

Mater Academy Charter Middle School

Consistent Expectations

Mater Academy Charter Middle/High School is located in what was once a big box store in a commercial and industrial area of Hialeah Gardens, FL. The same energy that transformed a vacant store into a thriving campus for a grades 6–12 school is apparent in every classroom.

Students, parents, community members, and staff members all speak of the “magic” that is Mater. Even the mayor of Hialeah Gardens credits the school with helping to transform the city into a community.

As striking as the physical transformation was, the continuing academic transformation is what draws people to the school, a Title I public charter school that began seven years ago with 500 students in grades 6–9 and added a grade each year. The middle school (grades 6–8) is leading the campus on all success indicators and is recognized as

an separate entity from the high school for this award. Current enrollment for the entire school is over 2,800 students, 94% of whom are Hispanic and 76% of whom qualify for free and reduced-priced meals; the middle school has 1,159 students. The students are proud and confident and attribute their successes to their teachers.

When questioned about their expectations and goals, the students—even sixth and seventh graders—open their notebooks and point to their individual data sheets in mathematics and reading/language arts and discuss their academic goals and the steps they have to take to reach their targets.

The students don’t stop the discussion with the data, however. They talk about classroom expectations and how important it is to write down each day’s objective in every class so

they can use it to measure their own learning. They also talk about the supports that are available to them before and after school and on Saturday mornings.

Students aren’t alone in being accountable for their academic performance. Everyone in the school analyzes data: a data team examines schoolwide trends, every department meets to review course and class data, and every teacher reviews individual student data by content domain.

After analysis, an action plan is created for the school, the department, and each classroom. Those action plans include a detailed instructional focus calendar that clearly states which skills and strategies will be taught and reinforced in which classrooms every week of the school year. All teachers are expected to follow the calendar and are supported by the instructional coaches.





Academic achievement is a priority at Mater but the arts are important too.

Because the data analysis is linked to teacher goals, it has led to changes in curriculum and support systems. No decisions are made in a vacuum; all instructional decisions are based on the data and arrived at by consensus. Parents are also included in this process as team members and as partners in their students' education. To that end, parents sign a contract to complete 30 hours of volunteer service to the school.

Consistency in expectations from classroom to classroom didn't happen by chance. Principal Judith Marty, her assistant principals, and a large leadership team model and moni-

tor best practices. Marty walks through at least 30 classrooms every day and requires that her assistants walk through 15. Teachers also visit one another's classes. Those classroom visits reinforce the importance of consistency and accountability.

Team meetings and professional development are devoted to providing the supports needed to achieve consistency and set high expectations. From day one, sixth graders are told that they will graduate and they will go to college. Nothing less is acceptable.

Marty attributes the calm academic spirit of the middle school to having a high school on the same

campus. Every middle school student takes at least one high school credit-bearing course in the eighth grade; many take more. The older students mentor the younger students, and transitions are seamless. The results have been outstanding. The middle school is a Florida "A" school in addition to meeting AYP for the last three years.

Staff members attribute the students' success to the inclusive, collaborative environment of the school, to the fierce belief that students will develop to their highest potential. The magic of Mater is that students are embraced and shown step-by-step how they can achieve and succeed.

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Leadership and Collaboration

Mater Academy's success rests on the commitment of all stakeholders to shared leadership and governance. The governance structure is unique in that the principal reports directly to the board of directors of Mater Academy Inc, a not-for-profit organization of K-12 schools that is responsible to the School Choice Office of Dade County, FL. As a public charter, the school must operate in accordance with all Miami Dade district policies as well as be in compliance with all Florida and federal mandates. The board is responsible for hiring, evaluating, and dismissing the principals. The principals in turn hire, evaluate, and can dismiss all staff. All school employees work on yearly contracts.

An Educational Excellence School Advisory Committee—composed of students, parents, teachers, administrators, and local community members—participates in a decision-making process that has authority over all aspects of

the school. The committee is dedicated to tapping leadership potential within the entire school community; for example, students who serve on the board and its committees then serve as mentors to involve other students. Teachers and assistant principals represent the school at conferences, serve as team and committee leaders, and provide professional development to the entire staff. All teachers collaborate through horizontal and vertical curriculum teaming, grade level teams, the curriculum council, and the literacy team, taking leadership roles whenever possible to share their expertise on specific topics.

As assistant principal Kenneth Feria said, "Mater Academy is [a] leadership boot camp." The principal views leadership as a condition of employment and does not allow anyone—staff or students—to sit on the sidelines. That belief in the power of collaboration and shared leadership serves the school well.

The Evolution of Leadership

When Principal Judith C. Marty was asked how her leadership evolved over time, she thought about it and realized the changes that had occurred.

I remember an axiom that I heard years ago at the first conference that I attended as an administrator. On a big overhead (before the age of Power Points) and after a pertinent discussion, one of the assistant secretaries of the U.S. Department of Education wrote:

In education the only constant is change.

I know that I have used those words often when presenting new requirements or programs to the staff. As I thought more about the question, I also remembered that my coworkers have always described me as a change agent. But there are many things that have *not* changed through my years as an educator. My passion for children and my absolute belief in the power of high expectations have guided my career for the last 30 years.

My first leadership positions were in the field of college financial aid. As a director, I was very involved with the state, regional, and national associations. Because of my known concern about underrepresented populations, I was appointed the director of the Minority Concerns Committee and later elected as a trustee of a national organization. While serving in these positions, I had the opportunity to see statistics that confirmed my greatest fears. The drop-out rates and the lack of participation of minority and economically disadvantaged students in higher education was alarming, and it was getting progressively worse.



Together my colleagues and I tried to do something about it, and partnering with several other national organizations, we spearheaded an early awareness program in 10 urban areas. I became very involved with the South Florida group and started visiting middle and high schools to talk to parents and students about the benefits of staying in school and the importance of preparing for college; the rest is history. A big change occurred in my career as a result. I decided that it was time to pursue my first dream and go back to work with adolescents.

In my years as a public school administrator, I have been constant in a firm belief that:

- Schools need visionary leaders who know that all students can learn.
- High expectations lead to high results: students need to be exposed to advanced and honor courses.
- Administrators have to be visible.
- Participatory leadership is essential for success. Principals need to know all aspects of running a school.
- My door is and always has been open to teachers, parents, and students.

- Administrators need to be proactive rather than reactive.
- Successful principals are also excellent fiscal managers.

To answer the question of how my style has evolved, I asked a group of teachers who have known me for a while, at Mater and at previous schools. Some of them were students, some were teachers when I was an assistant principal, and others have been at this school since the day it opened in 2002. The answers varied from “You haven’t changed much, you have always visited classes and your door has always been open” to others saying “You have become more passionate. Your expectations keep growing and we worked harder because we don’t want to disappoint you.”

The most common thread of the discussion was that as a leader, I have become data driven and more involved in all aspects of adolescent literacy.

I firmly believe that the role of the leader is to develop leadership in others, and in the last few years, I have tried very hard to develop assistant principals into fine instructional leaders.

Take Aways

The leadership team had no problem explaining what other schools can learn from Mater.

Mater is a Title I school that offers a college preparatory curriculum. We provide academic excellence and rigor for all our students, many of whom are first-generation college students. Our 6–12 model, along with our dual enrollment program, provides a seamless transition academically and socially from middle school to high school to college. Students benefit from dynamic lessons, infusion of critical thinking throughout all content areas, and opportunities for collaboration among all stakeholders. One goal is to develop metacognition and enhance higher-order thinking skills.

Relevance is created through the fusion between our diverse curriculum and extracurricular activities. Students can explore their goals by making choices that are directly

linked to their career paths. Courses in the fine and practical arts provide an avenue for exploration and discovery.

The Career Research and Critical Thinking class allows students to delve into and investigate options for the future. Students practice goal-setting, conduct mock interviews, and participate in excursions that enrich their lives. Cocurricular and extracurricular options include interest clubs, academic organizations, and athletic teams to enhance the curriculum and provide real life opportunities for our student body. This combination creates relevance.

Relationships are fostered through the collaboration of faculty and staff members, students, parents, and the local community. Our teachers are dedicated. Our students are committed. Our parents are involved. Our community responds. These are the building blocks that allow Mater to break ranks. **PL**

Mater Academy Charter Middle School

Principal
Judith C. Marty

Grades
6–8

Enrollment
1,159

Community
Urban

Demographics
Hispanic 95%, Black 2%, Other 3%; free or reduced-price meals 79%



- High expectations and family-like school culture
- Staff and student leadership
- Shared decision making
- Schoolwide data team
- Classroom analysis by content domain
- Goals and targets set each year
- Instructional focus calendar
- Volunteer hours
- Title I parent outreach
- Clear intent for postsecondary

Using Data to Inform Instruction

Guiding Questions

The Big Picture.

Write a statement that describes the school's performance in reading. What are our strengths? Weaknesses?

The Closer Picture.

How did we do at the programmatic or department level? (For example, with the population who are English language learners?)

The Details.

- How did each of your classes perform?
- How did each of your students perform?
- What data sources will you use to know?
- How will you sort the data or display it? (By instructional group, demographics, AYP group?)
- Which students show erratic performance across tests?
- Identify your bubble students (high 2s and low 3s on the FCAT). What are their instructional needs?
- What patterns, if any, exist in each of your periods? Across periods? Do all periods show different needs?
- What is your plan to improve student performance? Identify your needs; identify potential strategies; identify resources (including professional development); develop action steps and targets. What will create the greatest "bang for the buck" in improving student achievement?