Masada Charter School

Centennial Park, Arizona

"*We are ignited, we are ablaze, burning with the fire of life! We have invited you to this place, to step into the circle of light…"* Masada Charter School students leave the morning salute in the multi-purpose room singing "Carriers of the Light," their school song. Students in grades K–6 have gathered to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, observe a moment of silence, hear school announcements, and listen to a group of sixth graders talk about the *papier maché* vases they have made as part of a project on ancient Greece. The vases, hand-painted with images of ancient Greek life, form an impressive display along one wall of the room. Equally impressive is the attentive audience, all dressed in the school uniform of plaid jumpers for girls and burgundy polo shirts for boys.

Community members built the school building.

Masada Charter School opened its doors in Fall 2001 and all 150 K–6 slots were filled immediately. The school currently enrolls 464 students and is expanding every year. Masada maintains an open enrollment policy and to date has been able to accept all applicants. The elementary school building itself was constructed by members of the community and financed through a Department of Agriculture loan. Students moved into the new building during the school's second year. Students in Grades 7–9 are housed in rented space in a community-owned building across the parking lot from the elementary school. After Grade 9, most students attend a private high school in the community, but a few attend the K–12 public school in a neighboring town.

Student Demographics

Masada Charter School
Centennial Park, Arizona
www.masadaschool.org
464 students, K – 9

Students eligible for free/ reduced price meals	75%
Students with Limited English Proficiency	0%
Special Education Students	8%
Average Teacher Turnover rate	5%
Student/Teacher Ratio	20:1

Centennial Park is a relatively homogeneous community in rural northern Arizona with an all-white population of native English speakers. Masada Charter School began as a Master's degree project of Leanne Timpson, a teacher in the rural district's lone K–12 school. Enlisting the assistance of other interested teachers and community members, Timpson developed a proposal for Arizona's Charter School Board.

The school received $150,000 from the state in start-up funds for each of the first three years, and has supplemented those funds with six grants and various fund-raising activities. The business aspects of running the school are outsourced to a firm in Phoenix that assists other charter schools.

Now the school administrator, Leanne Timpson is assisted at the elementary school level by a Lead Teacher who functions much like a school principal, assuming responsibility for curriculum, professional development, counseling, discipline, and technology. At the junior high school level, one staff member divides his time between principal and teacher roles.

Administrator Timpson initiated work on the school as part of a Master's degree.

Masada Charter School impresses its visitors with a multitude of strengths. First and foremost, the entire community is committed to the school's vision to "unleash the learning power of students." This is exemplified not only through empowering students to make their own learning choices, but also in the strong commitment to the teachers' professional development. The school uses few textbooks, and carefully selects the instructional materials it needs to address the Arizona education standards. Parent involvement is expected.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Masada Charter School staff places a high value on professional development and has worked continuously with a California consultancy, Life Long Learning, for eight years. The consultants have trained staff to conduct Action Research and Cognitive Coaching.

Each summer Masada teachers examine student data from the previous year, select a focus area, set a goal, and formulate a plan. To help meet their goals, teachers meet twice a month with their Action Research team. Every six weeks teachers write, and the Lead Teacher provides feedback on, a reflective summary of their Plan-Do-Study-Act phases. Teachers receive a $4,000 bonus each year from Arizona Proposition 301 funds for participating in Action Research projects. Teachers also take part in monthly study groups on topics of interest, such as improving student grammar or writing.

One hallmark of the school's culture is teachers' willingness to collaborate and get help from each other, formalized in Cognitive Coaching sessions, held twice a trimester. The coach may be a teacher peer, the Lead

Teacher, or one of two Life Long Learning consultants. A Cognitive Coaching session the site visit team observed began with a pre-conference during which the teacher clarified what she wanted help with and defined the strategies she wanted her coach (the Lead Teacher) to look at. She shared her lesson plan with the coach, noting which state standards she planned to address.

The lesson involved teaching students to use a software program to create different kinds of graphs. The teacher wanted students to use their own achievement data to make the graphs more meaningful, but she also wanted to use some cooperative learning strategies and was concerned that students might compare their data with each other and didn't want anyone to be embarrassed by their scores.

Students wrote and illustrated haiku poems about flowers.

Checking that she understood what the teacher wanted her to attend to, the coach observed the teacher giving the lesson. In a debriefing conversation afterwards, the teacher said she felt the lesson went well, although she accidently skipped a couple of steps when she demonstrated the software. She was pleased that students seemed so involved in creating their graphs that they didn't have a chance to compare their data with others. After seeking confirmation that the teacher was open to some feedback, the coach made some suggestions for incorporating cooperative learning strategies (partner feedback form, think-pair-share) into the lesson.

Teachers also participate in grade-level Collaborative Teams. The team structure facilitates ongoing communication among grade-level teachers and topics frequently center on standards. The site visit team observed a group of junior high school teachers who met after school to work on a planning matrix that aligns the state's math standards with the junior high Saxon math textbooks. The junior high team had previously set up a matrix in Excel which permitted team members to conduct item analyses quickly and efficiently. The teachers were trying to create some assessment items that were more like the Arizona AIMS test, but their items appeared to be more difficult and they discussed making some changes.

Over the past few years, outside trainers have provided workshops for staff on such topics as guided reading, Handwriting Without Tears, Love & Logic, and behavior management. Teachers are also encouraged to attain Master's degrees, and 16 of the school's 23 teachers have earned them. Eleven of these 16 teachers just finished their degrees through a Lesley College program that meets in St. George, Utah; two more teachers are currently enrolled in Walden University online, which will bring the total of teachers with Master's degrees to 18.

The school provides some tuition reimbursement for this program and teachers receive raises when they complete their degrees.

STUDENT EDUCATION PLANS (SEPs)

Part of unleashing students' learning power is helping them take ownership of their education. At Masada, students at all grade levels formulate their own educational goals in Student Education Plans (SEPs) and evaluate whether they accomplished them. SEP meetings, held each trimester, include the student, the teacher, and a parent.

In a SEP meeting the site visit team observed, the teacher began by asking the student, a sixth grader, what he liked and disliked about school, then reviewed his scores on classroom tests, the state AIMS test, and DIBELS. The teacher asked the student, who had achieved high scores on the tests, what he thought made him so successful. "I turn in my homework on time; I pay attention; I'm responsible," the student explained. The teacher noted that these were all good skills that would also transfer to life outside of school.

Next the teacher looked at the student's goal for the trimester, which involved improving his grammar skills. Because a teacher intern had helped this student develop his goal, the classroom teacher asked if it was really the goal he wanted to reach. When the student hesitated, the teacher encouraged him to reach for something he really wanted to learn or accomplish—not necessarily an area of academic weakness. With that, the student said that he would like to accelerate his progress through the seventh grade math (pre-algebra) textbook and start eighth grade math (algebra) this year. The teacher suggested another sixth grader who could work with him on this, and promised to help them find a mentor.

Down the hall, another teacher, student, and parent met to discuss a fifth grade girl's SEP. The mother listened as the teacher and student engaged in a serious discussion of the student's goals, which were related to effort, new learning, and getting along with new friends. The student rated her school progress as "pretty good….6 on a scale of 1 to10" and reported that she was making more friends and being more trustworthy. She noted that she was still having difficulty catching up and being responsible about completing her work and suggested that she needed an incentive to stay caught up.

The teacher and student discussed strategies for getting her homework done and possible incentives. When the student expressed doubt that she could catch up, her mother suggested that if the student stayed caught up, her mother would take her out to lunch. The student and teacher agreed, then reviewed the student's goal of reading more. The student said she was reading a lot more and listening to books on tape. She was also reading some of the books out loud, and understanding them better; her reading scores are improving. The teacher prompted the student to set a goal for the rest of the year, and the teacher, mother, and student agreed that for every week that the student stays caught up, she will receive a dollar to spend on a craft project. The student proposed that she stay at school an extra half hour every day to work on her homework because it is easier for her to stay on task at school. The teacher, who generally stays after school for at least a half hour to complete her own work, accepted the student's proposal.

CURRICULUM

The curriculum at Masada school is built around the Arizona state standards. Few textbooks are used, except in mathematics, where Saxon math is used at all grade levels. For reading instruction, teachers focus on the "big five skills" (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension), and use a four-blocks (guided reading, self-selected reading, working with words, and writing) model. Teachers noted that the administration is very supportive, purchasing instructional materials as needed to meet student needs and state standards.

Technology grants helped fund a computer lab.

Initially, technology was a challenge because the community didn't have high-speed Internet access. The school administrator worked with a member of the community to bring Internet access to their rural area. Technology grants have helped to fund a computer lab as well as mobile laptops.

One highlight of the Blue Ribbon School site visit was an observation of the day-long fifth grade "Fabulous Fraction Fest," which involved both fifth grade classrooms, two teachers, and half a dozen parent volunteers. In the morning, three groups of students explored fractions via music, dance, and the visual arts. In the afternoon, students rotated through six stations which involved 1) using colored candies to create bar graphs that represented the fractions for each color, 2) graphing decimal fractions, 3) egg carton fractions, 4) circle fractions, 5) fraction Uno, and 6) cooking fractions. The latter station was clearly the most popular, but also somewhat challenging in that each student had to make 1/8 of a recipe for a snack. As they moved from one station to the next, students sang a fraction song to the tune of "Clementine."

Students learn to represent their thinking visually.

To plan for the Fabulous Fraction Fest, fifth grade teachers reviewed all of the Arizona standards related to fractions to ensure they were covering each standard, and then set out to create activities that moved students through concrete, representational, and abstract activities, using kinetic, visual, and oral learning. "By the end of the day, all children should understand fractions in multiple ways," a teacher explained, "The activities were developed based on state standards related to fractions, so there is a strong fit that wouldn't be possible if strict adherence to a textbook was the norm."

At the junior high level (Grades 7–9), all students are enrolled in a Project class; they select learning goals and present their projects to the community. Students can change their projects each trimester or continue with the same project. Examples of past projects include refurbishing a car, making a desk, learning to play a musical instrument, learning a new language, learning archery, sewing clothing, writing a novel, working on the school yearbook, and producing a movie. If students need funding for their projects, they can submit grant proposals to the school administration. Students are expected to enlist the assistance of a mentor for their projects, although mentors need not be members of the community. Some students have worked with online mentors for special projects.

PRIMARY GRADES

In the primary grades, displays of student-made, teacher-made, and commercially-made materials ring the classroom. In a first-grade classroom, large cards indicate centers for Handwriting Highway, Journal Writing, Puzzle Places, Library Center, Listening Center, Spelling Space, Book Bag Center, Sequencing Corner, Games Center, ABC Center, Buddy Reading, Phonics Center, and Sort Street.

The 58 first-grade students have been divided into three groups, each studying a different animal and each led by one of the two first-grade teachers or an intern. The focus is on research skills. In one group, the teacher reviews the previous day's work and the students explain that they did a "brain dump." At the teacher's prompting, they describe it as a way "to see what we knew about our topic." They had listed what they knew about leopard seals and sorted the items into either facts or opinions. As they begin seeking more information from books, the teacher displays another chart, directing the students to place facts they find during reading into one of four quadrants: Description, Habitat, Food, and Protection/Shelter. The first graders will present their completed projects to the kindergarten students.

The teacher reviews examples of each type of fact as students volunteer information and define each type. When the teacher asks where they can find information about leopard seals, the students suggest the Internet, Google search, library, dictionary, books, and newspapers. The teacher holds up some books and invites the students to join her on the rug. On an overhead projector she shows the Wikipedia entry on leopard seals, cautioning that "There are some big words. It will take some stretching." A child asserts, "We'll use our brains!" Encouraging the students to try to read the entry, the teacher advises them to look for something they recognize; then she reads the summary aloud, modeling how to select information, asking "Is this important?" Together the students and teacher agree on what to highlight.

Shifting the focus to books, the teacher asks students to use sticky notes to mark anything they find about leopard seals. She models how to use a book to find information and gives students 15 minutes to peruse the books. All students focus on the task. One girl carefully reads a book's table of contents to orient herself to the book. The teacher supports individual students as needed, observing, "Are we finding much in these books for our animal? I think we may have to go to the Internet." The children nod enthusiastically, several exclaiming "Internet!" At the

teacher's prompt, students put all the books they have tagged into a basket and pile the others separately pile. As the teacher pulls out a stack of "Fact Strips," strips of paper roughly 2 by 8 ½ inches, she asks, "What shape is it?" When the students reply "rectangle" she notes that each strip is big enough to write just one fact.

One boy reports that his book said a leopard seal is a mammal. The teacher demonstrates how to record the first fact on a fact strip and asks, "Where does it go on the chart?" Together they agree it belongs in the Description quadrant. The teacher pulls out a folder containing some previous note-taking about Antarctica, and explains that children can select facts from their earlier notes as well. All the students appear to understand the assignment and quickly begin recording facts: "Leopards swim in water." "They eat penguins." "They eat krill." Invented spelling is allowed; the emphasis is on finding and writing facts. The children enjoy taping facts on the chart, and most do not need the teacher's help to do so. The teacher tells students they will come back to the charts later during center time: "It looks like you've got the idea." Taped music signals that students are about to transition to another activity. Most have classroom jobs, and students put the materials away quickly without prompting or instruction from the teacher.

The library is a sunny and inviting space.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Although parent involvement is expected at Masada, parents do not view it as a chore. "We created this school together—parents were involved from the ground up. There is a lot of community pride in this school," a parent explained. "This school succeeds for the same reasons that a good business succeeds," another parent added, "They have a vision, mission, goals, a responsible governing board, a passion for excellence, and good communication with the community."

There are many ways to be involved at Masada. In addition to traditional activities such as helping out in the classroom, on field trips, and with fund raising, parents participate in Community Activity Days to clean up the school grounds, serve as mentors for the junior high Project class, make class presentations, attend SEP meetings with their children, participate in the Readathon, serve on PRISM (Parent Resources In Service to Masada) committees, and attend parenting seminars.

Offered two or three times a month, parenting seminars address such topics as creating a literate home environment, using positive communication, reading to children, helping with homework, and helping children develop critical thinking.

Parents expressed appreciation for Masada's dedicated staff, the focus on positive communication, and the pleasure their children take in going to school. In spite of the expected annual parent involvement hours (15 hours each for the first three children, and five each for each additional child), parents claimed they had no trouble meeting those numbers and most exceeded the requirement. Parents are encouraged to track their hours online via the school website. They can also monitor their child's progress online and check whether their child has any missing assignments.

STUDENT OUTCOMES AND STUDENT LIFE

Over the past several years, Masada Charter School has made steady progress in getting all children to meet or exceed the Arizona state standards and is currently in the top 10 percent of all Arizona schools; more than 90 percent of students meet or exceed state standards in reading and mathematics.

In addition to a rigorous academic curriculum, teachers create a positive learning environment, using the Love & Logic model for discipline. This model encourages students to solve their own problems. Teachers strive to make 90% of discipline positive and only 10% negative. Students can earn recognition and prizes for good behavior and receive "Carriers of the Light" tickets when they are caught doing something exemplary. The school holds a drawing each week for small prizes and twice a year for big prizes such as bicycles.

Unlike many other public schools, Masada Charter School does not provide transportation or a school lunch program. Most students walk to school and walk home for lunch. Students who live in neighboring communities are transported by their parents.

Masada students are required to wear uniforms. Although there was some resistance at first, compliance is high. Students and parents now all seem to agree that uniforms benefit the educational process because they put all students on the same level. One student council member noted that uniforms "remind us that school is for learning—it's not a fashion show."

The original staff at Masada school developed a set of professional norms to guide their behavior and relationships. These norms included such expectations as taking responsibility for the climate and culture of the school, valuing diversity, exhibiting good communication skills, being mutually supportive, striving for quality, and keeping commitments. Eight years later, these norms are woven tightly into the culture of the school.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How could more heterogeneous, urban communities achieve the level of parent involvement that Masada has attained?
- What are the advantages or disadvantages of working with the same professional developers over a period of several years?
- How could Masada evaluate the success of its Student Education Plans?

Masada Charter School **Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) Achievement Test** **% proficient and above: 8th grade English Language Arts**					
	2003–04	*2004–05*	*2005–06*	*2006–07*	*2007-08*
All	n.a.	88	84	94	100
% proficient and above: 8th grade Mathematics					
	2003–04	*2004–05*	*2005–06*	*2006–07*	*2007-08*
All	n.a.	77	77	100	97