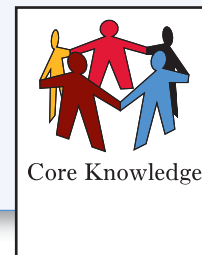


II. Newark Charter School Newark, Delaware



Grades 5–8

Enrollment: 648

Low-Income: 5%

Non-White: 15%

Situated on 19 leafy acres in New Castle County, Delaware, the Newark Charter School strives to help its approximately 650 students achieve “Excellence in Academics and Decorum.” The school was founded in 2001 by a group of local parents frustrated by a perceived lack of rigor and challenging content in Newark-area middle schools. Core Knowledge came highly recommended by a parent who volunteered to research curriculum options for the group’s charter school application.

Because Core Knowledge was its curriculum from the start, Newark has faced fewer implementation hurdles than other schools. But there have been challenges. For example, the staff members could find few classroom materials on the market aligned with the Core Knowledge Sequence in grades 5-8, so they visited other schools to get ideas and generated a lot of materials on their own. “In math, we brought in parents and math teachers and basically had a think tank,” says Greg Meece, Newark’s director.

He admits that the lack of materials might even have had a silver lining. “That forced us to really focus on what we were trying to teach,” says Mr. Meece. “Instead of letting textbooks drive the curriculum, the content drove the selection and creation of classroom materials.”

In addition, Mr. Meece has had to recruit aggressively to find teachers who can handle the curriculum, as well as the high expectations it embodies for students. “Someone coming out of an education school to teach middle school history might not have taken a lot of history classes,” he says. “That doesn’t mean they can’t learn it and teach it, but it’s not always the case we can find folks to come in with this kind of strong content knowledge. Nor do they come in with a sense that kids can learn this kind of high level content. They look at Shakespeare and Don Quixote and say, ‘Kids can’t read this! They should be allowed to select books according to their interests and reading level.’”

While he wishes education schools would make his recruiting challenge easier, he also stresses that teachers are very adaptable. For example, Newark combines language arts and history in an interdisciplinary Humanities approach in sixth grade, and applicants tend to have stronger backgrounds in the former than the latter. But recently a sixth grade teacher approached him about moving up to teach seventh grade history full time because she had fallen in love with the subject. “This is the same teacher who said, ‘I’m good at teaching reading and love to read, but I’m anxious about teaching history’ a few years ago when I hired her,” says Mr. Meece.



The Core Knowledge curriculum has been a particular boon to seventh and eighth grade teachers, who at Newark can now count on students entering those traditional “junior high” grades well prepared and equipped with a common set of knowledge and skills. Indeed, the board and administration is conducting a serious study to assess the feasibility of opening a K-4 elementary school charter in order to extend the benefits of a common, sequenced curriculum down into the elementary grades.

“One year we had only half the fifth grade enrollment because we were out of room,” says Mr. Meece. “The next year we did have the room and we had to add the other half of the enrollment as sixth graders. Our sixth grade teachers noticed a big difference in the kids who’d been here in fifth grade compared with the others. It was much easier for our teachers to work with the kids who had the Core Knowledge curriculum for fifth grade. That’s why we are looking at incorporating the elementary grades.”

Newark’s staff members have learned a powerful lesson: If you teach it, students will learn it. And the reverse is also true. Mr. Meece likes to recount another anecdote that, for him, vividly illustrates that principle. Every morning he starts the day with a “Core Knowledge Challenge Question” over the public address system. Classes put their answers in a box, and the following morning he announces which classes got the answer correct.

One day, my question dealt with the Boston Massacre, which is covered in Core Knowledge in the fourth grade. No homeroom got that question right. The next week I played a piece from Beethoven ... and most classes got that right because it had been covered in the grades 5-8 in the Core Knowledge curriculum. That told me that important things are not being covered in the schools, but that if you did teach it, even something as esoteric as a Beethoven piece, they will learn it. In many middle schools, history and geography is almost nonexistent, the science content is very weak, art is almost all hands on with no content about art techniques and history and how it relates to other aspects of cultural history. And that means a whole lot of good learning isn’t taking place.

The attention to challenging content shows up in student assessment results. In 2003-4, 95 percent of Newark’s students met or exceeded Delaware standards in reading and 93 percent met or exceeded standards in math, well above the goals the state set for schools in those subjects (57 percent and 33 percent respectively).

Of course, having a logically sequenced and very specific curriculum has given Newark’s extended family another benefit—clarity. “Teachers know what it is they are supposed to teach, administrators know what they are supposed to see teachers teaching, the teachers talk to each other about what’s being taught, the parents easily see what’s being taught and where it’s going next year.”

That clarity provides a solid foundation for another Newark hallmark—professional collaboration. Teachers meet frequently both “horizontally,” to coordinate the curriculum across disciplines, and “vertically,” to ensure a tight-fitting sequence of content across grade levels. Core Knowledge “makes it much easier to plan lessons, to do assessment, and to make sure the students are able to make the connections and fit everything together,” says Mr. Meece.

Remarkably, even in a charter school founded by parents, the right kind of rich, common curriculum can help increase parent involvement. Of course, parents always enjoy attending special events like the Renaissance Fair, Ancient Civilizations Day, and the Invention Convention. But, in addition, “The parents are picking up books here to do some research and homework themselves to be able to help out and have conversations with their kids about what they’re learning,” says Mr. Meece. “We’re using Core Knowledge to build a bridge between the school and the home so everyone is learning and talking about the same topics.”

Nearly All Students Meeting State Standards At Newark Charter School

