foundation subjects change as students progress from grade to grade; for example, an early elementary school writing lesson may emphasize cursive handwriting, whereas an 11th-grade writing lesson may require students to elaborate on the connotations of key words in an argument.

AALE accreditation recognizes other subjects as important to — but not necessarily required in the K-8 and 9-12 liberal arts curriculum. These include but are not limited to Architecture, Economics, Philosophy, and Psychology. AALE similarly recognizes the centrality of arts education in dance, theatre, music, and/or visual arts and respects different ways schools may integrate instruction into the curriculum, whether in studio/practice, appreciation, or history courses.

Since there is no one path to a good education, AALE respects curricular variety and considers exceptions and supplements to these subjects. But it strongly supports these **Principles of Curriculum Design**:

- **core areas of learning** represented by the liberal arts
- **rich content** (manifested for example in readings with strong vocabulary and narrative)
- a high degree of **specificity** in what students must learn
- **grade-by-grade** expectations, so that teachers and students can rely on intellectual progress
- evident and sensible **sequence**, so that students build on previously acquired knowledge and continue to be challenged
- clear linkage to **assessment**, enabling teachers and administrators to identify ways to improve and accommodate the strongest and weakest students
- strong evidence of **effectiveness**
- a **universally solid** liberal-arts curriculum, democratically accorded to all students, with accommodation for ability allowed in the pacing, but not in the path, of learning

Recommended Models

Rather than insisting upon a one-size-fits-all model, AALE offers flexible options for charter schools to identify curricula on which their formal accreditation review is based. The following therefore are not to be read as requirements but as informed suggestions. AALE welcomes the opportunity to review well-defined hybrid curricula, with approval dependent on conformity to the Principles of Curriculum Design listed above.

Further, in some cases, charter schools have created their own curricula, standards, or frameworks. AALE similarly welcomes the opportunity to review and approve these.

Since charter schools often employ widely available **curricular resources**, and must also respond explicitly to mandatory **state frameworks/standards**, AALE recognizes a range of particularly distinguished examples. The following lists are not intended to be exhaustive, however, and applicants for accreditation must demonstrate the degree to which they rely on these standards/materials in actual practice.

1. **State Curriculum Frameworks/Standards.** The quality of curriculum frameworks/standards varies greatly state by state. Well-regarded examples include (but are not necessarily limited to) the following²:

Art: Arizona, California

Economics: Delaware

English: Alabama, Arizona, California, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nebraska, Nevada, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia

History: Alabama, Arizona, California, Kansas, Maryland, Massachusetts, Oklahoma, Oregon, Texas, Virginia

Geography: Alabama, Arizona, Colorado, District of Columbia, Florida, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Missouri, New Hampshire, South Carolina, Texas, West Virginia

Mathematics: Alabama, Arizona, California, District of Columbia, Georgia, Kansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Virginia, West Virginia

Science: Arizona, California, Connecticut, Delaware, Indiana, Illinois, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Utah, Washington

2. **Exemplary Curricular Resources.** Several organizations have developed well-regarded standards and/or extensive curricular materials. The following are recommended, although this list is not meant to be exhaustive³.

²AALE is indebted to independent evaluations conducted by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation in the areas of English, History, Geography, Mathematics, and Science, and to expert advice in the areas of Art and Economics.

Comprehensive:
Advanced Placement Program
Calvert Curriculum
Core Knowledge Sequence⁴
International Baccalaureate Program
K12
Montessori
SABIS

The Teaching Company: High School Series in Chemistry, Mathematics, History

Economics:
Voluntary National Content Standards in Economics
(National Council on Economic Education)

English:
Direct Instruction
Great Books Foundation
Open Court Reading
Shurley Grammar

Foreign Languages:
U.S. Foreign Service Institute Language Series
University of Michigan Language Resource Center

History:
Pearson Learning / Core Knowledge
Joy Hakim, *A History of US*, Oxford University Press

Mathematics:
Sadlier-Oxford Mathematics
Saxon Math
Singapore Math

Visual Arts, Dance, Theatre, Music:
National Standards for Arts Education
(Consortium of National Arts Education Associations)

³Additionally there are resources dedicated to institutional mission, methods of reform, and pedagogical effectiveness. AALE respects diversity in this area but also wishes to recognize the promising work of America's Choice, KIPP (Knowledge-Is-Power-Program), the Paideia Project, School Development Program, and Success for All.

⁴AALE has adapted the K-8 curriculum standards developed by the Core Knowledge Foundation. Core Knowledge Schools, which comprise a sizeable portion of charters to date, and those that rely extensively on Core Knowledge textbooks, will likely find these standards suitable. Even schools that do not use Core Knowledge materials will find excellent models of rich content, grade-by-grade specificity, sequence and other principles of AALE accreditation.

PART II: ASSESSMENT

Overview

A well-defined, intelligently sequenced, rigorous liberal arts curriculum cannot guarantee high-quality education on its own; it must be accompanied by equally well-defined, sequenced, and rigorous assessment. AALE accreditation rests on a strong complementary relationship between these two features, even as it respects the diversity of methods by which charter schools achieve success. What matters most is demonstrable student learning-and "learning" in this context is more closely aligned to concrete achievement or attainment of knowledge than to the abstract idea of ability or aptitude.

Subjects, Frequency, Effectiveness

Subjects: It is expected that schools will assess student learning in all **foundation subjects** enumerated above [See Part I: Curriculum] as students progress from Kindergarten through the 12th grade.

Physical Sciences: Astronomy, Biology, Chemistry, and/or Physics
Mathematics: Arithmetic, Algebra, Geometry, Trigonometry, Pre-Calculus, Calculus
Foreign and/or Classical Languages
Reading, Speech and Writing
Literature in English and in Translation
World History and Geography
American History and Government

Where appropriate assessment should occur in other areas, e.g., Economics, Philosophy, Psychology, Oratory, the Arts (Dance, Music, Theatre, Visual Arts).

Frequency: Assessment in general must occur **annually**, although more frequent schedules may be advisable. Early testing in the year identifies areas of strength and weakness; late testing establishes adequate yearly progress or lack thereof. Continuity is an allied virtue to frequency: student learning is more easily measured by use of the same test(s) over successive years.

Effectiveness: AALE requires that charter schools explain in thoughtful detail how the results of assessment influence curriculum, teaching, and other central school practices.

Assessment Mechanisms/Methods

AALE recognizes that a number of well-conceived and long-standing **independent assessments** are available and currently in use in charter schools. Charters are also typically required by law to test their students in **state assessments**, the quality of which varies, normally in accordance with the learning or curriculum frameworks/standards on which they are based. Weak state curriculum frameworks typically lead to weak assessment programs. Yet strong state curriculum frameworks do not guarantee strong assessment. "Alignment" of the two is notoriously problematic.

In keeping with the flexible and responsive nature of AALE charter school accreditation, no single assessment or test is required for AALE accreditation. But cases where a weak state assessment is legally mandated, the use of a second independent assessment is expected. In order to guide effective teaching and curriculum, at least one highly reliable gauge of student learning must be employed.

State Assessments that are well-regarded by independent analysts include those that accompany the superior state curricula listed in Part I: Curriculum. Other valuable state assessments may not actually be accompanied by strong state curriculum frameworks: for example, the New York State Regents Exams. (Charter schools are invited to comment upon their state assessments in relation to their own missions and the aims of liberal education.)

Independent Assessments administered by national organizations may prove equally or more valuable. These tests are typically norm-referenced rather than curriculum-referenced: the questions and answers are drawn from what most students in the nation can be expected to know, regardless of their locale, circumstances, curriculum, etc. Among those of particular merit are the following:

Advanced Placement Examinations
American College Test
California Achievement Test
College Board (CLEP, PSAT, SAT, SAT II)
Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills/Terra Nova
Educational Records Bureau
Gates-Maginitie Reading Test
International Baccalaureate Examinations
Iowa Test of Basic Skills
Metropolitan Achievement Test
National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)
National Writing Board
Nelson-Denny Reading Test
Stanford Achievement Test
Tests of Engineering Aptitude, Mathematics, and Science

Contests/Competitive Examinations deserve favorable mention as well. Where appropriate, charter schools should explain their role in monitoring student learning.

American High School Mathematics Exam
The Concord Review (History)
The DuPont Challenge (Science Essay)
Intel Science Talent Search
National French Exam
National Geography Bee
National German Exam
National Greek Exam
National Latin Exam
National Mythology Exam
National Russian Essay Contest/Olympiada of Spoken Russian
National Spanish Exam
Ralph Waldo Emerson Prizes (National History Club)
Scripps-Howard National Spelling Bee
Siemens Westinghouse Competition in Math, Science and Technology
United States Academic Decathlon

PART III: TEACHER QUALITY

AALE-accredited charter schools hire and retain teachers based on clear measures of quality.

AALE accreditation standards do not require that teachers be certified. (There is no persuasive evidence that certification, when earned by accumulating credits in schools of education, leads to increased student learning of academic subjects.) A teacher's lack of certification should not be a barrier to employment in AALE-accredited charter schools, except where state regulations require only certified teachers be hired.

Instead, AALE places first importance upon the teacher's contribution to student learning in liberal arts subjects. This primary measure of quality relies on what experts call "outcomes." How well do the teacher's own students actually learn the subject in question-biology, Spanish, geography-as determined by verifiable assessments?

If "outcomes" are the decisive criterion for evaluating the work of teachers, certain "inputs"-such as the qualifications teachers bring to the classroom-clearly augur success. These include:

- extensive knowledge of the subject(s) being taught, as evidenced by high scores on such measures as these: SAT II/Achievement Tests; the Graduate Record Examination Subject Area Tests; a college or university transcript showing distinguished performance in numerous courses in the subject(s); a major in the subject, with a senior thesis; a master's or doctoral degree in the subject, with a thesis; and/or

high professional achievement that depends on mastery of the subject(s), for example, laboratory science.

- a broad base of general knowledge, characteristic of liberal arts education, typically embodied in a liberal arts college degree with substantial coursework in various fields, with distinguished performance; also reflected in high scores on the Graduate Record Examination and/or the Armed Forces Qualifications Test.

- high verbal ability, as reflected in relevant standardized scores and in impromptu and prepared speech.

- enduring habits of study, reading, cultural activities, and civic engagement.

- a profound and palpable desire to help young people learn and to develop the habits of mind and behavior of educated persons

- a personal history that is free of any record of criminal or other behavior that would compromise the trust that parents and communities confer upon teachers.

PART IV: FINANCE/GOVERNANCE/ADMINISTRATION

AALE financial administration standards determine whether a charter school is successfully employing adequate financial and organizational resources to carry out its educational mission and activities

To help assess the institution's compliance with these standards, the Academy uses a modified process it developed to identify the operational strengths and weaknesses of college and universities with respect to its postsecondary accreditation.

The process, called KPI (Key Performance Indicators), relies on a ratio analysis of an institution's operations using measures developed by AALE and Moody's Investors Service.

AALE governance standards ensure that accredited charter schools are in full compliance with relevant state, local, and federal mandates, reporting requirements, and other regulations and legislation.

Characteristics of Exemplary Charter Schools was written by William Craig Rice, former director of Education Assessment & Charter School Accreditation at the American Academy for Liberal Education.