


A Case Study Evaluation of the Capitol Learning Academy: Inaugural 2019-2020 School Year



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report describes the results of a case study evaluation of Capitol Learning Academy (CLA), a private elementary school in Washington, DC. This innovative school utilizes a unique instructional approach that is based heavily on the work of Dr. Sugata Mitra and the concept of Self-Organized Learning Environments (SOLEs). Using this instructional model, students at the school are provided nearly full control over the learning process. Rather than centering the majority of instruction on specific curriculum standards and teacher-led lessons, students are provided resources, such as laptop computers and non-fiction reading materials, and are encouraged to identify topics in which they are interested and then explore them at their own pace. The 2019-2020 school year marked CLA's inaugural year and was the topic of this case study research. While the school operated normally during the first portion of the year, as with other schools across America, it was forced to pivot to a fully virtual implementation of its learning model for March, April, May, and June in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study examined parents' and other stakeholders' perceptions of the school's efficacy in fostering student engagement and learning during its inaugural year. Using a mixed-method case-study design, the research team collected data from measures including a parent survey, comprehensive interviews with parents, teachers, and CLA board members, and a site visit/observation of the school's instructional day.

Findings suggested that parents hold positive impressions of the school and the impact that they perceive it is having on their children's learning and development. Parents expressed a high-level of satisfaction with the school's responsiveness, level of communication, and ability to leverage technology to deliver instruction virtually. Parents were often highly complimentary of the school's instructional leadership and cited numerous examples of how the school has leveraged community resources, such as the Capitol Hill Arts Workshop, in fostering real-world, experiential forms of learning for students. CLA teachers and board members also highlighted these features as key strengths of the school.

Though generally positive overall, parents offered somewhat varied impressions concerning the school's self-directed learning model, as well as the learning gains attained by their children during the past year. Though parents appeared to appreciate many aspects of the SOLE learning model and were pleased with the personalized attention their children get by virtue of the school's small size -- many parents noted that they would like to see their children receive more frequent teacher instruction in the core subject areas to balance against the already abundant time that students spend working independently. Given the school's cross grade-level configuration, findings also suggested that students may benefit from more grade-level specific differentiation and more formal progress monitoring.

In terms of student learning outcomes attained during the year, parents frequently highlighted "whole-child" types of improvements that they had seen, including those related to their children's confidence, sense of self-awareness, and sense of responsibility with learning. On the survey, parents expressed unanimous agreement that their children had improved their reading ability, their knowledge in civics and social studies, and their sense of agency/control over their learning. Though many parents expressed positive impressions of their children's learning in math

and science, less consensus was exhibited in terms of students' growth in these subjects. In providing their concluding thoughts on the year, parents expressed that they felt positively about their children's experiences as students at CLA and were excited for them to continue attending the school as it grows and develops in the years ahead. Notably, parents indicated, many enthusiastically, that they would recommend the school to parents of other elementary-age children.

A Case Study Evaluation of the Capitol Learning Academy: Inaugural 2019-2020 School Year

The present report describes the results of a case study evaluation of the Capitol Learning Academy (CLA), an innovative private school serving elementary-age students in Washington, DC. This case study employed a mixed-method design and examined perceptions of student engagement and learning, as well as parent and student perceptions of the school's instructional program during its inaugural year.

As described by the school's leadership team, "Capitol Learning Academy is a school that is adaptable to and ready for the unknown future that lies ahead." The school takes an individualized approach to learning: Students are given personalized learning goals and provided resources to achieve mastery of these objectives at their own pace. To achieve their learning goals, students are encouraged to engage with the community through field trips, real-world projects, the arts, and outdoor activities. In specific, the school's instructional program is structured around the concept of Self-Organized Learning Environments (SOLEs). This approach is heavily influenced by the work of Professor Sugata Mitra and seeks to foster critical thinking and self-mastery by using a combination of Montessori and Socratic teaching methods.

The 2019-2020 school year marked Capitol Learning Academy's first year of existence. During this inaugural year, six students, ranging from kindergarten to fourth grade, attended CLA as part of a single "class." For this case study, the Center for Research and Reform in Education at Johns Hopkins University (JHU CRRE) conducted a series of interviews and surveys with school stakeholders, including parents, to assess perceptions of the school's development, as well as its instructional impact on students. The evaluation questions listed below were used to guide this research.

Evaluation Questions

1. To what extent does attending Capitol Learning Academy lead to improved personal and educational outcomes for students?
 - To what extent does attending Capitol Learning Academy lead to improved student learning?
 - How are students' learning-specific attitudes (academic self-efficacy, motivation, and engagement) impacted by attending Capitol Learning Academy?
2. To what degree are parents satisfied with their child's experience at Capitol Learning Academy?
 - What changes (if any) have they observed in their child's engagement and learning in school?
 - What features of the school are perceived as the most (and least) important?
 - What, if anything, would they like to change?
3. What are students' experiences in attending Capitol Learning Academy?
 - What are the school's main instructional activities?
 - Which instructional activities are perceived as the most (and least) helpful, and why?

Method

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-method case study design to obtain qualitative and quantitative evidence concerning Capitol Learning Academy's efficacy in fostering student engagement and learning. Data collection included a parent survey, as well as comprehensive interviews with parents, teachers, and CLA board members. These data were collected in the spring of 2020 (May-June). To obtain descriptive information concerning the school's pedagogical approach, the research team also visited the school to conduct an observation of daily instructional activities in December 2019.

Participants

Participants included parents of CLA students, members of the CLA Board of Directors, and CLA teachers. Parents of all six CLA students were interviewed and participated in a survey, while interviews were conducted with three members of the Board of Directors, as well as with three teachers. The participating teachers included the CLA "learning facilitators" from the fall and spring, respectively, as well as one teacher who provided art lessons to students as part of the Capitol Hill Arts Workshop.

Measures

Data were collected from the participant groups using a variety of methods. These are discussed in greater depth below. The specific instruments and measures used for this case study are provided in the Appendix.

Parent survey. The JHU CRRE research team administered a survey to all students' parents to assess their perceptions of the quality of instruction and climate in the school and to gather perceptions of their child's engagement, learning, and development. The survey consisted of roughly 15 Likert-based items, as well as four open-ended questions in which participants provided narrative feedback. The survey was administered online to parents in the spring (May-June) of 2020 using the Qualtrics online survey platform. The parents of all but one of the school's students completed the survey during the administration window.

Parent interviews. All Capitol Learning Academy parents were interviewed individually by phone in the spring of 2020. The interviews addressed similar topics as the parent survey but gathered more granular and contextualized information with regard to parents' experiences and perceptions. The interviews consisted of roughly 15 guiding questions designed by JHU CRRE in conjunction with CLA. Using these questions as a general guide, the interviews often took on a conversational tone with parents in order to facilitate the most narratively salient responses. Parents of every CLA student participated in the phone interviews.

Teacher interviews. Both of CLA's lead learning facilitators participated in phone interviews during the spring of 2020. Given CLA's partnership with the Capitol Hill Arts Workshop (CHAW), which provides CLA students with instruction in art and music – a visual arts teacher from CHAW was also interviewed. The teacher interviews consisted of roughly 15 guiding

questions that were used to gather information concerning the CLA instructional model, as well as teachers' perceptions of the school's strengths and areas in need of improvement.

Site-visit/observation. For purposes of gathering descriptive information with regard to Capitol Learning Academy's structure, instructional programming, and daily schedule, two members from the JHU CRRE research team visited the school to observe a typical school day in December 2019. In addition to recording narrative information meant to better understand the school's instructional programming and classroom environment, the researchers also recorded the prevalence of a variety of pedagogical strategies and student learning behaviors using items from the OST Indicator Classroom Observation Tool. This instrument is specifically designed to assess instruction and student learning behaviors in classroom settings that involve a high degree of student-centered learning.

Analytical Approach

Narrative responses provided by participants through the interviews were analyzed qualitatively using a combination of techniques outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994) along with Glaser and Strauss' grounded theory approach (1967). Participant's responses were recorded and then coded using an iterative process that identified overarching themes. Parents' responses provided to the open-ended survey questions were analyzed using these same techniques. Quantitative data derived from parent's responses to Likert-based questions on the survey were analyzed descriptively. Here, response frequencies and other descriptive statistics were summarized for the parents as a combined group¹.

¹ Participant responses across the survey and interviews were aggregated for purposes of this analysis. To ensure participant anonymity given the small number of participants (six), disaggregated results that provide parent responses based on variables such as student grade level and gender are excluded from this report.

School Context and 2019-20 Overview

Information concerning the CLA instructional model was gathered through a site visit conducted by the research team in December 2019, as well as through interviews with the school's learning facilitators and board members. During the site visit, members of the JHU CRRE research team observed the school's instructional activities over the course of a single school day. Interviews were conducted via telephone in late spring/early summer 2020. Due to alterations in the data collection schedule as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the research team also corresponded with the CLA founder during the spring of 2020 to gather information concerning changes in the school's instructional programming.

This section summarizes the findings as they relate to the school's context and the structure of the 2019-20 school year. In specific, background information is provided that describes the CLA instructional model and outlines the school's development up through the inaugural year. Background information is also provided concerning the school's learning facilitators and the school's student body.

The CLA Instructional Model

Broadly, the instructional foundation of Capitol Learning Academy is the concept of Minimally Invasive Education (MIE) and the implementation of a Self-Organized Learning Environment for students (SOLE). These specific concepts are based largely on the work of Dr. Sugata Mitra of Newcastle University and the "Hole in the Wall" experiments, conducted in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In these studies, the first of which went on to become the topic of a TED talk that has been viewed over 100,000 times, Mitra's team placed a single computer in an abandoned courtyard in New Delhi – and children from the neighborhood, without any prompting, began to "play" with it². Without any instruction on how to use the device and very limited to access to technology in general, Mitra's team observed that the children became proficient in basic computing features in a short period of time. Within three months, the team observed that students could complete tasks such as drawing and painting pictures, loading and saving files, downloading and playing games, playing music, surfing the internet, and setting up email accounts. This experiment has since been replicated with similar results in other cities in India including Shivpuri and Madantusi³.

Borrowing elements from a number of student-centered instructional approaches, as well as from lessons learned from these experiments, Mitra developed the SOLE learning model. In this model, which is centered around "Self-Organized Learning Environments," students are provided nearly full control over the learning process. Rather than centering the majority of

² Mitra, S. (2007). *Can kids teach themselves (TED Conference Presentation)*. New York, NY: TED. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xRb7_ffl2D0

³ Mitra, S. (2012). *The Hole in the Wall Project and the power of self-organized learning*. Marin County, CA: Edutopia and the George Lucas Education Foundation.

instruction on specific curriculum standards and teacher-led lessons, students are provided resources – such as computers, non-fiction reading materials, and encyclopedias – and are encouraged to identify topics in which they are curious and then explore them at their own pace. When students do engage in more structured activities, the activities are typically centered on addressing an overarching cross-curricular question (e.g., “How were the Pyramids of Giza built?”). In addressing the question, students conduct research, either individually or as a part of a small group, and will often engage in learning that spans subjects including civics, science, mathematics, and reading⁴. Using this model, in theory, can address a variety of different learning goals while simultaneously fostering independence and curiosity.

As outlined by CLA’s founder, the pedagogical structure of CLA is based heavily around the concept of the Self-Organized Learning Environment. The research team observed this instructional model firsthand during its full-day site visit to the school during the middle of the year, and also gained further insights from interviews with the school’s learning facilitators and discussions with the school’s founder.

At CLA, students of different elementary ages are grouped in a single “class” led by a learning facilitator. Each morning, students engage in independent reading for roughly an hour and then engage in several hours of self-study, where the learning facilitator provides each student with a personalized checklist of learning tasks that they are to complete. During this time, students work independently on their laptops using instructional programs such as Prodigy, Freckle, and Discovery Learning – with the goal of developing foundational skills in language arts and mathematics. In the mid-afternoon students attend recess at a community playground and then walk to the Capitol Hill Arts Workshop (CHAW) – a public art studio – where they are provided lessons in art and music. In the afternoon, students engage in the SOLE portion of the day. As outlined above, for these activities, students work in small groups to research an overarching question – and then discuss their learnings with the class as a whole.

CLA Development and Background

Though the 2019-20 school year marked the inaugural year for Capitol Learning Academy as a “school,” CLA’s founder indicated that she ran a series of academic camps for students in the year leading up to the school’s opening – where the overall instructional model was piloted and refined. In this preceding year, understandably, a great deal of effort was expended by the school’s founder and its Board of Directors to bring the school into creation. As outlined by the school’s founder, securing a physical location, hiring a learning facilitator, identifying community partners, fundraising, and a host of other logistical tasks were undertaken in order for the school to officially “launch” in August of 2019.

⁴ Mitra, S., Leat, D., Dolan, P., & Crawley, E. (2010, December). *The Self Organised Learning Environment (SOLE) School Support Pack*. ALT.

Weisblat, G. Z., Stiles, E. A., & McClellan, J. D. (2019). Does the Innovation Really Work? Effectiveness of self-organized learning environment (SOLE) in the classroom. *Childhood Education*, 95(2), 60-66.

To ascertain further input concerning the school's development up to and during its inaugural year, interviews were also conducted with members of the CLA Board of Directors. Three of six board members were interviewed; two were original founding members of the board and the third joined approximately one year ago when the school first opened. The original members were personal friends of the school director; the newest member applied after seeing a notice on the CLA website looking for members. Each board member has their own area of expertise. Their backgrounds are diverse and included education advocacy and family engagement in education, law, and violence prevention and working with vulnerable populations.

The original board members described their role as being "all hands on deck" in getting the school started, including setting up the non-profit status for the school, working with financial institutions, developing best practices and bylaws, as well as literally moving the school into its current space. Since the school opened, the board members' roles have become more defined: one reported working on protocols for board practices; another described their role as being related to following up on admission leads, attending admission meetings, applying for grants and pursuing fundraising opportunities. The third member has a primary role in marketing and fundraising for CLA.

Inaugural School Year Overview

Clearly, the 2019-20 school year was unique in many ways. In addition to being the school's inaugural year, CLA was tasked with addressing two significant challenges: changing learning facilitators mid-year and pivoting to fully virtual instruction for the final portion of the year in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Given its small size, a single learning facilitator (teacher) is tasked with teaching the entire CLA student body. As such, this individual plays an extremely crucial role in the student experience at CLA and the learning outcomes that students attain. The school's initial learning facilitator taught the CLA student body from September through December of 2019, before leaving the position for personal reasons. The school's second learning facilitator shadowed this individual for several weeks in December before taking over as the school's lead teacher at the start of 2020. This learning facilitator remained in place for the duration of the school year and is slated to continue in this position in the upcoming 2020-21 school year.

In March, as with other schools across America, CLA decided to end in-person instruction in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic. For the final two-and-a-half months of the school year, CLA delivered instruction to students using a virtual model. Specifically, the school transitioned to fully virtual learning in mid-March in response to mandated safety measures instituted across Washington, DC.

CLA Learning Facilitators

To gain insights into the CLA instructional program, as well as the learning facilitator role, interviews were conducted with both of the CLA learning facilitators. As previously noted, CLA experienced a change in facilitators midway through the first year. The original learning facilitator had teaching experience in two different districts in the region and had homeschooled her own children. She holds a master's degree in curriculum and instruction. Her replacement was a Teach

for America instructor who worked in multiple districts in two states. She also participated in City Year, an organization that partners with public schools in high-need communities across the U.S. She taught kindergarten for three years and also grades 5 and 10.

The original learning facilitator joined CLA one year prior to the school's opening, working primarily to get the school off the ground, organizing events and connections with the community, and recruiting families. She did not originally intend to teach at the school but agreed to fill that role based on an alignment of beliefs with CLA and her own vision of effective education. Having homeschooled her own children, she liked the idea of allowing children to have an education that was not traditional, and providing the same opportunity to a diverse population within CLA's neighborhood community. In December, this learning facilitator departed CLA for personal reasons, and was replaced by the school's current facilitator.

The replacement learning facilitator indicated that she "never taught anywhere like CLA," which made the experience "more fun and got me wanting to pursue that (type of instruction)." She did have experience teaching with technology through a charter school where she taught in Texas, however. The replacement learning facilitator initially connected to the school through a job posting that she found online.

Both learning facilitators described the midyear transition between them as being very successful. The original learning facilitator stayed on for two weeks while her replacement shadowed her in the classroom, learning the different programs utilized and ensuring that she was comfortable using them. This also allowed the replacement learning facilitator to develop relationships with the students prior to taking over as the classroom lead.

While these learning facilitators are in charge of delivering instruction to students in the core subject areas (language arts, math, social studies, and science), instruction in "specials" content, such as art and music, is provided to students from instructors affiliated with various neighborhood community organizations. One such organization is the Capitol Hill Arts Workshop (CHAW), where students participate in art and music classes once per week, respectively. A visual arts instructor from CHAW was interviewed by the research team to provide more information concerning this organization and its instructor's relationships with CLA. This instructor noted that she had no prior experience with public school teaching, but had worked for five years with nonprofit organizations, as well as with other institutions like the Smithsonian and National Gallery. Her role as an instructor was primarily to teach CLA students the fundamentals of visual arts, such as form, color, and structure. Through these art lessons, CLA students worked on self-portraits and learned about art history. The teacher noted that her lessons often included discussions of existing works of art, where students offered critiques and expressed what feelings were experienced when they viewed specific pieces of art.

Student Enrollment

For the 2019-2020 school year, the six CLA students ranged from kindergarten through fourth grade. In the previous school year, three of these students attended school (or pre-school) in the DC Public School System. Of the remaining students, two were homeschooled (these students were siblings) and one attended a local Catholic school.

Parents cited a variety of motivations for enrolling their children at CLA. Multiple parents expressed that they were unhappy with the DC Public School System and were looking for an alternate option for their child. One of these parents noted that she felt their child wasn't regularly challenged at their previous school – noting that instruction seemed to come to a halt around February of the previous year once their child demonstrated mastery of all their sight words in reading. Another noted that she watched her child “go from a very sweet, innocent child to very aggressive, (even) throwing chairs” due to boredom and a lack of stimulating instruction in her previous school. Similarly, one parent indicated that their child's late summer birthday placed them somewhat in-between grades and that CLA offered the opportunity for them to attend first grade, as opposed to kindergarten. This parent noted⁵:

“With my child having a late birthday, I realized her struggles in public school. She was advanced but because of her birthday she was forced to be in a grade lower. I wanted a program that served my child where she was and could help facilitate her educational needs.”

For other parents, CLA offered an instructional approach that they were interested in their child experiencing. These parents highlighted that they were interested in their children receiving more personalized, one-on-one attention that was “flexible” and “adapted to the individual child.” As one parent noted, they felt that CLA could offer an experience that they wished they could have delivered while homeschooling, bumping the instruction “up to another level.” In describing their attraction to the school, others noted that:

“I liked the teaching model and the focus on developing real-world skills.”

“We were interested in a learning environment that would challenge our child and provide her with 21st-century skills to prepare her for life-long learning.”

About half of parents noted that they learned about CLA from some sort of marketing material. One parent learned about the school through social media (Instagram), another found the school website online while looking for private schools in the area, and a third saw promotional materials on a bulletin board at a local community center. Several other parents noted that they had already had some exposure to the CLA learning model previously when they enrolled their children at a camp led by the CLA founder.

Members from the CLA Board of Directors also shared input concerning their perceptions of the school's instructional program and its potential appeal to parents. During the interviews, each board member highlighted the personalized logic-based learning model and the school's flexibility as being very appealing to prospective enrollees. They believe that because of the small number of students, the learning facilitator is able to provide individualized attention to each child, giving the learning facilitator the ability to stretch the students academically. One member noted that the school requires parents to be invested in their child's education and be willing to try something different from a more traditional school experience. The school's “cutting edge” model

⁵ Throughout this results section, as applicable, direct quotes from parents have been removed of participant identifiers and edited for clarity.

of education through self-organized learning objectives offers something to parents who do not want to send their child to their neighborhood public school. Finally, the board members noted that the sliding tuition scale appeals to parents who want their child in a learning environment that fosters individual learning, collaboration, and engagement, but who may otherwise not be able to afford non-public school options.

Results

The following section summarizes the results of this case study as it relates to stakeholder perceptions of the school and addresses the outlined evaluation questions. In specific, results concerning participant perceptions of the school's level of communication, instructional quality, use of virtual learning, and student impact are provided, among others. Findings are presented from all data sources, including the parent interviews, parent survey, teacher interviews, board member interviews, and the research team's site visit/observation. As appropriate, these findings are synthesized across data points to present main findings and recommendations.

School Communication and Parent Involvement

Most parents expressed a high level of satisfaction with the level of communication and correspondence that they received from the school over the course of the year. Parents noted that ongoing correspondence often occurred through Class Dojo, the school management system (SMS) employed by CLA, and that communication was also frequent from the school's founder. Parents consistently noted that, overall, they found the school to be highly accessible and communicative. As summarized by one parent:

“I think it's great! That's one thing they do really well. I communicate with Sadie all the time and Alex has been on top of everything! They do a great job”

Parents also highlighted that the school would frequently gather feedback from them on a variety of topics and was highly responsive in addressing parents' concerns. One parent shared an example of the school, at their request, providing additional support with helping their child improve their handwriting. Multiple parents noted the ongoing communication and discussions that happened with them in the lead up to the COVID-19 pandemic. Parents noted that throughout the school year, emails, texting, video conferences, and other forms of communication were regularly employed by the school.

Though the consensus among parents was a high level of satisfaction with the level of communication they received, some parents did provide critiques. One noted that though they appreciated the frequency of correspondence from the school's founder, they would have liked to have received more communication from the learning facilitators themselves. Another parent noted that they did not feel like they had a great sense of what students' actual school day looked like until the school switched to a fully virtual model in the spring. They would have valued more ongoing communication from the learning facilitators concerning what, specifically, the students were learning about in school at any given time – and if there was anything that the parent could do to help their child with learning these concepts while at home.

Instructional Quality

In terms of the level of teaching quality at CLA, parents generally expressed positive views. Though parents expressed unanimous strong agreement that the school communicates regularly and is responsive to parent needs, more mixed impressions were noted elsewhere. On the survey, half of parents strongly agreed, and half somewhat agreed when asked if the school engages them

in their child’s learning. When asked if they felt that the quality of instruction and teaching at the school is high, parents responses ranged, however, from “strongly agree” to “somewhat disagree.” A full breakdown of parents’ responses to these survey items is provided in Table 1⁶.

Table 1
Parent Perceptions of Instruction and Communication

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
The quality of instruction and teaching at CLA is high	0.0%	25.0%	25.0%	50.0%
The school communicates regularly	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
The school is responsive to parent needs	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
The school engages me in my child’s learning	0.0%	0.0%	50.0%	50.0%

During the interviews, parents provided additional explanation as to their attitudes concerning the instructional quality at CLA. Though parents harbored relatively positive views on the quality of teaching from both instructors, about half of the parents specifically highlighted that they felt the learning facilitator from the spring was an overall improvement for the school. One parent described this learning facilitator as “an amazing fit – especially with the distance learning.” Other parents highlighted how the current facilitator does a good job of “holding students accountable” describing her as “very on point.”

Though parents generally felt that the quality of teaching at CLA was high, they had somewhat mixed views on the learning facilitator role. Multiple parents highlighted that this role, by virtue of the uniqueness of the CLA instructional model, is likely challenging for teachers to learn. Others highlighted that, ideally, they would like the learning facilitators to be more active instructionally with students, and would like the facilitator to develop more balance between teaching lessons and supervising students as they complete independent work.

Observation findings. Insights concerning instructional quality were also gathered by the research team during the site visit and classroom observations at CLA. In the areas of the observation instrument related to instructional strategies and as well as the content and structure of the activities used – mostly positive ratings were recorded.

To begin, the CLA workspace was clearly conducive for learning. The classroom is a bright, long, narrow space that is both clean and work-friendly. At the entryway to the space there is a receiving area and place for students’ coats, lunch boxes, and backpacks. Adjacent to this area,

⁶ Four of the five sets of parents at the school completed the survey. The remaining parent provided their perceptions of the school’s instructional quality through the phone interview only.

there is a dry erase board with the daily schedule and SOLE big question listed (See Figure 1 in the Appendix). In the main seating area, students sit at long rectangular tables. All students have their own laptop computer and headphones. Four students sit in pairs, and two students are seated individually. The teacher's main workspace is located at the back of the room. Other features of the room include a class library, a carpeted space for group lessons, a reading center with comfortable chairs, and areas for storing learning kits and other materials. A few process charts and visual aides are also posted on the classroom walls. These include a "class contract," a word/vocabulary wall, and small process charts containing strategies for reading and for self-regulating behavior. Overall, the space is work-friendly, comfortable given the small number of students, and appears conducive to the SOLE learning model.

The research team also made observation ratings concerning the instructional processes and strategies employed throughout the day. Throughout both the independent study and SOLE portions of the day, the learning facilitator clearly communicated goals, purpose, and expectations to students and made efficient use of class time. The activities that students completed appeared well organized, the materials and the learning space were prepped for the activities ahead of time, and there appeared to be a plan and relatively clear timeframe for each activity. For the independent study portions of the day, the activities outlined for each student on their personalized "checklists" appeared sequenced in terms of their level of priority (see Figure 2 in the Appendix). Though students worked independently for the vast majority of the day, there was some time that was clearly planned for students to work together. This occurred mainly during the SOLE activity in which students worked cooperatively to research information on the Pyramids of Giza. In the brief class discussion that accompanied this activity, pairs of students were asked to present what they learned through their research, and then were often asked to expand upon and provide explanations to support the information they presented. Throughout this activity, as well as with the other portions of the instructional day, the learning facilitator frequently provided encouragement and verbal recognition of students' efforts.

With these ratings in mind, other important instructional features were observed somewhat less often during the site visit. For the vast majority of the day students engaged in work independently, and as such, the learning facilitator only employed a relatively limited number of instructional strategies. The SOLE activity notwithstanding, students spent the majority of time completing tasks from independent learning checklists, much of which involved accessing digital programs such as Prodigy, Freckle, or No Red Ink, or completing ELA workbook activities. Though students briefly completed a journal question to begin the day and attended a music class at Capitol Hill Arts Workshop following lunch, these activities made up a comparatively small portion of the day's instructional time.

The activities that students completed independently appeared to vary somewhat in terms of the level of structure and the level of challenge they presented to students. Some students appeared to easily progress through their checklists, while others did not. Though the specific instructional programs used by students were likely embedded with activities that incorporated skill sequencing – the degree that the overall collection of activities assigned to students was scaffolded or fostered a learning progression was also not immediately apparent. Though the learning facilitator somewhat regularly circulated around the classroom, answered students' questions, or worked with students individually, at times, it did appear that some of the younger

students may have benefitted from more supervision or coaching. Two students appeared to repeatedly switch between activities without progressing on their checklists, and though not disruptive, were frequently off-task. In other instances, students appeared to be unfamiliar with the content needed to complete activities on their checklists, and it went unnoticed by the facilitator when the students completed the work incorrectly. While not ubiquitous throughout the day, these instances did occur with multiple students.

Teachers' perceptions of their preparation and support. Related to these findings, during the interviews, teachers discussed the extent to which they felt prepared and supported in acting as learning facilitators at CLA. Overall, both teachers noted that because of their prior teaching experience, they felt well prepared for the role. One teacher noted, however, "You don't really know how it's going to go until you actually do it." The current facilitator also indicated that her experience working across different grade levels prepared her for the different ages of students in the first CLA cohort. Understanding the school's expectations and knowing DCPS standards was also helpful, as was having experience in teaching online programs, in helping make for a smooth transition to the learning facilitator role at CLA.

In light of these impressions, teachers did express the need for slightly more ongoing support in executing the learning facilitator role. One of the teachers noted that one family transitioned out of CLA due to their child not being prepared for the style of learning at the school. This teacher indicated that she would have liked more assistance at that time in working with the child and family. She also noted the need for more support in preparation and lesson planning:

"A lot of people think it's easier because it's six or seven students but you're really planning a lesson for each student individually. That makes it a bit more complicated, a bit more difficult. Otherwise, the support was pretty good."

On a similar note, the visual arts instructor from CHAW expressed that they would have liked classroom management support given the different personalities of the students, as some management techniques worked for some students, but not for others. The current learning facilitator also echoed the sentiment that the diverse ages and learning needs of the class could be challenging. She reported that reaching different grade level learners was outside of her comfort zone and something she had to further develop as an educator. Developing multiple lesson plans and acquiring appropriate materials for so many different level learners was challenging.

Virtual Learning

Numerous parents expressed substantial satisfaction with the virtual learning environment the school pivoted to in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Here, parents noted that the school's pre-existing infrastructure for virtual learning made the transition to fulltime distance learning more successful. In particular, parents highlighted that the school-issued every student a personal laptop that they used throughout the year, and also regularly utilized a variety of educational technology programs, including the Class Dojo SMS platform, which greatly helped ease this transition. Parents also highlighted the expertise of the school's founder with regard to digital instruction and noted how this also helped the school pivot to digital learning. Parents noted that the school "had a plan" for the pandemic, effectively prepared students ahead of the transition

(e.g., taught them how to use Zoom), and did a good job of making the virtual learning environment interactive in ways that largely replicated online the in-person CLA experience.

“I think it’s gone really well. It was a really smooth transition. They were doing a lot of that already. There were a few challenges, but it has gone really well...I was super impressed how well they pivoted to virtual learning and how effective it has been.”

“That was one of my concerns (the pivot to virtual learning). Are the teachers going to be available when I’m working? Or are we going to have to become a ‘home school’ teacher? But they’ve done a really good job with being available...In my opinion the transition has gone as well as it could have.”

“I was very impressed (with the virtual learning). That’s actually the main reason I want to stick with (CLA) this year – because I’m not confident that schools will open (this fall) and I think that CLA has a really great virtual learning program.”

Overall Student Experience

Parents expressed largely positive impressions of their children’s experiences with CLA. Almost all parents cited the “hands-on” aspects of the school as the most exciting for their children. About half of the parents explicitly indicated that participating in “specials” such as art and PE were the areas that their children were most excited about. These parents highlighted how their children enjoyed learning soccer, yoga, karate, taking art classes, taking music classes, and participating in a variety of offerings at the Capitol Hill Arts Workshop (CHAW). Two parents summarized what their children were most excited about as follows:

“Everything. She had never been exposed to soccer before; she learned soccer at the school. Karate, all the extracurricular activities that they don’t get in public school she was able to be exposed to and in a different environment while being at school. So I think that that was really different. She talked about it and she looked forward to going to all the different activities and *liked going to school.*”

“The most engaging activities that my child participated in were the art and music classes at CHAW. That partnership appeared to be especially valuable to the school, and my child expressed that classes at CHAW were one of the things they enjoyed the most.”

Other parents highlighted how their children were excited about the various “field trips” students would take outside of the school. These often involved visiting different community institutions within close proximity of the school to engage in experiential forms of learning. As one parent noted:

“I think just going out in the community and engaging in some hands on learning. So, they did a lot of that. Like going to the bank and going to the park, and looking at different types of resources. Things like that.”

A small number of parents noted more traditional aspects of the school that their children had expressed excitement about, and a few struggled to provide specific examples of academic areas that sparked notable enthusiasm. The one academic area that was cited by parents was social studies, however – as some students were particularly excited about a “city planning” activity that was completed as part of the SOLE instruction.

“The SOLE projects are really engaging. I did not know how much work went into the projects until distance learning began. It makes me so proud to see my child work so hard and apply what they are learning.”

In addition to discussing the aspects of the school that their children perceived as exciting, parents also highlighted a variety of other aspects of CLA that they felt important in shaping their children’s experiences. One parent highlighted that their child especially liked the amount of autonomy the school provides them in completing work (they noted that their child greatly prefers to work independently). Others noted that they liked how the school provided opportunities for students to work cooperatively and how this helps foster a sense of classroom community. Parents also indicated that they felt their children were appropriately “challenged,” kept “busy,” and are happy at the school. As one parent noted:

“I think it does a good job of driving the kids to try harder and do more. The kids kind of all look up to one another, and there is definitely a sense of community.”

Observation findings. Insights concerning students’ experiences were also gathered by the research team during the site visit and classroom observations at CLA. In the observation focuses related to relationship building and overall participation among students, mostly positive ratings were recorded. Notably, students were provided extensive opportunities to make meaningful choices and clearly showed a highly positive and friendly affect toward the school’s learning facilitator. Students consistently chose what to do, how to do it, and with whom they worked. Students were also observed at a “frequent” extent demonstrating respect for one another and assisting one another in learning tasks, and most students appeared to enjoy a friendly, relaxed relationship with one another. The learning facilitator was highly encouraging of all of the students and used positive behavior management techniques throughout. She appeared to set consistent limits and clear behavioral standards that were appropriate for the diverse ages of students and also exhibited an affect that was caring, friendly, and showed genuine interest toward the class.

With these ratings in mind, other important features of the social environment were observed to a less frequent, or only occasional extent. Though students appeared to enjoy friendly relationships with one another – for the vast majority of the day students worked independently, and active, collaborative forms of learning activities were observed to a noticeably lesser extent. With the exception of the SOLE activity that occurred for roughly 30 minutes in the afternoon, activities such as class discussions, formal peer-tutoring and collaborative learning tasks were not observed during the site visit.

Student engagement, though generally high over the course of the day, also varied noticeably between students and periods. During the early portion of the day when students were

completing their personalized learning checklists, engagement appeared consistently high across the group. However, interest began to wane after roughly an hour-and-a-half of this activity. Furthermore, while students appeared mostly engaged in the afternoon for the SOLE activity, two of the class's students appeared to struggle to actively listen and attend to the task at hand.

Student Learning Progress

Parents noted somewhat mixed, though generally positive, perceptions of the learning and development that their children exhibited during the 2019-20 school year. In sharing the specific successes that they felt their children had accomplished this year, most frequently, parents highlighted “whole-child” types of improvements that they had seen, including those in areas related to confidence, sense of awareness, and sense of responsibility with learning. As summarized by two parents:

“Conceptually I’d say – how my child approaches challenges (has been an area of growth). The idea that they can research something to solve a problem, to find the answer. I mean, they used that term just the other day. They were asking me a question and then they answered it – they said ‘Oh! I could just research it!’”

“I think overall there was a lot of improvement (this past year), especially with confidence. Being in a smaller classroom and having more one-on-one attention really helped my child.”

Several parents highlighted specifically that they felt their children had made good improvements in reading and math. A small number of parents listed other areas of improvement as well – such as writing ability and the ability to use technology.

“I think as a whole – all around, whole child type of successes. She wasn’t being challenged before. But (now) at my last parent-teacher conference – she was at a first-grade reading and math level. If she was going to public school, she’d only be in kindergarten. But she’s drastically changed.”

“I felt like their exposure to the public library has really encouraged her reading. We weren’t reading nearly as well as we are now. She wasn’t as interested in books as she is now until we started going to the library.”

“I think (our child’s) writing ability has significantly increased because of the journaling and the accessibility of the instruction/online learning.”

“I definitely think her technological skills (have improved this year). They can do more on a computer than a lot of adults I know!”

With these specific successes in mind, it is worth noting that several parents did express somewhat mixed feelings concerning their children’s overall learning progress during the past year. Several of these parents highlighted that, although they are generally pleased with their children’s learning, the academic progress hasn’t always been obvious – and they would like more

clear confirmation that their children are, indeed, progressing at a rate that is commensurate with what is typical for students in their grade. One parent summarized this sentiment as follows:

“It’s an adjustment for us all – this learning model. I didn’t realize it, but I didn’t know how much a grade would give me a sense of security. I’m not sure if I would want (CLA) to change the model to do that, but that was the only adjustment for me as a parent – and I think for my child as a student. Because there is a difference between knowing that you aced something or you failed something. So, I have mixed feelings on the grading system.”

Parent survey findings. Parents’ responses to items on the online survey largely buttressed these findings with regard to student learning progress⁷. Parents unanimously agreed, with 40% indicating strong agreement, that their children had improved their reading ability since the beginning of the year. Even more strong agreement was exhibited with regard to students’ attainment of knowledge in civics and social studies.

Parent’s impressions were somewhat mixed, however, as it related to improvements made in the other content areas. Although the vast majority of parents indicated strong agreement that their child’s writing ability had improved, a portion indicated that they felt improvement did not occur in this area. In science, the majority somewhat agreed that children had increased their knowledge base this year, while the remaining portion were equally split between strongly agreeing and somewhat disagreeing that improvements occurred. Attitudes with regard to improvements in student’s mathematics skills varied the most among parents. While 20% of parents strongly agreed, and 40% somewhat agreed that improvements occurred in this area, 40% somewhat disagreed that this was the case.

Table 2

Perceived Academic Impact: Content Area Learning

Attending CLA has improved my child’s...

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Reading ability	0.0%	0.0%	60.0%	40.0%
Writing ability	0.0%	20.0%	0.0%	80.0%
Math learning	0.0%	40.0%	40.0%	20.0%
Knowledge in civics/social studies	0.0%	0.0%	20.0%	80.0%
Knowledge in science	0.0%	20.0%	60.0%	20.0%

Parents also made ratings concerning their impressions of their children’s development during the past year in areas related to social skills and engagement in school. As shown in Table 3, parents unanimously agreed that their children had improved their maturity and sense of responsibility this past year, along with their motivation to learn. Parents were also in full accord that their children’s sense of agency and control of their learning had improved this year.

⁷ Two of the students attending CLA during the 2019-20 school year were siblings. For purposes of comprehensively representing parent attitudes for this section as it pertains to all of the students, this parent’s survey responses were counted as representing two separate students.

In other areas, while still largely positive, opinions were more varied between parents. Though the majority of parents strongly agreed that their children had improved their social skills, as well as their engagement with learning during the past year, a portion of parents disagreed that this was the case. Parents also expressed similarly varied impressions concerning the extent in which their children’s enjoyment in school increased this year⁸.

Table 3

Perceived Impact: Social Skills, Engagement, and Maturity

Attending CLA has improved my child’s...

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Social skills	0.0%	20.0%	20.0%	60.0%
Maturity/sense of responsibility	0.0%	0.0%	60.0%	40.0%
Engagement with school and learning	0.0%	20.0%	0.0%	80.0%
Enjoyment in school	0.0%	20.0%	40.0%	40.0%
Motivation to learn	0.0%	0.0%	60.0%	40.0%
Sense of agency/control of their learning	0.0%	0.0%	80.0%	20.0%

Overall School Strengths

In terms of strengths, parents almost unanimously highlighted that they strongly felt that the school had handled the various transitions and obstacles placed upon it this year in a highly effective manner. Parents noted that CLA leadership communicated well, and was “very open and transparent” concerning the teacher change mid-year; and also expressed significant praise for the school’s planning and the proactive way that it handled instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, parents were highly complimentary of the school’s leadership. As one parent summarized:

“I would definitely say that communication is strong with parents. Alex (the school’s founder) as a school leader is creative and resourceful. She is realizing that vision of a school with a connection to the community. How she has managed to create a program with multiple partners and an art program with CHAW....I think that that’s a real strength. That resourcefulness. I think there is a good amount of creativity. I know before the pandemic there was talk of having the kids participate in video competition. Identifying those opportunities for the students. Strong creativity, strong resourcefulness, strong use of community resources and relationships, and strong communication.”

Next, the majority of parents specifically noted that they felt the school promoted a strong “culture of learning.” Parents conveyed that they feel that the younger students are able to feed off

⁸ Parents of five of the six CLA students completed the survey. The parent of the remaining student provided feedback concerning their perceptions of their child’s learning through the phone interview only.

of and learn from the older ones, and that the school's autonomous learning environment can help foster students to "try harder."

"I think the overall model is the school's greatest strength. I like that a lot of questions are asked and the students are learning to problem solve and think on the level that is beyond learning facts."

"I feel like the way that they have kids feed off of each other and learn from each other (is a strength)...The kids really learn from each other."

"I think CLA does a good job of driving the kids to try harder and do more. The kids kind of all look up to one another. There is definitely a sense of community."

"The small groups and structure make for a great learning environment. They are able to serve each child and still teach independence."

In multiple instances, parents highlighted the school's use of community resources, and the robust opportunities the school provides for children to learn autonomously, as other notable strengths. These parents noted how the school really "puts the focus on the kids," and because of the small class size, how students are provided with a lot of opportunities to receive individualized attention. Another parent noted the positive impact that the use of community resources – particularly those related to art and music enrichment – has had for students. This parent noted that: "I think the relationship with Capitol Hill Arts Workshop is the most valuable relationship that CLA has." Another parent highlighted this particular area as a strength, along with numerous others:

"I think CLA is doing a great job of incorporating community partnerships and the resources in the city to facilitate rich learning experiences for the students. The school was responsive when we expressed concerns about foundational skills, such as handwriting, and incorporated handwriting practice into the daily checklist. In this time of COVID-19, I don't think any school in the District was better equipped to facilitate actual ongoing learning than CLA. Our child has done more in the last three months than most 1st grade students across the nation, even with two working parents and two older brothers all trying to manage at home. Alex Roosenburg is a strong, highly-skilled school leader. Ms. Sadie holds the students accountable and when we asked our student what she likes best about her teacher, she said "Ms. Sadie wants the best for us." The CLA team clearly cares for and is committed to the children as students and as people."

During the interviews, members from the CLA Board of Directors also shared input concerning their perceptions of the school's strengths. Although each board member noted that they do not have much direct involvement with the students and that there's no longitudinal data for comparison to assess student learning – they noted the most obvious success was in "getting the school off the ground" given the large number of private and public charter schools in the region. According to one board member, the school is meeting benchmarks around establishing learning objectives, evaluating them over time, and revising objectives as needed. They also noted

that they believe that students are showing academic progress, are meeting their learning objectives, and that one of the school's key strengths is its ability to meet students where they are so that they can progress:

“Having the student's attention, being able to provide necessary guidance that students have in their learning (are key strengths). You can't get that in a public school where there are 30, 40, 50 kids in a classroom. That will always be an advantage to our school. Being a small school where students will always have that personalized, individualized education.”

As another strength, like what was expressed by the school's parents, the board members praised the school's use of technology and its ability to quickly transition to distance learning during the current pandemic. The board noted that all of the school's students have their own laptop and are familiar with online learning routines, so they were able to smoothly transition to distance learning when the school was forced to shut down.

Other successes were noted by board members individually. One board member stated that CLA considers parents as partners in their children's education. As such, it is very advantageous to keeping open lines of communication between the board, school, and parents. Having continual and robust conversations with parents, communicating with them all the way throughout the school year is vital. Issues can be quickly communicated and addressed in a collaborative way with families. This board member considers this both a strength and success of the school. Other notable successes cited by the board were the transition to a new learning facilitator mid-year and the partnerships with community organizations for supplemental learning opportunities. As one board member stated, “Community engagement is one of the hallmarks of the school.”

Suggestions for Improvement

Though they held overall positive perceptions of CLA, parents did discuss some disadvantages of the CLA instructional model, and made suggestions for improving select areas moving forward. Most prominently, the majority of parents expressed some concerns with regard to the extent in which students engage in independent work. As part of the CLA instructional approach, students engage in self-directed study for the majority of the school day. Though students also engage in SOLE projects – which involve a degree of teacher-led discussion, these too involve a great deal of self-directed learning on behalf of the student. During the research team's site visit, students' spent all but roughly 30 minutes of the school day engaged in independent study (excluding music class). Though parents expressed that they appreciate aspects of this approach, they indicated that they would like to see more balance between providing students opportunities to engage in the self-directed learning, while still providing students ample actual instruction in reading, math, science, and social studies. Several parents added that they feel that particularly young students may not be ready for so much self-directed learning, and would benefit from more structure and guidance. Two parents further indicated that they felt their children struggled a bit with learning content this year – and did not make quite the progress in reading and math that they had hoped. More substantive instruction to complement the independent learning aspects of the program could be valuable in helping address these concerns.

“This may be a contradiction – I like the independent learning aspect, the research aspect, specifically with their SOLE projects. I love to see my child work on that. But the only thing that I don’t like is – *I feel like instruction is missing*. I just think a lot of the work is done online and then the students are expected to advocate for themselves. But in the first year, for my child specifically, I don’t think they are there yet. Where they can ask for help and they are attending well enough to an instructional video game or whatever they’re using to get the most out of it...I would want more one-on-one time or individual instruction and then follow-up with the activities online so that way (the teacher) can see what they’re struggling with after she taught them.”

“If I think of a typical first or second grade classroom -- kids are still getting read to, and there is still a lot of guidance. I don’t know that a six or seven-year-old knows what kind of learner they are and I don’t know that they will get as much as, say, a third-grader, out of the opportunity to explore and really push themselves intellectually. I think it is a little challenging for a younger child.”

“I think the only (other) recommendation is with the virtual learning. I like that they ‘check in’, but it would be good if they had a one-on-one lesson with each kid. Or like a mini lesson with a group. Rather than just all the kids kind of doing their own thing. Some more structured lessons (would be good).”

“I don’t know that there is enough differentiation between the ages for that inquiry based approach. That’s not a knock on the teaching per se, because from what I can see there isn’t much traditional teaching that goes on – in some ways, they are substituting worksheets for online classwork. So that’s a bit of a challenge. (Finding) that balance between self-directed learning and independence and *teaching*. And I know with SOLE the whole concept is self-oriented, but, is that meant to be the way that *everything* is formatted throughout the entire day? Which, I guess that’s the model, but I haven’t witnessed much deep instruction, per se.”

Beyond providing more teacher guidance and physical instruction – the other two most frequent suggestions made by parents were to enhance the amount of differentiation that occurs between students of different ages, and to consider more formal ways in which student learning is monitored. Multiple parents noted that the lack of student grades was an adjustment for them and that more formal progress monitoring would help give them the peace of mind that their children are sufficiently learning the material associated with their grade level. Interestingly, this suggestion was also noted by teachers during the interviews. One parent highlighted that due to this lack of progress monitoring, she felt the school may have missed some areas that her child was struggling in. As summarized by another parent:

“It’s kind of hard. I would like to have some sort of proof that he is actually at the proper level. I know that they do online assessments and things like that, but compared to a traditional school, we’re used to like, getting vocabulary words and things like that. So you see more of what’s exactly happening. But (at CLA) you’re almost kind of taking their word for it.... like he ended the school year where they

said he was testing at higher than grade level. But it would be nice to see that. When he's no longer at CLA, and when we want to get him into a good middle school -- he will need to test into it. And it's hard to see if he's literally above grade level, or just above grade level for this program, or where does he actually stand?"

Multiple parents also highlighted that next year they would like to see more differentiation in the programming that students at different grades receive. These parents noted that given the wide range of ages present in the class at CLA, that they feel it is important that the teachers take particular care that they differentiate instruction so that students have ample opportunities to complete activities that specifically match their grade level. At times during the past year, these parents felt that all students tended to engage in similar activities – even though the small class size could facilitate more individualized and differentiated support.

"I recommend that additional resources, training, and support be provided to the learning facilitator, including effective strategies to implement SOLE for various age/grade levels. The younger students seem less engaged than the older students. I'm not sure whether that is a factor of age and maturity or whether there are strategies to make SOLE more engaging and effective for younger children while not holding back the progress of older children."

Other suggestions varied and were made by parents individually. One parent highlighted that they feel it could be beneficial to provide CLA students with opportunities to socialize with students from other schools, perhaps through partnering to provide co-curricular activities. This parent noted that this could be beneficial for students – as the school's small class size and diverse ages can limit each CLA student's opportunities to make friends. Similarly, other parents noted that providing more diverse related arts and co-curricular options would be beneficial for students. One parent indicated that foreign language instruction would be valuable. Another noted that offering more co-curricular and after school type activities, things like chess club or debate team, would be valuable.

"We were a little concerned, and she expresses this herself, that she wanted to go back to her old school. All transitions are tough. I know she likes her teacher, but she misses her friends. The tiny environment, only six children of varying ages, that's a challenge. She's pretty social and she missed a larger classroom setting. Though they would go to CHAW and do that sort of thing – it's not the same as a larger environment. So, socially, I think she misses some of that. I think she had a picture of what a school building is. And this is very different."

"Given that it's such a small environment – (providing) more opportunities to engage socially (would be beneficial). I don't really know how that happens quite frankly, maybe partnering with other schools? I'm not sure if they could provide more exposure outside of the classroom?"

"Until the school grows, I suggest additional ways to get the children into social situations beyond the classroom with other children, if possible. The small, multi-

age setting has pros and cons. Younger children still very much need a level of instruction and play that I imagine could become frustrating for older children."

CLA board members also shared insights concerning the challenges the school faced during its initial year and suggested areas the school could grow moving forward. Similar as to what was articulated by parents – one board member indicated that they imagined having students at different grade levels and ages learning together could be a challenge, citing issues with effective collaboration/communication due to these differences. They also noted that it is a challenge, given its small size and enrollment, for CLA to provide as robust a variety of services to students as they would receive in a public school (e.g., counseling, mental health services, etc.). Another challenge noted by the board members was growing the school's enrollment. All three board members reported that financing and fundraising was a struggle and continues to be a concern— most notably identifying ways to diversify funding streams for long-term sustainability.

Other suggestions made by board members focused on more specific areas. One participant indicated that foreign language instruction is an offering that they are often asked about during the admissions process – and noted that they would like to see this added to the curriculum. Other suggestions included expanding the size of the board of directors, providing need-based scholarships, and generating more publicity for the school as a way to increase enrollment.

Recommending CLA and Participant's Closing Thoughts

Across the survey and interviews – the consensus among parents was that they felt positively about their children's experiences at CLA and that they would recommend CLA to others. Multiple parents stated enthusiastically that they would, and already have, recommended CLA to other parents they know.

"Yes (I would recommend CLA to others). CLA is a great place to foster your children's talents. They will get the attention they need and the most beautiful part about it is they are also offered emotional support. I am truly excited about this learning model and I see my child not only learning but becoming a responsible student right before my eyes."

"I have been singing CLA praises since our first camp. I've encouraged many of my friends to check out CLA."

Parents noted that, overall, older and more mature students are those who they feel that CLA is probably the best fit for. One parent noted that although they "would recommended CLA, but with a few reservations" for early elementary students – that they would recommend the school "without hesitation" for older students.

"I would definitely recommend CLA to parents with children in 2nd grade or above (8 years old or older), without hesitation. I'm not positive that our younger child has the foundational skills to make the most of the fluid learning environment and take charge of their own learning."

Another parent indicated that the experience was only “somewhat” what they had hoped for, stating:

“While I appreciate self-directed and independent learning, I think there was a learning curve for my child. With that I believe my child fell behind or did not learn as much because they did not yet develop the sense of responsibility and self-advocacy.”

Other parents reinforced this impression. These parents noted that students who have the maturity to self-manage and behave cooperatively around others make an ideal fit, noting that the school had one student early on who struggled mightily with behavior management. The general sentiment from these parents was that due to the highly self-directed nature of the school’s instructional approach, it is best if prospective students have a certain level of self-control and maturity in order to get the most from attending. During their interviews, teachers made suggestions for ensuring that the students who enroll at CLA are an appropriate fit. Teachers suggested that the school conduct background research on new recruits, identifying things such as where students attended school previously, and any learning issues they may have had. Teachers also highlighted the importance of clearly establishing expectations for new students before they enroll at the school, and suggested that prospective students “shadow” a student at the school for a day. They noted that if a child does not understand how the school works and has had issues in the public school setting, they would likely struggle at CLA given the abundant freedom and self-directed learning that students at the school engage with.

Lastly, stakeholders provided closing thoughts concerning CLA’s first year, and offered insights into the degree that the experience has been what they had hoped for. Across the large majority of the parent group – parents noted that they were pleased with their experiences so far with CLA, and looked forward to the coming year ahead.

“I would say that the experience was much more than what we could have hoped for. It was way more than I expected it to be – even up until the plague and (the switch to) virtual learning.”

“You have to look at too from – ‘ok, are the kids benefiting?’ And ‘what is the dollar/cost value?’ As a parent with the funds that we are going to invest, hoping that this is an investment for their future -- I believe the investment has been good. It’s been worth the money, if you will. I’m excited to see how it progresses and to see my child on this path that they are going, which is, I think, pretty impressive. I’m excited to see where it goes.”

“Even though it’s been a little rocky I’m still very impressed. I think they’re on the right path and I know that it’s the first year and not everything is going to be perfect. So I think it’s going well.”

“I’m glad we went for it (enrolling our child at CLA)! I went to public school, my husband went to public school, we’ve only ever had our kids in public schools. This is the first time we’ve tried a private school environment. And so I appreciate the

sliding pay scale, I appreciate the intentionality around diversity in the student body... I'm glad we took the risk with the school and we look forward to seeing what it looks like next year."

"We had generally hoped our child would learn new 21st century skills, improve their problem-solving, and be even more excited about learning. They have certainly learned new skills, developed their reading and vocabulary, and they demonstrate an ability to creatively solve problems. We are extremely impressed with their ability to navigate the internet and various tools on the computer. The global pandemic truly highlighted the success CLA has had in preparing children to utilize technology to facilitate their own learning."

Members of the Board of Directors, as well as the school's learning facilitators, also concluded with positive perceptions of the school's first year. During the interviews, one board member noted the incredible achievement in getting the school up and running and had the following to say about expanding the reach of CLA:

"As the school year finishes and we can get data on academic outcomes and share those with researchers and the business community, grant makers and funders, we'll be in great shape. The current pandemic has highlighted inequities in education and school systems. To the extent that we can share what works with our learning model with the education community at large will be a great plus for us."

Furthermore, all three of the interviewed board members agreed that highlighting the successes of the school and bringing attention to its unique learning model can increase student enrollment. Having data to demonstrate academic growth will be highly useful and informative in terms of "getting the word out" about CLA. They noted that partnering with other similar schools may also increase the school's profile. The learning facilitators buttressed these positive sentiments, adding:

"It's an amazing school and I feel so honored to be in this position. Hopefully, more schools will pick up on the things that we're doing and we can have more CLA-inspired schools in the future."

"In traditional schools, children do not feel seen; parents do not feel seen. That's not an issue that we have here. Children are really pushed to their full potential; there's not a moment where students feel bored or not challenged. We're always considering: 'In what ways can they grow more?'"

Discussion

The purpose of this case study was to examine parents' and other stakeholders' perceptions of the efficacy of Capitol Learning Academy in fostering student engagement and learning, and to explore the instructional directions that the school may take as it continues to expand and develop. Based on the findings from this research, CLA parents clearly hold positive impressions of the school and their children's experiences attending thus far. Parents find the school to be highly communicative, responsive to their needs, attentive to students, and especially well positioned for providing individualized attention to students, as well as quality virtual learning. Parents, CLA board members, and teachers, were all highly complimentary of the school's leadership and cited numerous examples of how the school has leveraged community resources, in fostering real world, experiential forms of learning for students. Parents often highlighted that they had witnessed "whole-child" types of improvements in their children during the past year. Improvements in confidence, self-awareness, sense of responsibility with their learning, reading ability, and knowledge in civics and social studies were all cited by numerous parents as areas where they saw particularly noticeable progress.

With these findings in mind, stakeholders did offer some recurring suggestions for the school to consider as it moves forward. Though parents appeared to appreciate many aspects of the SOLE learning model, most noted that they would like to see their children receive more frequent teacher instruction in language arts, math, science, and social studies to balance against the already abundant time that students spend working independently. Parents also believe that students would likely benefit from more grade-level specific differentiation and more frequent progress monitoring. Findings from the research team's midyear observation of a CLA instructional day appeared to buttress these conclusions.

Other suggestions may also merit consideration as the school continues to develop. For instance, it will be important for school leadership to regularly monitor the ways that support can be provided to the school's learning facilitator and to regularly update the learning resources provided to students for their independent study. Though the CLA learning facilitator appeared mostly satisfied with the training and support that they have received thus far, given the school's single classroom design, this individual will no doubt play a prodigious role in students' learning experiences. As such, retaining a highly skilled and experienced individual for this role, and providing him or her with ample support, training, and instructional resources appears to be crucial to the school's long-term success.

Given the substantial portion of each day students spend engaged in self-study, it will also be important for the school to regularly review the quality of, and update as necessary, the instructional materials that students use during these periods. During the research team's site visit, students were observed making extensive use of programs such as Prodigy, Freckle, No Red Ink, and Readworks. Though many of these programs are easy to access and often very inexpensive, the majority are specifically designed by their developers to act as instructional supplements, and few comprehensively address the reading, writing, or math content that children are typically expected to learn in elementary school. While the research team cannot speak to the ways that CLA may already employ these programs in tandem with other instruction, given the school's emphasis on self-directed learning, it will be of ongoing importance that careful attention be paid

to ensure that students are indeed provided ample resources to develop the full range of skills expected for their grade level.

Taken in combination, findings from this case study make evident that Capitol Learning Academy had a quite successful inaugural year. The school clearly boasts a distinct instructional approach and appears to have many features that position it well as an alternative learning environment for parents favoring student-centered, non-traditional forms of schooling. The capacity of the school's leadership team, as evident through its handling of challenges such as replacing the lead learning facilitator midyear, facilitating instruction for students across multiple grades in a single classroom, and pivoting to virtual instruction in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, further reinforce the school's encouraging potential. At the close of the year, the consensus among parents was that they felt positively about their children's experiences at CLA thus far and were excited for them to continue attending the school in the years ahead. Multiple parents stated, often enthusiastically, that they would recommended CLA to parents of other similar age students. These findings clearly demonstrate the success of the school's launch year and are suggestive of CLA's potential as it continues to develop and expand.

Appendix A: Parent Survey

Background Questions:

1. How old is your child?
(Multiple choice response)
2. Where did your child attend school before attending CLA?
(Open-ended response)
3. How did you learn about CLA?
(Open-ended response)
4. Why did you choose for your child to attend CLA?
(Open-ended response)

Likert Questions:

Likert Scale:

- Strongly Disagree
 - Disagree
 - Agree
 - Strongly Agree
5. Attending CLA has improved my child's:
 - a. Reading ability
 - b. Writing ability
 - c. Math learning
 - d. Knowledge in civics and social studies
 - e. Knowledge in science
 6. Attending CLA has improved my child's:
 - a. Social skills
 - b. Maturity/sense of responsibility
 - c. Engagement with school and learning
 7. Attending CLA has increased my child's:
 - a. Enjoyment in school
 - b. Motivation to learn
 - c. Sense of agency and control of their learning
 8. The quality of instruction and teaching at CLA is high
 9. The school communicates regularly and is responsive to parent needs
 10. The school engages me in my child's learning

Open Ended Questions:

11. Has your child's experience attending CLA been what you hoped for when you enrolled them?
(Open-ended response)
12. What is the most engaging activity your child has done at CLA this year?
(Open-ended response)
13. What do you feel are the strengths of CLA? What aspects of the school do you feel are working well?
(Open-ended response)
14. What recommendations do you have for improving CLA?
(Open-ended response)
15. Would you recommend CLA to other parents? Why or why not?
(Open-ended response)

Appendix B: Parent Interview – Guiding Questions

General Topic: Introduction and Background

1. Would you mind telling me a little bit about your child's school experiences leading up to this school year? Where did they attend school?
2. Why did you decide to enroll your child at Capitol Learning Academy?
3. What do you know about the school's instructional program?
 - a. What does a typical day look like?
4. To what degree are you typically involved with your child's experiences at Capitol Learning Academy?
 - a. Do you ever interact with [TEACHER NAME] or receive materials/feedback directly from them?

General Topic: Student's School Experiences

5. What types of things has your child expressed excitement about recently, related to school?
6. What are your child's major successes right now at school?
7. Has your child expressed any complaints or frustrations about school? If yes, what are they?
8. Is your child excited to work with [TEACHER NAME]? Why do you think that is the case?
9. To what degree has attending CLA positively impacted your child's learning?

General Topic: Recommendations and Closing Thoughts

10. Has your child's experience attending CLA been what you hoped for when you enrolled them?
11. What is the most interesting or engaging activity your child has done at CLA this year?
12. What do you feel are the strengths of CLA? What aspects of the school do you feel are working well?
13. What recommendations do you have for improving CLA?
14. Would you recommend CLA to other parents? Why or why not?

15. Is there anything else you would like to share concerning your child's experiences at CLA?

Appendix C: Teacher Interview – Guiding Questions

Background

1. Can you tell us a bit about your background as an educator? (e.g., how long have you been teaching, subjects taught, teacher certification information, etc.)
2. Why did you decide to work with the Capitol Learning Academy?
3. Have you been associated with any similar type of instructional programs in the past? (e.g., Self-Organized Learning Environments, Montessori Teaching, Socratic Questioning, etc. ?)

Student Participation and Engagement

4. Why do you think parents chose to enroll their children at CLA this year? What is the value to the students in attending CLA instead of more traditional schools?
5. What specific activities or instructional strategies have you used this year to help achieve these goals?
6. How engaged would you say your students are in school this year? (prompt for examples)
7. Have there been challenges to engagement (e.g., absenteeism, behavior issues, etc.)?

Professional Development

8. Do you feel that you were adequately prepared to serve as the lead instructor at CLA this year? Why or why not?
9. What type of ongoing support, if any, have you received? Has this support been adequate?
10. What additional preparation, if any, do you recommend for future CLA teachers?

CLA Perceptions

11. What do you feel are the strengths of CLA? What aspects of the school do you feel are working well?
12. What recommendations do you have for improving CLA?

13. Overall, do you feel that the school impacted students this year the way that it was designed to? If so, to what extent? (e.g., achieved what you hoped for most students? For all students? Exceeded expectations? Etc.)

Recommendations and Closing Thoughts

14. What have been your learning experiences as a teacher since you have been with CLA? How, if at all, has your skillset as a teacher developed since becoming involved with CLA?
15. What type of students do you feel the CLA instructional program is ideally suited for? (grade level, personality, interests, etc.)
16. Would you recommend working at CLA to other teachers? If so, what type of teachers do you think the school is best suited for (professional background, experience level, etc.)

Appendix D: Board of Directors Interview – Guiding Questions

Role

1. Can you tell me a bit about your background? How did you become involved with Capitol Learning Academy?
2. As a board member, what does your role currently look like with Capitol Learning Academy? In what areas are you most involved?

Goals and Outcomes

3. Why do you think parents enrolled their children at CLA this year? What is the value to students in attending CLA instead of more traditional schools?
4. What would you say the main goals are of the Capitol Learning Academy instructional program?
5. Which goals have been addressed most successfully this year? Please explain.
6. Which goals have been addressed least successfully this year? Please explain.
7. From your perspective, how have parents reacted to the school and their children's experiences at the school thus far?
8. What is your impression of early outcomes, if any, of the school on:
 - a. Student learning
 - b. Student engagement with learning

Overall Perceptions

9. What do you feel are the strengths of CLA? What aspects of the school do you feel are working well?
10. What do you feel were the school's biggest challenges during its first year of operation?
11. What recommendations do you have for improving CLA moving forward?
12. Overall, do you feel that the school impacted students this year the way that it was designed to? If so, to what extent?
13. What is next for CLA? How do you envision the school expanding in the future?

Appendix E: Site Visit/Observation Protocol

CLA OBSERVATION INSTRUMENT

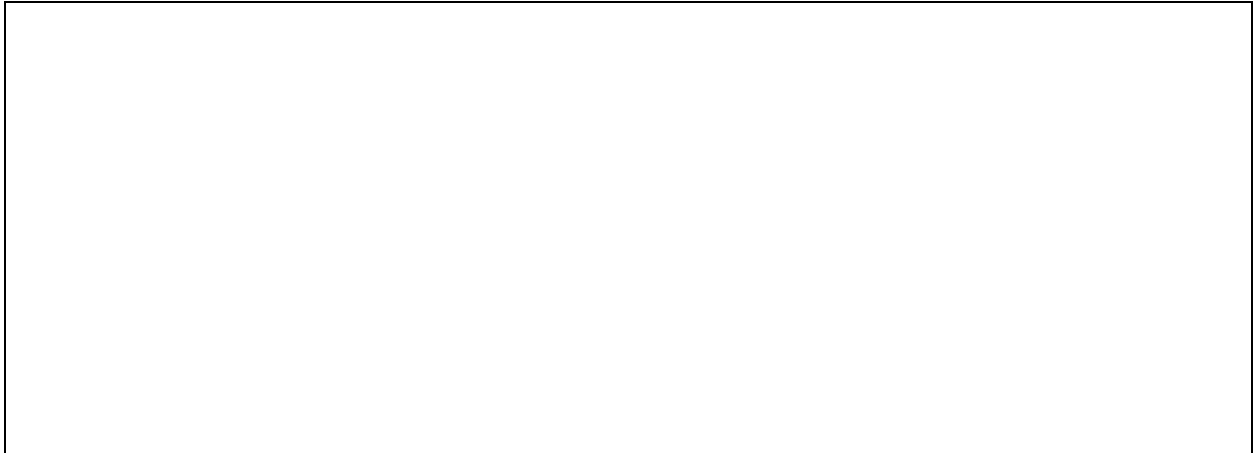
Observer:
Date:
Start time:
End time:
of students:
Grade levels:
of instructors:

Overview: Record open-ended reflections and descriptions of what you see with regard to the clarity of goals, teacher activities, student activities, student engagement with each other and with staff.

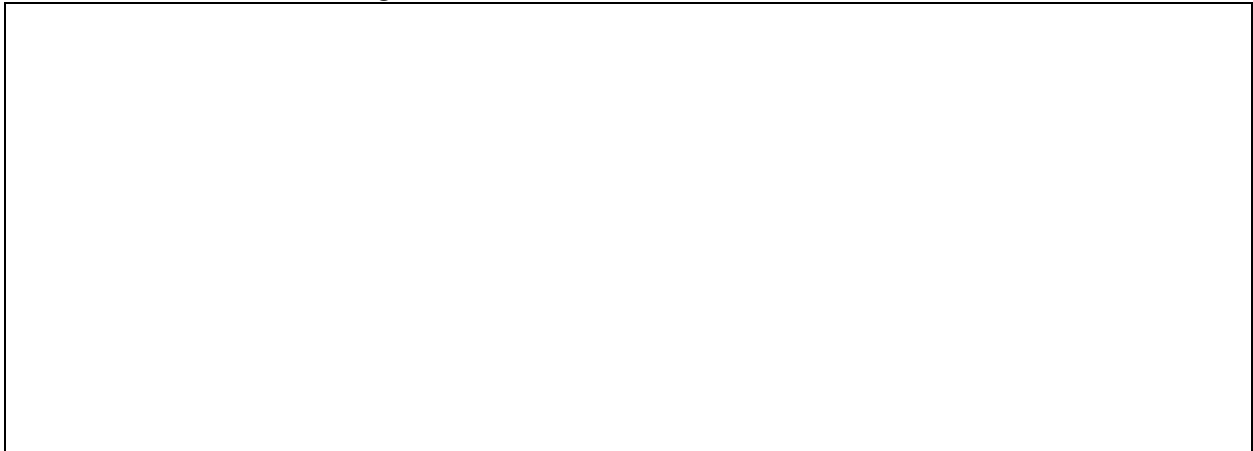
Classroom Environment

Teacher Activities

Student Activities

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for describing student activities.

Evidence of Student Learning

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for providing evidence of student learning.

Evidence of Student Engagement

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for providing evidence of student engagement.

OST INDICATOR ITEM RATINGS

Directions to Observers: After 15 minutes of observation, assign a rating based on the scale below:

Not Observed (NO): Strategy never observed.

Rarely (R): Received little emphasis in class.

Somewhat/Occasionally (S/O): Received modest emphasis in class.

Frequently (F): Received substantial emphasis in class.

Extensively (E): Highly prevalent in class.

Relationship building: Students...		Participation: Students...	
	Are friendly and relaxed with one another; they socialize informally and appear to enjoy one another's company.		Are on task, focused, attentive, and not easily distracted from the task/project. Follow along with the instructor and/or follow directions to carry on an individual or group task. Noise level and student interactions can be high if they are engaged in the expected task(s).
	Respect one another. They refrain from causing disruptions that interfere with others accomplishing their own tasks. When working together, they consider one another's viewpoints. If disagreements occur, they are handled constructively.		Listen actively and attentively to peers and staff. They appear interested in what others have to say. They look at peers and/or staff when they speak, and they provide concrete and constructive feedback about ideas or actions.
	Show positive affect to staff. Students interact with the staff, and these interactions are generally friendly.		Contribute opinions, ideas, and/or concerns to discussions. They discuss/express their ideas and respond to staff questions and/or spontaneously share connections they've made. This refers to sharing as part of the activity and within the class norms (more than just Q&A). Disruptive behavior is not part of this item.
	Assist one another. One or more students formally or informally reach out to help/mentor peers and help them think about and figure out how to complete a task. This refers to assistance that is intentional and prolonged, goes beyond answering an incidental question.		Have opportunities to make meaningful choices. Students choose what they do, how they do it, and/or with whom they collaborate, and they experience the consequences of their choices. This refers to genuine options about how to accomplish the task.
	Are collaborative. Students work together/share materials to accomplish tasks. They are equal partners in the work. This includes strategizing how to complete a product or project and plan a cohesive presentation.		Take leadership/responsibility/roles. Students have meaningful responsibility for directing, mentoring or assisting one another (or themselves) to achieve an outcome.

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Relationship building: Staff...		Instructional strategies: Staff...	
	Use positive behavior management techniques that allow students to accomplish the activity's objectives. Set consistent limits and clear behavioral standards appropriate to the age of the students and activity type.		Communicate goals, purpose, expectations. Make clear the purpose of what students are doing and/or what they expect them to accomplish. Goals/ expectations may also be implicit if students are clearly on task without staff direction. This goes beyond how students are expected to behave.
	Encourage the participation of all; try to engage students who appear isolated; do not favor or ignore a particular student or small cluster of students.		Verbally recognize student efforts and accomplishments. Staff explicitly acknowledge participation and progress to motivate using praise, encouragement, and/or constructive guidance/modeling.
	Show positive affect toward students. Staff tone is caring and friendly; use positive language and expression.		Assist students without taking control. Coach, demonstrate, or employ scaffolding techniques that help students gain a better understanding of a concept of complete an action on their own. The assistance goes beyond checking that work is completed.
	Attentively listen to and/or observe students. Staff look at students when they speak and acknowledge what they have said by responding and/or reacting verbally or nonverbally. They pay attention to students as they complete tasks and are interested in what students are saying/doing.		Ask students to expand on their answers and ideas. Encourage students to explain in depth, give evidence, or suggest conclusions. This item goes beyond basic Q&A.
	Encourage students to share their ideas, opinions, and concerns about the content of the activity through discussion. This item goes beyond basic Q&A to fully engage with students' ideas and thinking.		Employ varied teaching strategies. Staff use diverse instructional strategies which may include direct instruction, coaching, modeling, demonstrating or others. Varied instructional strategies can occur simultaneously and/or sequentially within the observation period.
	Guide positive peer interactions. May involve staff explaining or through planned activity content why negative behavior is unacceptable and offering constructive behavior alternatives. This item does not refer to behavior management.		Plan for/ask students to work together. Staff structure activities so that students work cooperatively to solve problems, and/or accomplish tasks. The focus is student-to-student.

CONTENT AND STRUCTURE: ACTIVITY		
	Is well organized. Activity has clear (implicitly or explicitly stated) goals/objectives; there is evidence of a clear plan and process(es), and tasks can be conducted in the timeframe available. If special materials are needed, they are prepared and available.	Involves the practice/a progression of skills needed to complete a task. If a long-term project, student's activity on the project provides the opportunity to apply or expand skills or techniques previously learned.
	Challenges students intellectually, creatively, developmentally, and/or physically.	Requires analytic thinking. Activity calls on students to think about and solve meaningful problems and/or juggle multiple activities or strategies/dimensions to accomplish a task.

Classroom Environment		
Is the level of teacher supervision appropriate to activity and age group?	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes
Materials and room are prepped for the lesson.	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes
Is the workspace conducive to the activity?	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes
Room climate is work-friendly.	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes
Class time is used efficiently.	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes

Element	Observer's Synthesis	Rating (NO to E)
Sequenced: Activity builds progressively more sequenced and advanced skills and knowledge and challenges students to achieve clear goals.		
Active: Students engage actively in learning. They lead/participate in		

<p>discussions, develop or research a product, contribute original ideas, collaborate, take on leadership roles, and/or are oriented toward completing tasks.</p>		
<p>Personally Focused: Actively strengthens relationships among students and between students and staff.</p>		
<p>Explicit: The activity explicitly targets specific learning and/or developmental goals.</p>		

Appendix F: Visual Artifacts – CLA Site Visit

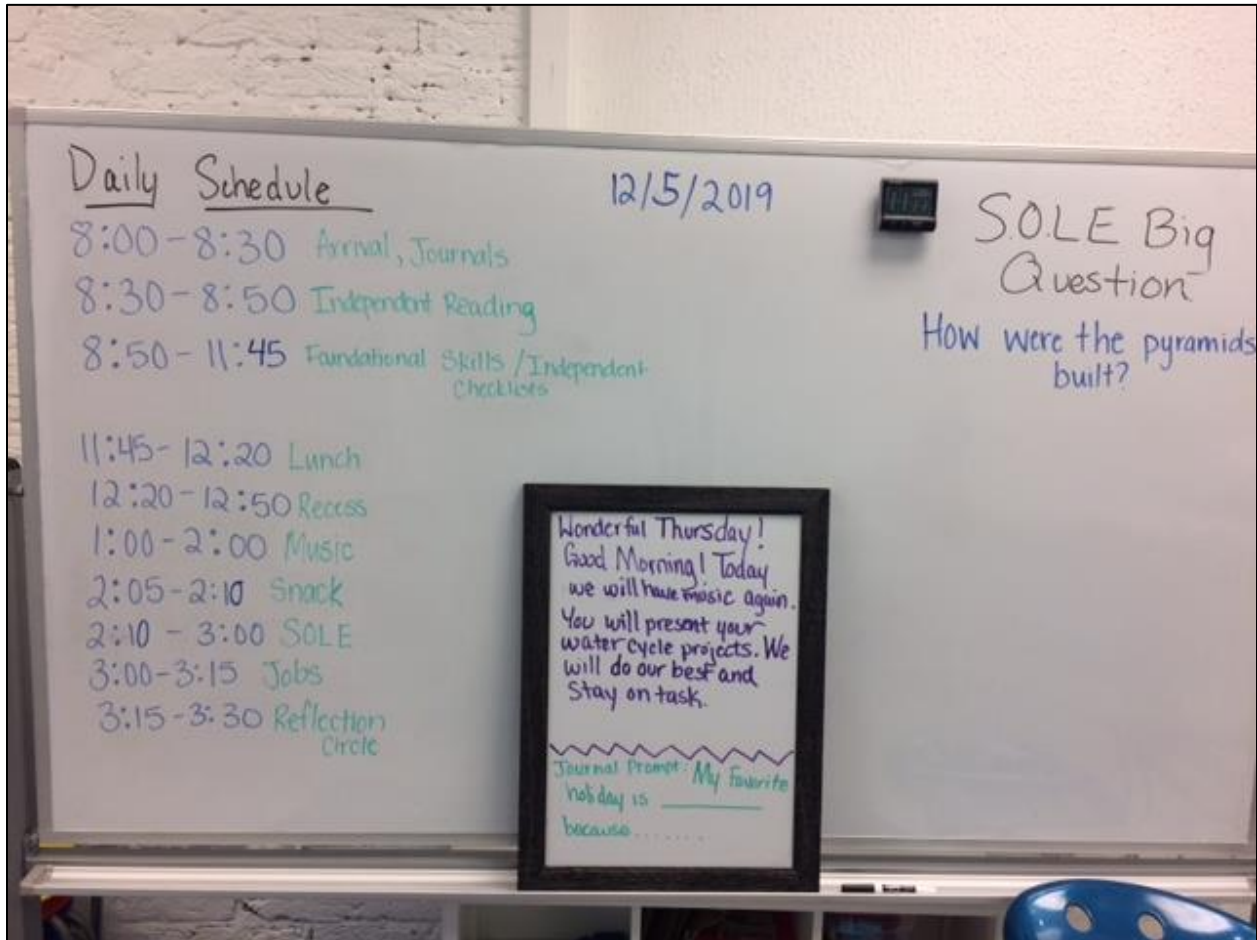


Figure 1. CLA Daily Schedule and SOLE Focus

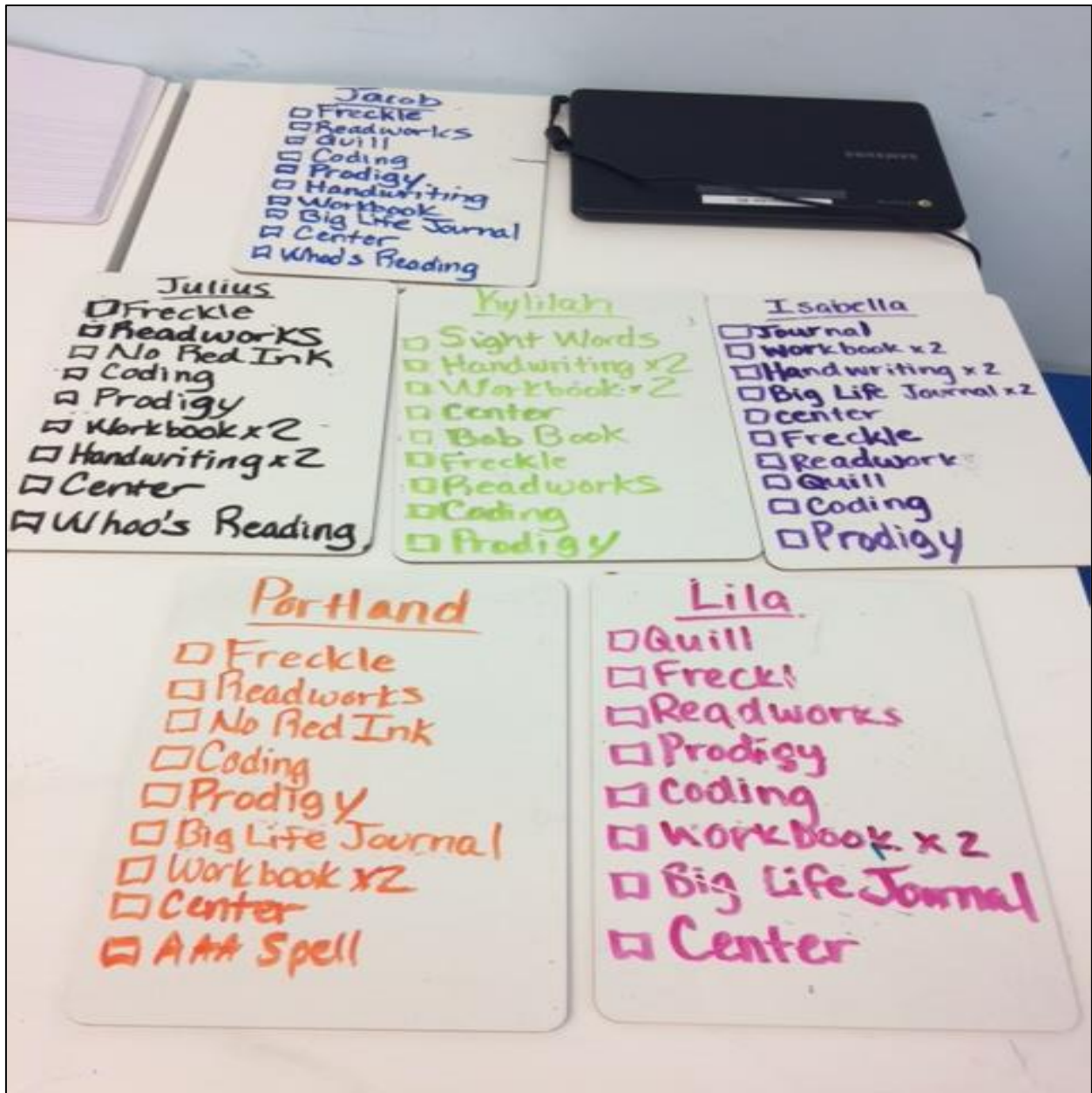


Figure 2. Student Independent Work Assignments

S.O.L.E. Self Organized Learning Environment

The Big ?

Information We Found

Figure 3. S.O.L.E. Activity Sheet

Rubric

Name: _____

The group answered the big question.

1 2 3 4 5

The student shared in researching by asking questions, sharing ideas, and listening to group members.

1 2 3 4 5

The student gave an honest reflection of his/her own work as well as the group's.

1 2 3 4 5

The student helps his/her group teach the class by sharing their knowledge and research on the topic.

1 2 3 4 5

Total Points: _____

Figure 4. S.O.L.E. Activity Rubric