

Arts & Technology Academy Public Charter School: Creating the Foundation for Student Learning

City: **Large** (Washington, DC, Charter School)
Size: **Small** (606 students and parents, 90 staff members)
Level: **Elementary** (K-6)
Demographics: **Ethnicity** (Black/Non-Hispanic (97.8%) /
Hispanic (2.2%), **High-Needs** 94% economically
disadvantaged



The Arts and Technology Academy (ATA) is a K-6 Washington, DC-based charter school that has been in operation since 1998. Its mission is to provide a rigorous education with an emphasis on performing, visual, and media arts instruction and the use of technology. Serving a predominantly “at-risk” population in an urban Washington, D.C. neighborhood, the ATA community faces a number of key challenges such as increased environmental stressors including community violence and poverty, coupled with rising incidents of in-school violence, a greater emphasis on standardized testing, and increasing demands on educators. To help address these needs more effectively, ATA began a school-wide social-emotional learning (SEL) initiative in the fall of 2006 to support the development of core non-academic skills for students and staff that would enhance student learning overall. As ATA’s Social-Emotional Learning Specialist, Vanessa Camilleri notes, *“It has been widely reported that when a school provides a safe and orderly environment, students and staff perform better; when we feel part of a strong community, we become more active participants, and when we feel acknowledged and cared about, we are more open to learning.”*

Measuring Success

A core piece of this SEL initiative was collecting and utilizing scientifically-sound data to inform the team’s focus for improvement. In the spring of 2007, ATA chose to administer the **Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI)** in order to get a reliable, baseline measure of the impact of their SEL efforts to-date. The scope and level of detail provided by the CSCI data as well as the comprehensive action-planning supports made it an ideal assessment tool for their needs. The Social-Emotional Learning Committee (a group of 15 members representing teachers, parents, administration and support staff) developed a targeted action plan based on the CSCI’s findings of their school’s particular strengths and needs, and focused their initiatives on improving respect for diversity school-wide (see action-planning below). The team decided to administer the CSCI at the end of each year to track the progress of specific initiatives and understand how the needs of students, parents, and staff evolved over time. Now in its third year of assessment, ATA has made the CSCI part of its culture and all members of the community know that their voices make a difference in shaping the direction of the school.

Overcoming Barriers

In the first year, ATA found that the high computer-illiteracy rates within their community created a challenge in terms of parent participation. To counter this issue in year two, the school assigned sixth graders to guide the parents through the CSCI survey on parent-

teacher conferences day. This drastically increased participation, allowing the school to collect valuable feedback from parents, engaging parents more actively in the process, and giving students an empowering opportunity to showcase their skills. To improve their staff participation from the first year, ATA administered the survey during a professional development session. An appointed CSCI coordinator helped the whole process run smoothly.

Action-Planning for Sustained Improvement

Based on the results of the CSCI, the SEL Committee led the planning process and worked hard to engage the entire community in their improvement efforts through sub-committees and information sessions throughout the year. The CSCI indicated that both teachers and students felt that respect for diversity was the least well-developed aspect of ATA's school climate. Further analysis pinpointed the four major causes of disrespect: lack of cultural exposure, low student self-esteem, low parental engagement, and poor staff relationships.

The SEL committee designed initiatives specifically tailored to each issue, and engaged the whole school through their efforts. To address the lack of cultural exposure, ATA created a **Penpal Project**, which connected students to other cultures by pairing them up with students from area schools as well as overseas. To expand students' perspectives beyond the school and city walls, ATA also instituted an annual **Summer Postcard Drive** that encouraged students and their families, teachers, and community members to collect postcards from their travels that were displayed and discussed in classes. They also planned cultural celebrations and field trips. A self-esteem-boosting initiative called the **Wall of PRIDE** (perseverance, respect, integrity, discipline, enthusiasm) entailed recognizing students who exemplified PRIDE characteristics by hanging their picture on the wall. Parent engagement was increased via the **Family Scavenger Hunt**, in which students and their families spent time learning about their community and sharing experiences. Staff relationships were enhanced via **Speak Out Boards** that highlighted kudos, thank yous and thoughts tied to specific themes each month and **Essential Contribution Boards** that celebrated the unique strengths of each staff member.

A peer mediation program was launched in 2009 to strengthen these individual efforts and create a more integrated social-emotional learning commitment, aligned with the core school-wide PRIDE (Perseverance, Respect, Integrity, Discipline, and Enthusiasm) initiatives already in place. By assessing the perceptions of ATA's community and thoughtfully planning for marked improvement, the SEL Committee was able to develop a much richer and effective program to meet their ambitious mission of helping each child "develop a strong moral foundation" that will ensure his/her life success.

Due to the careful planning, comprehensive evaluation, and implementation of targeted initiatives, ATA now reports substantial gains on state tests and overall student achievement, improvements in staff and student attendance and morale, an increase in teacher retention rates, and a decrease in student misbehavior referrals and suspensions.