

PATHWAY TO SUCCESS

Columbus
Preparatory
Academy raises
the bar on rigor

By Lyman Millard





Foreword

With little fanfare, Columbus Preparatory Academy regularly appears near the top of the charts when it comes to state test scores. In the 2016-17, this 800-student public charter school recorded Ohio's third-highest performance index score, a composite measure of student achievement, of any school in Ohio—charter or district. The school repeated this feat the next year, and in 2018-19, it ranked twelfth out of 3,225 schools on the performance index. This sterling track record outpaces some of the most sought-after and well-funded public schools in Ohio. What's more, it accomplishes these results while receiving less funding than the state average and serving a higher percentage of economically disadvantaged students than the typical suburban district.

How does the school accomplish this? In this profile, author Lyman Millard offers hints about their secret sauce. First, it's clear that Columbus Preparatory Academy has fostered a strong culture of high expectations, the *sine qua non* of an excellent school. Second, the school provides the extra supports that help students achieve challenging academic goals—things like extended school days, regular diagnostic assessment to pinpoint strengths and weaknesses, and nonacademic resources. Third, the school motivates higher student learning through a two-month initiative known as “The Blitz” (you'll have to read on to find out more).

To some, the laser-like focus on academics might sound a little too intense. But it's clear from this profile that school's educators have bought in—and just as importantly, students seem to embrace the challenge, too. Shay Losey, a student whom Lyman interviews, said, “They saw potential in me that I didn't see in myself and really pushed me to do my absolute best.” Today, Shay is taking college coursework while still in high school through College Credit Plus and is planning to attend Ohio Wesleyan.

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— AARON CHURCHILL
Ohio Research Director, Thomas B. Fordham Institute



Second grade teacher Alyssa Leathers leads a classroom lesson.

Creating a culture of high expectations

Most people who have worked in education reform in Ohio for any length of time have heard of Columbus Preparatory Academy. It's the school that did the near impossible in 2016: it scored a perfect 120 performance index score in math and a near-perfect overall score of 116.3. As is so often the case with such an incredible achievement, the school received as much criticism as kudos. Those who could not understand how any school could earn such eye-popping scores were quick to dismiss it as the result of “drill-and-kill” teaching to the test at the expense of critical thinking, creativity, and fostering a love of learning.

The story of Columbus Prep—the school, its students, and its educators—is, of course, much more complicated than a single performance index score, no matter how impressive. This is the story of a team of mission-driven educators who took over a school where only one-third of students were proficient, built a culture and approach to education that has achieved near 100 percent proficiency for each of the past seven years, and are working hard to understand and meet the individual needs of each and every one of their students.

As you pull into the parking lot at Columbus Preparatory Academy, you immediately understand that this is not a typical school. The stone façade of an imposing-looking main building adorned with large blue banners looms over you from a hilltop, giving you the feeling of a small college campus instead of a K-12 charter public school. Though impressive from the outside, the building has many of the challenges common to an aging facility built for another purpose. Originally constructed in the 1970s as a retirement community for Catholic clergy, the building also housed a health insurance company before Columbus Prep opened in the space in 2004 with about 150 students in grades K-4. Through a series of renovations and additions, the facility has been transformed to accommodate more than 800 students.

“When Chad Carr took over the school in 2007, it was really struggling,” recalls principal Erin Johnson. “There was no structure and no real focus on academics.” He put into place some fundamental changes that had an immediate impact. “Because he

knew students couldn't learn if they didn't feel safe, he focused on building a strong school culture with high expectations for everyone in the building."

As Chad and his team created a better environment for learning, they also changed the school's approach to academics. "He knew every child could be successful; you just have to give them the tools." Those tools included extending the school day and school year to give students the time they needed to cover more material. It also included biweekly and monthly assessments to monitor student progress and adjust teaching strategies. Instead of complaining about accountability as something to be suffered through or endured, the staff at Columbus Preparatory Academy leaned into it, celebrated it, and made it a fundamental part of motivating their students. Nowhere is this approach clearer than in something Columbus Preparatory Academy has become famous for: The Blitz.

The Blitz has to be seen to be believed. It's a two-month celebration of learning that is part academic challenge and part pep rally. "It feels like color wars from camp," says senior Shay Losey. The teachers at Columbus Preparatory Academy cover a full year's worth of academic content standards before February. Academic leaders use the February assessments to identify the five standards that need the most attention, and they become the focus of The Blitz. From that point until the state tests, the entire school is transformed into a hive of games, competitions, and activities designed to reinforce content, build confidence, and motivate students for the upcoming tests. "The kids love it," says Erin. "They're running out of their cars to get into school during The Blitz." Blitz days kick off with mini pep rallies celebrating student successes. Grade-level teams compete throughout the day in academic and creative challenges, earning points for cheers, songs, posters, costumes, and teamwork. "I love The Blitz," says Shay. "It's so much fun." The impact of The Blitz and Columbus Prep's other academic strategies can be seen in the school's being ranked in the top 1 percent of all schools in the state for each of the last seven years.

Some criticize Columbus Prep as putting test prep above the needs of their students, but the teachers and students see it very differently. When second-grade teacher Alyssa Leathers first interviewed at Columbus Prep, she admits she didn't

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— ALYSSA LEATHERS



have the best opinion of charter public schools. "I did my student teaching in a well-off suburban district school and heard a lot of negative comments." But when she started teaching at Columbus Prep, she discovered that she had much more control over the curriculum than in her previous school. "We're expected to have all of our students meet the standards, but we have a lot of freedom in how we get them there." That freedom comes with high expectations for academic success that is rooted in understanding and meeting the individual needs of each student. "We assess our students every two weeks so we can understand what each student needs to continue to make progress." She also found that she had much fewer discipline issues. "We keep them challenged and engaged all day, so most kids are just too busy to get into trouble."



Going above and beyond

Shay Losey first came to the school in the middle of third grade after moving to Columbus from West Virginia. “I came from a quiet rural school to CPA in the middle of The Blitz, and I thought it was a party,” remembered Shay. Shay had always been a good student and adapted easily to Columbus Prep’s rigor, but Shay’s teachers kept pushing for more. “For my teachers, it wasn’t enough for me to meet the standards; they wanted me to go beyond them. They kept telling me, ‘We know you can do better.’” In Shay’s old school, it was easy to hide if you just did your work, but at Columbus Prep, “it was really hard to be a slacker.” Shay initially felt the teachers were being too strict and unfair, but looking back, Shay has a different perspective. “They saw potential in me that I didn’t see in myself and really pushed me to do my absolute best.” In sixth grade, that motivation helped Shay earn a perfect score on the state English language arts test and a spot in Columbus Prep’s Ring of Honor.

When it came time to transition to high school, a local magnet school with an excellent reputation caught Shay’s interest. “I talked to some Columbus Prep alumni who went to the [magnet] school, and they said it was too focused on grades only and not students’ individual needs.” Deciding to stay at Columbus Prep, Shay had grown to understand that the school’s significant academic success was rooted in deep commitment to individual student growth. Each high school student has an individualized academic plan that is regularly adjusted to meet their goals and emerging needs. “The administration listens to us. We are empowered to talk about what we want in our school. Our voices really matter.”

Recently, other people have been listening to Shay’s voice, too. Last year, Shay won a citywide youth screenwriting competition for a short film “The Black Pill.” “I have always been a writer, and my teachers encouraged that creativity.” Columbus Prep also encouraged Shay to start earning college credits over the past two years, thanks to a partnership with Columbus State University.

“We have a lot of kids who graduate with a high school diploma and two years of college credits,” says Erin. Those credits will give Shay a head start next year at Ohio Wesleyan, and they’ll also help make college much more affordable.

Just as Columbus Prep’s teachers pushed Shay to always do better, they have been looking at how the school can continue to improve, as well. “We were so focused on getting to 120 [performance index score]. When we achieved it, we all looked at each other and said, ‘What’s next?’” The answer has been a significant focus on providing more supports for students. “We started looking at how we could transition our school culture to one that both emphasized high standards and high support,” said Erin. That has included building out the school intervention team and



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adding many more interventions. “We’ve invested a lot into academic support staff and counselors.”

Columbus Preparatory Academy has built one of the strongest reputations for academic excellence of any school in Ohio. For most educators, that accomplishment would be enough. But the team who continually pushes and inspires their students to improve has spent the last three years building a reputation for excellence in social and emotional support, as well. In doing so, they are helping give students like Shay near limitless possibilities in what they can achieve in their academics, in their creative pursuits, and in life.

