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## California Academy Early College High School: Creating Community through Rigor, Relevance & Relationships

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**CALIFORNIA ACADEMY EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL: CREATING  
COMMUNITY THROUGH RIGOR, RELEVANCE, AND RELATIONSHIPS  
BY ERIN CRAIG, DENNIS EASTMAN, AND NATALIE BATTERSBEE**

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**Abstract**

California Academy Early College High School (California Academy)<sup>1</sup>, an independent charter high school serving at-risk students in Santa Ana has created, developed, and sustained a community of family through rigor, relevance, and relationships. Over the past 10 years three different educational leaders, each with unique professional training, experiences, and leadership styles, served as California Academy's principal from its founding and development, to a sustained thriving early college high school (ECHS), effectively educating traditionally underserved students in Santa Ana. This longitudinal narrative case study depicts how aligned successive leaders created an academically successful community of formerly at-risk students in a California charter school, through the enduring values of rigor, relevance, and relationships.

*Keywords:* early college high school, charter school, community, rigor

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonym.

## Introduction

Over the past 10 years, California Academy Early College High School (California Academy), an independent charter high school serving at-risk students in Santa Ana has created, developed, and sustained a community of family through rigor, relevance, and relationships. California Academy is a public high school, founded on Christian principles with the belief and understanding that God would guide their efforts. The founders' vision and mission for California Academy has always reflected faith, value, and human dignity. One of the distinct callings referenced in the Bible is to those who will serve as teachers. In the founding days of California Academy, the leaders were filled with the conviction found in Matthew 25:40: "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." The principals in turn sought teachers who could provide a significant and needed ministry to at-risk students who were often overlooked or experienced great difficulty in traditional school settings.

California Academy readies students for lifelong success through an educational journey inspired by the power of a family environment. California Academy's vision is to provide underrepresented students access to an academically rigorous, blended high school and college curriculum. California Academy identifies students who are academically, behaviorally, and socio-emotionally prepared and offers them college courses, in addition to high school courses.

To prepare students for the 21st century, California Academy offered advanced opportunities to gain the knowledge and skills needed for them to smoothly transition to higher education or to be equipped with marketable skills necessary for the workforce. Woven into the rigorous academic experience was the opportunity for social clubs, including a student-led Bible club that met weekly at lunch time with the intent of providing students the ability to grow spiritually, as well as academically. The ECHS educational program implemented at California Academy was initially designed to increase the high school graduation rates and ultimately college and career success from 50% among students living in Santa Ana, as reported by the 2006-2008 US Census.

**Table 1: Santa Ana Urban Hardship Indicators**

URBAN HARDSHIP INDICATOR	SANTA ANA	ORANGE COUNTY
Per capita income	\$16,891	\$34, 550
Poverty rate	16.5%	9.5%
Lacking health insurance (non-elderly)	43%	22%
College degree attainment	11%	35%

Source: "Santa Ana Building a Healthy Community: A 10-year strategic plan, 2010-2020" by The California Endowment, 2010, *10 Year Strategic Initiative*, p 2.

Additionally, census data from 2008 indicated that the per capita income for a Santa Ana resident was approximately \$18,000 less than residents living in other cities in Orange County. Further, Santa Ana reported almost twice the poverty rate and percentage of residents

without insurance as compared to Orange County. Among students attending college, data revealed that Santa Ana residents had an 11% college degree attainment rate, as compared to Orange County's 35%, with the majority of Santa Ana students having attended a Santa Ana Unified public school.

With over 57,000 students, the Santa Ana Unified School District (SAUSD) is the largest school district in Orange County and the sixth largest in the state of California. SAUSD operates 36 elementary schools, nine intermediate schools, nine high schools, and has also authorized charter schools, one of which was California Academy ([www.sausd.us](http://www.sausd.us)). California Academy opened its doors in fall 2005 with eight students and has grown to serve approximately 400 students in grades 9-12.

From 2005 to 2013, the demographic of California Academy was approximately 95% Hispanic, with nearly 90% of these students qualifying for free or reduced lunch, and 30% considered homeless. These statistics created a challenging environment for basic survival, as well as a daunting environment for learning and college readiness to occur. As an independent charter school in California, California Academy is publicly funded and functions as an independent public school and district. California Academy, as all charter schools in California, is held to the same state testing accountability and measures as traditional public school but has the autonomy to create an academic program to best meet the needs of its diverse learners. In addition, every five years California Academy is required to participate in a charter renewal process with the local authorizing district.

Over the past ten years (2005-2014), California Academy has evolved from a very small charter school serving eight students who resided in group homes, to a school now serving approximately 400 students with future plans of adding a middle school. During the past decade, three different educational leaders, each with unique professional training, experience, and leadership styles, have served as principal from California Academy's founding and development, to a sustained thriving ECHS educating traditionally underserved students in Santa Ana.

The academic leaders discussed in this longitudinal narrative are: Natalie Battersbee, founding principal from 2005-2007; Dennis Eastman, who served as principal during the developing phase of California Academy from 2007-2010; and Erin Craig, who guided California Academy through the developing phase and into a time of thriving from 2011-2014. Each principal served at California Academy for approximately three years while striving to create a highly effective school through the intentional creation of an actively involved teacher/student community.

Creating a student community within a school must be deliberate and involve all stakeholders, addressing school needs from multiple perspectives simultaneously. According to Lezotte (1991), to create community resulting in a highly effective school, the school must: (1) have a relatable leader; (2) state a clear mission; (3) be a safe and organized place; (4) set high expectations; (5) provide opportunities to learn; (6) monitor student progress; and (7) create partnerships between school and home. The academic leaders at California Academy, though varied in technique, implemented the components identified above to promote a dynamic academic community that resulted in increased student learning, post-secondary enrollment, and contributions within the larger community as educated and productive citizens.

A 30-year quantitative analysis of data, theoretical insights, and professional wisdom by Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003) identified 21 leadership components that when consistently employed by principals and academic leaders, provided essential components that positively impacted student achievement. Each principal responsibility in Table 2 is significantly correlated with student achievement.

**Table 2: Principal Leadership Responsibilities**

RESPONSIBILITIES	TO THE EXTENT IN WHICH THE PRINCIPAL
Culture	fosters shared beliefs & a sense of community & cooperation
Order	establishes a set of standard operating procedures & routines
Discipline	protects teachers from issues & influences that would detract from their teaching time or focus
Resources	provides teachers with materials & professional development necessary for the successful execution of their jobs
Curriculum, instruction, assessment	is directly involved in the design & assessment implementation of curriculum, instruction, & assessment practices
Focus	establishes clear goals & keeps those goals in the forefront of the school's attention
Knowledge of curriculum, instruction, assessment	is knowledgeable about current curriculum, instruction assessment instruction, & assessment practices
Visibility	has quality contact & interactions with teachers & students
Contingent rewards	recognizes & rewards individual accomplishments
Communication	establishes strong lines of communication with teachers & among students
Outreach	is an advocate & spokesperson for the school to all stakeholders
Input	involves teachers in the design & implementation of important decisions & policies
Affirmation	recognizes & celebrates school accomplishments & acknowledges failures
Relationship	demonstrates an awareness of the personal aspects of teachers & staff
Change agent	is willing to & actively challenges the status quo
Optimizer	inspires & leads new & challenging innovations
Ideals/beliefs	communicates & operates from strong ideals & beliefs about schooling
Monitors/evaluates	monitors the effectiveness of school practices & their impact on student learning
Flexibility	adapts leadership behavior to the needs of the current situation & is comfortable with dissent
Situational awareness	is aware of the details & undercurrents in the running of the school & uses this information to address current & potential problems
Intellectual stimulation	ensures that faculty & staff are aware of the most current theories & practices & makes the discussion of these a regular aspect of the school's culture

Source: "Balanced leadership: What 30 years of research tells us about the effect of leadership on student achievement" by Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003, p. 5.

## Relatable Leader

As the educational leader of the school, the principal, more than any other individual is responsible for the promotion of an academic environment of engagement and attempt among teachers and students. Among the 21 principal leadership responsibilities identified by Waters et al. (2003), 16 are associated with the concept of the leader being relatable to all stakeholders within the school: culture, discipline, resources, focus, visibility, contingency rewards, communication, outreach, input, affirmation, relationship, change agent, optimizer, ideals/beliefs, flexibility, and situational awareness.

In 2005, Battersbee was invited to serve as the first principal of California Academy Early College High School after over 40 years of educational service in Los Angeles Unified School District. Interestingly, Battersbee had declined the offer to become principal twice before, and believing she had served her time in the trenches she was ready to retire. However, after a series of prayers for God's direction regarding his plans for her life and this proposed new school, through a series of providential events Battersbee accepted the post. As the principal of a brand new school, Battersbee was responsible for establishing an academic foundation and a school culture. She began by hiring teachers based upon their love for students and solid character rather than solely on the basis of subject area skill. Simply, she was looking for teachers to inspire students who had been labeled "lazy, troubled, and broken." As the school year began, Battersbee started with a message of family and accountability, and then proceeded to live out this maxim to the staff, teachers, and students. Battersbee believed wholeheartedly that each student could and would graduate, and set out to create that belief system school-wide with all stakeholders (Kouzes & Posner, 1987).

Battersbee's ability to communicate clearly and firmly, while providing affirmation and feedback, created authentic relationships that were built on faith, absolute honesty, and trust that did much to create a structured academic environment as well as one where students felt love and acceptance, and the understanding that God had created them to do great things. In 2007, as Battersbee transitioned the principal role to Eastman, it was clear that California Academy's school-wide academic and community had taken hold among the students and that a family atmosphere of trust had been created. However, though the school population was tightly knit, new challenges were afoot as California Academy was in need of student population growth to sustain existence. This growth phase would bring exciting changes and significant challenges during the next three years.

Eastman and Battersbee worked together to continue to foster the belief that students were created to do great things. Eastman's commitment to student success, sense of humor, and persistent accountability measures for all students appeared to be the ideal characteristics

needed to transition California Academy from a fledgling school into a period of maturation and development. The California Academy community and culture were on the forefront of Eastman's mind in his first year as he sought to create intentional experiences to build relationships with all stakeholders. To ensure meaningful relationships could be extended to all stakeholders, Eastman established a "five day per week" open door policy. Eastman believed that the school leader should be both visible and accessible and utilized every opportunity from early morning (working the car line, picking up trash, walking through classrooms) to early evening (teacher conferences and inspecting the needs of the school property) to send a message of presence, relatability, and reliability to parents and students alike. As a result, teachers, students and parents felt extremely comfortable with his openness to their input, school changes, and decisions regarding what measures would serve the best interest of the students. This practice was critical in the development of stakeholder pride during the developmental years of the school.

When Craig assumed the role of principal, she was pleased to encounter a school whose passion for educating underserved students was well intact but needed refinement to ensure California Academy could transition from a developing school into a thriving academic community. The California Academy stakeholders needed stability, instructional support, feedback, and shared governance in the building of the academic community. Craig sought to establish credibility by giving all stakeholders an opportunity to share strengths and areas of growth in each facet of the school anonymously. This data was compiled, analyzed, and presented to determine the best first steps in solving school wide challenges. This process did much to bolster the confidence and team concept of the teachers, as they were provided the opportunity to collaborate and evaluate school needs through a data based approach rather than imposing administrative edict. Craig used positive, constructive, instructional, and evidence-based professional feedback to support and affirm strengths and collaborate to discuss area that needed improvement. California Academy teachers and staff soon felt empowered that they had a voice and were able to contribute to school-wide program changes as California Academy continued to grow.

### **State a Clear Mission**

The creation, development, and expansion of California Academy relied heavily on the school's mission. The mission of California Academy ECHS is to inspire, educate, and prepare all students to be successful in college, career, and in life. Among the 21 principal leadership responsibilities, seven are associated with the concept of school mission: state a clear mission, culture, communication, focus ideals/beliefs, change agent, optimizer, and situational awareness (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003).

Battersbee led California Academy through the founding of the charter petition and then obtained the authorization required for opening a charter school in California. Battersbee led efforts to create a mission centered on early college, the idea of family, and implementation of support, fidelity, and loving relationships throughout the school. She believed that following biblical principles of acceptance, hope, and forgiveness were key elements when seeking to develop relationships with students and staff. Through consistent practice of these principles, Battersbee held the indefatigable belief that students and staff could be actively involved in creating a unique learning environment and become successful at the tasks before them.

As an experienced educational leader, Battersbee heavily emphasized the human resource and structural frames when working collaboratively to develop, state, and implement a clear and meaningful school mission (Bolman & Deal, 2003). After California Academy's charter petition was approved, the implementation, focus, and communication of the mission were critical elements that Battersbee discussed each day with students, teachers, staff, parents, and community members. The message from Battersbee was clear, "The voice of all stakeholders mattered and needed to be heard if California Academy was to become a thriving Early College High School." The demonstrated actions of this message spurred on school-wide ownership of the concept of family as the school continued to grow during Battersbee's service as principal.

As the California Academy student population grew during Eastman's tenure, the number of social-emotional challenges of the students also grew. Eastman continued to develop the culture where each stakeholder understood they were an active participant in California Academy's existence and success each day. The mission was reset each day through conversation, celebrations, and school-wide goal setting carried out by the staff, teachers, and Eastman. Teachers and students were encouraged to become active participants in the academic experience at California Academy rather than passive recipients who occupied classrooms and hoped for the best. Eastman's leadership style sought to support each teacher and student with the belief that the teachers and students were the very best assets of the school by encouraging them to "act like what they do matters" no matter the venue, be it in the classroom or local community.

As California Academy entered the 2012-13 academic year with almost 400 students, Craig led the school through two major accountability measures: charter renewal and accreditation through the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). Charter renewal is a mandatory reauthorization process that occurs with the authorizing district (SAUSD) every five years and is based on a 16-element charter petition (CA Ed Code 47605). Through this process, California Academy's mission, vision, educational program, and finances were scrutinized through a very complex process that coincided with the election year of members of the school board. Throughout the course of the charter renewal, Craig led the California Academy team to



work collaboratively with families, community leaders, and district leaders and obtained a 5-0 charter renewal approval with an addition of California Academy Middle School. Similarly, the WASC accreditation process demonstrated that California Academy had exercised diligence in creating, developing, and implementing the mission of the school with integrity over its eight-year history.

### **A Safe and Organized Place**

Among the 21 principal leadership responsibilities, nine are associated with the concept of a safe and organized place for learning: order, discipline, resources, visibility, communication, input, affirmation, monitors/evaluates, and intellectual stimulation (Waters et al., 2003).

Battersbee created a safe and organized learning environment by challenging the traditional educational process; enabling others to act and advocate for themselves; and offering heartfelt encouragement to relentlessly support California Academy students (Kouzes & Posner, 1987). Battersbee ensured every California Academy student and teacher was active within the safe and organized learning place with a daily class called Family. Family is a time when teachers provide students with strategies directed toward being successful in school, career, and life through authentic relationships, discussions, and supportive activities (Berger, Turk-Bicakci, Garet, Knudsen, & Hoshan, 2014). Students are assigned to a Family upon enrollment, and progress is monitored with their Family throughout their time at California Academy. The success of California Academy students was of the utmost importance, and Battersbee led the teachers to use community and Family to ensure California Academy was a safe and organized place for learning.

During the growth of the school, California Academy continued to recruit students who had frequently struggled to find success in traditional educational settings. Eastman modeled and led teachers in demonstrating relentless encouragement, support, and accountability for student behavior without using expulsion as a consequence. As the student population grew, Eastman and the teachers had to create new structures and policies to maintain a safe and organized place as California Academy's student population increased rapidly. However, it was necessary for the maxims of the California Academy mission to be introduced before an interested student set foot on the campus as an actual enrolled student of California Academy Early College High School. The message of the mission of California Academy was provided at the very earliest possible moment of student contact with the campus – during the student interview. These interviews involved parents and students and were utilized as a vehicle for preparing interested students for the rigors of an ECHS curriculum and community. During interviews students were encouraged to become active participants in their own learning, success, and behavior. In addition, parents were invited to get involved in various capacities as

volunteers. The results of the student interviews proved fruitful as the student population grew and parent involvement levels increased California Academy was taking shape as a place where students looked forward to come to school.

During the 2011-12 school year California Academy had grown to well over 300 students. At the end of 2011-12, data on student detention, suspension, and expulsion rates were analyzed within the current discipline system, and the need for a revised school-wide discipline plan was becoming clear. Following input from staff, teachers, students, and families, a positive behavior support plan was developed and implemented, resulting in the elimination of detentions and suspensions. This positive behavior support plan was based on the principle that students exhibit positive behaviors when they have strong relationships with California Academy staff. As a result, expulsion rates showed a significant decrease (National Student Clearinghouse, 2014). Peer pressure existed between students, but the pressure was to make positive choices and show character, which was modeled by all California Academy teachers and staff. With the implementation of a positive behavior support system and the addition of a Dean of Students, Craig shifted her focus to raising academic expectations for California Academy students and teachers.

### **Set High Expectations**

Among the 21 principal leadership responsibilities, nine are associated with the concept of setting high expectations: resources, curriculum, instruction, and assessment, contingent awards, input, affirmation, monitors evaluates, change agent, optimizer, and situational awareness (Waters et al., 2003).

High expectations are celebrated at California Academy. These efforts began with Battersbee, who insisted that meeting high expectations is made possible when administrators, teachers, and students optimize and maximize each facet of the education process by claiming 100% responsibility for the learning in all of the arenas in which life offered lessons (character, classroom and community behavior, in college courses, and of course, at home). The highest of expectations would best prepare California Academy students for life beyond high school—specifically, college and careers (The Education Trust, 2005). Many students entered California Academy not understanding how to be outstanding and responsible, but Battersbee’s firm, fair, consistent, and loving demeanor guided them toward opportunities to grasp the concepts and “big life lessons” she was presenting.

During the 2008 school year, Eastman aspired to build upon the formidable foundation laid by Battersbee. He desired to inspire and encourage the hearts of all California Academy stakeholders by introducing the theme: Attempt Difficult Things! The message that was consistently set and reset for the students was about realizing that everyone had choices, and

characteristics such as: endurance, fortitude in character, and a commitment to solid academic marks was built into a student, not born. These expectations required an enormous amount of time, tenacity, and leadership from teachers and Eastman, but produced results that were the most celebrated in California Academy's short history. Under the guidance and efforts of a tireless teaching staff and leadership of Eastman, (1) the first graduating class completed over 300 transferrable units of college credit; (2) Academic Performance Index (API) scores improved from 539 to 705 (an increase of 166 points), becoming the largest API increase in the state of California; and (4) California Academy was awarded a Bronze Medal as one of the top 60 schools in California by US News & World Report (2010).

High expectations and optimization were core values stressed by Craig to California Academy teachers, staff, and students on a daily basis. To identify where change should be focused, Craig utilized Clark and Estes' gap analysis methods to close knowledge, motivation, and organizational gaps within the California Academy community, realizing that most gaps were primarily due to knowledge and organization gaps (Clark & Estes, 2008). The intersection between Craig's doctoral coursework and principalship at California Academy allowed for theory to directly inform programs and practices each day. There existed a laser focus on all student learners, teacher instruction and planning, and continual academic improvement.

Students were guided to be more reflective, analyze their academic strengths and weaknesses and set goals for the quarter, semester, year, and upon high school graduation. Craig exemplified these methods by having high expectations for herself that were then translated to the California Academy team. Students continued to raise themselves up and strive for academic and personal excellence. Each year higher percentages of students were passing all of their classes, taking college courses, graduating, and applying and enrolling in postsecondary institutions.

### **Provide Opportunity to Learn**

High expectations for all students should be coupled with access and the opportunity to learn. Among the 21 principal leadership responsibilities, seven are associated with the concept of providing opportunities to learn: knowledge of curriculum and instruction, resources, focus, relationship, change agent, monitor/evaluates, and intellectual stimulation. (Waters et al., 2003).

Battersbee's 15 years as a middle college principal in LAUSD directly impacted the blend of high school and college curriculum that students experienced at California Academy. Battersbee's expertise and ability to be a change agent in the early college model were invaluable during California Academy's development of student learning opportunities. Battersbee knew and actively demonstrated what a highly functioning ECHS

looked like, and then methodically went about to develop and provide these learning opportunities for students from their first day on campus at California Academy. Examples of these learning opportunities included the following: the creation of the relationship with California Academy's initial college partner; ensuring the high school courses at California Academy directly aligned to the rigor required at the college level; and the development of a concurrent high school/college rigorous modular curriculum that addressed academics, study skills, time management, social-emotional needs, and the rigor required at the college level.

At the onset of the 2008 school year, Eastman insisted that a "one size fits all curriculum" was not an option at California Academy and that student learning strategies be differentiated to meet the needs of the growing student population. New opportunities were also developed in concert with teachers and school partners who identified learning gaps and actively contributed time, talent, and energy to closing those gaps. The results of these collaborations were exciting: a student-centered California State standards-driven curriculum, a relationship with the Pacific Investment Management Company financial literacy program, college pathway support curriculum, after-school tutoring, and the implementation of a California high school exit exam boot camp.

Craig's focus for learning opportunities was to examine, modify, and expand the current learning opportunities based on data analysis and action planning. The expansion of these opportunities included new grade level seminars, creative writing courses aligned with college courses and mentors, teacher peer review protocol to improve instructional practice, and the elimination of D grades through standards based grading techniques. New community partnerships were formed centered around student learning, and various prestigious colleges reached out to partner with California Academy. California Academy then introduced a tiered college course system to identify and support students taking diverse community, private, and University of California (UC) college courses in high school. These opportunities for learning with differentiated support resulted in California Academy having the largest API point increase of 66 points as compared to all other public schools in Orange County in 2014 (James & Terrell, 2014). California Academy students were applying and being accepted to universities at the highest rate in California Academy's history. Most importantly, a community of California Academy family members existed where each person could contribute to the decision-making process and felt supported and empowered.

### **Monitor Student Progress**

To determine success and new programs and opportunities, student progress should be monitored. Among the 21 principal leadership responsibilities, six are associated with the

concept of monitoring student progress: order, focus, contingent awards, affirmation, monitors/evaluates, and flexibility (Waters et al., 2003).

The monitoring of student progress within the context of California Academy's educational program was necessary to determine effectiveness and refining. In the beginning years, academic and family teachers overlapped due to the small number of students and staff. Regular student monitoring was handled by teachers by: grade level, content area, and families due to the small size, and focused on differentiated grade level support rather than remediation. This support structure ensured students were supported proactively and personally rather than at the end of the semester, when it was too late (The Education Trust, 2005). This monitoring supported student resilience and persistence even after failure. Battersbee's commitment to each student's success was relentless. Moreover, Battersbee was dedicated to the idea that students of California Academy were family members and as family members were welcome to seek academic and life assistance through high school graduation and beyond.

Eastman emphasized real time data with real time action to support and ensure all California Academy teachers could successfully monitor each student's progress. Teachers were supported through professional development to understand and ensure each student's academic standing was communicated to students and parents regularly. Teachers then took ownership and action in assisting students to take responsibility for missing assignments, content knowledge, overall academic grades, and ultimately, their high school graduation. Craig added yet another dimension of student accountability – self-accountability.

Since Eastman's student monitoring systems were already strongly rooted, Craig had immediate access to multi-layered analysis, support, and monitoring. A mathematician at heart, Craig first built a foundation for data-driven decision-making. She then established a culture of data use through weekly professional developments, invested in and expanded upon an information system, and continually built school capacity for data-driven decision-making using key indicators for student improvement (Datnow, Park, & Wohlstetter, 2007). The California Academy students started to experience success with a deep understanding of how they achieved the success, and then they started to feel empowered. Innovative ideas and programs were introduced and discussed, some of which were implemented with data analysis as the driving component. Student monitoring was multilayered and accomplished from multiple lenses.

Family teachers took ownership over their family students' grades in all of their courses, and subject area departments generated content specific interventions to ensure systems existed to support students in need. Students monitored their own academic progress weekly, and

parents monitored their child's progress monthly at a minimum. Systems with accountability were the key to success. Students felt supported and knew they would be checked on, resulting in a decrease of negative academic and social behaviors.

### **Create Partnerships Between Home and School**

Lastly, home and school partnerships extend and reinforce California Academy's work with each student. Among the 21 principal leadership responsibilities, seven are associated with the concept of building partnerships between home and school: culture, order, focus, visibility, outreach, relationship, ideals/beliefs, and situational awareness (Waters et al., 2003). Authentic partnerships between school and home sit on the foundation of strong relationships among all stakeholders.

Battersbee believed that if California Academy were to succeed, it would need to be a collective force united around loving and supporting students while holding them to high expectations. Their students needed to be taught the power of overcoming obstacles, the beauty of laughter, and the ability to accept failures and forgive themselves just as God forgives.

Battersbee made certain that California Academy's founding years involved all stakeholders in order to establish a foundation of trust that included parents, guardians, extended family members, and community members.

Battersbee established relationships with a family member or mentor in each student's life, no matter their living situation or family structure at home. The result of this care was that every California Academy student authentically believed they were cared for and held accountable by their California Academy family. Battersbee also initiated community partnerships in two strategic ways: using partnerships to support students' preparation for postsecondary opportunities and partnering with local businesses that allowed students to have hands-on experience working in their field of choice (Kouzes & Posner, 1987). The home and school partnership strategy Battersbee laid supported all stakeholders in believing and living their lives as a "California Academy Family" member.

Eastman continued to develop the idea of the "California Academy Family" during his tenure. The decision to hire Santa Ana residents as California Academy team members produced a positive environment of honesty and trust among parents and students. California Academy parents felt comfortable calling California Academy administrative assistants, teachers, and counselors who understood and lived in their community, and the California Academy parent participation, engagement, and trust increased. After the noticeable increase in trust, Eastman introduced new programs and events to enable parents to further engage. Monthly parent meetings were introduced, and the number of school events involving parents increased to include an annual Career Day, Science Fair, and La Kermes. Parents were encouraged to

participate, engage, and learn at California Academy regularly, which further developed the concept of “our school” and “our California Academy Family.”

Education and empowerment were major components of Craig’s vision for all California Academy family members, not just the students. A new parent education program was introduced with monthly topics and an annual end of year parent graduation. California Academy was a community where education of the entire family was a priority for the school, which further increased the trust between California Academy and California Academy families. Craig also regularly went to students’ homes if they were having attendance challenges, embodying a “whatever it takes” attitude. When the trust and community at California Academy thrived, the partnerships between home and school were natural. Parents then sought leadership roles and wanted to further contribute to the decision making process.

### Conclusions

California Academy was founded, developed, and continues to thrive due to the rigor, relevance, and relationships created and sustained through the aligned efforts of teachers and administration alongside the students and their parents. California Academy is now in the 10th year of operation and has greatly impacted individual lives and the Santa Ana community. The academic outcomes below are the results of increased rigor through a student centered and relevant curriculum.

**Table 3: Number of Students Passing College Courses and Graduation Rates**

ACADEMIC YEAR	QUANTITY OF STUDENTS	GRADUATION RATE
2007-08	N/A	100%
2008-09	86	100%
2009-10	108	98%
2010-11	164	90%
2011-12	173	98%
2012-13	192	95%
2013-14	N/A	95%

Source: "DataQuest" by the California Department of Education, 2014.

California Academy students have choice in their college course enrollment. College courses have been aligned to both students’ interest, academic level, and future career paths. Between 2008-09 and 2011-12, the number of students enrolled in at least one college course per year doubled, as the school size grew at approximately half the rate. More California Academy students qualified, enrolled, and succeeded in college courses.

California Academy not only increased the high school graduation rate among students living in Santa Ana (The California Endowment, 2010) but virtually doubled the rates. The graduation rates at California Academy have consistently remained at or above 90%, exceeding both the average high school graduation rate in the state of California and in Santa Ana. This is due in

part to the strong relationships students have with other California Academy students, teachers, and staff. Moreover, California Academy students have been accepted to and graduated from UC Irvine, UC Berkeley, UC Los Angeles, UC Davis, UC Merced, UC Riverside, UC Santa Cruz, CSU Fullerton, CSU Long Beach, CSU Los Angeles, CSU Northridge, CSU San Francisco, CSU Fresno, CSU Chico, CSU San Diego, CSU San Jose, CSU East Bay, Biola University, Cal Poly Pomona, Vanguard University, Concordia University, Point Loma, along with other colleges and universities.

The rigor provided at California Academy continues to support alumni as they garner graduate degrees, as well as obtain increased career opportunities, both results of which work to break the poverty cycle within their families. Each of the three principals in this longitudinal narrative has different instructional strengths, leadership styles, and experience but all led with aligned core values based on relationships with all stakeholders. California Academy's needs shifted as the student population increased, and continual innovation required new leadership and practices. Even with diversity between principals and skills, the common commitment to educational excellence for underserved students was clear and consistent throughout.

Consistency in the principal role and thoughtfulness during transitions of leadership are two ways to ensure California Academy will continue to thrive and move forward.

Since the first day of school the principal and teachers of California Academy have sought to provide an exceptional educational experience to all students, especially those recognized as struggling students. Spirituality connects people to the most profound realities of life, and thus it has a very important role to play in education. By bridging biblical principles and commitment of people who desire to create a generation of young men and women who understand their God-given direction to make the world a better place – amazing things can happen at school. This type of commitment requires the leadership of the school to create and foster a rich environment in which all stakeholders can serve, contribute, be heard, and thrive.



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