

FIRST COLONIAL HIGH SCHOOL LEGAL STUDIES ACADEMY

Year-Two Evaluation

VIRGINIA BEACH CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Department of Accountability
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This evaluation presents the School Board and superintendent with second-year implementation information on the Legal Studies Academy (LSA) housed at First Colonial High School. The academy is one of Virginia Beach City Public Schools' (VBCPS) specialized school-within-a-school designed for students with a deep interest in the law, law enforcement, and law-related careers and opportunities. During the 2003-2004 school year, the Legal Studies Academy enrolled 102 ninth-grade students and 79 tenth-grade students.

FINDINGS

- The Legal Studies Academy leadership responded positively to the recommendations from the year-one evaluation report. Collaborative efforts among administrators and staff at First Colonial High school, central office administrators, and community partners resulted in positive changes that improved the program.
- Several of the year-one recommendations continue to require attention including the evaluation of staff development activities, the development of measurable objectives to gauge academy success, and articulated agreements with institutions of higher education.
- Marketing activities were successful as evidenced by 276 applicants for 100 openings. Academy staff followed the approved application and student selection process. Students selected to attend the academy matriculated from all of the comprehensive middle schools. Reasons for student enrollment supported the idea of student interest in the legal field.
- The academy opened the 2003-2004 school year with 102 freshmen and 79 sophomore students. The ethnic composition and socioeconomic status of the academy students closely mirrored the ethnicity and socioeconomic status observed at the division level. Females continued to outnumber males.
- High rates of attrition were observed for both freshmen and sophomore students with the freshmen academy students evidencing a decrease of 22 percent in the number of students enrolled by the end of the 2003-2004 school year.
- Compared to the faculty at First Colonial High School and other division high schools, a higher percentage of the academy faculty had graduate degrees and were new to the system. The average years of teaching experience was lower for the teachers assigned to

teach academy courses because two of the teachers of the specialized legal courses had limited teaching experience. The teachers with limited teaching experience were provided with ongoing assistance throughout the school year.

- A few of the academy students in the sophomore class commented on the inexperience of some of the academy teachers when responding to a question asking for suggestions for improving the academy. A number of academy parents suggested staffing changes as a way to improve the academy.
- Based on data gathered during the 2003-2004 school year and further study of the academy course offerings, the Academy Leadership Team made changes to the 9-12 program of study. Some of the changes involved combining courses, incorporating the content of electives into other academy courses, revising the length of some courses from semester-long to yearlong, specifying the due dates for some of the requirements (i.e., job shadowing and community service hours), and clarifying portions of the original proposal that listed electives that were not truly courses for credit.
- A number of the electives listed in the original proposal as requiring dual enrollment agreements continue to need dual enrollment agreements before the course can be offered.
- Because of the revised time lines for completing the job shadowing requirement and community service hours, the extent to which these requirements have been successfully completed is not known at this time. Those students who have partially fulfilled the community service requirement reportedly enjoyed helping people in the community, and parents as well as academy faculty viewed it as a beneficial experience for students.
- Although students were to declare their major strand choice by the end of their sophomore year, the sophomore class of 2003-2004 will not declare their strand until the start of their junior year in 2004-2005.
- Students, parents, and academy teachers viewed an increased knowledge of the law as a gain associated with enrollment in the Legal Studies Academy.
- A majority of academy students indicated that they gained additional knowledge and understanding about law careers, police work and procedures, and the law more generally through participation in seminars and field trips. However, a number of sophomore students indicated that there were very few of these opportunities available to the sophomore class and several of the stakeholder groups (i.e., students, parents, academy faculty) recommended additional field trips and seminars as a means of improving the academy.
- Academy students performed well during the second year of the academy as evidenced by involvement in extracurricular activities, pursuit of the advanced studies diploma, and earning higher grade averages than non-academy ninth-grade First Colonial students and

higher passing rates on the end-of-course SOL tests than non-academy students and divisionwide performance.

- No formal articulated agreements currently exist between the academy and institutions of higher education; however, the academy coordinator plans to pursue such agreements during the fall of 2004.
- Ninth graders in 2003-2004 appeared to express more positive perceptions of the academy compared to the sophomore class. The perceptions of the academy on the part of the sophomore class did not appear to improve over the previous year when the students were freshmen and the first cohort in the academy. However, the results of the student spring survey should be interpreted cautiously because of the relatively low response rate among academy sophomores.
- Community partner participation in developing and arranging curriculum, seminars, and support activities was a significant and valuable aspect to the program's perceived success. Community partners expressed very positive views of the academy.
- While the original budget estimated the one-time purchases, fiscal year 2002-2003 costs, and fiscal year 2003-2004 costs for the academy to be \$1,883,728, the actual expenditures for academy preparation and two years of academy operation were \$1,414,146, representing a difference of more than \$469,582 to the good.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Continue to address the year-one recommendations that still require attention, particularly articulation agreements with higher education institutions.
- Examine the need to take action for replacing students who withdraw from the academy to address the attrition rates observed throughout the year and between each year.
- Continue to work closely with appropriate personnel in the offices of Gifted Education and Academy Programs, instructional services, and the Department of Human Resources to recruit and hire faculty who meet the academy qualification criteria.
- Secure dual enrollment and articulated agreements for the elective courses that require these agreements to sustain the viability of some of the academy strands.
- Review the student survey data and consider holding a student meeting with the sophomore class of 2003-2004 to gather additional information from the entire class concerning their perceptions and expectations of the academy.
- Offer a variety of field trips and seminars to all of the students in the academy.
- Continue evaluation of the academy for two more years.