

## Keiller Leadership Academy

### I. History

Before Keiller converted to a charter school, it was a public school that the California Department of Education deemed as one of the ten most “persistently dangerous schools” in the state, explained Patricia Ladd, the school’s principal. The school was in its fifth year of Program Improvement (PI), identified as one of the lowest performing schools in the district in 2004-05. It had been in PI since 1998-99. In 2004-05 the school enrolled 542 students in grades six through eight and served a similar demographic of students as it does now with a student body that is 55 percent Hispanic, and 40 percent African American. It also has 20 percent of its students in the foster care system, a high percentage for the district. More than 85 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-priced lunches, 16 percent qualify for special education services (higher than the district average of 12 percent), and approximately 35 percent are English learners. In addition, many students are being raised by extended family members because their parents are incarcerated and less than 10 percent of the students’ parents are college graduates.

Ladd described the school before conversion as a place where teachers showed up “just to collect a pay check.” Students used foul language and were out of control, and the school was neglected in terms of resources and materials. With a long history of school failure, a climate of chaos, and little professional development, the school was in dire straits. The district placed an “up and coming” administrator at the school, hoping to solve the school’s problems, but this same administrator was soon pulled to staff another failing school in the district. The vice principal intern, Patricia Ladd, became the principal, and on the third day of school, Superintendent Bersin asked her if she would shepherd the school through the charter school conversion process. She explained that while she did not know very much about charter schools, having come from more affluent and successful schools, she knew that something drastic was needed to turn this failing school around and that she could not walk away from this challenge.

### II. Conversion to Charter

Frustrated with the vandalism, neglect, and poor performance at the school, parents, community members, and staff met for a series of meetings to discuss their concerns about the school during fall 2004. After learning about charter schools as a strategy for school improvement under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), parents, staff, and community members organized and walked door to door to solicit support and gather signatures for converting the failing school into a charter school. When the parents and work group presented the signatures to the district at a board meeting, they were told that the parent signatures collected were insufficient, and they needed to collect 50 percent plus one of the current tenured teachers to sign the charter petition to proceed. Parents, a few dedicated teachers, and Ladd met individually with the tenured teachers, trying to persuade them to support the charter petitions, recognizing that they might be voting

themselves out of a job. The charter supporters explained that while the tenured teachers could transfer to teach at another school in the district, the students had limited options due to the neighborhood's failing, unsafe school. Eventually the union representative was convinced to "do what's right," explained Ladd, and within three weeks, the charter supporters had obtained all the necessary signatures from tenured teachers for the charter petition.

The hard work paid off when the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) board voted unanimously to approve the school's five-year charter in 2005, along with the charter conversions of Gompers Middle School and King Chavez Academy. With grants such as \$100,000 from the Girard Foundation, and \$360,000 from the Walton Foundation, Keiller was able to launch a new charter school program. The school opened as a charter school in September 2005 and in its first two years as a charter school, Keiller Leadership Academy raised its Academic Performance Index (API) score by 79 points, moved out of Program Improvement status, and met all Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets, continuing to serve the local neighborhood students. In 2005-06, the first year as a charter school, suspensions declined 33 percent, teacher retention increased 40 percent, and average daily attendance increased from 90 percent to 94 percent.

### III. Leadership, Staffing, and Governance

One of the key strategies that helped to turn Keiller around was the development of partnerships supporting the school. Principal Ladd approached the University of San Diego (USD), as an alumna from its administrative credential program, and asked the university to partner with the school for the process of becoming a charter school. This partnership facilitated introductions to businesses and community members that led to the creation of the 12-member board of directors for the charter school. New stakeholders included community members and USD professors and staff. The USD partnership supported both the school governance and instructional program. Faculty members from the university conducted professional development workshops for Keiller's teachers, and USD students now tutor Keiller students and serve as graduate interns and student teachers. The Dean of School Leadership and Education Sciences of USD serves as the president of the Keiller board of directors.

Under Ladd's leadership, parents were convened to organize support and transform the school. A Parent Involvement Director was hired to facilitate a strong connection to families, encouraging communication and involvement with the school. Parents were involved in the charter work group and were important advocates in the charter conversion process.

Because the school was now a charter, Ladd had the autonomy to hire staff aligned with the school's mission. Since only a handful of the original teachers made the commitment to work at the new charter school, Ladd explained she was able to hire teachers who were "not afraid of hard work and taking on this challenge." Ladd's question, "What is best for kids?" framed every decision at the school. Teachers now sign a commitment to the Six C's and are evaluated on their *commitment* to the school's mission and goals, ability to be

*coached*, ability to *collaborate*, ability to *connect* with students, ability to refine and implement *content*, and ability to demonstrate *character*. Each teacher develops three performance goals based on the six C's, as well as the California standards for the teaching profession, and the school's mission.

#### IV. Safety, Climate, and Culture

During summer 2005, parents, teachers, and student volunteers cleaned up the campus, washing windows, painting, sweeping floors, mowing lawns, weeding, and setting up classrooms. Soliciting bids for the custodial contract allowed the school to hire a custodial company that charged lower rates than the district offered with better quality services, saving the school \$18,000 that was then used for landscaping and campus improvements to create a clean and welcoming environment. With the change to charter, students were required to wear a uniform of collared polo shirts and khaki pants or skirts, keeping gang colors outside of the school grounds.

The principal now greets students as they walk onto campus through the front gates, named the "Gates of Wisdom," offering students words of encouragement as they start their day. Ladd explained that by "sweating the small stuff," the staff and students have transformed a "culture of chaos" into a safe "culture of learning." In Ladd's first year before the school converted to a charter, there were 707 suspensions. Now, the school no longer needs a security officer. Incentives are positive, such as a month without any fights is rewarded with a free dress day when students can wear jeans to school. Student achievement progress is displayed publicly at the school. A bulletin board outside the school office boasts the reduction of suspensions and fights on campus and displays a long list of students on the honor roll every six weeks. With guidance from USD's Director for Student Support Systems, the school has created a counseling center to support students' emotional and social needs. A behavior intervention plan provides staff with a clear process for working with students who need additional support. Daily rituals, such as the greeting at the Gates of Wisdom; lining up before going to class; and shared values, such as the school mantra of REACH – respect, enthusiasm, achievement, citizenship, and hard work – help to create a positive schoolwide culture for the staff, students, and families that is focused on learning.

#### V. Teaching and Learning

Patricia Ladd is an instructional leader. She keeps her focus on the quality of instruction and raising expectations for student learning. Because the school changed the traditional seven period day to a block schedule with 90-minute classes, one veteran teacher remarked, "I now have the ability to teach." Ladd extended both the school day and school year to increase the amount of learning time for students, providing 22,000 more minutes than the traditional district schools. Initially, all teachers provided systematic vocabulary instruction, addressing the fact that 70 percent of students were not proficient in reading. Enthusiastic, committed teachers have created a culture of learning with a college preparation focus. Teachers hold students to high expectations, and students who need additional support receive extra tutoring, and students who are ready for a challenge

are provided with acceleration. The school is raising the bar and accelerating learning. It now has one section of 32 sixth graders learning advanced math, and a group of eighth graders has already completed algebra and is studying geometry. For students who are struggling academically, intervention support is provided in nine-week cycles, adding an additional 56 minutes per day in reading and math. After-school tutoring is provided Monday through Friday.

Although the state only requires one semester of science in sixth grade, all grades receive 90 minutes of instruction in science daily. School wide classroom routines, such as learning how to take Cornell notes, posting clear agendas and objectives, and starting the class with quick questions to engage students, help to maximize learning time. The staff participates in professional development every Monday in addition to a daily 90-minute preparation period, which provides time for grade-level and department collaboration. Professional development has included lesson study, a “backwards mapping” process to align the curriculum with key state standards, and trainings from the USD professors. Teachers have received training in achievement data analysis and hold weekly grade-level and departmental meetings to examine student data, and to plan strategies for intervention and ways to adjust their instruction to meet students’ needs for additional support or acceleration. Formal and informal assessments drive instructional planning, and students receive progress reports every three weeks. As one teacher explained, “I feel really supported in being able to do my job. The kids know they are well taken care of. I feel safe coming to school now, and I didn’t always feel that way. We are working towards the same vision and that makes me want to do more here. We share the belief that everyone can improve.”

## VI. Academic Achievement Now

Since opening as a charter school in July 2005, Keiller has gained 79 API points, raising its API from 638 to 716, met AYP growth targets for every subgroup of students in both 2005-06 and 2006-07, and moved out of Program Improvement status. Keiller Leadership Academy has received recognition from San Diego City Schools for making the most gains in mathematics of any other middle school. The Growth Academic Performance Index (API) scores are listed below:

School	API 2005-06	API 2006-07	API 2007-08
Keiller Leadership Academy	638	716	681