

Community Academy of Philadelphia Charter School: Serving Urban Youth in a Supportive Environment

Community Academy of Philadelphia (CAP) recently celebrated its 40th Anniversary of service to the community. This institution was at the forefront of the charter school movement and has thrived due to innovative practices related to its mission to effectively serve urban youth in search of a positive school experience in a supportive environment.

The original school was founded in 1980 by current CEO Joseph H. Proietta. It was an alternative school that contracted with the School District of Philadelphia to accept students in grades six through 12 from the District that were expelled, adjudicated, or at risk of dropping out of school. In 1997, the school, now named Community Academy of Philadelphia was among the first four charter schools approved in Philadelphia and among the first six approved in the state of Pennsylvania, with the passage of Act 22. Today, CAP serves 1225+ students in grades kindergarten through twelfth.

Mr. Proietta had previously taught in Catholic schools and was an administrator for social services agencies. Through these experiences, he recognized the vital need for a school that responded to both the academic and social/emotional needs of students and created a school framework and mission devoted to at-risk students. When relating the mission of the school to new teachers, Mr. Proietta often says, "You won't see miracles everyday, but stick around. You'll see miracles." Three innovative programs form part of the much-needed support system central to their work: the Daycare, the Health Clinic/Nurse's Office, and the Emotional Support Team.

The Daycare

In 1988, the School District had additionally partnered with the school to allow referrals of up to 18 pregnant female students per year. In 1993, seeing that despite supportive counselors and teachers, that young mothers were still struggling to balance childcare and schoolwork, the school founded its own daycare to better meet these students' needs.



The daycare was, and continues to be, available to students' with infants as young as six weeks old. Babies and toddlers are cared for in the same building where their parents receive their education and students may visit their children during break periods or lunch. Additionally, the teen parents receive parenting classes and case management through Congreso, Inc.'s ELECT Program. A social worker meets with the teen parents weekly in group and individual sessions and also stays in touch outside of school. In the twenty-seven years since its inception, although still closed to the public, the scope of the daycare has widened to include paid services for faculty and staff members with infants and young children. These services have also

strengthened teacher/staff retention as well as continuity of education for students whose teachers have had the peace of mind to be able to return to work within a shorter time frame.

CAP's IMPACT	Number
Years of Service to our Community	41
Years as a Charter School	23
Years of Continuous Middle States Accreditation	26
Advanced Placement (AP) Courses	11
Group Counseling Sessions with Students	202
Counseling Contacts with Students within a year	2,736
Conflict Resolutions within a year	241
Family Contacts by EST Counselors within a year	466
Years of In-House Daycare Services	27
Average Percent of CAP Students Enrolled in College who returned for a Second Year	76

Innovation Spotlight: Community Academy of Philadelphia

Health Clinic/Nurse's Office

In 1996, to further meet the unique needs of its students, the school partnered with the University of Pennsylvania through the Philadelphia Health Department to open an OB/GYN Health Clinic and general nurse's office at the school. In 1997, the Health Clinic was renamed Lisa's Place in honor of a senior at the school who had been one of the first OB/GYN patients seen in the Health Clinic. While pregnant, and just days before her graduation, she was fatally caught in street crossfire while buying ice cream. Miraculously her son lived. He attended CAP from grades K-12 and graduated with a full scholarship to Drexel University where he graduated with a BS in Culinary Arts and Science in 2019. Since its beginnings, CAP's program had its own nurse practitioner/school nurse with MD supervision at times by St. Christopher's Hospital adolescent clinic and others by an MD Board Member. Although no longer functioning as an OB/GYN clinic, the Nurse's Office is staffed by a full-time school nurse who will complete her Certified Nurse Practitioner degree this year as well as a full-time certified medical assistant. These professionals provide a broad range of care to our large student population.



The Emotional Support Team

In addition to the vital need for the academic and physical health of its students, emotional support has been a critical component of CAP's educational program from its inception. Core to the school's mission is the belief that at-risk students need emotional support to provide an environment where they can grapple with and surmount personal difficulties in order to then be able to learn in school. Students who are at-risk for academic failure often face a complexity of problems due to poverty, health, and other social conditions that have made it difficult for them to succeed in school. In 2000, CAP formalized its counseling services, which had always been a part of students' experiences, into the Emotional Support Team (EST). In addition to the two more traditional academic guidance counselors in the school, CAP's comprehensive EST currently includes a Psychiatrist, a bilingual School Psychologist, one Therapist, two Licensed Clinical Counselors, two Certified School Counselors, one Counselor, a Licensed Social Worker, a Social Worker, a Conflict Resolution Facilitator, and a paraprofessional.

CAP's unique approach to ensuring positive outcomes includes individual and group counseling (i.e. affect management, social skills, grief support, teen parent support). CAP EST members offer conflict resolution and mediation, psychiatric services, psycho-educational testing, and interagency coordination. Even as other schools have been forced to cut back on their counseling staff, CAP is proud of its ability to have maintained a strong Emotional Support Team for over twenty years.

Outcomes

CAP is a school with a long legacy of service to Philadelphia. The school not only serves families within the community, but also generations within those families. A number of CAP graduates return to their Alma Mater when looking for a quality education for their children. They know their children will be supported to reach their personal best because they have experienced the way CAP lives up to its first name: Community. According to CAP's Acting CEO, Dr. Alberta P. O'Brien: "Our 40th Anniversary motto is 'At CAP, we build futures' and for 41 years and counting, CAP has established itself as a place where students receive a full-range of support so they can take control of their futures and be successful. That's why we are here."



Thank you to Elizabeth McCluskey, EdD, Chief Academic Officer, and the staff of Community Academy of Philadelphia, for sharing their story. If you would like to submit a suggestion for a future Innovation Spotlight, please contact Brandie Karpew at b.karpew@pacharters.org.