

## King-Chavez Academies

### I. History

Conversion to charter was one of the reform options under the No Child Left Behind federal mandate for San Diego district schools in Program Improvement (PI) year four. Under Superintendent Alan Bersin's leadership, a public request for proposals was sent to community groups, charter management organizations, and other interested groups to restructure San Diego's failing schools, without many responses. When the existing district public school, King Elementary, was scheduled to close in July 2005 due to its record of low academic performance as a PI year four school, a work group, including the principal of nearby Chavez Academy of Excellence, Dennis McKeown, and community activists drafted a proposal expressing interest in creating a charter in place of the failing elementary school.

### II. Conversion to Charter

King-Chavez Public Schools, an extension of the Academy of Excellence charter school, applied to convert the failing King Elementary School to several small charter schools. By petition of more than 400 parent signatures, and 21 of 27 existing King Elementary teachers voting in support of the charter, the San Diego School Board granted the charter with a 5-0 vote.

Down the street from the King Elementary site, Chavez Academy of Excellence was a kindergarten through grade eight (K-8) charter school operating in the neighborhood since 2000, and it had a positive reputation. McKeown wanted to improve the educational opportunities for students in the neighborhood by creating a new charter school at the King Elementary site. His plan was to reorganize the unwieldy 1100-student elementary school into three distinct academies located on the same campus. Managing both Chavez Academy of Excellence and the launching of the new charters, McKeown hired the directors and the teachers for the first year of the King-Chavez Academies. When he resigned abruptly, he asked Tim Wolf, at the time a consultant with the San Diego Office of School Choice, if he would take on the role of CEO of the new charter schools. King-Chavez Academies opened in summer 2005 with Wolf at the helm.

In the place of King Elementary, three smaller united charter schools were created. They were called the King-Chavez Academies (Primary Academy for grades K-2; Athletic Academy for grades 3-5; and the Arts Academy for grades 3-5). Eventually, a fourth program, King-Chavez Preparatory Academy for middle school students was added in 2007. The four academies operate independently, sharing one campus and are unified by a common mission, to "seek excellence in academics, the arts, and athletics from the foundation of love." Improvement efforts focused on three areas: improving the appearance of the school, changing the school culture over time, and setting high expectations for all students. In this process the schools developed "moral imperatives," a set of values and beliefs that are the foundation of the school culture. These values

included a commitment to creating a school community that is sensitive and culturally proficient, holding high expectations for every student, and assisting every child to achieve academic proficiency.

### III. Leadership, Staffing, and Governance

With autonomy as charter schools, the governance structure and leadership staffing at King-Chavez Academies differs from traditional district schools. The school is overseen by a five-member board that includes the director of a community college, an attorney, a parent community leader, a private middle school administrator, and a social worker. This board oversees the school policy and operations. Set up as a nonprofit 501c(3) organization with Tim Wolf as CEO, each of the charter schools on the King campus is led by its own administrator. These three principals were new to school administration, coming from medical school, community activism, and a teaching background in the arts.

The first year was replete with challenges. Roxanne Rojas de Blanco, principal of the Arts Academy, explained that she would have liked to have had more information about the students, such as academic and social history, as she did not receive the cumulative records and 12 students with individual education plans (IEPs) had not been evaluated. There was no transfer of information from the pre-existing school to the incoming staff. “I had a newborn and didn’t know what it meant to be a principal.”

Irisbelle Rodriquez, Primary Academy principal, agreed, “ I felt unprepared for starting a school without leadership training. In the spring of 2005, I had a child. July 2005, I got the keys to the school. It was frightening. We were putting out fires constantly. What saved us was sharing an office and supporting each other.” The three administrators collaborated and drew on each other’s strengths, leaning on each other’s shoulders. To support the charter school administrators who were not required to have administrative credentials, Wolf organized a monthly leadership academy for the principals and other staff members, led by an outside consultant, to discuss education articles and books on leadership topics.

When launching the new charter schools, all of the teachers at King Elementary were invited to interview with McKeown, but not many teachers were interested. Only eight out of 40 original staff members decided to join the new charters. But the schools quickly staffed their vacancies, picking up some district teachers from other schools, who now work at the charters on loan from the district, and hiring staff dedicated to work as team players.

Brian French, principal of the Athletics Academy, explained, “We get a lot of good applicants; people are dying to work here.” To support teacher retention, the school offers competitive salaries that are higher than the district in some cases, including merit pay for “above and beyond effort” for things such as attendance, attitude, and student assessment results.

Rodriguez noted, “The teachers want to be here.” Prior to charter, Wolf said that the school had many independent programs that no one person was coordinating or overseeing. Now, although on paper King Chavez Academies has four charter schools with independent budgets, these schools are working together. They are independent, but also interwoven.

#### IV. Safety and Climate

Wolf described the scene before the charter school opened, “There was trash in every direction, under walkways and under tables; the school was not clean.” Together families, teachers, district volunteers, and a newly contracted custodial staff cleaned up the campus, giving the school a face-lift by power washing walls, creating colorful murals, and contracting gardeners to fix up the campus with drought-resistant plants. Wolf explained, “We all help. We pick up trash and paint over graffiti; it’s our house and we need to take care of it.” The auditorium, formerly used for storage, now hosts adult exercise classes and student classes. The facility is welcoming to parents and students. After-school clubs (e.g., Cesar Chavez Community Service Club, soccer, Scrabble, music, art, garden book, tutoring, and cinema) are open to charter students and non-charter school students from the district schools on a first-come, first-served basis, making the campus a hub of activity in the community.

Parents are encouraged to participate in many ways at the school. Teachers and administrators at the King-Chavez Academies reach out to families. Recognizing that “the school is the foundation of the community,” Rodriguez explained that “The parents expect us to have the answers.” The first Parent Night drew over 700 parents, who overflowed the school’s auditorium. This attendance was a marked change from before the school became a charter.

Brian French explained, “We make parents feel welcome. They are here all the time and are encouraged to be part of what the kids are doing.” The four charter schools work on building parent trust through teacher home visits, and the schools empower parents to find solutions. In one year, Coach Worthing, in the Athletics Academy, conducted over 100 home visits. Initially, the administrators explained that parents complained a great deal. “They didn’t know if they could trust us,” said Rodriguez. They complained about the bathrooms, the requirement that students walk through the halls in lines, the traffic in the alley, and the need for stop signs. “They expected us to have all the answers,” she continued. But by developing dialogue and trust, she explained, “Parents have now shifted to helping the school through fundraisers, volunteering, and classroom support. We had to train our parents, talking about how to help their child. If they raised a concern, we asked them to also bring up two solutions.” Parents are welcomed to campus to participate in fitness and education programs for adults as well as to help out at each of the charter programs. Families are provided with a low-cost opportunity to get a computer and printer for their homes to increase learning opportunities and school-home communication.

The administrators explained that the culture changed over time. Each charter school has a uniform with different tee-shirt colors; blue for Athletics, red for Primary, green for the Arts, and brown for the Preparatory. This distinction helps students to cultivate a proud sense of identity with their program and pride in their school. The schools instituted longer school days and school years to increase the learning opportunities. Brian French explained that before the school went charter, security supervised recess for 20 minutes during the day, with a collection of shoddy playground balls. Now, the athletics coach coordinates structured activities during recess, and students can select from activities such as kickball, soccer, red bars and other games to develop socialization skills. After school, clubs are offered in reading analysis, baseball, aerobics, tennis, computers, and music, extending the school day.

## V. Teaching and Learning

The dedication of the teachers and administrators at King Chavez is evident in the classrooms and on the athletic fields. Each of the administrators has set high expectations for students, including expecting homework to be completed every day. Each of the charter schools uses standards-based curriculum that is infused with arts and athletics. At the Athletics Academy, students start their day with soccer drills before lining up to go to class. Students work in small groups of three or four students each morning, using a guided reading and guided math program. Additional staff members are assigned for each guided reading class so that they can keep the group sizes small.

In the Arts and Athletics charters, students have an hour of direct instruction and then work on projects using a block schedule in which students are learning in gender-separated classrooms. After lunch, boys and girls come together for an arts and athletics wheel of activities, such as soccer, yoga, drawing, chorus, drama, computers, and capoeira. Students in upper grades participate in field trips to learn about their community, such as a fourth-grade trip to Old Town to learn about California history. In the Arts Academy, the school curriculum has a focus on celebrating culture and diversity, woven into the academic program so that material is interesting and engaging to students. For example, on Fridays, an artist works with teachers to integrate arts into the curriculum. The use of technology allows students to access library resources through a wireless network, and provides teachers and administrators with data tools, such as Powerschool. In the Athletics Academy's fitness arcade, video games are operated from the energy created by students' pedaling on a bicycle machine or dancing on the "Dance, Dance, Revolution" (DDR) pad.

The middle school Preparatory program uses a block schedule for language arts, science, math, and social studies. A Saturday school program is provided to reinforce reading and math skills for struggling students. Teachers have been provided with Guided Language Acquisition Design (GLAD) and English-language-development training and specially designed academic instruction in English (SDAIE) strategies and topics, such as differentiated instruction, to support teaching practices during weekly, after-school meetings and at monthly, half-day staff development meetings. Once a week during the

arts rotation, grade-level teachers meet to discuss curriculum and instruction and strategies for collaboration.

VI. Academic Achievement Now

With a population of students who are 90 percent Latino, 5 percent African American, 77 percent English learners, and 100 percent qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch, student achievement is improving since the conversion to a charter.

In 2004-05 King Elementary had an API of 557. The charter schools have shown steady improvement since the change to charter. The chart below shows the Growth Academic Performance Index (API) for these charter schools.

School	API 2005-06	API 2006-07	API 2007-08
King/Chavez Primary Academy	675	751	811
King/Chavez Arts Academy	631	641	674
King/Chavez Athletics Academy	683	709	739