

# Focus Learning Academy

## DALLAS

Focus Learning Academy, an open-enrollment charter school serving elementary and middle school students in southwest Dallas, is dedicated to helping children with learning differences such as attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, dyslexia, and other reading difficulties. The school's mission is "to provide a multi-sensory teaching approach to instruction that respects academic differences among children" so that students can develop learning skills, experience success daily, attain critical thinking skills, and "impact the future of our world." Although the school specializes in helping children with learning differences, they work with all children.

The school was established to fulfill the vision of Leroy McClure, the school's founder (who is also the school's chief executive officer and serves as the superintendent). After watching his brother struggle through school with dyslexia and noting the staggering dropout and illiteracy rates among African Americans, the superintendent felt called to assist nonaffluent students with learning challenges who otherwise might not receive help.

After receiving an open-enrollment charter in 1998, Focus Learning Academy opened with only 177 kindergarten through sixth-grade students. Currently, the school is housed in two Dallas churches with kindergarten through grade 3 at its Concord campus and grades 4 through 8 at its

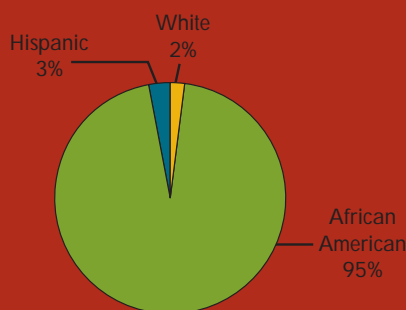
Laureland campus. Through a Texas Education Agency renovation grant, the charter school plans to purchase and move into a permanent building in summer 2003.

### Student Characteristics

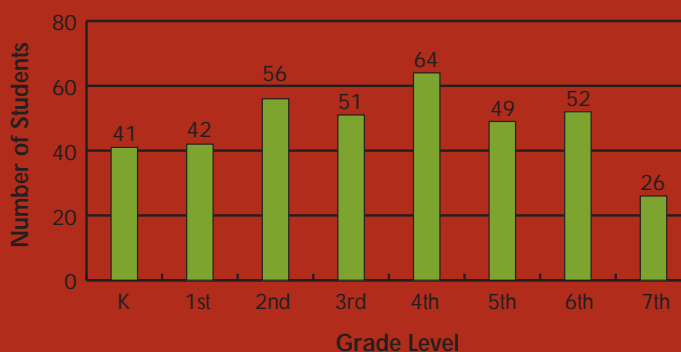
In the 2001–02 school year, Focus Learning Academy enrolled 381 students in kindergarten through grade 7. Almost all of the students attending this school are African American (95 percent), and half (49.9 percent) are economically disadvantaged. Approximately one-third of students (39 percent) are served in the school's special education program.

Educators at Focus Learning Academy believe its students are motivated to work hard. According to the school's assistant superintendent of instruction, parent communication is key. Educators work to increase parent and student "buy in" by helping parents "understand the critical nature of the teaching and learning that must take place." According to one teacher, "We explain that we have to work and don't have time for discipline." Through monthly meetings, parents are shown what students will be learning, so they can help them at home. The school held a mandatory session for parents of children who needed tutoring to brief them on the history of the Texas

Student race/ethnicity: AEIS 2001–02



Student Enrollment in Focus Learning Academy: AEIS 2001–02



Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) and to give them the opportunity to take a mock TAAS test. After that, the assistant superintendent noted, “They made sure those kids were there because we had raised their level of awareness.”

## School Characteristics

Student enrollment at Focus Learning Academy varies across grade levels, with the lowest number in the recently added seventh grade. Students attend school from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. and have tutorials available before and after school. The student attendance rate at this school (96.7 percent) is higher than the state average (95.5 percent).

The majority of teachers have degrees (91.9 percent), and some (8.1 percent) have advanced degrees. To join the faculty, teachers must agree to become certified in the school’s alphabetic phonics program. Some teachers work simultaneously on Texas teacher certification and alphabetic phonics certification. In addition to campus training, teachers attend workshops at the regional education service center and read three books a year related to their teaching area. Administrators formally evaluate teachers twice a year and conduct periodic, focused walkthroughs. In addition, the alphabetic phonics coordinator evaluates teachers’ implementation of the school’s phonics program. Class sizes range from 15 to 17 students, with an overall student-to-teacher ratio of about 11 to 1.

Educators appreciate the school’s small classes, family environment, alphabetic phonics program, and focus on the students. One teacher said, “I feel like I can reach the child.” Staff cite a lack of resources, especially in terms of space and materials, along with limited manpower (i.e., not having a duty-free lunch or



substitutes when a teacher is absent), as challenges. The assistant superintendent described the limited resources as a “culture shock” compared to resources at a previous school district. For example, the Laureland campus has only 15 computers in a computer lab and one computer in the teacher workroom; there are no computers in the classrooms. She points out: “The results that we achieved...we did it on a shoe string budget. We had nothing... but a commitment, determination, and a team spirit.”

Educators and students speak proudly of the committed, caring teachers. One teacher said, “I think we have a super staff here.” Similarly, the assistant superintendent spoke of the teachers’ commitment— “They hit the ground running. The school day starts at 8:00...By 8:01, they are on it...If Johnny comes in at 8:30, he has missed 29 minutes of solid instruction.” She further notes that teachers know they do not “have any time to waste.” Students believe teachers “really care,” help all students learn, make learning fun, are knowledgeable, and are good with discipline.

Teachers value the leadership of their administrators and believe administrators work collaboratively with them. One said, “We have an administration concerned about teachers.” Another stated, “I feel comfortable that I can go and share...with the next person in command, that they’re going to give me some

### School Characteristics

Founded	1999
Grades	K to 7
Enrollment	381
Daily schedule	8 a.m. to 3 p.m.
Days of instruction	175
Student attendance rate	96.7%
Student dropout rate	0.0%

Source: 2001–02 AEIS report.

### School Staffing

Number of teachers	35.6
Number of instructional aides	0.0
Student-teacher ratio	10.7 to 1
Beginning teachers	2.7%
Teachers with 1-5 years experience	56.8%
Teacher average years experience	7.1
Teacher turnover rate	21.4%
Teachers with no degree	8.1%
Teachers with advanced degrees	8.1%
Average teacher salary	\$33,097
Average campus administrator salary	\$57,500
Average central administrator salary	\$99,999

Source: 2001–02 AEIS report.

type of feedback.” Teachers and students are supported through the superintendent, assistant superintendents of instruction and operations, campus principals, special education director, a speech/language pathologist, two language therapists, and two campus-level special education coordinators.

Principals take the role of “instructional leader” seriously. They set high expectations for teachers and students, communicate assessment results, teach mini-lessons, purchase instructional materials, ensure students receive proper nourishment during the day, and make sure the parents and community are involved. The assistant superintendent of instruction, who also serves as the interim principal at the Laureland campus, talks of a “very calculated and deliberate approach” when making decisions about staff development or meeting individual teacher needs.

Teachers work collaboratively and provide input through weekly staff meetings and grade-level team meetings. Teachers at each grade level have common planning periods and meet to conduct grade-level planning and to share ideas and concerns. Teachers also serve on committees that develop policies and procedures for the school, including the staff development committee, campus improvement committee, and sunshine committee.

## Educational Program

Focus Learning Academy’s curriculum is the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). They use curriculum guides developed by the Charter School Resource Center and use textbooks along with other

resources to ensure all of the TEKS are covered. To meet students’ varied learning needs, teachers implement visual, auditory, and kinesthetic strategies to help students move from concrete to abstract understanding of concepts. Educators are creating new guides to align the curriculum with the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS).

In addition to the core curriculum, students with reading challenges complete a three-year alphabetic phonics program. The program is based on Orton-Gillingham instructional techniques and research done at Scottish Rite Hospital related to helping children with severe learning disabilities. The superintendent describes the program as “sequential, very structured, cumulative, multisensory, and repetitive.” Educators view the program as innovative in meeting students needs. One teacher stated: “That’s a tool that has been really positive...I call it my foundational tool, and if a child is lacking literacy, it really promotes that.” All of the school’s teachers complete the three-year certification requirement to use the program. Through the training, teachers learn philosophies and concepts related to working with learning challenged children as well as how to teach students to read.

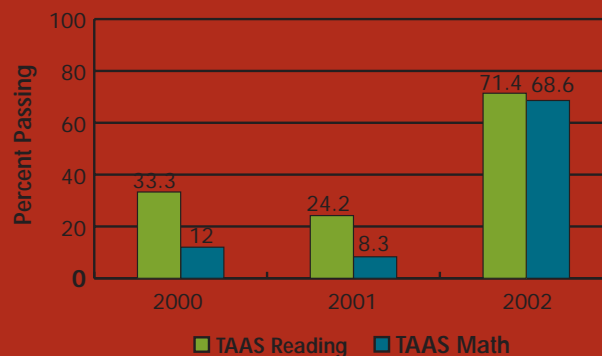
Ongoing assessment is important at Focus Learning Academy. Students complete a battery of tests when they first arrive, including an alphabetic phonics test, the Stanford Achievement Test, and Woodcock Johnson. Based on the test results, students’ strengths and weaknesses are identified. A personalized education plan is developed for each student, with strategies that will be used to address the weaknesses. In addition, students complete benchmark alphabetic phonics tests, TAAS benchmark tests, and the state standardized assessments.

## School Finance

Per-pupil expenditure	\$7,744
Per-pupil for instruction	\$4,412
Local revenue	6%
State revenue	83%
Federal Revenue	12%

*Source:* Actual financial data for all funds, PEIMS 2001–02.

TAAS Passing Rates for Focus Learning Academy: AEIS 2001–02



Students' progress on assessments is discussed during January parent-teacher conferences.

Extracurricular student activities at Focus Learning Academy include football, basketball, volleyball, cheerleading, chess club, newspaper club, and career investigation.

Focus Learning Academy enforces its discipline management plan and provides in-school suspension and counseling, if needed. Staff members work to build relationships with parents so they can jointly help students with problems. Also, they strive to help students know they care about them. Due to learning difficulties and the frustration that comes with them, the superintendent notes that many students arrive at school with attitude problems. However, he says, "We earn their respect. We don't demand it. All of a sudden that attitude leaves and learning starts."

## Parental Involvement

Educators and students report "strong parent support" at Focus Learning Academy. One teacher noted, "We have parental support that other schools lack." Teachers believe the school's "effective parent-teacher communication," along with parent "follow through" in working with students at home and ensuring that they attend tutorials, benefits students. Parent volunteers also make copies, read to children, tutor, help with programs, bring supplies, organize parties, go on field trips, and cover for teachers.

## Governance

The school's seven-member governing board promotes the school's mission and provides oversight for school

operations and financial management. The board also evaluates the superintendent. Through monthly meetings with clearly defined agendas, the board stays apprised of the school's academic plan, capital campaigns, and fund raising for facilities. They also receive updates from school administrator meetings. Board members, who have different professional backgrounds and varying levels of experience, view board members' diversity and dedication to the school's vision as important strengths. As stated by one board member: "One of our greatest strengths is our diversity...we come from a little bit different backgrounds, but we have a common cause."

## Accomplishments

Focus Learning Academy received a Commended rating in 2002 through the state's alternative education accountability system. The percentages of students passing the TAAS reading and math subtests grew substantially in 2002, with rates for reading and math increasing 47 and 60 percentage points, respectively. Educators credit the school's success to commitment, determination, teamwork, small-class size, flexible grouping, academic interventions, and the alphabetic phonics program. The superintendent attributes TAAS improvement to hiring the assistant superintendent of instruction, an outstanding leader with public school administration background, and implementing a plan she developed to increase student achievement. The assistant superintendent cites six areas that contributed to the increase in students' TAAS scores: strong instructional leadership, diagnostic assessment, staff development, research-based instruction, instructional intervention, and progress monitoring.

### Campus Accountability Rating

2000	No Rating: New
2001	Low-Performing
2002	AE: Commended

Source: 2001–02 AEIS report.

### TAAS Percent Passing

	TAAS Reading			TAAS Math		
	2000	2001	2002	2000	2001	2002
Grade 3	20.0	22.7	41.4	18.2	0.0	23.1
Grade 4	20.0	23.1	85.2	0.0	5.9	79.3
Grade 5	44.4	15.8	78.3	11.1	5.0	78.3
Grade 6	N/A	41.7	85.7	N/A	30.8	92.9
Grade 7	N/A	N/A	75.0	N/A	N/A	66.7

Source: AEIS reports.