



## Christel House Academy South



**Designated in 2011, Redesignated in 2014**

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## 2014-2015 School Statistics

Community: Urban  
Enrollment: 635  
Grade Levels: K-12  
School Schedule: Fluid block/modified bell

### Student Demographics

- 41% Hispanic
- 34% White
- 16% African American
- 9% Multi-racial
- <1% American Indian
- 94% Free/Reduced Lunch

2014 National and State Schools to Watch Redesignation  
2013 MetLife Foundation-NASSP Breakthrough School  
2012 & 2010 Sharing the Dream Winner  
2011 National and State Schools to Watch Designation  
2008, 2010, & 2011 Title I Distinguished School  
2007 National School Change Award

## School Characteristics and Replicable Practices

### Academic Excellence

- All middle school students at Christel House Academy South (CHA) are expected to meet high academic standards. Expectations are made clear for both students and parents through the students' evaluation of exemplary work, the use of rubrics to evaluate student work, a standards-based grading and reporting system, our teachers' use of student-friendly learning targets, a school-wide focus on revision, and the incorporation of a Project Based Learning model that drives students to create products that have real world application and utility. For example, students endeavored to create a book of poems that encapsulated the vast humanitarian impact of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in an attempt to advocate for peace. Students were immersed in a cross-curricular exploration of the historical foundations of the conflict and its modern impact while simultaneously studying poetic devices and form-writing. The students participated in poetry workshops with published poets to strengthen their writing, visited the Islamic Association of North America to form a deeper understanding of Islam, and had a Q and A session with a Rabbi at a local synagogue to develop their understanding of Judaism and to gain perspective. Students wrote, compiled, edited, and published their book of poetry afterward, and held a public poetry slam to introduce their writing

and message to the world.

- Curriculum, instruction, assessment, and appropriate academic interventions are aligned with high standards. Teachers deconstruct the standards into student-friendly learning targets in order to help students articulate and focus on what they should be able to know and do by the end of class or over the course of a project. For example, in science class the teacher will post a learning target such as “I can explain how my immune system fights off bacteria”. Students would document the target in their science journals and deconstruct it as a class in order to connect what they are learning to the objective and standard(s) they will be evaluated on later. Because we are using PBL as the means for student learning, both the curriculum and the work we ask kids to do are rigorous, and propel the students forward in their thinking and learning.
- We strongly believe that subject integration and embedded literacy are necessary in order to get kids to develop essential skills and deepen their overall understanding of content. We’ve taken great strides this year to integrate our PBL units across subject areas and to ask kids to tackle real world issues. For example, we recently completed a Science Learning Fair in which students presented their scientific findings which were the results of original, student created experiments, to the entire school and community. The students focused their experiments on the use of natural and synthetic materials in modern society, and wrote an accompanying argumentative essay responding to the question, “Should we change the way that we use plastics?” This project provoked students to view the materials we use on a daily basis through a molecular lens in Science, while also reading and writing about the impact that our consumer habits have on the environment, and subsequently created an informed opinion about the subject, in English class.
- Our middle school students learn through a variety of challenging engaging activities that are directly connected to state standards and reinforce 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. Every student is equipped with a tablet, each classroom has a Smartboard, and students sit at tables rather than individual desks. Because we structure our curriculum and instruction through PBL units, students are constantly working in collaborative groups and teachers use a variety of active pedagogy (such as gallery walks, fieldwork, webquests, etc.) to engage students in their learning.
- Teachers at CHA use a variety of assessments in order to monitor the academic progress of their students. In addition to quarterly Acuity tests, students are given weekly quizzes in classes like social studies and math, participate in performance tasks such as labs in science, create writing portfolios in English, and create multiple projects and exhibitions in both core and elective area classes. As previously mentioned, students are asked to assess their own work and to give others feedback using learning target(s) centered rubrics.
- The middle school schedule is fairly unique at CHA because teachers have a great amount of flexibility and autonomy with how they choose to divide their time. Four teachers share the 100 seventh and eighth graders. Administration establishes the middle school related arts and lunch times in coordination with the flow of the K-6 and high school resources and classes. Otherwise, the teachers create their own routine based on what works best for their students. There are no bells, so the “schedule” can be changed from day to day in order to accommodate curricular or instructional needs. Currently, because of the time that lunch falls in relation to related arts classes, the morning block is longer than the afternoon block. Therefore, teachers are able to rotate when classes meet if, for example, the science teacher needs extended time with seventh graders in order to complete a lab, or if the interventionist needs to pull a specific group of students for targeted interventions. This flexibility also allows the teachers to carve out extended work times for students to collaborate in their groups on their projects without having to worry about disrupting the flow of the “schedule”.
- Our students receive extra support in a variety of ways. For example, our special education teachers often co-teach classes as well as provide general push-in support with our interventionist during math and English classes. A special education aid acts as literacy support in the seventh and eighth grade science and social studies classes as well. All three staff members are able to pull kids out for targeted support and / or interventions as needed. Furthermore, the teaching and support staff, including counselors and social workers, meet every week in RTI meetings to discuss targeted interventions for students and to write referrals for students to participate in the school-wide RTI program. In addition to before and after school

help students receive on a volunteer basis from staff, students may also come in after school for formal tutoring sessions. Finally, CHA also has a longer school year than traditional public schools. If a student is still struggling to meet academic standards (as communicated to parents through weekly standards-based progress reports) he or she is required to attend either one or both of our summer sessions. The first two-week summer session is for students who have struggled to meet the English standards, and the second-two week session is for support in Math. Because the number of students is usually fairly low, students are able to receive more personalized and targeted academic support. For those students who aren't required to attend or who don't need the extra support they may opt to attend anyway, or participate in summer enrichment programs (such as a young writer's or painting course) designed to propel them forward in their academics.

- The middle school teachers have significant time to collaborate with each other in order to design or revise curriculum, discuss best practices, and analyze student data and work. All of the middle school students go to two blocks of related arts classes together each day which provides the staff with a personal prep and team meeting / planning time. Additionally, CHA is a part of the TAP evaluation system. This means that each staff member has a mentor who works with them, they are observed formally and informally by other teachers and administrators in order to get feedback on their instruction, and they participate in weekly professional development sessions in order to improve their instruction and evaluate student work. Currently, two of the middle school teachers serve as mentors on the school-wide TAP leadership team.

### **Developmental Responsiveness**

- CHA is a very small and personalized environment with staff that helps support each student and his / her development. The middle school is one "house" or team at CHA and is comprised of four core teachers, one special education teacher, one English language learner teacher and two interventionists.
- Each core teacher has a group of students he/she meets with each day for forty minutes as a part of an advisory or homeroom. Because the activities coordinated during this time focus on teambuilding, character education, student goal setting, etc. it allows teachers to know a group of students well apart from academics. Homeroom teachers conduct home visits, are present for student conferences, and are often asked to advise or sit in on discipline meetings with parents.
- There are many opportunities for students and families to receive support at CHA. Because the middle school is so small and all of the teachers share the same students, teachers are able to discuss and problem solve individual student issues. We have a counselor and social worker who pull small groups of students for targeted support for things such as dealing with parental divorce or anger management, and who conduct grade level lessons in homerooms on topics such as conflict resolution, or the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Scholars program. Students are also required to complete a college and career readiness unit that is led by their advisory teacher. We also have rotating literacy, numeracy, and technology nights in the evenings that give families the opportunity to participate in educational activities and receive information and strategies to better support their children at home in these areas. Additionally, we have a speech therapist and two mental health therapists from Cummins in the building who provide onsite services for both students and families.
- As previously mentioned the middle school curriculum is designed through PBL units, thereby naturally fostering social skills, curiosity, and creativity in students. In PBL it is essential for teachers to use a wide variety of active pedagogy to engage kids in learning, and requires teachers to incorporate organizational skills into their curriculum. Furthermore, the teachers created a middle school economy program to help teach financial literacy and to assist with developing procedures and effective management. Students get middle school "bucks" for working well together, completing homework, coming to class with supplies, etc. that they can then spend on items in an auction each quarter. CHA also received several grants that provide opportunities for our middle school teachers to incorporate both technology and the arts into projects. For example, students created documentary videos to accompany persuasive speeches that address the lingering impact of imperialism in Africa. Students delivered these speeches and displayed their videos in a public

forum, allowing them to synthesize the content that they were learning in various classes in an authentic context.

- In addition to advisory class wherein students are given opportunities to explore issues and current events relevant to their lives and interests, teachers make a conscious effort to infuse these practices into the core curriculum. For example, as part of the poetry project mentioned above, students explored how conflicts arise, and postulated potential means of alleviating conflict both abroad and in their daily lives. Students are explored and discussed current issues such as the debate on bullying, cliques, etc. in an effort develop informed opinions pertaining to their lives. Because most projects are extremely collaborative, teachers intentionally teach and support conflict resolution in their daily practices.
- Middle school students are engaged in interdisciplinary projects that address real-world issues. Students read “The Outsider” in conjunction with an exploration of the impact of gang-violence within the city of Indianapolis. This aligned with an ongoing theme of conflict resolution which resonated in each subject area.
- In addition to the diverse projects middle school students will do that let them set high academic goals while exploring a rich variety of topics, the summer enrichment opportunities they have available, and general guidance they are given about college options, students also participate in Camptown, an outdoor experiential program that helps kids learn about themselves and their strengths. Sixth graders participate in day programs, seventh graders do an overnight program, and the eighth graders attend a weeklong backpacking trip in the Big Spoon National Park through the Camptown organization. Through these experiences our students are able to get out of Indianapolis (often for the first time), explore their natural intelligence, and further develop “non-academic” strengths they possess in a way that is challenging but supportive. Furthermore, CHA also hosts a career day for middle school students and participates in a school-wide college exploration program.
- CHA middle school students have several opportunities to voice their opinions and have a say in the school. The student council designs and puts on school events; homerooms plan and carry out bi-weekly middle school community meetings; they lead their conferences; they help advise teachers on what after school clubs to offer; and when a group of students decided they wanted to go on a trip at the end of the year to Washington D.C., organized and started fundraising for it.
- Whenever possible, the teachers try to develop relationships with families to support the well-being of their students. Teachers are strongly encouraged and compensated for visits they make to the homes of their students. Most teachers do them at the start of the school year in order to establish solid relationships with parents and to be proactive in knowing the students particularly as they move from sixth to seventh grade. However, teachers also do home visits throughout the year to help maintain or reestablish relationships as needed. Nearly 100% of parents come to the school each quarter for conferences. Parents are also involved in creating behavior plans for their children to follow if they are having issues at school. As previously mentioned, we also offer family counseling on our premises for families that need additional support.
- In addition to curricular projects that help improve our community and the world such as the middle school Israeli-Palestinian poetry book “Young Voices of Human Conflict”, middle school students are also responsible for maintaining a positive school culture through the use of restorative practices. Students use restorative practices to hold one another accountable for their choices and to foster a positive school culture.
- CHA middle school students have a wide variety of activities to choose from that develop skills, character, and interest beyond the classroom. During the school day students take gym, visual art, technology, Spanish, music, piano, and strings to name a few. They can join a club like Christel Knights, Coding Club, Student Council, or Drama, or participate in cheerleading or sports such as volleyball, soccer, track, cross country, and basketball after school. They can also take private lessons in harp, piano, guitar, violin, etc. after school for little to no cost, or they can participate in the Christel House Academy honors choir. There are also opportunities outside the school year such as the summer enrichment programs previously mentioned.

### **Social Equity**

- All of our students, including our English language learners, special education students, and gifted students are in heterogeneous classes. In addition to differentiation provided by the general education teacher in each class, students receive additional support through push-in services by our special education teacher and aid, as well as an interventionist. Interventions take place as needed and both push-in and pull-out groups vary according to the needs of the students. Data from Acuity as well as those from classroom assessments determine the interventions or acceleration services individual students receive. As a result, targeted groups can vary from week to week and from class to class. Again, students also have the opportunity to attend after school tutoring groups.
- Teachers vary instruction and are given several opportunities to demonstrate mastery. Students are able to demonstrate their content knowledge through several ways. For example, students were able to write narratives, conduct a speech, create an artistic visual, and write a research paper for their Native American project.
- The middle school staff meets each week to collaboratively plan and assess their project curriculum, outcomes, and assessments. As a result, the team continually adapts to the needs of the students. Projects have been revised to add more fieldwork to help students with content comprehension, and experts to support skills acquisition. State standards are integrated within the broader context of the project so as to promote mastery in all content areas.
- All of our middle school students have equal access to all school classes and activities. With the exception of math, our students are not assigned textbooks. Although teachers have class sets of textbooks for student reference, student learning is planned and scaffolded by our teachers in order for our students to have exposure to resources, data, and knowledge beyond the surface level usually provided in middle school textbooks. Our students have participate in science labs, read novels, attended fieldwork at museums, viewed plays, conducted research on the computer, and participated in writing workshops led by professionals. Students with disabilities actively participate in all parts of all classes and receive support in classes co-taught by our special education teacher. .
- CHA is one entity of a network of schools internationally. As a result, we have sister schools in India, South Africa, Venezuela, and Mexico that we try to connect with as much as possible. As a school in an international network, our focus is to educate our students about the cultures and people of the world in order for them to be knowledgeable and competitive in a global age. Whenever possible, we try to have our projects connect to both local and global issues, such as our exploration of the impact of imperialism on modern-day Africa and the underlying foundations of conflicts in the Middle East. Additionally, our students attend programs and convocations that support the school-wide global focus each year.
- Our school community knows every student well. Because we are so small, every middle school teacher from sixth through eighth grade will have every middle school student in class. In a further effort to ensure that every student has an adult advocate in the building, students have a forty minute homeroom each day where they can connect with one of their teachers in a low stress, community building environment. As previously mentioned this adult is present at conferences, visits the student at home, and attends RTI and behavior meetings for students in an effort to share strengths and suggestions for better support. Because every adult acts as an advocate for a group of students, discussions about students remains professional and respectful.
- Because the large majority of our students come from poverty and over forty percent come from families where English is not their first language, it is important for us to provide support services to our families. In addition to free bussing to and from school during normal operational hours, we also have a bus that runs at 5:30 in the evening to return kids home from after school activities such as sports, clubs, and private lessons. These activities are often supported by grants and offered at little to no cost to families. We have translators at evening parent meetings and conferences. We also support a fruit and vegetable program at school in which every student gets a fresh, raw fruit or vegetable to snack on during the day. This was started in an effort to expose our students to more healthy food options at school and to educate them about

different goods from around the world. Lastly, we also provide our low-income families the option of receiving back packs that are full of ingredients to make healthy meals at home when school is not in session.

- We recognize that all of our students have different strengths in different areas. Although we give academic awards each quarter, students also receive awards for character and for excellence in the arts. Awards are given for both achievement and improvement in these areas. On a daily basis, our middle school students are also recognized and awarded for good deeds to each other with middle school bucks and recognition in individual classrooms. Additionally, each homeroom selects a student of the month based on a theme such as perseverance. Students who demonstrate academic excellence and perseverance, as well as character attributes that are in alignment with our core values of respect, responsibility, independence, and integrity, are awarded with Prefect status; students are given jackets that serve as recognition of their hard work.
- All of our staff members are a good match for our school. All of our teachers were hired for their passion and skill for reaching out to and helping kids in poverty. Many of our teachers have lived and/or taught abroad, are active in charity work outside of CHA, or have entered teaching as a second profession. Our experiences make us committed to our work and understanding of the backgrounds, strengths, and needs of our families.
- Our rules are spelled out in our school-wide handbook as well as classroom expectations for students. While our rules are clear and fair and consequences for minor infractions are consistently applied, the consequences for major or repeated infractions vary by student. Our mission is to be a transformative presence in a child's life. Therefore, we recognize that one size does not fit all when it comes to disciplinary consequences and changing the behaviors of our students. For some students, an after school detention will have more impact on their behavior than an in-school suspension. For others, having a parent conference to write a clear behavior plan will yield more results than an out of school suspension. Therefore our administration, counselors, and social workers work very closely with teachers and parents to assign consequences appropriate for each student and his/her disciplinary issue. Additionally, our teachers meet twice a month to discuss interventions for students with continual behavior issues.

### **Organization Structures and Processes**

- Both administration and teachers are involved in shaping and driving the school vision. As previously mentioned, our founding goal is to educate our students in order to break the cycle of poverty through development of content knowledge, character, habits of work, and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. Through TAP or current focus is to develop a school-wide culture of revision. This long term goal drives our professional development in terms of classroom strategies, and our philosophy on discipline and character development. We discuss and field test best practices through house cluster meetings comprised of career, mentor, and master teachers and administration. We also discuss and analyze progress during our school-wide leadership meetings, which are attended by the middle school lead teacher and other school leaders on a bimonthly basis. Our academic goals are communicated at weekly cluster and bimonthly staff meetings and are posted around the school in February. Staff members are also a part of a regular book club. The most recent book club has focused their attention on *Transformational Learning* by Ron Berger.
- The principal shares the leadership of the middle school with the lead teacher and the classroom teachers. The principal meets weekly with the lead teacher to discuss the direction of the middle school and the lead and mentor teachers meet two to three times each week with middle school teachers to act as support for project planning, discipline, and professional development. The two mentor teachers meet weekly with other mentors, the master teachers, and administration to discuss professional development. The lead teacher meets bimonthly with other school leads and administration to discuss general school issues, concerns, and progress.
- Learning, experimentation, and reflection are becoming the norm for our middle school teachers. We have focused on a PBL curriculum this year, and in previous years have utilized an Expeditionary Learning

pedagogical framework. Teachers have collaborated intensely this year and last in order to design our curriculum to meet the standards and needs of our students. We have been encouraged to learn from our mistakes in an effort to constantly improve for the benefit of our kids. When we had hiccups in our projects, we didn't view them as failures but as opportunities to learn what we can do better next time.

- Our ongoing professional development is tailored to the needs of our middle school teachers and students. TAP master teachers, with the help of mentors, are designing and field testing effective middle grade level strategies students can use to help them think about and revise their work. After testing, these strategies will be taught to teachers who can then implement them in their own classrooms. Teachers will receive support by way of feedback, co-teaching, mentoring, etc. from master and mentor teachers in their implementation of these strategies. TAP allows teachers to discuss and learn about best practices and to receive support in their classrooms on a weekly basis.
- Although we are a charter school and not a part of a traditional district of schools, we are a part of several supporting networks. TAP helps us develop professionally in general as a staff and our teachers work with a teachers in other houses to vertically align and scaffold curriculum. Teachers wanting to attend more professional development or conferences are encouraged to do so and often the registration and travel fees are paid for by the school. Because we are so small we are able to easily align our curriculum vertically and horizontally, and use data to ensure that students are able to meet or exceed grade level standards and secure fluidity from one grade to the next. Right now, we are using PBL as a way infuse relevant projects with rigorous academic standards.
- Our teachers are held accountable for student success. In addition to receiving performance based bonuses for student achievement on ISTEP, teachers also are responsible for administering Acuity, and analyzing testing and standards-based grading data to design interventions and modify curriculum over the course of the year. Last year, after analyzing long term trend data from ISTEP we realized that we needed to do something different with our middle school program in order to better meet the needs of our students. After extensive research, the staff chose to use PBL three years ago. We have seen growth and evidence that our students are producing higher quality work, deepening content knowledge, and are engaged in more rigorous and meaningful work than in previous years. It is our goal that this deeper knowledge, as well as the thinking and problem solving skills they are developing, will help students when it comes to achieving higher levels of success on ISTEP, and also give students relevant skills to use within their own lives and their future professions.
- It is our business and desire to see that our students receive the best possible education in order to go onto college and be productive members of society. It is our goal that 100% of our students go to college and are successful. If we see the barriers our students must faces as “problems” rather than challenges to overcome, our students will get nowhere. In order for them to effectively learn how to problem solve and cope with things happening in their lives we have to model for them that these are just challenges to overcome. The staff is so adamant in their belief of this philosophy that everyone rated our school as a 4 in this category.
- CHA tries to include families and the community in our culture and decision making processes as much as possible. We host community, literacy, numeracy, and technology nights, have an ice cream social to kick off the year, host Title I meetings to update parents on available programs and services as well as expectations for students, have quarter conferences with parents, and invite parents and community members to exhibits and concerts. Additionally, we have PTO and booster clubs that give parents a voice and opportunities for further involvement at CHA. Finally, we have a school board comprised of community members and parents who help guide governance and improvement decisions at CHA.