

## 2014-15 DDOE Charter School Annual Report

Charter School Name: SUSSEX ACADEMY

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## **I. Charter School Program**

### **History**

Sussex Academy currently operates as a charter school authorized by the Delaware Department of Education. Opened in 2000 the Sussex Academy of Arts & Sciences began as a 225-pupil middle school located in a newly constructed facility at 21777 Sussex Pines Road in Georgetown, Delaware. Within three years of opening, Sussex Academy made two minor modifications to first expand to 300 and then 325 students. The school renewed its charter for 2003-2008 and then again for 2008-2013 with only minor changes in structures and expectations. A major modification was approved in 2012 to begin adding high school grades in 2013. Then Sussex Academy was approved for another five-year renewal (2013-2018). In order to meet facility demands needed for adding high school grades, the Sussex Academy Foundation executed an agreement with a nearby independent school, Delmarva Christian High School, to exchange buildings. This entailed a major capital campaign by the Sussex Academy Foundation to raise \$15.1 million so that Sussex Academy could occupy its new facility at 21150 Airport Road in June 2013. A second and third phase for facility completion was planned for the next three school years. The second phase included the completion of the cafetorium, cafe, and library information commons, turf and sod athletic fields along with some interior redesign of hallways and lobby. This was completed in August 2015. The next phase includes a new middle school wing with expected completion in August 2016. The costs of these construction projects are estimated at an additional \$16.5 million for a total of \$31.6 million invested from 2013 – 2016. Further, the construction of a swimming pool gifted by Schell Brothers at \$1.4 million will be completed in Spring 2016. When the Executive Board decided to move to a new facility and expand the program to a 6-12 program, they shortened the school's name to Sussex Academy and endorsed a new tagline, school colors and mascot beginning with school year 2013-2014.

### **Mission**

To foster academic achievement and social responsibility in a small school environment where students participate in an accelerated college preparatory program that prepares them for the technological and global challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and that fosters

ethical conduct and service to others in their day to day lives.

### **Vision**

To cultivate students of distinction by providing them with the knowledge, skills, and values to become successful productive citizens.

### ***Academic Framework Performance: 2014-2015***

Sussex Academy continues to take academic performance as its top priority in preparing students for college and careers. While the State was not in a position to publish data about the Academic Framework because SBAC was in its first year, Sussex Academy reviews various data and school processes on an annual basis. There are numerous innovative components or features of our educational model. Some of these are described here.

### **Teaching and Learning**

At the founding of Sussex Academy, the original Executive Board determined that they would adopt the Expeditionary Learning Program as the philosophical and structural focus for the school. Thus, over the last fifteen years, Sussex Academy has grounded itself in the practices and principles of expeditionary learning with a more project-based, hands-on approach to learning. Literacy for students and best practices for teachers undergird the academic content in all subjects. In addition, the school has fostered a culture that is respectful and polite - one built around character development. Within this framework students are required to complete community service, expeditions, and portfolios.

As the Executive Board discussed programs for the high school, they determined that the International Baccalaureate Program dovetailed with the middle school program already in place. The school applied for candidacy and gained approval as an IB World School in the Diploma Program in 2014. Therefore, ninth and tenth grade courses prepare students for IB coursework that takes place in grades 11 and 12. The coursework is very rigorous and meshes with international academic standards. Within the framework, IB students take tests that are juried outside of the school. In addition to the coursework, all students must participate in a CAS (Creativity, Action, Service)

project, and all high school students must take a course called “Theory of Knowledge.” Ultimately, Sussex Academy’s aim is to develop the IB Learner Profile in each student.

One of the unique features of the school is that for thirteen years, the school operated as a middle school (grades 6-8) with no individual feeder schools. Therefore, sixth grade students entered the school with varied academic background and expectations for performance. This dynamic coupled with the expeditionary learning philosophy created the impetus for our heavy emphasis on literacy such that all middle school students have 90 minutes of language arts per day and literacy infusion into the other core courses of social studies, science, and mathematics. Now that we have implemented our high school program, we have ensured that all new students coming to the high school are required to take a writing course in addition to their regular English class.

Of course, the common core standards are the bases for the curriculum. However, teachers have a great deal of flexibility in selection of instructional materials and texts (digital or paper) so long as the standards and key school-wide practices are at the center of the instruction. These practices are modeling, content specific vocabulary, and critical thinking using concrete specific details. Thus, classrooms at Sussex Academy are not clones of one another, but reflect the teacher’s and the team’s collective wisdom about teaching and learning. Technology is part of every classroom with smartboards, ipads, and laptops. At the middle school there is a 1:3 ratio with technology and in the high school it is 1:1

### **Performance and Expectations**

Every student, faculty member, staff member, administrator, and board member subscribe to the school’s tagline: Explore, Experience, Excel. All are expected to have and meet high expectations. One of the benchmarks for Sussex Academy is how well students perform on standardized assessments. Performance data for school year 2014-2015 illustrate that Sussex Academy is a high performing school academically.

▪ **Data Chart 1 - Smarter Balanced – Reading and Math - % Meet or Exceed the Standard**

<b>2015 Smarter Balanced Results</b>				
Grade	SA Reading	State Reading	SA Math	State Math
6	94	48	62	34
7	98	50	79	37
8	94	49	80	35

**Chart 1** illustrates that across all demographic groups on the 2015 Smarter Balanced assessment Sussex Academy sixth grade students scored within the top three middle schools in the state in reading and within the top six in mathematics. Our seventh grade students scored above all middle schools in the state in reading and second in mathematics. Our eighth grade students also scored above all middle schools in the state and second in mathematics.

▪ **Chart 2 - Delaware Comprehensive Assessment (DCAS) – Social Studies and Science - % Meet or Exceed the Standard**

<b>2015 DCAS Results</b>				
Grade	SA Social Studies	State Social Studies	SA Science	State Science
7	99	58		
8			94	49
10			91	44

**Chart 2** shows that Sussex Academy students scored very well in both the social studies and sciences as measured by the Delaware Comprehensive Assessment System. Our seventh grade social studies surpassed all other students in the state while our eighth grade science did the same thing. Our tenth grade science students were second to all other students in the state.

▪ **Chart 3 - PSAT – Critical Reading, Writing, and Math -**

<b>2015 PSAT Results – Grade 10</b>			
	Critical Reading	Writing	Math
SA Average Score	49.5	45.6	48.4
SA Median Score	51	52	48
National Average	42.6	43.5	41.2
College Readiness	42	44	42

**Chart 3** shows data for the first year that Sussex Academy students participated in the PSAT test. Both students' average scores and median scores outpaced the national average and college readiness in all areas of the test – critical reading, writing, and math.

▪ **Chart 4 - Advance Placement – Online Courses - Scores**

<b>2015 AP Online Test Results</b>		
	AP Psychology	AP Microeconomics
SA Average Score	3.3	2
Global Average	3.09	3.07
# scores 3 or higher	5	0
# scores 4 or higher	2	0

**Chart 4** illustrates first time participation of online AP tests for Sussex Academy students in 2015. We had eight students who participated in either AP Psychology or AP Microeconomics. Data reveal that seven of our students had scores of 3 or higher on the AP Psychology. Acceptance of these scores and the credit(s) accrued are determined by the receiving college. A score of 3 or higher is accepted by many colleges.

### **Students and Culture**

The intention of the original founders was to open the school to all students in Sussex County. Most students who apply reside in one of the six school districts in Sussex County with a few students coming from Kent County. In school year 2014-2015 the school population was comprised of 498 students in grades 6 – 10 with 42% male and 58% female; 78% white, 9% Hispanic, .5% Hawaiian, 3.3% Asian, 1.1% American Indian, 5.2% African American, 3.5% Multi-race. Interestingly, the demographics for Sussex County posted by the U.S. Census Bureau for 2014-15 are the following: 49% male, 51% female; 75% white, 9.3% Hispanic, .1% Hawaiian, 1.2% Asian, 1.2% American Indian, 12.8% African American.

Unlike most charters in the state, Sussex Academy draws its students from a large geographic area. The founders envisioned that students would come from all geographic areas of Sussex County that encompasses 1,196 square miles. As the school has evolved, this is the case with most students coming from six Sussex County school districts involving 11 middle schools and roughly 16 elementary schools along with a few Independent and home schools. While the sense of community may be initially lacking, this diversity is an opportunity for the school to forge a strong school culture. One of the ways that Sussex Academy builds school culture is through a school-wide expedition held for the middle school students during the first week of

school. The focus of the expedition is known as SAAS (Superior Academics, Awesome Students). During the expedition, we focus on relationship building and “standing up” for what is right – not being a bystander for what may be hurtful. The expedition is revisited throughout the year. At the high school level, the freshman and sophomores complete an overnight camping trip where team building and Sussex Academy culture is emphasized. Throughout the school year the exploratory teachers provide activities and instruction relative to positive relationships and behavior. Last school year, the faculty intertwined the *Rachel’s Challenge* program and a visit by Jay Asher, author of the adolescent literature piece, *Thirteen Reasons Why*, within our language arts to stimulate conversation and sensitivity to how actions and words impact others. In this expedition entitled “The Chain Reaction,” students had the opportunity to work with students across the school.

Our faculty overtly teaches respect and responsibility as key ingredients to the culture of Sussex Academy. Perhaps the words of a gentlemen who routinely delivers items to our school summarizes what others have to say about the culture at Sussex Academy. He said, “Your school is so different than any other school I go into. It’s evident that students are working and busy, but they are nice to one another. They treat each other kindly. Your school is so serene.”

We believe that other influences upon our school culture are uniforms, community service, school structures, and a superb faculty and staff.

### **Student and School Service**

All students in the school complete community service in two ways. First every student in the middle school must complete at least ten hours of personal service throughout the year. They must document this with evidence and reflection on their service. Service ranges from planting beach grass to working in a nursing home to cleaning up a little league park. In addition, each of the teams through their expedition work also completes a service project. Examples for 2014-2015 include the Ghost Tours in Georgetown with proceeds going to or the SPCA, a pencil drive where students collected 5,150 pencils that were distributed to other students within and outside of Delaware, a coat drive where 150 coats were collected for “Students in Transition,” the “Giving Tree” where household items were distributed to needy families.

Service projects are expanded at the high school. Each high school student must do more hours of community service as well. Types of service projects completed by high school students in 2014-2015 included a “Georgetown Clean-Up” Day, “Toys for All DuPont,” and “Food Drive”

At grades 11 and 12 students must complete a CAS (Creativity, Activity, Service) project as part of the IB program. Each student must develop and carry out a year long project that demonstrates his/her initiative, perseverance, and self-determination. School year 2015-2016 will be the first year that Sussex Academy students begin their CAS projects.

### **School Structures**

There are school structures in place that are fairly apparent to students, parents, and visitors. First, each group of students is organized into a team with a grade six team, grade seven team, grade eight team, and a high school team thereby making the team the unifying structure for the group of students. Each of the middle school teams has five teachers while all high school teachers are considered a team. Also, the middle school exploratory teachers constitute a team. Each member of the team takes on a specific responsibility such as being the leader, or being the parent contact, or being the fieldwork coordinator and so on. The team structure allows the teachers who are responsible for the students to make decisions relative to curriculum, instruction, student schedules, student grouping, discipline, and general well-being of their team.

Another structure within the school relates to school governance and decision-making. The administration and team leaders meet monthly as does the Instructional Leadership Team. Both groups are charged with making decisions and leading the school relative to school operations, budget, curriculum, instruction, students, professional development, etc.

Sussex Academy enjoys the support of an organized PTO and a Sports Boosters group. These organizations continually work to provide additional funds and help in all activities that are of a school-wide and or team nature.



These structures allow for collaboration and collective decision-making in order to respond to the needs of the students. Decisions tend to be more inclusive and change can be made more quickly.

### **Strengths**

Our academic performance in reading and writing is our strong suit. In addition, our strong faculty and staff along with a responsive Executive and Foundation Board are critical to the school's academic success. Our emphasis on a school culture of responsibility and respect helps students and staff to stay focused on academic work. Also, the school structures that are in place help us make better decisions about our work with and for students. Certainly the support of parents and their willingness to "stay the course" by keeping their child at Sussex Academy is important for the school's academic outcomes. Consistency, hard work, and high expectations are borne out through excellent standardized test scores.

### **Challenges**

Our current academic challenge is to move the needle upward in mathematics. While we believe we have a very clear handle on the change in standards, our students did not perform as well on SBAC as we want them to nor do we expect them to. Through PLC work and professional development opportunities our mathematics and science teachers are working collaboratively to determine what interventions and or changes need to be made to effect improvement.

Another challenge is ensuring that the Next Generation Science Standards are understood as they are rolled out and to take corrective curriculum/instruction action where needed. Keeping pace with technology is also very important. We need to make sure that we have the technology, the expertise, and the academic course corrections in tow so that our students are college and career ready.

### **Opportunities for Growth**

As we move toward having our first graduating class, we have the opportunity to review our grades 6-10 program to ascertain if and where we may need or want to make curriculum and or structural changes in our delivery systems. This includes how the school will structure its leadership and administration.

## **Organizational Framework Performance: 2014-2015**

### **Overall Rating: MEETS STANDARD**

Sussex Academy met the standards in each of the six areas of performance on the Organizational Framework Performance Report 2014-2015: Educational Program, Financial Management and Oversight, Governance and Reporting, Students and Employees, School Environment, and Additional Obligations.

### **Strengths**

The school expects to meet all performance expectations of the Organizational Framework. The school tries to be in compliance with all rules and regulations. The past reports have indicated that the school has met the standards in the organizational framework each of the last four years. The challenges involve staying abreast of the changes and learning how the department tracks this information.

Often times there is no clear-cut line between academic, organizational, or financial frameworks of a school. Sometimes these elements overlap so a decision is made to describe them in one category or another or to “leave them out” altogether. Such is the case for School Governance and Reporting that falls into the Organizational Framework. While the criterion identified is about compliance requirements, much more can be said about School Governance for Sussex Academy. The school has several strengths not measured by the Framework. For example, the school has a very active Executive Board. The Board works closely with the school administration to monitor the academic, financial, and organizational health of the school. It works closely with the administration to enact policies that establish the general parameters of the charter schools operations. Board members come from across Sussex County and have their own professional lives in finance, human resources, law, medicine, education, etc. In other words, they are experts in their fields such that they effectively look at the strengths and challenges of the school and have a vision for its future. Sussex Academy is fortunate to have such a fine array of Executive Board members.

## Challenges

While Sussex Academy met the standards in all six areas, there was one note relative to noncompliance in the 2014-2015 Organizational Framework Report. This note dealt with budget versus expenditures in Title II, Part A. In this instance the Consolidated Application was completed in July 2013. However, by the time the school spent the funds in 2015 the funds were spent for new professional development items not identified in that year's program but were documented in the professional development needs for the school. The rules for budget amendments had changed and the school did not complete a budget amendment request. The school ensures that it has taken corrective action to check the expenditures against the Consolidated Application budget in the future.

## Opportunities for Growth

As Sussex Academy expands the student population into a 6-12 configuration, it has the opportunity to weigh how it will operate organizationally with both a middle school and a high school. Growth impacts all aspects of the organization including curriculum/instruction, students, staff, facilities, and finance. In moving forward, Sussex Academy is analyzing what administrative structures should be put in place to ensure that the middle school (grades 6-8) and high school (9-12) are unique – that is that each has the ability to identify itself while at the same time to cultivate a “single school identity” as it meets the standards of the Organizational Framework.

## Financial Framework Performance: 2014-2015 Overall Rating: MEETS STANDARD

The Sussex Academy met the standard on all indicators included in the Financial Performance Framework for the 2014-2015 school year with the exception of one. Additionally, the FY15 audit and financial statements indicate that the school continues to be fiscally sound.

External auditors have conducted annual independent audits of the school finances of the Sussex Academy for the past 15 years with no findings during that period. It is

anticipated that this performance will continue into the future.

The school's budget is reviewed and approved by the Executive Board of the Sussex Academy. The school's Citizen Budget Oversight Committee (CBOC) and the Executive Board review monthly financial reports. A current financial report is posted on our website on a monthly basis. The school typically operates with an annual financial surplus to ensure fiscal viability and sustainability, as was the case in FY15. Consequently, the school has established, and continues to maintain, a sufficient reserve fund to cover unanticipated and/or emergent events.

The enrollment is projected to increase through the 2017 school year as high school grades are added. Accordingly, the school expects to benefit from economies of scale. That being said, the "growing" years may have been more challenging than in the past because our 9<sup>th</sup> grade classes have been smaller than anticipated and there are on-going one-time, initial expenses related to renovating and relocating into a much larger facility. This was the one area where Sussex Academy did not meet the benchmark as the total student population in grades 6 through 10 for school year 2015 was only at 90% of the approved total enrollment.

### **Strengths**

The school's financial future is secure. A long waiting list is maintained for all middle school grades in the event of any unexpected openings. Clearly, this is a sign of financial stability. The financial decisions that the school makes are based on sound and planned reasoning. The Executive Committee of the Board and/or the CBOC is involved in financial decisions that were not included in the original approved budget. Policies are in place to ensure that adequate reserve funds are maintained to cover unexpected and/or emergent events.

### **Challenges**

Funding for our school is a function of enrollment. Funds for student transportation and local funding are based on expenditures of the prior school year and thus are difficult to predict. Shifts in the number of students enrolled at our school from one school district or another can cause anticipated revenues to fluctuate, as can decreases in local expenditures.

In addition, the Sussex Academy has benefited greatly from the opportunity to swap buildings with Delmarva Christian High School as the new facility provides both finished and potential new spaces to accommodate the anticipated growth in our student population over the next few years. However, there have been and, most likely, will continue to be unexpected building related expenses due to the age of the building and the unknown maintenance practices and history of the former tenant. In an effort to address this concern, the Sussex Academy maintains an account at PNC Bank and is currently depositing approximately \$1800 monthly to establish a maintenance reserve. It is anticipated that this amount will be increased as additional students are enrolled in the upper grades.

### **Opportunities for Growth**

We are fortunate to have an active and successful foundation supporting our school. The Sussex Academy Foundation, Inc. has raised the funds to purchase and renovate portions of the building that the school is currently occupying. To date, all of the interior spaces and amenities of our new building have been finished with a library, kitchen, cafetorium, and stage being the most recent projects to be addressed. The Foundation has funds on hand to continue improvements to our building to accommodate the anticipated increase in enrollment and program changes and will continue to aggressively solicit funds to develop the property further in the coming years. This includes constructing additional classroom and a multipurpose room for our middle school students and teachers. A local construction company has donated an indoor pool. Both of these projects will break ground in the 2016 fiscal year and be completed prior to the opening of school in 2016-17. A Building and Grounds Committee has been established to work with the Foundation to ensure that the school's needs are addressed as we continue to grow into an institution serving grades 6 through 12.

## II. Performance Reflection

In school year 2014-2015 Sussex Academy was a Tier 1 school. When reflecting about practices that drive the school, numerous structures that are part of the success can be replicated as identified here.

### Academic Practices that Can Be Replicated

- Engage in a Project-based learning through mindset where student is worker and where high expectations are held. We recommend investigation in current program and practices as @www.elschools.org
- Engage in a rigorous academic program such as the International Baccalaureate Program or Expeditionary Learning. We recommend investigation in current programs and practices as @www.ibo.org
- Establish an instructional focus. At Sussex Academy literacy as the instructional focus with school-wide practices such as 6+1 Writing Traits, CSET, cross-curricular expeditions and curriculum
- Enact practices that position the school to know their students better. At Sussex Academy we have practiced “Looping,” where a set of students stays with the same set of teachers for two years. Sussex Academy has utilized this practice for grades 6 and 7 since its founding. Enact a strong team approach with all teachers having a set of responsibilities around a set of students. This includes collective decision-making.

### Organizational Practices that Can be Replicated

- While not defined by the Organizational Framework, but imperative for a well-functioning, high performing charter school is an outstanding Executive Board who understand and live their role and responsibilities. Finding members who have diverse backgrounds and live in different communities has brought strength to the school.
- Sussex Academy has been very fortunate in finding and keeping outstanding faculty who are student-centered, well-educated, and prepared to teach. All administrators, faculty, and staff understand that they are here by invitation.

### **Financial Practices that Can be Replicated**

- Under our Director of Finance and Operations we have developed excellent financial management and oversight structures and practices
- We have a Foundation Board that is clearly connected to the school's growth and development. Whether this can be replicated is not clear; however, the current Foundation Board is extraordinary and Sussex Academy's growth has occurred because of the commitment and leadership on the Sussex Academy Foundation Board.