

Bringing the Mission to the Classroom: Developing an Educational Philosophy Statement for Living Stones Academy

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Project description

Nine years ago Living Stones Academy was founded to address the racial inequity in education by making a Christ-centered education accessible to more students and families; our goal has always been clear! Over the past nine years our mission has also been sharpened. Our mission statement is “Living Stones Academy is a neighborhood Christian school committed to inspiring the hearts and minds of our students, equipping them to embrace economic, cultural, and racial diversity, and empowering them to love and serve in community.” Today we summarize it by saying **LSA is “unwaveringly Christ-centered, academically rigorous, and radically inclusive.”**

While our goal and mission have been clear, our approach to education has lacked that same kind of clarity. As a learning community, we have relied heavily on individual teachers to interpret our mission and to faithfully integrate it into their classrooms, which they have done remarkably well! Over the past nine years, however, we have grown a great deal--our student body has grown from 55 to 160 and our staff has grown from five to eighteen. While we are exceptionally grateful for the growth, it is more challenging to provide a consistent learning experience as our community expands. To ensure we deliver a cohesive education at Living Stones Academy that is grounded in our mission and shaped by best practices, the LSA board directed our education committee **to develop an educational philosophy statement.**

In September 2017 the education committee took up this important work. We began by digging into the results of a survey teachers had filled out in the spring of 2017. In the survey teachers were asked to identify both strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum by answering questions like:

- What are we currently doing that aligns well with our mission?
- What are we NOT doing that we aspire to?

Our teachers' responses to those questions served as the raw materials of our first draft of the educational philosophy statement. In late September the education committee brought a first draft of the statement back to the staff. This was the early phase of highly collaborative process that involved significant input from the staff, the board, and the education committee. This process went on for seven months and included more than 20 iterations. It also included multiple opportunities for various stakeholders to provide meaningful input. Then in March the education committee recommended a final version to the board for approval. On March 26 the board voted and approved this educational philosophy statement.

Living Stones' Educational Philosophy Statement

Approved March 26, 2018

Living Stones Academy is a **Christ-centered** school committed to the City. Rooted in a loving God revealed in the Living Word and creation, we seek to help our students learn to love the things that God loves.

Knowing all this, education at Living Stones Academy is:

- **Boldly Transformative**... equipping students to bravely participate in the restoration of God's world by teaching them radical hospitality, justice seeking, and community building.
- **Rich Through Diversity**... understanding that learning is enhanced and deepened through the participation of a diverse group of learners and engagement with a diverse group of texts.

- **Inclusive**... recognizing the inherent dignity and God-given potential of each and every student.
- **Integrated**... weaving learning across disciplines and through grades.
- **Built Around Creativity and Wonder**... inspiring student curiosity and engaging students in mind, body, and spirit.
- **Rigorous**... built upon high expectations in order to help each student develop strong character and to foster a critical understanding of the world.

What did we learn?

We have learned a great deal over the past year through our work on this educational philosophy statement. Some of the things we learned were quite affirming. For example, as we began this process we learned that our teachers had done an exceptional job of integrating LSA's mission into the classroom over our first eight years. With little structure and guidance, they had taken responsibility for student learning in their classrooms that was in many ways consistent with our mission.

This project also taught lessons that others could have predicted. For example, we learned this kind of project that involves three layers of an organization (staff, education committee, board) takes longer than initially planned. At the outset we had hoped to have this approved by the board in January. As we moved through the fall, however, we realized that it was going to take more time if we wanted to include so many different stakeholders in the process--and give them time to react to the input of other groups. It did not take us long though to all agree that it was more important to get this statement right than it was to get it done "on time".

This project also taught us important lessons that we did not anticipate. The educational philosophy statement provided a shared priority for the staff, education committee, and board to work on together. This shared project required frequent communication about substantive topics. This regular communication deepened relationships and increased trust. This was one of the unanticipated blessings of this project that will shape our shared work moving forward.

These are a few of the things we learned from developing an educational philosophy statement. I am eager to see the impact--both direct and indirect--of our work on this statement over the past year.

What difference will this statement make at Living Stones Academy?

If you want to know what difference this statement will make at Living Stones Academy, you will need to check back in 3-5 years. The work we completed over the past year is important, but the most important work is still ahead of us. We are proud of the work we accomplished--and we are proud of the statement that we have developed. Now, however, we must work together as a staff to implement these six pillars more fully into the life and learning of Living Stones Academy. If we fail to do that, then we will have a mission-focused educational philosophy statement but not a mission-focused education. Consequently, our education committee will remain focused on working closely with teachers to get the pillars of this statement woven into the teaching and learning of LSA. If we are able to accomplish that, here are some of the benefits we expect to see:

- Clarify priorities that will then in turn inform decisions about hiring, professional development, assessment, teacher evaluations, and curriculum
- Provide guidance for teachers as they work diligently to integrate LSA's mission and to further student learning

- Improve how we communicate with parents, prospective families, and donors about how our Christ-centered mission shapes the teaching and learning that takes place in and out of the classroom

The question remains: How will we know if this new EPS has been effective? Beginning this fall we will be asking teachers to reflect on their lessons and units. Is this lesson/unit boldly transformative? Made rich through diversity? Inclusive? Integrated? Built around creativity + wonder? Rigorous? What we are looking for is incremental improvement that builds upon the good work that has been done in the past.

The EPS will also be evaluated on how well it shapes our decisions about curriculum. For example, this spring we moved through a process of selecting a new English Language Arts curriculum. As we evaluated potential options we found ourselves going back to our six pillars to evaluate how well the options fit our mission at Living Stones. Once we narrowed our search to two ELA curriculum finalists, our staff came up with a shared list of priorities that would shape our final decision.

- Does it include a diverse group of texts?
- Does it spark curiosity?
- Is it accessible to and supportive of students with a variety of learning styles and needs?
- Is it rigorous?
- Does it empower students?

In the end I was proud of our staff for selecting the curriculum that they did. They did not choose the easiest curriculum but instead the one that will allow our staff to build learning around the six pillars of our EPS.

Developing this statement has been challenging and exciting. I am grateful for what we have accomplished and eager to see it implemented into the teaching and learning at Living Stones Academy.