

Create Academy Strategic Plan

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Strategic Planning Process

The following strategic plan represents the work of all constituencies to focus Create Academy's future around the key tenets of our mission the long term goal of institutional security. The process began with a substantive review of the school mission and original charter document. The Board engaged in a healthy "SWOT" (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis to determine the unique space the school occupies. Brainstorming sessions occurred with the Board, faculty and administration and, anecdotally, with parents and students. The school's faculty and administration reviewed academic data against local, state and national benchmarks. Ultimately, the Strategic Planning Committee identified six global initiatives that the school should pursue in order to achieve the next stage in its growth over the next three to five years.

School History

Create Academy is a public, tuition-free charter school with 501(c)(3) status. The school, while open to all students, specifically seeks to support students who have been historically disenfranchised due to economic and societal inequities. Nearly 95% of the student population lives at or below the poverty line.

The vision for the school was born, for founder Angela Pinholster, in 2009, while she was teaching for a Title I district school not far from the Create Academy campus. Harried by state-mandated benchmarks, the district school's response was to remove any opportunities for creative expression (already branded "specials") and to rigidly constrain both teacher and student behavior into tighter and tighter lines that traded actual learning for marginal improvements to testing performance - a common response to a common problem. The shortsightedness of this course of action was further confirmed during Pinholster's time working with first-year students at Arizona State University, where it was made doubly clear that "college preparatory" curricula were in reality curricula designed to get students *into* college through success on standardized tests - and when those students actually show up on a college campus, this type of learning let many of them down when they were asked to confront complex problems or answer open-ended or ambiguous questions.

Knowing that available data indicated that other roads were possible, Pinholster began researching and designing a vision for a school that would not only prepare students for success in the educational system as it is, but also prepare them for the world that is to come - a world in which creativity and collaboration are valued above Industrial-age practices of information retention and repetitive operations.

After connecting with co-founder Rebecca Halonen in the Arizona Charter School Association's Aspiring Leaders Fellowship program, Create Academy formally entered the planning and implementation phase in 2013 when it received funding from the US Department of Education's Charter Starter Program and the Walton Family Foundation.

Create Academy opened its doors to 92 students in the fall of 2015. Since that time, enrollment has grown beyond 130 students from kindergarten through fifth grade. The school's curriculum has evolved to match the distinct and different needs of its students while still seeking to prepare them for a bright future. The school's small size has allowed it to be agile and responsive to market demographics and to honor a spirit of creativity and project-based learning. The curriculum and program are unique not only in the process of educating children, but also in the school's dedication to social justice.

Mission

Through an arts integrated curriculum anchored in project-based learning, Create Academy will prepare all students for success in college, career, and society by teaching students to collaboratively invent, design, and implement creative solutions that address societal problems and injustices.

Vision

Create Academy was developed and implemented to provide a school environment that didn't exist in the current educational landscape. It was meant to be a space that felt like a home away from home, where students were cared for and supported, where their individualism would be celebrated. Ultimately, school should be a time and a place that students are excited to be, with elements of challenge and fun.

1. The Arts: The arts would no longer be “special,” but deeply embedded in the fabric of Create Academy’s educational practices. It is a place where doodling is understood to be the brain’s way of making connections to learning, not a reason for detention. The arts provide ways of understanding our culture and society, and exploring similarities and differences in ways of thinking and doing. They offer transferable skills such as empathy, collaboration, and creativity - skills that employers seek in the professional arena, and which make us human.
2. Project-Based Learning: School shouldn’t be about a “sage on the stage” or regurgitating information from teachers or textbooks, and PBL allows students to take ownership over their education by celebrating their curiosity. Humans are built for problem solving and overcoming challenges, and their learning environment should provide opportunities for students to actively engage with their learning, using technology and resources to make something or solve a challenge in the community.
3. Social Justice: Aside from the ethical benefits of having a school committed to a better world for everyone, engaging students directly in addressing or even attempting to address real-world, thorny problems while they are youth has long-term positive impact on their ability to achieve their personal long-term goals, to see their lives as meaningful (which is directly linked to happiness), and to be active, engaged, and responsible citizens.

Strategic Initiative #1: Arts-Integration and Project Based Learning

Create Academy's mission challenges the school to fully employ arts-integration through a project-based approach and to deeply engage in social justice. The school will seek to become an educational leader in creating students who are ready to meet the challenges of our 21st Century society.

Action Steps:

1. Achieve a State Letter Grade of "A".
2. Explore new ways and innovate new practices for deploying arts integration and project-based learning in the environment of a Title I school.
3. Implement a continuous and comprehensive curriculum review process that uses data and research to ensure that Create Academy continues to grow in the academic offerings it provides to students, that identifies enriched learning opportunities and that articulates a social justice program as inherent to the Create Academy student experience.

Strategic Initiative #2: Outstanding Faculty and Staff

Create Academy realizes that outstanding and dedicated teachers are central to the school's success. The School seeks to employ excellent individuals who are responsive in their approach to educating Title I students, who embrace an arts-integration, project based learning and social justice, and who maintain high standards for themselves, their students and their colleagues.

Action Steps:

1. Evaluate additional avenues and approaches to attract and retain dedicated and talented faculty and staff.
2. Develop a faculty compensation and benefit package that places Create Academy in line with top charter and public schools in the state, and ultimately, the country.
3. Further refine a faculty evaluation plan that reflects the school mission, ensures professionalism, and measures teacher proficiency in relation to student outcomes.

Strategic Initiative #3: Community Engagement

Create Academy will expand into the local community, engaging with neighbors and businesses in order to cultivate community revitalization through educational, and social justice initiatives as well as build awareness of the school's program and the way it is impacting the lives of children.

Action steps:

1. Establish meaningful partnerships with arts and social justice organizations.
2. Become a community resource organization offering before/after school and summer enrichment programs, adult learning opportunities, artist residencies, and community marketplaces.
3. Direct the school's social justice curriculum into a social action movement in which students interface with individuals from all walks of life in productive and growth-oriented contexts to address societal injustices.

Strategic Initiative #4: Plant, Operational, and Financial Security

In order for a public charter school to flourish, it must operate with maximum efficiency and thoughtful decision-making. Create Academy will implement a financial plan that ensures the long-term security of the school and fully engaged resources at every level.

Action Steps:

1. Define enrollment growth objectives as a pathway through which the school can build equity in its facility and that prepares for potential growth through additional grades, classrooms, and programs.
2. Provide state-of-the art measures in safety and security with respect to the facility and school management.
3. Create a 5-year financial forecasting model that projects stability and growth from the defined enrollment objectives, and accounts for depreciation of major systems, planned capital expenditures/reinvestment, projected enrollment, improved faculty and staff salaries and benefits, and establishes ample cash reserves.
4. Identify and focus on public funding opportunities related to our mission and school population.

Strategic Initiative #5: Advancement

Create Academy's long-term security relies on more than responsible fiscal planning. The school will implement a development plan that seeks to secure the resources needed to push our institution through new heights of learning while expanding our accessibility to all learners.

Action Steps:

1. Refine the Create Academy recruitment process to include applicant pools that reflect the diversity of the school community and attract families who value the school mission and vision.
2. Implement a thoughtful and forward looking communications strategy (including sufficient staff and resources) that articulates, educates, and communicates the unique elements of the school.
3. Align Create Academy with arts organizations in strategic partnerships focused on fundraising efforts and mutually beneficial program experiences, professional development, and community services to promote a positive understanding of Create Academy as an asset to the community.
4. Cultivate relationships with and awareness in local, regional, and national foundations and agencies funding in relevant areas.
5. Activate and deploy the governing board more systematically in resource development activities.
6. Create a development plan that includes targeted fundraising goals for short and long term financial security and specific initiatives (facility improvements, technology, faculty development) that support the long-range goals of the school.

Strategic Initiative #6: Leadership

Create Academy relies heavily on the leadership and dedication of the Board of Directors and the support of families to preserve and translate its mission into action. As the school prepares to transition into a new phase of growth, it must develop its leadership and professional structure to facilitate ongoing success.

Action Steps:

1. Review and revise the school governance and staff structures to provide the resources and leadership needed to achieve the outcomes of this strategic plan.
2. Implement a formalized Board member recruitment, mentorship, renewal, and transition plan that ensures effective leadership, broad professional experience, and diversity among board representation.
3. Review, re-vision and create, as needed, formal Board by-laws, policies and membership expectations.