

PATHWAY TO SUCCESS:

Columbus Collegiate Academy embodies high expectations for all students

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By Ellen Belcher





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Columbus Collegiate Academy (CCA) epitomizes the relentlessness and vision necessary to close achievement gaps in urban education. Started in the basement of a church with 57 students in 2008, CCA evolved into one of the city’s top-performing middle schools. It earned national awards for the gains achieved by students who are overwhelmingly disadvantaged, and grew into a network of schools serving 600 students. I visited CCA in its original location in 2009. Despite its unassuming surroundings, I knew right away this school was different. It was the type of place that inspires you the moment you step through the door. Its hallways echoed with the sound of students engaged in learning. College banners and motivational posters reminded students—and visitors—of why they were there. Teachers buzzed with energy, motivated by a combination of urgency and optimism—all students can and will learn. Its founder and visionary leader, Andrew Boy, spoke deliberately and matter of factly about the success CCA would help each student achieve. He was aware of and sensitive to the challenges facing his students—hunger, trauma, housing instability, and the myriad complications of poverty. But these obstacles would not become excuses upon which to hang blanket statements about children. Boy knew that for the most at-risk students, low expectations victimize them even further—and they deserve better.

Columbus Collegiate Academy - West, a replica of the original CCA, opened in 2012 in Franklinton in one of the city’s poorest neighborhoods. The school’s relentless focus on academics and high expectations both academically and behaviorally are exemplified through Jahnea’s story. An eighth-grader, she tells about her plans for high school as well as college and beyond—a vision for her own life made possible in no small part because of the expectations CCA leaders and teachers have for her and their willingness to do whatever it takes to help her get there. We hope her story reminds you that this is what’s possible when we invest in and empower high-quality charter schools.

— JAMIE DAVIES O’LEARY
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Thirteen-year-old Jahnea Potts doesn't mind that her teachers and family call her an old soul. Intended as a compliment about her uncommon maturity, the comment reminds her of a special bond that she shares with her beloved grandfather.

Both Jahnea and her papa have premature gray spots—evidence, she believes, that they are wise beyond their years.

“He gives me a lot of advice,” Jahnea said of Eric Potts, age fifty-six. “He talks about our family’s core values”—including, she said, integrity, discipline, and honesty.

Jahnea will be an eighth grader at Columbus Collegiate Academy - West (CCA West), one of three charter schools in the United Schools Network in Columbus. Columbus Collegiate Academy, the network’s flagship school and the model for CCA West, has been recognized nationally for the extraordinary learning gains realized by students and for its rare ability to close achievement gaps between low-income students and their more well-off peers. United Schools has grown from fifty-seven students in 2008 to 600 students today. In 2014, it opened its first elementary school, and the plan is to open a second in Fall 2017.

In 2014-15, eighth graders at both United Schools Network middle school campuses significantly bested the statewide proficiency test averages in reading and math. At CCA West, 85 percent of eighth graders were proficient in reading—17 percentage points above the statewide average—while 79 percent were proficient in math, a 25-percentage-point positive difference. Compared to the results for Columbus City Schools, the proficiency rates are even more stark—a 37 percentage-point difference in reading and a 46 percentage-point one in math.

The results are remarkable because the schools are located in two of Columbus’s lowest-income neighborhoods, and their students—the overwhelming majority of whom are socioeconomically disadvantaged—typically come to sixth grade scoring two, even three, years below grade level. That means that not only has the United Schools Network accomplished the difficult task of getting students up to speed academically by the time they graduate from middle school, but it has



also ensured that students will perform on par with—or even outperform—students who are more socioeconomically advantaged.

Bilan Potts, Jahnea’s mother, said that except for her daughter’s year in Kindergarten, she has always sent her children to charter schools. “It’s no secret” in her West Side neighborhood, she said, that Columbus City Schools are behind. She investigated CCA after hearing about it from a friend.

“I had not twenty but fifty questions for them [the staff],” she said. In particular, she wanted to know what CCA would do for an advanced student.

A single mother of three who also is caring for two children of a friend, Potts, age thirty-two, works at a Columbus bank. She’s already planning to send her fourth-grade daughter, who struggles academically, to CCA in two years.

“I have a child who’s behind and a child who’s advanced. That’s what CCA is about,” and “I don’t have to go broke” to send them to a private school for their needs to be met.

Housed in a century-old former Columbus City Schools building that is cold in the winter and stifling in the spring, CCA has managed to draw in 220 students in the sixth through eighth grades, in spite of the building’s age and appearance. It wins over families based on its nose-to-the-grindstone focus on academics and culture that honors discipline and achievement.

"I don't think that a lot of the people [families] we recruit are used to wonderful facilities," said Kathryn Anstaett, CCA's director. "It's the people who are greeting them and how they're spoken to" that attracts parents and students.

CCA supporters have pledged \$1.4 million for a \$6 million building-improvement plan—money that could earn a matching amount from the Ohio Facilities Construction Commission. As compared to the resources available to traditional public schools for building construction and renovation, the new state-grant competition available to high-performing charter schools is still not enough to mitigate the funding inequities that charter schools face in Ohio.

Relentless in its mission to prepare students for demanding high schools and college, each classroom at CCA is named after a university. From their first day as sixth graders, students are encouraged to imagine themselves earning a degree. Potts pointed out that even the youngest students are taken on college visits.

A regular at parent meetings, Potts said that she once questioned the math curriculum, and "a few weeks later, they [teachers] were developing an after-school [math-enrichment] program."

"It meant a lot to me," she said, that the concern was dealt with quickly.

Potts said she was particularly impressed by the faculty's commitment. Students may contact their teachers via text or telephone until 8 p.m. or until 10 p.m. the day before a test.

CCA students are grouped according to assessment scores in an effort to catch up students who are behind—a strategy the students know and can speak about.

Always punctuating her sentences with "ma'am," Jahnea explained that last year, the Ohio Northern class was struggling, while the DePaul class had the advanced learners. Few students object to the groupings, Jahnea said, because everyone is aware that the assignments are designed to help each young person move ahead two grade levels in a single academic year.

To introduce new students to the school's expectations and to reinforce its goals to returning

students, students spend three days in Culture Camp at the start of each year. In addition to getting to know their teachers and building excitement about the work ahead, students learn about CCA's mantra to STRIVE: S stands for scholarship, T for teamwork, R for respect, I for intelligence, V for virtue, and E for effort.

The school's hallmark reinforcement is a STRIVE paycheck given out every Thursday that reflects each student's make-believe earnings for that week.

Andy Boy, the thirty-eight-year-old founder of the United Schools Network, said the paycheck

system is "hugely important" for creating a positive climate, establishing goals, and measuring progress. Pay stubs are an immediate and tangible way to validate students' work. For instance, exemplary participation in class earns students \$5 to their check. Showing exemplary respect also results in a \$5 bonus. Forgetting to get a paycheck signed at home and returned the following day results in \$20 off next week's pay.

The accounting is tracked as precisely as student grades to reward positive behavior and emphasize habits and traits required for success in school, college, and the world of work.

Each week, students celebrate the highest earners. Their "money" can be used to purchase items from the STRIVE store. Students have to save, though. A CCA sweater costs \$3,500. Pocket folders run \$250—more than three times the \$70 minimum students must earn in a week in order to attend that week's celebration activity. In addition to reinforcing good habits and instilling a sense of personal responsibility, the paycheck system imparts lessons on financial literacy. Consistently a top earner, Jahnea routinely earns \$150 or more per week.

Luke McClellan, dean of students, said that the overwhelming majority of students are motivated by the paycheck system. "They're really competitive. They want to have the highest paycheck in the school."

A student ambassador who is often called on to explain the school's philosophy and practices, Jahnea said she values CCA's emphasis on high expectations

"I have a child who's behind and a child who's advanced. That's what CCA is about. I don't have to go broke to send them to a private school for their needs to be met."

— BILAN POTTS

and good behavior. “They’re preparing you for college... I don’t like it when kids are disruptive. It agitates me a lot. They don’t let things slide.”

Students who interrupt class are sent to the “Culture Office,” where they fill out a reflection form explaining their perspective on why they were told to leave class. They then meet with McClellan, who teacher Caitlin Hughes calls a “saint” because of his seemingly infinite patience and ability to connect with often-melodramatic middle schoolers. Though most of the infractions are minor, McClellan gets an average of fourteen referrals a day. Though he’d like the number to be fewer, he argues that the no-nonsense environment is critical to learning.

Hughes, Jahnea’s favorite teacher and a seventh-grade English and language arts teacher, said having McClellan so involved “alleviates a lot of stress on teachers.”

“We are able to discipline wisely,” she said. “Nine times out of ten, that student just needs a bit more love that day.”

Jahnea said she wants students to be held to account. Recalling a new teacher she found too forgiving last year, she said, “He’s been getting meaner because I told him he should. And it’s been working. They [the students] are starting to get their act together.”

Proud of her grades and paychecks, Jahnea said, “I don’t like a grade that’s 95 or less. Getting a B is disappointing to me.” In sixth grade, she scored 100 percent on a comprehensive English and language arts exam. That score earned her lunch over the summer with teacher Alicia Harris.

Although she’s no longer in Harris’ class, Jahnea remains close to the teacher, who continues to loan Jahnea books from her “super-secret library”—a closet at the school.

“One thing I love about Jahnea,” Harris said, “is when something is tough, she doesn’t give up. She’s going to work hard even when other students aren’t... I told her that the way she could push herself was by reading lots of books.”

Anstaett, the school director, said, “Our inclination is to assume a lot of kids need extra help. But Jahnea is an example of a child who pushes us to do more for our high-performing students.”

CCA’s hiring, training, and mentoring processes are intense. Following a long online application, a job interview can last all day. Applicants are always required to teach a class, and they may be asked to teach a second one after being critiqued—a quick way to learn how well candidates respond to and incorporate feedback. If school is out of session, adults sit in for students, acting out various classroom challenges. Once a teacher is hired, he or she completes a mandatory four-week training over the summer (returning teachers attend for three weeks).

Training includes strategies for engaging families, and there’s a heavy emphasis on effective classroom-management techniques.

Teachers and students are versed about SLANT, a phrase that teachers use when they see the class losing focus.

The call out is a reminder, not a reprimand. S means to sit up, L to listen, A to ask and answer questions, N to nod for understanding, and T to track the speaker.

Jahnea said tracking is important because it’s a way to signal a teacher to slow down or start over “if we have confused looks on our faces.”

This fall, CCA’S school day will begin at 9 a.m. and end at 4 p.m., while the school year is about a week longer than that of the Columbus City Schools.

Previously, classes started an hour earlier, but Boy said teachers need time for team meetings and to participate in professional development. “Without that hour in the morning, we have been keeping people very late into the evening,” he said.

After-school programs are offered three days per week until 5:30 p.m., but students must arrange for transportation home—a challenge that Jahnea said limits participation. Last year, she attended an after-school activity focused on Japan, joined the mock-trial club, and began taking violin lessons.

Strong in math and technology, Jahnea said she has considered studying engineering in college but is most interested in becoming a lawyer—like her mother’s cousin, Nicol Madison. “She’s not rich,” said Jahnea, “but she has money in her pocket.”

Madison, a graduate of Spelman College and The Ohio State University’s Moritz College of Law,

*“I don’t like a grade that’s 95 or less. Getting a B is disappointing to me.”
In sixth grade, she scored 100 percent on a comprehensive English and language arts exam.*

isn't surprised by Jahnea's aspirations. "She's not embarrassed to be smart or different"—an ethic she believes Jahnea's grandfather, mother, and CCA have imparted.

Even as a sixth-grader, Jahnea was planning for her next step after middle school. Spurred by a CCA staffer who told her about [A Better Chance](#), which helps place minority students in rigorous high schools, Jahnea began researching the program. She recently learned she was accepted and is eligible for assistance. She hopes to attend [Girard College](#), a tuition-free boarding school in Philadelphia for students from single-parent homes.

CCA tries to direct students to selective and high-performing high schools, both public and private, by



holding high school fairs where families and students learn about their options and schools can recruit students. Though some private schools offer scholarships to CCA students, most CCA students ultimately attend a Columbus City high school.

What is Jahnea happy and excited about?

"I like my life," she said. "I struggle a lot. But I have a lot of privileges, compared to a lot of people

I've met. I can rely on the home I'm in. I know I'm going to be able to have something to eat every day. I'm able to have an after-school snack. I have a lot of clothes. We have cable. I have a comfortable bed. And I have my mom and my grandfather."

Columbus Collegiate Academy – West (CCA West)

Home District: Columbus City Schools

Enrollment: 210

Grades Served: 6th – 8th

School Director: Kathryn Anstaett

Operations Director: Brett McAdoo

Mission: Columbus Collegiate Academy – West provides college-preparatory middle school education to students in Columbus, Ohio through solid academic preparation that opens doors to promising futures.

Opened: 2012

Percent Economically Disadvantaged: 80.9%

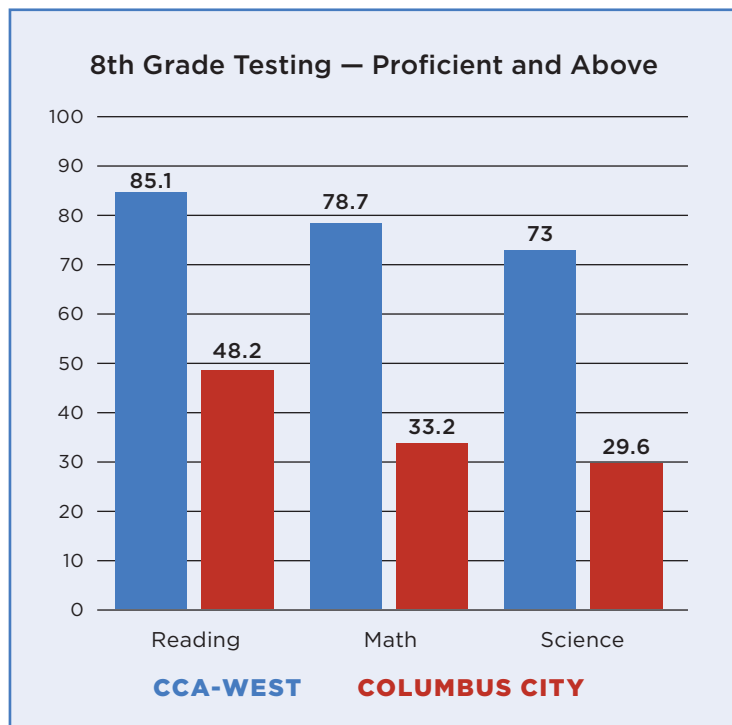
Percent Non-White: 65%

Performance Index Grade: C

Value Added Grade: A

Other Highlights

- Auditor of the State Award 2014 and 2015
- Excellent Schools Network, 2014 Instructional Leadership Award (Kathryn Anstaett)



Source: Performance data comes from Ohio's 2014-15 interactive Local Report Cards.



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