

Introduction

Graham Digital Academy (GDA) is a charter conversion public school that offers a nontraditional educational to a diverse array of students in need. Drawing upon a dedicated staff and an innovative curriculum, GDA fills a huge gap in the district's educational offerings by serving students who are not well-served in other schools. Included here are the following:

- students wanting a safer school environment with more accepting peers
- students whose experience in traditional public schools resulted in their failure to thrive
- students seeking credit recovery in order to complete graduation requirements
- students needing advanced courses not offered elsewhere
- students affected by difficult home circumstances
- disengaged students who are not performing at their ability
- special needs students who require innovation and flexibility in their IEPs
- students being home schooled
- students who simply need a “fresh start” in a new school in order to meet their potential
- students suspended for disciplinary problems, including those under juvenile court supervision

Graham Digital Academy helps students and their parents by offering flexibility and choice, and it accepts students of all ability levels and circumstances. The range includes “gifted” students who need a greater challenge, and those hard-to-reach learners who have experienced failure, peer rejection, and diminished motivation at other schools. For some, GDA constitutes a new beginning where they are provided with the guidance they need to succeed – guidance that perhaps they failed to receive at their former schools. For other students, the rigorous academic climate and diverse array of course offerings attracts them to GDA. For all students, GDA provides unique opportunities not available in the district's other public schools.

Both the mission of GDA and its organizational framework center around achieving the following seven goals:

1. offer a personalized approach to instruction from caring adults within the confines of a family-like school climate;
2. enable all students, including those classified as academically “at-risk,” to meet state achievement standards;
3. serve the academic and social skills needs of students who do not thrive in traditional schools;
4. foster in all students the values of respect, non-violence, and responsible citizenship;
5. create an educational environment where the teachers and administrators can function at their highest professional capacities;
6. establish effective collaboration with parents in order to promote student achievement;
7. provide curricular and other support to students being home schooled.

In the six years since its formation as a charter conversion school, GDA has increased the number of full-time and part-time students it serves each year. To date, however, there has been no comprehensive evaluation of the school. Three sources of data currently are in play to offer GDA feedback. First, there are informal reports from staff, students, parents and others about the school. Second, GDA has access to standards-related performance assessments from the Ohio Department of Education. Examples include the *Family Score Report* and annual data from standardized tests such as the OGT. Finally, in 2007, GDA contracted the services of the School Study Council of Ohio for the purpose of conducting a program evaluation study. Although the June 2007 report constituted the first independent assessment of selective aspects of GDA’s performance, its scope was narrow and there were significant gaps in the data collected. Thus, the report’s value as an evaluation and planning tool was limited. The goal of this current evaluation, conducted in 2009, is to provide a far broader range of useful information to school officials.

Scope of Study

In order to help GDA assess outcomes and to facilitate planning, data from various constituencies needed to be collected. The rationale behind data collection reflects the following core assumptions:

1. The majority of students currently enrolled in GDA first attended other more “traditional” schools. To be forthright, many of these students did not thrive academically or socially in those schools. Some felt alienated from their peers and teachers, some suffered from disciplinary problems, and some felt confined by what they saw as an inflexible system. For various reasons, they transferred to GDA. Additionally, many parents of these students experienced dissatisfaction with their children’s progress, and with the manner in which these schools served their children. In light of its mission, there was a compelling need to assess both student and parental perceptions of how well GDA is doing relative to prior school experiences. Simply stated, a major goal of this study was to provide a *comparative* framework for evaluating what GDA is doing relative to the schools from which students transferred. In order to accomplish this end, a series of measures were developed to determine how students and their parents view the performance of GDA compared to that of other schools.
- 2) To understand the role that GDA plays in the lives of students, it is important to look beyond typical concerns such as curriculum offerings and instructional technologies. Because GDA strives to serve the whole person, an understanding of the overall climate in which relationships are formed and maintained – and through which learning takes place – was necessary. This climate includes mentor-student relationships, peer-on-peer relationships, relations with parents, and collegial relationships. An important goal of this evaluation was to paint a picture of the academic and social climate at GDA. As is true of all schools, it is this climate in which students succeed or fail, and in which educators fulfill their role as mentors. Thus, it was

viewed as essential to describe those aspects of the academic and social climate at GDA that constituted strengths and limitations, and how that climate was perceived by various constituencies.

This evaluation involved three related assessment procedures: 1) self-administered surveys to various groups; 2) structured and semi-structured face-to-face interviews; and 3) direct observations and informal discussions. Specifically tailored survey instruments and interview schedules were developed for each of the following: current students, graduates of GDA, teaching and support staff at GDA, parents of students enrolled at GDA, elementary students being home schooled, parents engaged in home schooling, and educational professionals representing Graham Local Schools. The following is a breakdown of those constituencies asked to participate.

- All full-time students currently attending GDA were given a self-administered survey.
- All parents/guardians of full-time currently enrolled students at GDA were mailed a self-administered survey.
- All five teachers plus support staff at GDA were interviewed.
- All graduates of GDA were mailed a self-administered survey.
- All elementary students being home schooled with the assistance of GDA were interviewed.
- All parents/guardians of students being home schooled with the help of GDA were mailed a self-administered survey.
- Several teachers from Graham High School who work with students who take a single course through GDA were interviewed.
- Approximately 50 - 60 hours of informal observations over the course of three months were made on premises at GDA.

Although not everyone who was asked to participate responded, many did. The data collected offer compelling feedback on both the comparative success of GDA, and on its overall climate. Data

from the two largest groups – currently enrolled full-time students and their parents – is especially relevant. As will be seen, the findings of this evaluation present a highly favorable and affirming portrait of GDA. *The multiple data sources indicate that GDA is succeeding in its mission to create a supportive educational climate for students, their parents, and the professionals who serve them.* It is hoped that the observations of this report will shape thinking about how best to sustain an alternative school that effectively serves a population whose needs are not easily met in other educational arenas.

Findings

Data sources for this evaluation were multiple and varied. Assessment tools were developed to gather useful information from current and former students, parents, and GDA staff. The background for designing these assessment tools was this researcher’s experience and understanding of best practices regarding effective schools generally, and alternative schools in particular.¹

Interviews with GDA Teachers

In-person structured interviews with the five teachers were conducted. Each interview took approximately thirty minutes. These face-to-face interviews were designed to identify the teachers’ sense of mission, feelings of collegiality, and perceptions of the climate at GDA. The teachers also were given the opportunity to share their views on the school’s strengths, and to solicit their recommendations for possible changes. Findings include the following.

1. *Shared Sense of Mission.* There is a remarkable degree of shared purpose among the teachers at GDA. To a person, they expressed their deep commitment to creating a caring and nurturing learning environment for all students, including those who have known failure and rejection

at other schools. As a critical part of their educational mission, these teachers consistently articulated the need to establish a positive bond with every student. Each teacher talked about how GDA provides an accepting “family atmosphere” defined by mutual respect. The teachers also noted that GDA is a place where many students thrive because they have been given a “second chance.” Quite simply, the teaching staff at GDA uniformly believes in creating a “personal approach” to instruction that fosters academic achievement, and social and emotional learning. As one teacher stated, “We are a *family school*, and we are proactive. We see a problem and act right away. We expect excellence in behavior and learning.”

Current research on the importance of social and emotional learning suggests that a fundamental condition must be present in order for most school programs to succeed with all students, including high-risk students.² There must be a conscious and consistent effort among school personnel to increase the sense of belonging and attachment that students have with their school. Educators accomplish this by communicating caring in their teaching and by establishing personal bonds with students. Such caring attachments increase student interest in learning and their willingness to refrain from destructive and self-defeating behaviors.

Each staff member at GDA understood the importance of a personalized learning environment that includes individualized instruction as the basis for their students to become healthy and competent overall – socially, emotionally, and academically. Quotes from three of the teachers say it best.

- “At other schools, teachers don’t have a relationship with kids. We care about them as if they are our own.”
- “We want to give each student what is needed to be successful. We are not teaching subjects – we are teaching students.”
- “Students [here] are not scared to make mistakes. Mistakes are okay here – students get a second chance.”

From the interviews, the surveys, and from direct observation, it is the judgment of this evaluator that *the teachers are succeeding at a high level in their mission to create a caring environment where students can learn the necessary academic and social skills.*

2. *Esprit de Corps.* Augmenting this caring environment are feelings of collegiality and mutual respect among the staff. The teachers were unanimous in their rating the staff relations and the cooperation with administration as better at GDA than at other schools. There is a willingness to support and cooperate with one another in meeting students' needs and in advancing the school's mission. At GDA, there is a noteworthy absence of tension between staff; this sets a tone for the students. Students suffer in schools where staff members are antagonistic toward one another. The opposite is true at GDA. Here, the teachers and staff model solidarity, shared responsibility, and team effort. Effective leadership, care in hiring staff, and teachers who *choose* to be there because *they want to work in an alternative school* with challenging learners contribute to this *esprit de corps*. As one teacher said, "We are a character building school" – and the starting place for building character is to embrace collegiality by working as a team.

3. *Perceived Staff Development Needs.* The teachers at GDA appear to be well-prepared for the challenges of working in an alternative school; the overall sense is that they have a high level of professional training. Three had attained a Masters degree, and two are completing their Masters degrees. When asked about their professional development needs, there were several areas where a degree of consensus emerged. For example, responses suggest the teachers feel prepared to address the academic and disciplinary challenges of working with students (and their parents) who transfer into an alternative school. The teachers also felt they were up to speed on computer-based instruction approaches. There were, however, two areas of training needs they felt deserved more attention. Some saw a need for more professional development on working with "special education" students and those with "learning disabilities." There was recognition of the "emotional complexities" involved in teaching special populations. A related area of professional development need was on the best ways to

develop and implement individualized educational strategies to the diverse array of students being served at GDA.

4. *Perceived Strengths.* The effective relational skills of the teachers in working with challenging learners was recognized by each person interviewed. They also believe that GDA does a very good job in establishing positive relations with the parents or guardians of the students, many of whom have had only negative experiences with other schools. There is regular communication from GDA teachers and the principal to students' homes, and there are frequent meetings where parents and guardians can learn more about matters of shared concern.

Teachers also were consistent in reporting that GDA was far more effective than other schools in meeting the following core goals:

- increasing students' overall academic performance and their chances of graduating
- improving student performance on state standards tests such as the OGT
- improving student attendance and reducing absenteeism
- reducing the frequency of disciplinary interventions and improving students' social skills
- improving students' motivation to learn and their attitudes toward school
- reducing student-parent conflicts over school performance
- holding both students and their parents/guardians responsible for success in school
- creating respectful peer relations and a supportive school climate
- giving students more choice in course selection

There was a strong sense that teaching content areas was only one part of an overall approach to instruction in this alternative school. Teaching and modeling the values of respect, personal integrity, good citizenship, and honesty are part of the teaching mission. Perhaps that is why teachers at GDA felt that Ohio's proficiency exams are not useful in measuring the effectiveness of their teaching, or the intensive work that they do with students. Moreover, the proficiency exams, they felt, were not helpful

in guiding staff development at GDA. The reality is that the kind of social and emotional learning that takes place at GDA – learning that is essential to reducing the risks faced by alternative education students – is not reflected in the proficiency exams. This view is shared by alternative school educators throughout the nation.

5. *Challenges and Suggestions for Change.* The teachers at GDA recognize the challenges of maintaining a “family atmosphere” in a school where there is demand to enroll more students. As one teacher stated, “We are torn now. We need to keep the personalization, but you can’t turn them [students wanting to enroll] down. In response to increasing enrollment pressures, all the teachers offered the same two suggestions for improvement at GDA: 1) they need more staff; and 2) they need more space.

Teachers also were asked about their views on challenges to effective collaboration with other local schools, including the difficulties of transition from a student’s prior school to GDA. There was a strong sense among the teachers that educators at other schools do not fully understand the mission of GDA, its operations, or for that matter, why students want to attend there. Several teachers noted a paradox in how GDA is seen by educators in other schools. On the one hand, GDA constitutes a convenient “dumping ground” for difficult students who are perceived as problems for teachers in other schools. On the other hand, GDA teachers sense a degree of resentment coming from other schools from which students transfer. This resentment, they believe, has several roots. One is a feeling that GDA is taking resources away from those schools. There may also be resentment when talented students choose to transfer to GDA because they feel disconnected from their prior school. Hence, GDA is seen as “stealing the good students.” As one GDA teacher stated, the reason why some students want to leave their former school is the “antiquated ideas” about education at those schools: “They are stuck in tradition and are not willing to change. They [other educators] don’t understand the time and effort we put into these children.” Several teachers also noted that when GDA is successful with students who failed to thrive in their prior schools, other educators may simply dismiss this success as a

function of GDA being too easy. The bottom line is that teachers at GDA believe they and the school's mission are not perceived accurately by at least some educators at other schools.

It is difficult to assess how such perceptions might affect coordination between schools, especially when students transfer to GDA. Several teachers noted there is not always effective communication and effective coordination between GDA and other schools from which students transfer. Specifically, the timely transfer of records such as transcripts can be a problem. In addition, there is not always a follow-up discussion with each transfer student's former teachers and school counselor. Despite the need to have accurate information about new students when they enroll at GDA, the quality and timing of information sharing between schools can vary with each case.

Overall, it is clear that the teachers at GDA feel it is a special place to work and to serve students. They are proud to be a part of something that is making a difference for so many students, including those who have known little success in other schools. These teachers believe in second chances, and daily they demonstrate their commitment to changing the lives of young people. They appear especially adept at establishing caring relations with students, assessing their needs, and in raising expectations for success. Accountability is a clear expectation. It is a school that is living up to an ideal of being advocates for children. As one teacher stated, at GDA, "kids feel empowered."

Interviews with Support Staff

Interviews were conducted with GDA's two computer technicians, the administrative assistant, and three teachers at the local high school who are involved with GDA programming. One of these teachers serves as a liaison who helps with oversight of the "singletons" – students taking a single course through GDA but enrolled full-time at the high school. The other two are high school science teachers. One has developed an online science course she teaches through GDA, and the other offers tutorial and science lab help to students.

Responses from these six interviews strongly paralleled those from the five GDA teachers. Each respondent talked about GDA being a special school that serves students and families in ways unlike any other school in the district. They too talked about the “family atmosphere,” the shared sense of mission, the positive connection with students, the ability to address the diverse needs of students, and the quality of leadership at GDA. When asked what GDA offers students that they do not receive in other schools, one high school teacher stated, “individual attention, sense of community, a supportive climate, and the ability to work at their own pace.” The following comments are illustrative.

- “GDA offers kids something they can’t get elsewhere. It reaches those kids who are falling through the cracks.”
- “At GDA, there is a sense of cooperation. I would love to clone that here [the high school].”
- “All are treated fairly and equally, no matter what they are like when they come here.”

There was also a sense among those interviewed that educators at other local schools do not truly understand the work that goes on at GDA.

- “People outside of GDA don’t have a clear picture of GDA.”
- “They [other educators] don’t understand online instruction. They think this is where the ‘losers’ go because *they* [other educators] have given up on them [the students who transfer to GDA].”

Several persons interviewed noted that there is a need for better coordination between GDA and the high school in two areas: 1) timely sharing of information when students transfer out of the high school; and 2) advising high school students about GDA’s more expansive course offerings. For example, teachers and counselors who could advise students to take a single specialty course not available at the high school (e.g., Chinese), may not be aware of all the course options GDA can offer. Such lack of knowledge may persist despite GDA’s best efforts to communicate what is available to

students. In addition, the monitoring of students who do take an on-line course can be difficult. This academic year, for example, there were approximately 60 such “singleton” students at the high school. Given that these students are not present at GDA, the degree to which their progress is being monitored effectively at the high school is an open question. To its credit, GDA recognizes this challenge and sought a liaison at the high school to assist in monitoring. Although that is a positive step, more effort may be necessary to monitor such students, especially as the number who take advanced or other online courses continues to increase.

The need for more space and more staff at GDA also was noted. One concern – the need for GDA students to experience “hands on” science instruction in science labs – might be addressed through better coordination of facilities use in the district. The scheduled addition of new science labs in the high school should help. Given GDA’s growth in enrollments, an overall plan for coordinating facilities use throughout the district would be beneficial.

Several noteworthy comments were made about the technological infrastructure needed to serve students seeking online courses. At present, as one respondent stated, GDA is “ahead of the curve in terms of hardware,” including the capacity to do podcasts if needed. In addition, the teaching staff appears to be well-trained and proficient in the use of equipment and educational software, though there is always a need for ongoing training to keep abreast of advances in the field. As demand for online education grows, however, the “patchwork” of wireless capability throughout the district is a concern. In light of this increasing demand, there may be a need to add technical staff to serve GDA students, their families, and the teachers. The following comment is noteworthy. “We make everything technically ready and family friendly. GDA excites me with all the technical possibilities it holds. It also scares me that we have to stay ahead of the technological curve.”

The overall picture derived from these interviews is that GDA effectively fills an enormous need in the district, even if its mission is not well understood by some educators in other schools. As the demand for online instruction increases, there will be a commensurate demand for services

provided by GDA. Technical training, space, technical infrastructure, staffing considerations, and coordination need to be assessed in light of this continued demand.

Results from Student Survey and Parent/Guardian Surveys

Surveys were developed for the GDA students attending full time who come to school daily. In addition, two separate surveys were designed for the parents/guardians – one for parents whose children are in middle and high school, and the other for the few whose children are at the elementary level. It is important to note that the two parent/guardian surveys served different functions. For nearly all middle and high school level students, other schools were part of their educational experience before attending GDA. For these students and their parents, the surveys were designed to compare GDA to their prior schools. These surveys of students and parents reflect parallel questions to allow for before-after comparisons. The survey of elementary school parents/guardians focuses specifically on the GDA experience and does not seek comparisons with other schools. The following are highlights of findings from students and parents at the middle and high school levels. (Parents who are home schooling their students with the assistance of GDA are included.) Copies of these surveys, along with the percentage responding to each question, can be seen in the Appendix.

Of the approximately 45 middle and high school level students who attend GDA daily, 39 completed the survey. In addition, 35 parents completed the survey, but 8 of these parents had two or more students attending GDA. Hence, the total number of parental responses is for 43 students. Because a few survey questions were left blank, the percentages for each question reflect the number responding to that question. The overall sense from the two surveys is that students and their parents overwhelmingly agree that they are better served by GDA than at their prior schools. Simply stated, in every category of comparison, GDA does much better – or at least as well – as the former schools. The following highlight such comparisons.

Student Responses

- 67% said they are *more likely* to stay in school and graduate, and 33% said *as likely*, now that they are attending GDA.
- 77% said that now they are attending GDA, they like school *better* than before.
- 69% said they are learning *more* at GDA than at their former school.
- 64% said they are *more likely* to do their school work now that they attend GDA.
- 69% said they are *more likely* to obey school rules at GDA.
- 72% said they are *more likely* to consider going to college now they are attending GDA.
- 94% said teachers at GDA *care more* about them than teachers at former schools.
- 50% said students at GDA *care more* about them than students at former schools.
- 89% said teachers at GDA give them *more help* than teachers at former schools.
- 59% said they are *more willing* to ask teachers at GDA for help than before.
- 67% said that now they attend GDA, they *feel happier* about who they are.
- 44% *feel safer*, and 54% *as safe* at school now they are at GDA.
- In every subject area, well over half the *students feel more confident that they will pass* the requirements now that they are attending GDA.
- Overwhelmingly, there was a perception that GDA *students are less likely to use tobacco, alcohol, or drugs* than students at their former schools.

It is worth pausing to reflect upon the magnitude and direction of favorable responses from students toward GDA, especially when compared to their experiences at former schools. There exists a panoply of reasons why students exited these schools – hostile encounters with teachers, bullying and substance abuse by peers, disciplinary difficulties, poor academic performance, lack of motivation, the absence of individual attention or needed help, and a climate of indifference are but a few. Quite simply, many of these students enter GDA with a sense that school is not a welcoming place. Yet

something happens at GDA that transforms negative attitudes and behaviors – something that transforms students into willing learners and participating members of the school community. In a fundamental sense, that “something” seems to be a feeling that GDA is a safe place where each student is valued and treated with respect. To the extent that academic achievement and a commitment to responsible citizenship among students flow from the creation of positive, affective bonds within school, GDA is a resounding success in fostering such bonds. The general conclusion? *GDA is a school that creates multiple opportunities for achievement – a school where students feel they belong.*

It is no small accomplishment when so many students report that the teachers at GDA care more about them and give them more help than teachers at their prior schools. It is no small accomplishment that so many students at GDA report they are more likely to stay out of trouble, more likely to do better academically, more likely to consider continuing their education, and generally much happier about themselves and their school performance than before. It is no small accomplishment that students feel more confident that at GDA, they will pass the various content areas essential for graduation. And finally, it is remarkable that a perceived sense of parental satisfaction, of school safety, and of a reduced likelihood of peer substance abuse is common among students.

To further illustrate such student perceptions, consider the pattern of their responses to the following question: “Could you briefly describe one thing about GDA you like best when compared to your other school?”

- “I like the more friendly environment from the teachers.”
- “I love working at my own pace. I can finish stuff quicker than I could at my previous school.”
- “This school is easier to work in. There is no threat of bullies.”
- “I like that there is no drama and I also like the help that the teachers give.”
- “I like the help that I get one on one with the teachers.”

- “One thing I like is that the teachers help you a lot more.”
- “The teachers are more willing to help, plus they want to see us succeed more.”
- “One thing I like best about GDA when compared to my other school is the teachers are more helpful.”
- “I can trust the teachers when I need to talk and I get help on work when I need it.”
- “I like how you can redo lessons and how they are much nicer here than the others.”
- “I like the fact that you can work at your own pace.”
- “I have more flexibility.”
- “I like...that I don’t get made fun of here.”

Students also were asked, “Could you briefly describe one thing about GDA you most want to see improved?” In many instances when students are afforded the opportunity to register complaints about a school, the list is long and at times, somewhat nasty. In this instance, however, the suggestions for improvement were minor and tended to focus most on upgrading the facilities. Many responded by saying they do not want anything changed. The following are some of their responses.

- “I would like a place to eat. I don’t like eating in the classroom.”
- “Less crowded classrooms.”
- “We can use more space.”
- “More elbow space in the lab.”
- “Nothing.”
- Nothing. It is cool the way it is.”
- “I like GDA the way it is.”
- “Gym needs to be improved..”
- “I don’t think anything should be changed.”

- “There isn’t anything that needs to be changed because everything is awesome.”
- “I wouldn’t change this school for a billion years.”
- “Equipment for school.”
- “Exercise!!! We only get 20 - 30 minutes of that.”
- “Papers graded faster.”
- “We should have bigger classrooms.”
- “There is nothing that needs to be improved at GDA. TRECA is where work is needed. The [online] teachers are never as available as they could be. They have too many students, plus the lessons need to be more clear and informative.”

Responses from students also suggest a noteworthy observation relative to their parents. When students are struggling in school, regardless of whether the reasons are social or academic, often two things occur. First, many students will avoid informing their parents about the difficulties they are experiencing. Second, poor performance or other difficulties at school can have the unintended consequence of producing conflicts with parents. Struggles at home over assignments, or disciplinary infractions at school, can further complicate the student’s life in both spheres. It also can undermine parental communication with the school. The positive climate at GDA appears to have the added benefit of reducing these problems. The following three pieces of data are telling.

- 36% of the students report that since coming to GDA, *they get along with their parents better than before.*
- 74% of the students indicated that at least one of their parents *knows more about how well they are doing in school* now that they attend GDA.
- 79% of students said their *parents are much happier*, and 21% *as happy*, with their school performance now that they attend GDA.

The bottom line is clear: students feel they are better served at GDA than at their former

schools, they feel safer at GDA, and they feel the teachers and students are more caring when compared to their experiences at other schools. This is a recipe for student success and for parental cooperation with the school's mission. Indeed, survey responses from parents paralleled those of the students.

Parent/Guardian Responses

The general finding from this survey is that parents/guardians have far more positive perceptions about GDA when compared to the former schools their children attended. There is strong agreement among parents that GDA is a welcoming place where their children are thriving. Indeed, there were either zero or very few negative responses directed toward GDA on the many items in the survey. The following is illustrative when GDA is compared to former schools.

- 54% of GDA parents said their children are *more likely to stay in school* and graduate.
- 63% said their children *like school better* than before.
- 58% said their children are *learning more* at GDA.
- 55% said their children are *more likely to complete school work* at GDA.
- 51% said their children are *more likely to obey school rules* at GDA.
- 75% said *teachers at GDA care more* about their children than at other schools.
- 71% said teachers at GDA *give their children more help*.
- 63% said their children are *more willing to ask teachers for help* at GDA.
- 67% said their *children feel happier about themselves* since attending GDA.
- 56% said their children *feel safer* at GDA.
- In every subject area, the overwhelming majority of parents *feel confident their children will pass* now that they attend GDA.
- The majority of parents feel students are *less likely to use tobacco, alcohol, or drugs* at GDA

when compared to other schools.

- 90% of parents said the lessons their children learn at GDA will *help them to be more successful in life*.

- 97% of parents said that GDA is *more flexible* and offers their children *more opportunities* when compared to other schools.

Like many of their offspring, parents also had negative experiences wherein they felt as if the schools were not meeting their children's needs. Whether it was uncaring teachers, an inflexible system, negative peer behaviors, lack of educational opportunities, or any number of other concerns, it is clear these parents see GDA as a positive alternative. It seems apparent that these highly favorable attitudes toward GDA translate into better cooperation between parents and children on school matters, and better communication between home and school in striving to accomplish GDA's mission. The following results from the parent/guardian survey are indicative.

- 32% of parents reported that since their children enrolled in GDA, they *get along better* than before; none reported a worsening of relations.

- 75% of parents reported they *know more about how well their children are doing* in school.

- 66% of parents are *much happier about their children's school performance*.

- 82% of parents report having a *more positive relationship with the teachers and staff* at GDA than what they experienced at the last school.

- 95% of parents said that relative to their experiences with other schools, *GDA is the school they most want their children to attend*.

These positive findings are further reinforced by the comments parents made when asked to articulate one thing they like best about GDA when compared to other schools. The following are direct quotes.

- “Each student is given the tools for success based upon individual needs versus ‘the group’.”

- “Teachers not only take the time to listen but they help too! Even with the parents.”
- “The lab feels like home; the staff are wonderful in every aspect of the students’ studies. They [the teachers] are so much more than educators!”
- “I love how all the teachers show how they care about each and every student.”
- “I love the positive outlook on everything.”
- “The teachers are always on top of what the students are doing.”
- “Freedom being the basic tenant of our society ... GDA is built upon that platform.”
- “School schedule is more open.”
- “I like how positive the teachers are with the students.”
- “GDA is very focused on capitalizing on each student’s strengths and encouraging them to exceed in their gifted areas.”
- “Better quality education.”
- “Responsibility the students have.”
- “I feel that my child can concentrate better and get the one-on-one she needs when needed.”
- “It is more flexible. It is also easier to see how and what they are doing.”
- “Individual attention by the teachers.”
- “The students treat each other with kindness and respect.”
- “Plenty of help when needed.”
- “Students have to complete their work rather than just not doing it.”
- “Flexibility.”

It is reasonable to conclude that such positive parental responses toward GDA stem from two fundamental conditions. First, parents see improvement in their children’s school performance and their attitudes toward school. *The GDA experience has altered the trajectory of the student learning*

experience in a manner consistent with parental hopes. Parents also see the labor-intensive and individualized work GDA teachers put into each student. Second, the Principal and staff at GDA go to great lengths to communicate regularly with the parents about how well each student is performing. There is transparency in what the school is doing, and there is prompt feedback to the home. As a result, parents trust the school to do what is in the best interests of their children, and thus, they are more willing to cooperate with the school. Positive changes in student behavior yield positive relations with the school. Perhaps one parent said it best: “My child gets more help with his classes and actually understands what he’s doing now. He likes going to school now – he didn’t before.”

Parents/guardians also were asked what they would most like to see improved at GDA. Similar to the students, many offered no suggestions for improvement or otherwise affirmed they were pleased with current operations. Others tended to focus on the need for space and improvement of facilities. Several expressed a desire for more communication online. The following comments are indicative.

- “You can’t improve perfection.”
- “More interacting online among students/supervised.”
- “So far I love everything.”
- “They need more classroom space.”
- “Maybe a parent-teacher organization? Small scale, to promote various ideas for the school, community, and beyond.”
- “It takes too long for emails to be returned. Teachers being online for only two days a week. Not enough.”
- “People to really notice what GDA is and does for the kids.”
- “The facility. GDA is such a great learning experience that it is growing by leaps! There are needs to accommodate the number of students working at the GDA lab.”
- “More advanced courses.”

- “Newer equipment for students. Overall, this school kicks – from the teachers to the environment – nothing else beats this. I recommend GDA to all I know.”
- “I would love to see GDA [be] perceived in a more positive light.”
- “Teachers’ recommendation(s) as to what additional classes would benefit students.”
- “I would love to see the school lab be bigger, have a library. A better way to have lunches – have their own cafeteria, instead of [food] being brought over to the students.”
- “The kids seem to want more physical activities.”
- “More social interaction with other Graham district students.”
- “Nothing.”
- “None – it’s a great place – glad we could be a part of it.”

“Honors [classes] ... to help students with college!”

When reviewing responses from the middle/high school level students and their parents, one is struck by the many affirmations that GDA is an effective and caring educational environment. One is also struck by the relative absence of complaints, with the possible exception of the need for more space. *Very few public schools reflect such consistent agreement on so many positive educational attributes as is seen in these survey results. In virtually every point of comparison, GDA appears to trump both student and parental experiences at other schools.* To quote the Principal of GDA, “We are a family school.” It is clear that students and their parents overwhelmingly agree.

Results from Parents of Elementary School Students

Graham Digital Academy also serves a handful of students who are at the elementary level, including those who are home schooled. A specially designed survey was mailed to the parents of these students asking the extent to which they agree or disagree with a series of statements about GDA. Parents of 17 students returned the survey; 11 of these students are being schooled at home with

assistance from GDA. Using a Likert Scale, responses to statements included *strongly agree*, *agree*, *unsure*, *disagree*, and *strongly disagree*, with a numerical score ranging from one to five respectively. A score of one reflects a strongly positive view of GDA for each statement, and a score of five a strongly negative view. The mean or average score from these 17 students is indicated beside each statement below.

- I am happy my student is enrolled at GDA (Score = 1.12)
- My student likes attending GDA. (Score = 1.12)
- My student is succeeding academically at GDA. (Score = 1.24)
- GDA is meeting my expectations for effective instruction of my student. (Score = 1.12)
- The staff at GDA gives individualized attention to my student. (Score = 1.18)
- Because of the education received at GDA, as my student advances to middle school, he/she will be successful. (Score = 1.12)
- I am pleased with the efforts of the teachers at GDA to communicate with me about my student's academic progress. (Score = 1.18)
- The staff at GDA gives me the support I need to help my student with school work at home. (Score = 1.24)
- I would not want my student to attend any elementary school in the area other than GDA. (Score = 1.12)
- My student feels safe at GDA. (Score = 1.12)
- There is a climate of respect between teachers and students at GDA. (Score = 1.00)

These responses indicate a highly favorable view of GDA. When asked to describe what they like best about the school, written comments from these parents further reinforce this positive view.

- “CHOICE - CHOICE - CHOICE -CHOICE. School should NOT be a one-size-fits all.”
- “We love the family feeling. You know everyone there. The staff is great with the kids.”

- “I love how the staff at GDA treats each student with respect. They see each child’s individual strengths, and work hard to improve their weaknesses.”
- (From a parent who home schools.) “If we need any help, GDA is there always. With the best teachers.”
- “Being a part of GDA has given us the freedom to choose to educate our child the way we want to.”
- “Self-paced courses so they learn at their own pace + the individual attention for the students.”
- “The people. Everyone we’ve worked with – teachers, staff, administrators – have been great. They really care about the students and are enthusiastic about what they do.”
- “We enjoy the freedom to work at our own pace. We are able to expand our interests.”
- “The genuine love that my child receives! I am so pleased with GDA.”

These parents also were asked to describe what they would most like to see improved at GDA.

The following are their responses.

- “I would like to see more parent-sponsored activities for the kids (i.e., teach sewing or cooking class). Have parents talk about their professions or expertise.”
- “I don’t know what could be improved. They do a great job.”
- “End of the week communication so I know exactly what my child needs to work on (to get the teacher’s perspective, not just the child’s).”
- “More rooms to use.”
- “More students! Keep growing, which I’m sure it will!”
- “Space! GDA has outgrown its allotted space. They really need another couple rooms for classes, tutoring, etc.”
- “I would like to see a quarterly meeting with parents and GDA staff. We could share information.”

Parents who are home schooling their children were asked to share their views on the assistance they receive from GDA. Their responses suggest a high level of cooperation between GDA and the home, and that GDA is providing assistance to these parents in a number of important ways. Consider their responses to this question: “What does GDA allow you to do that you could not do if you were home schooling without its assistance?”

- “GDA provides a plethora of learning supplies. It provides a teaching staff who listen, encourage, and partner with me. It allows my family to interact with other families who share the same goals.”
- “Organize the lessons. I would have a really difficult time trying to develop curriculum on my own. Also, they ensure all the state requirements and testing are done well.”
- “Emails are sent every day. There is a connection [between] school and student that goes beyond learning.”
- “It allows our children to participate in other learning activities such as baton, dance, and drama.”
- “We are able to participate in baton twirling, drama club, and other organized activities.”
- “We wouldn’t be able to afford all the wonderful curriculum GDA purchases for us to use. Also, GDA offers many optional enrichment opportunities.”

Parents also were asked to respond to this question: “In what way does GDA support your choice to home school your student?”

- “GDA recognizes that I know my child best, and helps to put tools and resources at our access to improve and inspire their educational pursuits. They provide workshops and classes that supplement our curriculum.”
- “They love our boys. Always getting emails or phone calls checking in with us. Also started tutoring that has really been helpful.”

- “They clearly feel every child is important, and that everyone learns differently and has talent. They are open and supportive to what each of my kids needs, and they seem to view the parents as learning partners...”

- “GDA gives us more options than the ‘normal’ school. They realized a long time ago that education should fit the child instead of each child conforming to fit (many times unsuccessfully) their education.”

- “It has provided the curriculum for our child, as well as the use of a laptop computer, and copier/printer/scanner.”

- “There are resources made available to us. We have used many of the suggested web sites.”

These parents also were asked to offer suggestions regarding how GDA could further assist them in home schooling. The following are their responses.

- “I would love for my children to have some musical training. I wish we could feel more a part of the Graham Elementary community at times. Sometimes it seems like GDA is far removed from the local system and is somewhat competitive.”

- “I don’t know what it would be. They go out of their way making sure we don’t have any problems. They are GREAT!!!”

- “The only thing I can think of is maybe include the home students’ accomplishments a little more. Sometimes we see emails praising kids for finishing blocks on time, even when my boys are doing that.”

- “It would be great to see a music program added for children...”

- “Continue to keep as many things as possible (enrichment, tutoring) optional.”

- “I am very satisfied with what GDA does for our family.”

A special word is in order concerning GDA’s efforts to assist parents who choose to home school their children. Nationally, home schooling is a source of controversy within education. Debates

focus on costs, on educational quality and outcomes, and on the social side of the educational experience. Even so, home schooling is a growing movement. Increasingly, local schools are being asked to assist parents who want to educate their children at home. Quite honestly, not every school provides these parents with the help they need in this effort. In some instances, rather than being partners in a common effort, local schools are seen as interfering or “meddling” with parents who home school their children. No so with GDA. The data suggest that GDA is seen as a helpful partner to those parents who select the home school option. Home schooling seems to work best when the following conditions are present:

- 2 Parents coordinate with certified teachers on instructional matters and on assessment of student progress.
- 3 The school provides parents with curricular and other instructional resources.
- 4 There is frequent communication between the school and the home.
- 5 Home schooling students have easy access to the co-curricular, extracurricular, and enrichment programs of the school.
- 6 The school assists parents in preparing students for state-mandated standardized tests.
- 7 Parents and students are made to feel they are part of the school community, rather than being isolated.

The positive responses toward GDA from parents who are home schooling their children strongly suggest that these conditions are indeed present. There is every indication that GDA goes to great lengths to help these parents and to ensure a quality learning experience for their children. Furthermore, the children being home schooled also feel a positive bond toward GDA, as reflected in their responses to interviews.

Results from Elementary Home School Student Interviews

In the Graham Local district, GDA was given the responsibility of working with parents who chose the home school option. During the 2008-2009 school year, 15 elementary level students were being home schooled with the assistance of GDA. As part of this evaluation, all 15 of these students were interviewed. The goal was to determine the perceived relationship between GDA and each learner. The following are results from these interviews.

- All 15 students knew the names of the teachers at GDA.
- All 15 students said the teachers at GDA were friendly.
- Of the 15 students, 14 said the teachers at GDA pay close attention to the school work they do at home; 1 student was unsure.
- All the students indicated there was regular contact between GDA and their homes regarding school work. Most said they communicate online or in person with GDA about two or more times each week.
- All 15 students said the teachers at GDA encourage them to do their best work.
- All 15 students said the teachers at GDA care about how much they are learning.
- Of the 15 students, 14 said their parents were happy with the help received from GDA; 1 student was unsure.
- 14 of the 15 students said they liked coming to GDA for special events.
- 13 students said if they were not being home schooled, they would like to attend GDA; 2 were not sure.

Comments from these students also indicate the positive feelings they have for GDA. Many indicated how much they like having a computer and printer supplied by the school. They also commented on how much they like the enrichment activities at GDA such as baton, dance, drama, and field trips. The general sense was that these students felt they were part of the school community, including having friends there, even though they were schooled at home. GDA welcomed them and

offered them the benefits available to any student. The following are quotes regarding what these home school students like best about GDA..

- “I like the computers they gave us.”
- “Teachers are friendly and nice. But if someone steps out of line, the teachers are not afraid to correct it.”
- “You can do more things here than at regular school. You learn more than you would at a regular school.”
- “You get to do extra things if you are doing good on your work.”
- “Everybody is friendly. The enrichment classes (e.g., drama, junior great books) are fun.”
- “Mrs. Ward (the principal). She’s really nice. The school itself.”
- “They have a lot of friendly people. I like the special events here.”
- “How much the teachers care for you. The kids [here] learn so much. It’s great! The students here are not mean or rowdy – not like other schools. Here, they don’t behave badly. If someone moved to Ohio, I think it would be best if they came to this school.”
- “I like how they are always nice to you – never mean – and always encouraging you.”

The students also were given the opportunity to share one thing that GDA could do to make their home school experience better. Thirteen students could not think of anything GDA might do to improve. One student noted the difficulty of doing science experiments at home and the need for a lab. The other student expressed a desire for more art and drama classes. Overall, these home school students felt a strong bond to GDA, to its teachers, and also to the students there. There was not a sense that the home school students were isolated from the school or otherwise seen as peripheral to the school’s mission. These students – and their parents – felt gratitude toward GDA for the help they received.

Graham Digital Academy Graduate Survey

One final group was surveyed and presented with the opportunity to share their observations – GDA graduates. Surveys were mailed to 67 former GDA students who have graduated. Unfortunately, only 15 surveys were returned. Part of the difficulty in reaching this group is that many have changed their address since graduating. Fourteen surveys were returned unopened with no forwarding address. There is no way to know if surveys found their way to others, or what the reasons might be for the lack of response. Hence, it is not clear to what extent the 15 respondents are representative of GDA graduates.

Those graduates who returned the survey generally expressed positive views of their GDA experience, those not as universally positive as the views of current students. Again using a Likert Scale, responses to statements included *strongly agree*, *agree*, *unsure*, *disagree*, and *strongly disagree*, with a numerical score ranging from one to five. A score of one represents a highly positive view, and five a highly negative view. The average score for each statement is indicated beside each statement.

- I was much happier with school once I enrolled at GDA. (1.73)

I was much more likely to stay in school and graduate because I attended GDA. (2.1)

- I learned more at GDA than I did at my other school. (1.93)

- Because I attended GDA, I was more likely to complete my school work. (2.13)

- I became more successful academically because I attended GDA. (1.93)

- Once I enrolled at GDA, I was more likely to obey school rules. (2.0)

- Once I enrolled at GDA, I had fewer disciplinary infractions. (2.2)

- GDA did a good job of preparing me for work/college. (2.13)

- My parent(s) thought GDA helped me more than my other school. (1.93)

- Teachers at GDA cared more about me than at my other school. (1.93)

- Students at GDA cared more about me than at my other school. (2.07)

- Teachers at GDA give me more individualized help than the teachers at my other school.

(1.93)

- I was more willing to ask teachers for help at GDA than at my other school. (2.07)
- Overall, my peers at GDA were happier to be there than at their other schools. (2.4)
- Overall, I felt safer attending GDA than when I was attending my other school. (1.93)
- My parents were much happier with my school performance once I attended GDA. (1.87)
- There was a climate of respect between students and teachers at GDA. (1.93)
- Overall, GDA did a much better job of teaching me the values and skills necessary for success in school or work than any other school I attended. (1.80)

When reflecting upon classes taken at GDA, many graduates stated they became more confident – and some were as confident – that they would pass in each of the subjects when compared to their former schools. Most also stated that peer substance abuse was either less likely at GDA, or in some cases, as likely when compared to other schools. In addition, 13 of the 15 respondents (87%) said that once they enrolled at GDA, at least one of their parents knew more about how well they were doing at school than before. One was not sure, and one did not agree that the parent(s) knew more.

Graduates of GDA were asked to describe one thing they liked best about GDA when compared to their other schools. Their responses are similar to those of many current students.

- “Class flexibility – more teacher input [and] one on one time.”
- “The teachers and peers made all the difference. They are innovative and creative, and created a whole other world of learning that I would have never experienced at any other school.”
- “I had to learn organizational skills and learn how to navigate *blackboard*. It helped a lot when I went to college.”
- “Able to have one on one time, and feel comfortable with taking steps ahead with a better understanding of how to do it.”

- “I completed 2 years at GDA in 1.5 years. I got more done in less time.”
- “The thing I like about GDA is that I can do all my work from home, unlike at my other school.”
- “The time Mrs. Ward and the teachers took with the students and parents to make everyone comfortable.”
- “I could work at my own pace on my school work.”
- “I could work day or night and do my school work, before or after school.”
- “I like to be able to go at my own pace.”
- “The flexibility was particularly beneficial.”
- “[GDA] has activities to bring students together and involve the families.”
- “I particularly love the flexible schedule. I also like being able to redo assignments rather than continuing on without thoroughly learning the material.”
- “Since GDA started, they [have] done nothing but improve and try to provide the best for students. The teachers are dedicated and that makes all the difference!”

Graduates also were asked to describe one think about GDA they would like to see improved..

The following are the responses.

- “Nothing.”
- “More students.”
- “Maybe to add a tutoring program.”
- “Nothing.”
- “I think GDA would be much more productive if they had a larger faculty.”
- “A better system to help a student not get behind. Every student is different so a customized plan per student.”
- “ There needs to be better communication.” [With online teachers?]

- “Some of the online teachers are very slow to grade. This slows progress down sometimes.”
- “The speed of getting back exams [from online teachers].”

Overall, graduates expressed positive views of GDA. It is difficult to know how the data might change if more graduates had responded. During informal conversations I had with several GDA graduates, the perceptions of the school could not have been more positive. It seems reasonable to assume that because GDA is a relatively new school that has been in operation only six years, it has had to overcome some initial growing pains. Perhaps the experiences of earlier students do not fully reflect the many overwhelmingly positive responses about the school as expressed by current students and their parents. Still, whatever the initial growing pains, GDA’s accepting and affirming learning climate seems to be a constant for nearly every student who has passed through its doors.

American School Students

The American School students constitute a special group that is served by GDA, even though they are not formally enrolled. There are approximately 30 American School students who are completing their high school degree by taking one or more online or other courses in their homes. Technically, they are not being home schooled, but are simply trying to complete graduation requirements on their own without attending regular school. The reasons are many: these students may have been expelled, are in trouble with the law, have failed multiple courses, or otherwise refuse to attend school. The Superintendent, GDA’s Principal, and GDA’s teachers report that the American School students represent a significant educational challenge in the district. These students are, in many instances, deeply alienated from *all* schools. The lack of a parental connection to the schools may also be a factor.

Even though they technically are not GDA students, GDA has been given the responsibility of providing assistance and oversight regarding their course progress. Despite the help these students

receive from GDA's teachers, they do not necessarily see themselves as part of GDA's "family." Their single concern appears to be credit recovery in order to graduate. It is not surprising, therefore, that only one of these "disaffected" students decided to return the survey that was designed for them. (A copy of the survey form is included in the Appendix.) As such, no comment can be made about this group, other than the obvious fact that GDA is extending a helping hand to facilitate their graduation.

Direct Observations

This researcher spent between 50 and 60 hours in the GDA school building observing routines and interactions, having informal discussions with students and GDA staff, and working with students as a volunteer writing tutor. The time spent there was invaluable in helping to formulate a "sense of the place." Several observations are particularly useful in painting a picture of GDA – a picture that is not easily derived from the surveys.

Among my clearest and most consistent observations is that unlike many schools I have observed, there is a *high level of academic engaged time* at GDA. Educational researchers have noted that effective schools tend to be relatively free of disruptions – schools where students are engaged in their lessons without distractions. Daily I observed GDA students working diligently, staying on task, without annoying disruptions from peers. The teachers were equally on task, working through the planned lessons and directly assisting students with course content. In all my visits, I did not observe a single disciplinary infraction that disrupted this academic engaged time.

It is equally noteworthy that students and teachers were respectful, polite, and civil in the many interactions I observed. I did not hear students making nasty remarks about their peers or their teachers. I saw many smiles on the faces of students and teachers alike. I heard many positive comments about students from each of the teachers. I never heard teachers complain about the students

they served. I also observed teachers calling students by their names. Everyone knew one another. Moreover, I observed many parents visiting school. Often they mentioned to me how glad they were to have their children attending GDA. The overall climate I observed was peaceful, safe, orderly, kind and friendly. My strong sense is that this is a place where learning occurs – and everyone honors that fact. Quite honestly, I looked forward to coming there and working with such bright and respectful students, and observing the dedicated teachers in action. GDA is a close-knit community; I can understand why the Principal often said that GDA is a “family school.”

I must share one additional observation about the Principal, Mrs. Marcia Ward. I think the Superintendent got it right when he said, “Marcia is the catalyst.” She is, in every sense, an instructional leader who is unswerving in her dedication to her staff, to the students, and to their parents. She is involved in all aspects of the life of the school; nothing that needs attending to escapes her scrutiny. Perhaps most important, she believes in the capabilities of students being served. Despite the many negative educational experiences these students bring with them from prior schools, Marcia Ward makes certain they can expect something better at GDA – and something better will be demanded of them. From the first orientation meeting on, these students and their parents are made to feel welcome, but also are made to feel that a higher standard of educational expectations will have to be met. And once at GDA, these students do rise to meet the challenge of higher expectations. The staff know it, the students know it, and the parents know it. The cooperative staff relations, the caring and helping environment for students, the positive connections with parents and guardians, and the success of the program in meeting its goals can be attributed directly to her leadership. The Principal sets the tone of a school’s climate; none does it better than Mrs. Ward.

Brief Summary of Findings

Results from all data sources, including staff interviews, are highly consistent. The data

indicate a remarkable degree of agreement that the GDA is very successful in the following ways:

- providing a safe, drug-free, and tolerant place for young people to learn;
- providing a structured environment that emphasizes academic preparation and meeting individual needs;
- providing a learning environment that promotes student self-confidence, self-worth, self-discipline, and self-sufficiency;
- providing a continuum of academic services to students and families in the district, including students being home schooled;
- providing a caring and supportive staff of advocates for students.

Evidence also indicates that the teaching and support staff, the parents, and the students see GDA as being successful in meeting the following goals:

- increasing the likelihood that “at-risk” learners will complete credits and finish school;
- reducing discipline problems among all students, including “at-risk” learners;
- fostering both academic and social skills among students;
- restoring positive relations with “at-risk” learners and their parents/guardians;
- creating a peaceful and safe learning environment;
- offering flexibility and choice;
- establishing positive rapport and civility within the community of students and educators;
- increasing the likelihood that students will complete their school work;
- reducing conflicts at home over school performance;
- improving attitudes toward school.

In reviewing all of the data sources, it is clear that GDA is meeting many needs. It is also true that GDA faces a number of challenges. The following are points that GDA may wish to consider as it plans for the future.

Considerations and Recommendations

As GDA strives to address so many demands, it is important to review several challenges – some small, some larger – that are evident. To their credit, the GDA staff and administration are aware of the difficulties ahead. The following reviews points to consider, along with several recommendations.

1. Transition from other schools to GDA. A number of people noted bumps in the transition process from other schools to GDA. A significant source of difficulty involves having accurate and complete records sent in a timely manner from a student’s prior school to GDA. Records involving credit completion, proficiency exams, IEPs, and disciplinary concerns are most relevant. Each school appears to have its own way of keeping records on its students, with little standardization to allow for easy sharing of information. Clearly, this affects the quality of information that GDA receives when new students enroll.

Perhaps part of the difficulty – also noted by a number of people – is that educators in other schools do not understand what GDA does, or inaccurately believe that GDA constitutes an “easy” alternative for the most challenging students. Some see GDA as a “dumping ground” for students who constitute academic and disciplinary problems. Some also may resent GDA for using district resources, for “stealing” students, or even for being successful when former students now thrive at GDA when they failed to do so before. Whatever the reasons, it would help in both the referral process and in the transition to GDA if other educators had a better understanding of GDA’s purpose.

Recommendation

It would help if representatives – particularly counselors, teachers, and administrative staff – from referring schools actually paid a visit to GDA. The principal of GDA has noted that such

invitations to visit are made regularly, but often are declined. Many educators in neighboring schools who are in a position to guide students have never visited GDA.. There is a public relations concern when (as was often reported) the schools know little about what GDA is doing, and what has happened to the students they send there. A goal of GDA should be to make sure that such site visits take place, and that the topic of information sharing is placed on the table. Perhaps developing standardized forms could be part of the discussion.

There are two things about information sharing that GDA can somewhat control. First, it is important to send reports back to a student's prior school about his or her progress following the transfer. Second, discussions about a more comprehensive referral packet may help. Information sharing should include not only basic information about a student's academic credits, but also behavioral information and information about the student's assets – his or her strengths and what he or she is doing well. Hopefully, the primary information that is shared with GDA will reflect more than deficits and negative reports. In turn, appropriate transfer information needs to be available to GDA teachers as soon as the student is enrolled.

To its credit, the orientation of students and their parents to GDA seems to be comprehensive. Parents agree to certain conditions involving a student's online work, school expectations, and parental involvement. A plan for each student is developed. To further assist students in the transition, GDA might also wish to consider having a peer mentor arrangement in place once the student starts classes. Trained peer mentors (a temporary buddy system) can help new students feel welcome and ease the transition into a new social environment.

2. *Staffing Needs.* Increasing enrollments are a testament to GDA's effectiveness; students want to go there. Given the pressures created by these increasing enrollments, it is widely recognized that GDA needs more staff. Not everyone was in full agreement, however, on the exact combination of staff to be added. Nearly everyone thought it necessary to hire at least one more full-time teacher – preferably two. It was not clear what content areas should be emphasized. In addition, there was

across the board recognition that the Principal, Mrs. Ward, needs more help with administrative tasks. As one person stated, “Marcia needs someone to filter emails and calls,” and to receive help with many other administrative tasks. (An administrative assistant may also free Marcia to teach occasional science units – something that feeds her spirit as a teacher.) There are also counseling needs, and as the school grows, there are needs for additional technical support persons. There are so many demands on everyone’s time that, as the Superintendent stated, “they [teachers and staff] don’t have time to go to the bathroom.”

Recommendation

GDA might consider forming an *ad hoc* committee to study staffing and to make recommendations. Representatives from the school board, the administration, teachers, and parents might be included. The purpose would be to find agreement on staffing priorities and on how many positions to add as the school grows. (This is especially important as the school transitions to the new, A.B. Graham school.) Based upon this review, it is my view that two positions are needed immediately. One should be a full-time administrative assistant to the Principal. The second should be at least one more teacher. That teacher’s responsibilities can be determined based upon need. Other positions should also be considered. The counseling needs of GDA (and the new A. B. Graham) will continue to grow. The same may be true of special education, and if home schooling continues to grow, a home school liaison may be required. There is even discussion of creating and staffing a writing center. Persons with technical expertise in computer software and technology currently have multiple duties in the district. Their ability to serve the school effectively could, in time, be affected without more staff. The point is that discussions about staffing should be undertaken in order to factor in all the contingencies.

3. Staff Development. It is not obvious to this evaluator how professional development opportunities and inservice training at GDA are evolving. It is clear, however, that staff development should be a high priority. Several areas of staff development needs were mentioned. The teachers saw

a need for more training in dealing with all the variables associated with “special education” students, including special education law. The behavioral and academic challenges of working with such students require ongoing training. The teachers and the Principal also saw a need to devote more professional training to developing student IEPs. Additional preparation in innovative ways to individualize curriculum and to develop a comprehensive “student compass” is desirable.

Recommendation:

A more systematic consideration of staff development should be part of a strategic plan. The training needs that the teachers and staff mentioned in the interviews seemed on target. In addition, given the number of “at-risk” students who enroll, staff training in how to deal with student disclosures (e.g., victimization experiences, substance abuse) would be beneficial. Although the Superintendent stated that “disciplinary problems here are zilch,” some training in appropriate disciplinary interventions might also be considered in staff training. The purpose is to make certain that all staff are consistent in their interventions, when necessary. Overall, however, the staff is well-trained and prepared to address the challenges of dealing with such a diverse population of students.

4. Facilities. It is clear to everyone that the school needs more classroom space. Steps are being taken to open several additional classrooms in the building. There is also discussion about using modular units for temporary classrooms. A number of people mentioned additional needs – access to a science lab, a dining facility and kitchen, recreational space, office space. The building is functional but old; there are significant maintenance issues. To their credit, the Principal and the Superintendent are considering options, knowing that more space is essential.

Recommendation

With proper consultation, a long term plan for facilities development and use should be considered. A decision will have to be made about building renovation, additions, or possibly another facility. With the start of the new A.B. Graham school, enrollment pressures are expected to increase significantly. Simply opening an additional classroom or two in the old building is a necessary albeit

temporary measure. A strategy to accommodate more students, and what that may mean for sharing facilities (e.g., science labs) with other district schools is in order.

Two other spacings needs became evident during the course of the observations at GDA. There is a need for a private meeting space to conduct uninterrupted discussions with students and parents, and possibly for staff and small group meetings. No good place for such meetings currently exists. In addition, current facilities limit the extent to which physical education can be a regular part of the curriculum for students attending GDA. There is a need for students to have access to indoor and outdoor recreational facilities and equipment. The role that physical education should play in the curriculum needs to be given deliberate attention – something connected directly to facilities.

5. *The Food.* Without placing too fine a point on it, the quality of food offered to students for lunch could be improved. This may be difficult without a school kitchen. But like physical education, nutritional education is a concern for all.

Recommendation:

Admittedly, this is glib. Still, make it a priority to explore better ways to provide healthy and appealing meals to students.

6. *Enrichment Programs.* Comments from students and parents, including those being home schooled, suggest an appreciation for current enrichment activities, and a desire for more. Of course, enrichment programming is connected to staffing and facilities. Dance, drama, baton, guest speakers, and field trips are highly popular and are among GDA's successes. But there is also a demand for music, art, creative writing, sports and other enrichment activities.

Recommendation

With the transformation of GDA into A.B. Graham school, there is an opportunity to think about how the demand for more enrichment programs can be met. (This should be tied to staffing and enrollment discussions.) It might be helpful to query members of the school community about the

kinds of enrichment programs that are feasible in light of staffing and facilities. Are there ways that parents and community volunteers could help in expanding such offerings? Are there ways to better coordinate with other district schools? Can students take some of the responsibility for organizational leadership in this endeavor? The goal is to avoid doing what some schools do – treat enrichment programs as an afterthought with low priority in educational considerations.

7. *Singletons and American School Students.* There are two groups of high school students served by GDA who appear to be somewhat disconnected from the daily life of the school – American School students who are completing credits at home, and “singletons” who are enrolled full-time at the local high school but are taking an accredited course through GDA. The motivation for singletons may be to catch up on credits because they have fallen behind schedule to graduate, or they may want to take a specialty course not offered in the high school curriculum. At present, there are approximately 30 American School students and 60 singletons using GDA to complete their accredited course work. Given the self-paced nature of the online courses they take, both groups face the common challenge of staying on task and completing the course modules in a timely fashion. The difficulty for GDA is in finding the staff time to monitor the daily progress of so many additional students who are not full-time at the school. It appears that neither the American School students nor the singletons visit GDA often or seek the tutorial assistance of its teachers. Because they are working on their own without much guidance, it is very difficult to detect a problem when a student falls behind. Quite simply, some students “fall through the cracks” if they lack the motivation to maintain an adequate pace on completing course modules.

During this past year, GDA has secured the help of a teacher at the high school to assist in checking the progress of the singletons. These singletons have their allegiance to the high school, are enrolled there full-time, and often use the school’s facilities to do their online work for the course they take through GDA. Several people have reported that this monitoring at the high school has helped. Still, this “add-on” responsibility of a teacher at the high school may not be sufficient to guarantee that

all students will stay on track. This seems like a temporary measure. Is it likely that a full-time teacher can effectively monitor on a regular basis the work of an additional 60 students? Given that the number of singletons is expected to increase, the challenge here is obvious.

Recommendation

Fundamentally, the problem with monitoring American School students and singletons – and to some extent home school students – is one of staffing. In the words of one person, “someone needs to take point” in keeping track of so many who are on the margins yet are using the services offered by GDA. It is strongly recommended that staffing discussions focus on hiring an additional person – possibly part-time – to oversee the growing number of these students.

A second recommendation is in order – one related to the public relations challenge faced by GDA. It seems likely that many students at the high school would be interested in taking an accredited course in a specialty area (e.g., Chinese) out of pure interest if they knew what was available. At present, however, it is not clear how the array of courses offered through GDA is being promoted at the high school. There is no way to know if lack of information about GDA’s course options might have depressed the number of students who might benefit. One solution is for the high school to list as part of the available curricular offerings the additional online courses offered through GDA. Would the high school be willing to do this? Do they see a downside – possibly a hidden cost – to including GDA courses in their curricular listings? Would there be a dramatic increase in the number of singletons as a result? Clearly, there is a need to have open discussions with representatives from the high school about such concerns.

8. *The Challenge of Growth.* During the interviews, more than once GDA was likened to a “one room schoolhouse” where everyone knows everyone else. Intensive individualized instruction and deep personal bonds form in such an intimate environment. Disciplinary problems, when they arise, tend to be addressed immediately and effectively. Students, teachers, parents, and administrators feel connected to one another and to the mission of the school. Time and again, that is how people

described the climate at GDA – a school that transforms lives in positive ways.

In expressing their affection for GDA, many also articulated a deep concern – a fear that the growth in students will result in losing the intimacy that makes the school unique. People *want* to come to GDA (soon to be A. B. Graham). The school *wants* to accommodate all who need what GDA offers. The teachers *want* to preserve the intimacy but also *want* to serve those who are not served in other schools. The two unanswered questions are: Will continued growth produce a tipping point which alters the very things that make GDA successful? How can the school grow yet retain its qualities?

No one knows the answers to these questions. Yet it is a fact that the new A.B. Graham school will have to face the demand for higher enrollments. To their credit, the Superintendent, the Principal, the teachers and others often discuss this concern. It is not clear to this evaluator, however, if there is agreement on a plan to address the growth. There is some discussion of what might be called a “franchising” of GDA – a deliberate replication of GDA programs in other schools. Indeed, a strong argument can be made that GDA is a model alternative school that should set the standard for other schools in the state and nation. But can GDA be replicated? Just how likely is it that the outstanding quality of GDA’s leadership and staff, including the deep *esprit de corps*, will be replicated in other schools? In fact, nearly everyone acknowledged the pivotal role the Principal, Marcia Ward, plays in fostering the many strengths of GDA. How easy is it to replicate all that she does?

Mr. Zerkle, the Superintendent during this evaluation, articulated a desire for “controlled growth.” He saw a danger in getting “too big too fast.” He also knows how difficult it is to turn students away because there is no more room. He acknowledged the space and facilities challenges, and he acknowledged the need for more staff. Those needs have to be balanced with other needs in the district, yet weighed against the mounting pressure from parents and students to attend the new A. B. Graham school – pressures which are expected to increase over time. Would it be possible to split off some of the students (e.g., middle school students) into a satellite program? What would be the costs

and benefits? Could or should this be tried through a demonstration grant?

Recommendation

The evaluation cannot answer such complex questions. If it is not yet in place, it is recommended that a select group be designated to work on the challenges of growth, and to make timely recommendations to the board and to the administration. All interested parties should be invited to voice concerns, share ideas, and offer suggestions on how to proceed.

Summary and Conclusion

In every important way, GDA is doing a remarkable job in educating such a myriad of students. This evaluator is deeply impressed by the efforts of GDA's teachers and staff, especially in light of the

rapid growth of the school – growth that is expected to continue under the new banner of A. B. Graham school. The affirmative climate that permeates the school – a climate that links social and emotional learning to academic success – is central to its effectiveness. With that in mind, a discussion should ensue within the highest educational circles in the district about how to provide the resources needed to continue with the services and the successes that are so evident.

In summary, the data paint a highly positive picture of GDA and the favorable regard it enjoys in the community. The goals GDA succeeds in accomplishing are not mere abstractions, but are connected in concrete ways to the dedicated people who are devoted to their students and to the mission of the school. Although not everyone sees GDA as a perfect place, nearly everyone finds it to be a vast improvement over other schools they have experienced. The general conclusion? Graham Digital Academy is a model for what an alternative school – indeed any school – can and should be. It is a school that serves the human spirit.