

PROGRESSIVE PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS SERIES | 3

The Arts & College Preparatory Academy Charter School

By McCall Hopkin and Dana Laurens

The Arts & College Preparatory Academy (ACPA) is a public charter high school founded in 2002 in Columbus, Ohio. The school enrolls about 400 students drawn from more than 20 school districts in Central Ohio. ACPA combines interdisciplinary arts instruction with academics and was created to “sustain a progressive teaching and learning culture that thrives on safety, acceptance and inclusion, rigorous academics, a commitment to the arts, and college preparedness.”

ACPA students and faculty are known for their unified respect for one another, regardless of race, religion, gender identity, or sexual orientation. Anthony Gatto, ACPA Principal since 2010, believes “schools have a responsibility to teach their kids the importance of diversity. We need to be able to understand, respect, and learn from each other.” ACPA is well-known as a safe haven for non-heterosexual and non-cisgender youth. Nearly 40 percent of ACPA students identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer (LGBTQ). In 2013, MSNBC featured ACPA in a national story with the headline, “How One School is Making Social Progress a Priority: A Charter School in Ohio is Standing Up to Discrimination Against Gay Students.”



State Representative Hearcel F. Craig (D-Columbus; middle) toured ACPA on October 2, 2017 to experience its model and story first-hand. He is pictured with Principal Anthony Gatto (second from the right) and several students and staff.

In a story by Ohio's National Public Radio affiliate, ACPA students contrasted the culture and climate of their old schools with that of ACPA:

"I basically couldn't walk down the hallway without somebody (being) like, 'Dyke.' After I cut my hair off that just made things worse." — Katie Johnsen

"If you're gay in Reynoldsburg, you're not OK, apparently. I've had people push me up against lockers, I've had people smack books out of my hands ... and all that stuff." — Marcus Petry

"ACPA's like a nonconformist school. So there's like no bullying so even if you brought yourself out there no one would bully you. Everyone has something about them that maybe they don't want people to know about but here you can just kind let that out there." — Eden Tetteh, who came to Columbus, Ohio from Ghana, Africa

Tolerance, respect, and inclusivity are certainly not reserved for LGBTQ students at ACPA. Educators and students bring awareness to a myriad of social issues and marginalized groups through curriculum and outside activities. Students are encouraged to take advantage of the school's workshop offerings (elective-style courses in special topics selected by students and administrators). Workshops are designed to "support, extend, enrich, and apply" student learning beyond the classroom – they "intentionally promote an inclusive environment by focusing on issues or histories of minority groups." Examples of past workshops include World Religions, Equality Project, ROXX – Empowerment of Girls, and African-American History.

"If you had asked me my opinion on charter schools a few years ago, I would have said I didn't like them. As a lifelong progressive democrat, I believed the greatest thing about the common school system was that it united people from different backgrounds on shared values and purpose. But when my youngest was viciously cyber-bullied by schoolmates, the district's disinterest in dealing with the problem led us to search for another option – this time seeking not only high-quality academics, but also a school that cared about climate."

— MARIANNE LOMBARDO, *Parent of 2015 ACPA Graduate*

ACPA is diverse. Among ACPA students, about half are white, 31 percent identify as African-American, and 7 percent as Latinx. The remainder identify as belonging to one or more racial or ethnic groups. Fifty percent of students come from low-income families. Females outnumber males at the school by about 2:1.

Earlier this year, ACPA held its Second Annual Six Word Night with the theme “Immigration, Identity, and Coming to America.” Students were challenged to articulate, in six words, how their stories fit into this theme. The school is also known for its annual Trailblazer Project, an event where students use their chosen medium to “bring awareness to social issues and societal injustices through creative expression and art.”



*“I take curry over
cheeseburgers anyday.”*

ANJALI, SENIOR



*“Tell me what is considered
black.”*

AUJIE, JUSTUN, & JAELYN,
FRESHMEN

ACPA held its Second Annual Six Word Night in March 2017. Students Anjali, Aujie, Justun, & Jaelyn share what “Immigration, Identity, and Coming to America” means to them in a six-word statement.

ACPA demonstrates year-to-year growth and above-average test scores.

ACPA’s art-driven curriculum was ultimately designed to supplement and reinforce core academics to ensure students graduate from high school and are prepared for college. In 2015, ACPA outperformed both state and district schools on Ohio state assessments in Reading, Writing, Math, Social Studies, and Science. U.S. News and World Report scored ACPA’s Mathematics and English Proficiencies at 96 and 98 percent, respectively. ACPA graduates 98 percent of its students (compared to Ohio’s 82 percent rate and the nation’s 83 percent average) and outscored both state and national ACT averages in 2015.

ACPA was named the Ohio Department of Education’s “School of Promise” and “School of Excellence” in 2010, 2011, and 2012. In 2013, the Ohio Alliance for Public Charter Schools presented ACPA with its “Charter High School of the Year” award. Later that year, ACPA received the U.S. Department of Education Dissemination Grant to support its VOICE program. The purpose of VOICE is to replicate ACPA’s emotionally safe climate in other schools across the country.



“Arts across the curriculum and focus on active civic engagement encourages student investment in their education, serves varied learning styles, and improves creative problem-solving skills essential to achieving their goals beyond high school.” ACPA outranks state and district averages in writing and math proficiency, graduation rates, and ACT scores.

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