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Secrets of their success: Area charter schools earn high marks

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PANAMA CITY — A common charter school philosophy is students learn by doing.

At University Academy, the elementary school that repurposed a former airport terminal, one example is Rock and Roll Academy.

Fifth-graders Madeline Olive and Catherine Lee, both 10, recorded vocals on a song their band, the Geniuses, wrote called, "I'm Happy to Be Me." Teachers Aaron Bearden and Jennye Shaling preferred the rock and roll campers to write and perform their own music. Although Rock and Roll Academy is a regular class, the school hosted a Rock and Roll Academy camp over the summer.

"What I like is that it has more opportunities," Olive said of her schooling at University Academy. "You get to have more fun. It's hands on, everything."

Both University Academy and the Bay Haven family of schools — North Bay Haven Elementary, Middle School and High School and Bay Haven K-8 — have exemplary records for school grades. Dating back to 2009, the schools earned a slew all but one A, and that grade was a B.

Of the Bay Haven schools' 119 graduating seniors from 2014-15, 20 had Advanced Placement honors and 108 students plan to attend universities in the fall, many receiving some of the \$5.4 million in scholarships awarded Bay Haven students by various colleges. Out of the graduating class, 58 students participated in internships at the school. The school also had a National Merit scholar, now on a full ride to Auburn University.

Bay Haven Chief Education Officer Tim Kitts said the explanation of the charter schools' success is simple: They do things differently than other public schools.

But Bay District Schools officials counter that the success of charter schools is based on cherry picking high-performing students.

Team mindset

Rock and Roll Academy encourages students to take initiative and work together as a team.

"The research says kids engaged in music do better in other subjects," University Academy principal Elizabeth Crowe said. "But we want the kids to enjoy coming to school."

At North Bay Haven Charter Academy K-5, STEM teacher Jackie Russell performed a similar exercise. In her class, she told her students they would be launching rockets. After giving the basics on how the rockets worked, she told her students to start firing them, with the projectile that traveled the farthest the winner.

On their own, or with the help of some scientifically inclined parents, the students worked out the best way to propel their rockets. "In five weeks, they were hitting 300 feet," Kitts said.

High school students at North Bay Haven also said a hands-on teaching experience is what they liked about the school.

"She would explain subjects," Jamiah Morris said of her favorite teacher, Christie Stilwell, formerly an English teacher at North Bay Haven High School. "For projects, she would take a small thing and make it bigger. Whenever we learned about civil rights, we wrote an essay, performed in front of the class and used apps to make a video."

Kitts said one of the most important teaching tools in the Bay Haven schools is articulation, the practice of applying teaching techniques and lessons throughout the school. It is practiced in staff meetings, for instance, where it is common for an eighth grade teacher to suggest that a third grade teacher start teaching a subject if the school expects students to be versed when they reach middle school.

Bay Haven teacher Jennifer Buffkin said she tends to teach to the higher-achieving students, believing competition among students will allow those within range to strive toward the best. "You can't teach to the lower level," she said.

North Bay Haven middle and high school Principal Michelle Gainer said sees a similar effect in behavior. She described a situation when a student started to act out and the other students corrected him. "We don't do that here," she said, relaying the students' message.

Unique

North Bay Haven High School has four emphasis areas: engineering, criminal justice, marine environmental sciences and health occupations. These established tracks, each selected because of the importance to the Panama City job market, also make the school unique.



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Third-grade teacher Margaret Shamblin works with Cesar Narvaez, 8, at University Academy in Panama City.

Kitts, formerly assistant principal at Rutherford High School, and Larry Bolinger, former Bay District Schools superintendent and current principal at Bay Haven, founded Bay Haven. Kitts said he was dissatisfied with his children's public school education and considered home schooling but chose to start a school.

"Larry and I did this because we're selfish, selfish, selfish," Kitts said. "We wanted our kids to stay here."

Kitts said teacher recruitment is crucial to the school's success. Kitts and Bolinger are known to attend college job fairs, bringing along several vials of white beach sand, and then pitching the school to the top teaching students they can find.

Parental involvement is required at Bay Haven. Each family must volunteer 20 hours annually at the school, a task that can be completed by any family member. Kitts said it is important for parents to express ownership in their child's education.

University Academy also takes some different paths to education. One program is Singapore math. The idea behind Singapore math, Crowe said, is to teach the concepts behind mathematics in order to give students a better understanding of the reasons to learn the universal science. Crowe said the difference in philosophy creates a need to do more science-based mathematics than elementary students are used to.

"There are multiple ways of solving a problem," University Academy Executive Director Judy Vandergrift said. "It's all about problem solving."

University Academy teaches STEAM — science, technology, engineering art and math. The way the course is organized is the first nine weeks are research and technology, the next nine weeks are debate and economics and the next nine weeks are devoted to visual art.

"Technology is involved in all of that," Crowe said.

For the school's own problem solving, Crowe said they will try to divide students into different groups based on a variety of factors, behavior and intelligence being two.

Like Bay Haven, Crowe said University Academy has a passionate group of parents.

"Since we're a school of choice, they're choosing to apply here, the parents are more involved," Crowe said.

The other side

Bay District Schools officials chalk up University Academy's and Bay Haven's high schools to getting students predisposed to academic success.

Based on numbers from 2013, about a quarter of nearly 3,000 students are eligible to receive free and reduced lunches at Bay Haven schools.

University Academy is more diverse, with 35 percent of students being economically disadvantaged.

"Part of what we're trying to do is have our demographics mirror Bay District's," Crowe said. "We made the effort to get the word out to all different types of communities."

Gainer said Bay Haven's demographics mirror Bay County, but there is a stark difference when comparing charter schools to other Panama City and Lynn Haven schools. A complete breakdown was not available.

Bay High School has 59 percent of its students on free and reduced lunches. Mowatt Middle School has 51 percent of its students on free and reduced lunches. Jinks Middle School has 87 percent of its students on free and reduced lunches. At Lynn Haven Elementary, 51 percent of the student population qualifies for free and reduced lunches. At Tommy Smith Elementary, 68 percent of its student qualify for free and reduced lunches.

The National Assessment of Education Process has documented students on free and reduced lunches score at least 20 percent lower than their wealthier brethren.

"When your data shows that you have a very large percentage or very small percentage of free and reduced lunch, you can have segregation between have and have nots," School Board member Ginger Littleton said.

Littleton also said Exceptional Student Education students are another factor. Gainer and Crowe admitted their schools have fewer ESE students.

Getting in

Each charter school conducts its enrollment through a lottery. However, students or parents need to apply to be a part of the lottery.

"In 2002 somebody started the rumor that we selected our kids," Kitts said. "We didn't select one kid."

The barrier for students to attend either Bay Haven, North Bay Haven or University Academy is most likely transportation, Littleton said. Although both school systems have a contract with Bay District Schools for bus service, it is not as expansive as Bay District's. Kitts said parents are often responsible for dropping off students at North Bay Haven. Crowe said the same is true at University Academy.

Bay District Schools Superintendent Bill Husfelt said charter schools have had an impact on the changing demographics at public schools on the east side of Hathaway Bridge.

"Many of our high poverty areas, there are less middle class kids in those schools than in the history of those schools," Husfelt said. "It's an issue in Panama City proper more than any other area."

However, Husfelt could not deny the impact of charter schools and that the changing demographics will be a continuing reality.

"It's a very complicated issue," he said.

