

# PATHWAY TO SUCCESS:

Citizens Leadership Academy develops  
strong citizens and scholars

By Ellen Belcher



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Citizens Leadership Academy (CLA) is preparing its middle schoolers for success in high school, college, and life—and not just academically. CLA, whose population is 79 percent economically disadvantaged and made up almost entirely of students of color, is second among all public schools in the city on student growth. The school’s eighth graders reach and surpass proficiency at a rate that is more than three times that of their peers across the city. Reading and math proficiency rates at CLA are more than double those of Cleveland’s. No matter how you slice the data, CLA is providing academic preparation that would likely be unavailable to them if the schools—and its broader high-performing charter network (Breakthrough Schools)—did not exist. And yet its academic prowess is just the tip of the iceberg. The school’s model—as captured in its name, *Citizens Leadership Academy*—prioritizes and cultivates broader attributes and mindsets necessary for long-term success. As you’ll read in this profile about one student, Keith Lazare Jr., CLA asks students to consider what it means to be active, engaged citizens and community members. Students are asked to grapple not only with tough math problems or reading passages—strengthening the stick-with-it-ness known in education circles as “grit”—but also to develop a sense of responsibility, ownership, and persistence in all aspects of their character. And this is not done in top-down fashion, either. Instead, CLA’s leaders and staff have created an environment where students advocate for themselves. These are skills that will no doubt serve them well in high school, college, professional and personal relationships, job interviews, board rooms, and beyond. CLA cares as much about empowering students and helping them hone their voices as it does about high test scores. This is a testament to their commitment to their students’ lifelong success as well as to the school’s deep understanding of what it takes to lift students in poverty and propel them toward the success they so deserve.

— JAMIE DAVIES O’LEARY  
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# PATHWAY TO SUCCESS



*Teacher, Carolyn Bunjevac and Keith Lazare Jr.*

Keith Lazare Jr. is in both honors math and English classes at Citizens Leadership Academy (CLA) because last year's eighth-grade student council members had an idea. They argued that some students at the public charter school in Cleveland's struggling Hough neighborhood weren't being sufficiently challenged.

Administrators acted on the students' recommendation to add high-level classes and celebrated their advocacy.

"Advanced people should be learning advanced things," said 13-year-old Keith, who enjoys math and science almost as much as he enjoys basketball. "They [some students] feel like [the class] is too hard. I think it's like a privilege. I don't like doing things I already know how to do."

CLA is one of twelve Breakthrough Schools, one of the highest-performing charter networks in Ohio. All told, Breakthrough enrolls 3,500 students and hopes to serve an additional 2,500 students by 2020. Celebrated for its success with underprivileged students, Breakthrough has won considerable support from Cleveland's foundations and philanthropic community, including a \$10 million commitment in 2015 from the owners of the Cleveland Browns, Dee and Jimmy Haslam.

Although Breakthrough's schools receive limited funding from the Cleveland Municipal School District—the only such opportunity for charter schools to receive local funds in Ohio—the network still has to engage in fundraising because of broad funding inequities facing Ohio's public charter schools.

Citizens Leadership Academy also is one of two Ohio schools that belong to the national 152-school EL Education consortium (formerly known as Expeditionary Learning), the brainchild of the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Outward Bound USA. Instruction is largely project-based and infused with character education, emphasizing grit, integrity, and personal and civic responsibility.

Math problems, science experiments, reading and writing assignments, and extracurriculars typically involve a societal challenge or have a practical application—like the need for advanced classes, the cause CLA's Student Council took up.

Getting students outside the classroom—to visit the Cleveland Clinic's Lerner Research Institute or the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument, for example—is a priority. The school dismisses at 1 p.m. on Fridays so that teachers have time for professional development and reviews of students' progress, an example of the school's focus on reflective teaching.

Founded in 2011, CLA ranked second in Cleveland for students' overall growth last year, earning an A for "value added" on its 2015-16 Ohio School Report Card. It also earned As for the "value added" progress of two subgroups of students—children who test among the lowest-achieving in the state and students with disabilities. The school's 273 sixth through eighth graders, most of whom live nearby (and about half of whom live within two miles), are overwhelmingly economically disadvantaged, and nearly all are African-American.





Like many Ohio schools with high concentrations of high-poverty students, CLA received a D on the state report card for its “performance index,” which measures the percentage of students testing proficient in subject areas. Principal Sydney Gruhin said that the number of children meeting proficiency standards has increased, but that CLA has struggled to meet the state’s increasing overall passage

rates required for a top grade. Carolyn Bunjevac teaches Keith’s math class. Petite, soft-spoken, and constantly on the move, she peppers her sixteen students with questions, counting down the minutes or seconds she gives them to complete a task. During one class in October, she introduced the concept of slope through a real-world case study:

Judging from the graph she just distributed, at what point will Company X’s cost of electricity be the same as Company Y’s, considering that Company X charges less than Company Y for small amounts, but Company Y’s rate of increase is less than Company X’s?

After she reads the problem, she asks the students to write down their first thoughts.

*I should see pencils moving. I’m circulating, noticing your sentences. Who has an observation? Heads up. Can anyone make a prediction? What can I say about slope? Voices off in 5. Let’s vote.*

She continued: *Now I want to give you time to grapple independently. What’s the formula? Eyes on me in three minutes. Is anyone willing to be a tutor? Whatever question you have, someone else will answer. Call on someone who hasn’t gotten his or her participation points yet. Let’s check back in*

*“Advanced people should be learning advanced things, ... some students feel like the class is too hard. I think it’s like a privilege. I don’t like doing things I already know how to do.”*

— KEITH LAZARE JR.

*Citizens Leadership Academy middle school campus*

*with our learning target. It’s our first day doing this; tell me about your mastery. Everyone has to check in, so I know where to go with this tomorrow.*

With the clock ticking, time flew. All students but one were immersed in the work. (Bunjevac explained this student had been absent lately, and she’ll see him privately to find out

what’s going on. He’s bright and catches up quickly on work he misses, she explained.)

At the end of the sixty-five-minute class, the students’ grappling—a word CLA teachers use repeatedly—was having the desired effect. Eyes were lighting up with understanding.

Keith, who participates twice a week in an hour-long, after-school math enrichment club as well as a mentoring program, said Bunjevac is one of his favorite teachers. “She is always pushing us to do our best,” he said. “She’s always talking about high school.”

Bunjevac said she aims for “student talk as opposed to teacher talk” in her classes. “Students do a lot of the heavy lifting,” she said. “They take ownership instead of my telling them the answer or how to solve a problem.”

She sets time limits for tasks and counts down the seconds remaining to build a “a sense of urgency.”

“I want them to learn to use their class time well—to push through when there’s a distraction,” she said. “In high school and college, they’re going to have a lot of distractions and free time.”

Leris Lazare, Keith’s mother, said she and her husband moved Keith and his 11-year-old brother

Nathan to Breakthrough Schools because they were struggling to afford the tuition at a faith-based school. They chose Breakthrough because of its reputation for strong academics.

“We love the expectations, the learning concepts they have [at CLA],” Lazare said. “It’s hands-on. They [students] take what they learn in the classroom and they apply it.” Keith, who especially looks forward to science labs, doesn’t “get bored and drift.”

Lazare, a loan officer who immigrated at 18 to the United States from Dominica, said she wishes the school offered foreign language classes.

A carpenter, Keith’s father, Keith Sr., said he’s impressed with CLA because teachers “don’t hide anything from parents” about students’ behavior or their academic progress.

Keith Jr. has a theory about why he and his friends earn good grades and rarely find themselves in the dean’s office. “The instructions are clear,” he said. “We’re not confused. When a student gets in trouble, they [teachers] let you speak. The consequences will be fair. It’s good to explain why you did what you did.”

Ricardo Franklin Sr. said CLA is intensely focused on ensuring that students know the school’s norms, which are reinforced using a common language. Franklin, who has been promoted from CLA dean to the founding principal of a new Breakthrough middle school that will open next year, said all new teachers receive a list of words and phrases in their training that they are asked to use throughout the year.

When students misbehave, they’re first given a “redirect.” Multiple “redirects” may result in having to write a “reflection.” “Referrals”—involving a trip to Franklin’s office—are reserved for more egregious misbehavior.

“Every disciplinary action starts with a conversation,” said Franklin, who estimates that he gets about 100 “referrals” per week, most of which result in after-school detention. “We want our students to be able to advocate for themselves—whether they’re right or wrong.”

When students return to class after seeing Franklin, they must have a “restorative conversation,” taking maybe fifteen seconds, with their teacher. The exchange usually includes an apology and a fist bump or a handshake.

Among the oldest staff members at CLA, Franklin, 37, “is a really good role model for students who have a hard time with their behavior,” Keith said. On Fridays, “he tells us to be safe and make smart decisions over the weekend.”

“Safe,” Franklin said, has a “very specific definition” at CLA. “It means protect the investment that is yourself. It comes down to them [the students] making smart choices.”

Shelly Saltzman, the founder of CLA, said that Franklin understands that “supporting students in a social-emotional way in middle school involves a lot more than strict consequences of rules. He understands that it’s all about the conversation.”

Franklin, who grew up in a single-parent home with five siblings, said he knows the temptations and threats children in high-poverty neighborhoods face. He remembers what it’s like, he said, to “believe no one cares” and to “hide myself inside a school building.”

He recalled that this year, CLA accepted an incoming eighth-grader, which can be a challenging transition because most CLA students started school together at a Breakthrough elementary school or have been at CLA since sixth grade. The student’s mother was desperate to move her daughter out of a school for troubled children. On

the second day, the student was involved in a “verbal altercation,” and there were complaints that she shouldn’t be allowed to remain.

Franklin resisted the complaints and invited the student to join his twice-weekly leadership class, where she thrived. She’s carrying a 3.6 GPA and at a recent event brought teachers and students to tears when she recited a poem she had written about bullying.

“Responsible” is another word students hear a lot—the need to be responsible students and responsible citizens, even as young people. To emphasize good citizenship, the school assigns each grade an “essential question” that is integrated into lessons throughout the year.

The sixth grade discusses what makes a community thrive. In seventh grade, students consider what makes a morally courageous person. Eighth-graders, who travel to Washington, D.C. as a culminating “expedition,” ask, “What makes a critically engaged person?”



The questions also are discussed in “crew,” the twenty-five minutes set aside every morning for teachers to set the tone for the day, and also on Fridays in the school’s “community meeting.” The goal of the gatherings is to create bonds that are nurtured and negotiated.

Keith said that he likes hearing others’ opinions in “crew,” where he and his classmates have learned about Internet safety, leadership habits, bullying, and breast cancer.

“I had no idea how many lives it [breast cancer] took,” Keith said. “I’m learning a lot, and I get to meet with my friends.”

Gruhin, CLA’s principal, said “crew” meetings, the school-wide “crew” curriculum, and the community gatherings are critical to the school’s success.

“The purpose is 100 percent relationship-building between students and staff,” she said. “Our teachers build very close connections with the students in their ‘crew.’ In order for students to feel welcomed and engaged—which is something we pride ourselves on—we have to take time to build relationships.”

Keith’s mother, Leris, has seen those relationships in action and the difference it makes.

“They’re preparing them for high school and beyond. They’re starting them now.”

# CITIZENS LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

**Home District:** Cleveland Municipal School District (CMSD)

**Enrollment:** 270

**Grades Served:** 6-8

**School Principal:** Sydney Gruhin

**Model Education Leader/School Founder:** Shelly Saltzman

**Director of Operations:** Davis Karousis

**Mission:** To prepare our middle school students to lead in academics, service, and civic engagement during high school, college, and beyond.

**Opened:** 2011

**Percent Economically Disadvantaged:** 79%

**Percent Non-White:** 98%

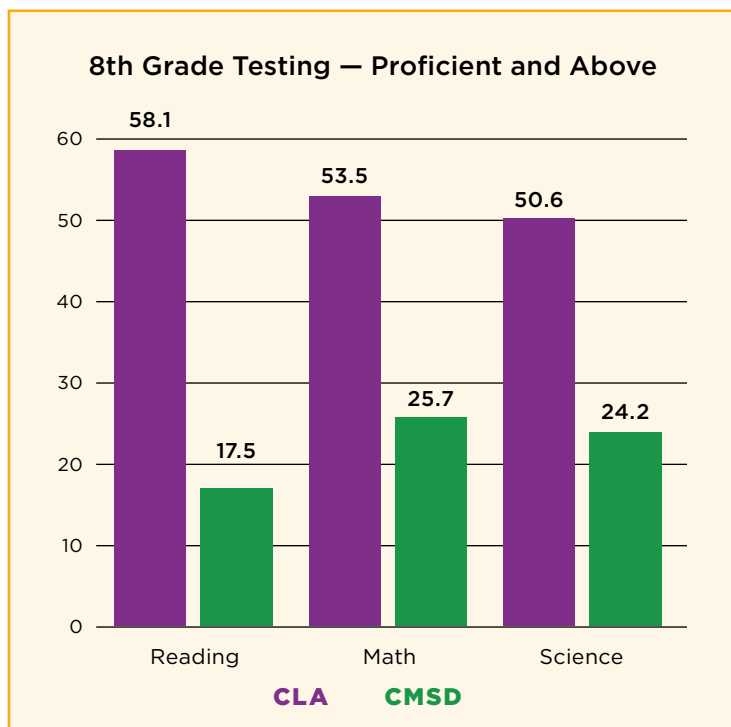
**Performance Index Grade:** D

**Value Added Overall Grade:** A

**Value Added Component Grade:** A

**Other Highlights:**

- Second highest performing school in Cleveland on student growth
- Earned statewide Momentum award from Ohio Department of Education for school-wide progress
- One of two Ohio schools that belong to the national 152-school Expeditionary Learning Education consortium



Source: Performance data come from Ohio’s 2015-16 interactive Local Report Cards. Enrollment data come from the 2016-17 school year.



