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Spokane International Academy cites fast start

Charter school outperforms in testing

Blythe Thimsen June 16th, 2016

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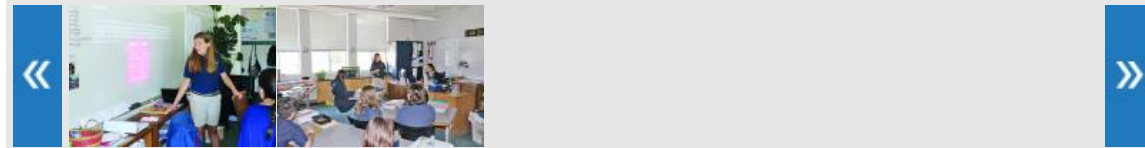
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Outperformed.

That is the word that melted away the nerves gripping Travis Franklin, head of school at Spokane International Academy, as he, the teachers, staff, and students at one of Spokane's two new charter schools nervously awaited their Cambridge Exam Results at the end of May.

It also was the word that justified the long hours, hard work, and struggles that



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were overcome this year by students and staff, as the academy wraps up its first full school year.

Academy sixth-graders outperformed the average Cambridge International School Secondary 1 student in every academic category when compared with results worldwide. According to exam results, “SIA K/1 students have also outpaced a traditional year’s worth of growth in math this year. Kindergarten students have grown an average of 1.2 years and 1st grade students have demonstrated an incredible 1.75 years worth of growth.”

More than 90,000 entries are submitted every year for Secondary 1 checkpoint assessments in the Cambridge Exams, and those entries come from 10,000 schools in more than 160 countries.

“I was hoping we’d be somewhere similar to an average Cambridge International School; that we would be either just above or just below,” Franklin says of the academy, located in the old St. Patrick’s School at 2607 E. Queen, in East Spokane. “By the time we got all of our kids in, we pulled the results, and it was like, wow. It was really cool.”

The academy has a total of 145 students in kindergarten, first, and sixth grades and eventually will teach kindergarten through eighth grade. It administered The Cambridge Exams because it is what’s referred to as a Cambridge International School, part of an international network of schools using an



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inquiry-based approach to teaching. At Spokane International Academy, the focus is on an international component, and in every class, topics such as math, science, social studies, and reading are taught with a global perspective.

Sixth-graders this year gave micro-financing loans through Kiva to entrepreneurs all over the world. Kiva is a nonprofit organization that seeks, and via the Internet, “to connect people through lending to alleviate poverty.” The students learned about different cultural contexts and why it’s a big deal for someone to have livestock to support their family, saw the economic return of the loan, and managed the financial impact.

“We want to create leaders who can transform communities, and that takes a broad range of skills to be able to do that,” says Franklin.

Every student at the academy studies Spanish, with the goal of becoming fluent in the language spoken by more than 427 million people worldwide. Students work with a Spanish teacher throughout the week to learn both Spanish vocabulary and the cultural context of some of the Spanish speaking countries.

Eight-hour school days, running from 7:45 a.m. to 3:45 p.m., are about two hours longer than a typical day of instruction at other Spokane-area schools. Students, however, don’t have homework.

“One of the reasons our day is longer is so we can contain all of our homework here in what we call our learning lab time,” says Franklin. “Our middle school students have an hour and ten minutes every day—one 35-minute block for math, one 35-minute block for English—where they are doing their homework in



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class with their teacher.”

The Cambridge approach, global perspective, and longer hours all have paid off, asserts Cal Larson, board chairman and parent of an academy student.

“It’s been a thrill for everyone to see the academic progress,” Larson says. “They work toward the international standards for math, science, etc. This is top-tier education for a public school, no bells or whistles.”

People are often confused about whether a charter school is a private or public school. As a privately run, publicly funded school, there is no tuition charged and no cost to attend. It is open to any student in the state of Washington, as an alternative to the traditional public school setting. The school is funded from state and federal funds, grants, donations, and other sources.

Those state funds have been the root of legal problems.

In 2012, voters in Washington approved Initiative 1240, enabling the creation of public charter schools. The League of Women Voters and the Washington Education Association filed a lawsuit to overturn the initiative and not allow public charter schools.

In September 2015, the Washington state Supreme Court ruled charter schools were unconstitutional on the basis that they are not “common schools,” making them ineligible for common school funding. Much of the Spokane International Academy’s first year was spent in limbo, not knowing the future.

Franklin and the rest of the academy teachers and staff worked to shield students from knowing much about the lawsuit.

“I view my role as shielding anything that has nothing to do with our classroom,” says Franklin. “I would imagine most of our kids didn’t know. It was a little bit stressful in the idea that what we built might be taken away, but I never felt like we were at jeopardy of not having a school next year.”

On April 1, Washington state Gov. Jay Inslee allowed Senate Bill 6194 to become law without his signature. It keeps charter schools afloat with state lottery money, rather than general-fund tax revenues.

“I am not interested in closing schools in a manner that disrupts the education of hundreds of students and their affected families,” Inslee wrote, though he expressed concerns about accountability and oversight provisions of the bill.

With the green light to go ahead, the academy is wrapping up the 2015-16 school year with—as of April 30—revenue of about \$2.4 million and expenses of about \$1.7 million, leaving it with an operating income of just under \$700,000. Projecting five years out, it anticipates annual revenue of \$5.2 million, total expenses above \$4.6 million, and an operating income of about \$500,000.

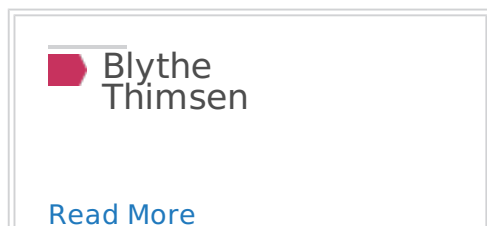
“By the end of this school year, we’ll have in reserve, somewhere around \$646,000,” says Franklin. “Some of that is because of a startup grant that we received from the Washington State Charter School Association. We have essentially not spent any of it, and we’ve saved around \$45,000 as well, knowing that one of the big challenges of our school is that we’ll only be in this facility for

two years. We need to find another home, so we need to put some money in reserve so we have the ability to do that.”

A new facility will be needed, because the academy will outgrow its current building once more students are added. Currently, the 145 students are in kindergarten, first, and sixth grade; next year will bring the addition of second-grade and seventh-grade classes, with more classes added as current students advance.

Not only will that bring the number of students up, but also the number of staff members. This first year, the academy had a 26-person staff. That included seven teachers, six instructional assistants, one Spanish teacher, as well as an office manager, office assistants, a director of finance and operations, dean of students, head of school, a kitchen manager, a special education director, and a school psychologist.

Franklin just hired 13 new staff members, bringing the total for the 2016-2017 school year to 40 staff members, with expected enrollment of 290 students. Kindergarten through 2nd grade enrollment is full for next year; however, there are still a few spots available in sixth and seventh grades.





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