

NC ACCESS BEST PRACTICES



Office of Charter Schools
NC ACCESS PROGRAM
NC Department of Public Instruction

School Culture

Social Emotional Learning

What's Shared in the Circle, Stays in the Circle

Implementation Description

Apprentice Academy High School (AAHS) of Union County prepares students to enter college or a career immediately following graduation. The AAHS school culture is built upon restorative practices and mentorship. Research has shown that mentor programs increase the likelihood of academic success for all students (Harper, 2018). AAHS students partner with faculty mentors, participate in paid internships and apprenticeships as part of their weekly academic schedule, and attend an Advisory Circle. Every AAHS teacher is assigned an Advisory Circle at the beginning of the year, which serves as a home room class. These Advisory Circles meet for 45 minutes every day starting at 10:00 AM, and on Friday mornings they have a structured, group conversation with their faculty advisor. These Circles provide opportunities for students to “*feel part of a supportive community*,” which is an essential part of restorative practices (McClure, 2016). As the COVID-19 crisis isolated students across the globe, they began to require additional emotional support (Prothero, 2020). In response, during fall 2020 the AAHS staff redesigned Advisory Circles to facilitate students’ Social Emotional Learning (SEL). AAHS’s Counselor and Restorative Practices Coordinator (RPC) created a collection of SEL slideshows for Advisory Circles using the [Restorative Communities Resource Guide](#) and materials from an NC ACCESS funded professional development with Triad Restorative Justice, which they would distribute to faculty members on Thursdays. These slideshows facilitated discussions and provided structure for virtual Advisory Circles during COVID-19. Each Advisory Circle meeting began with announcements.

June 28, 2021

About This School

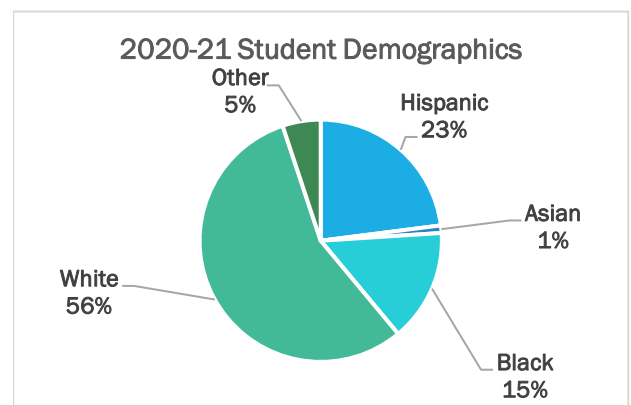
Apprentice Academy High School of North Carolina

Apprentice Academy High School will provide students with a career and technology-focused education that prepares them for post-high school employment and delivers the academic rigor necessary for college success. At Apprentice Academy we (a) prepare all students for careers and/or college through individual learning and career plans, (b) use differentiated instruction to facilitate personalized learning and individual learning plans through our PEAK personalized learning curriculum and, (c) ensure all students receive formal, weekly mentoring to accommodate their social-emotional needs. School administration demonstrates its dedication to the mentoring program by providing time for it in the master schedule.

Year School Opened: 2019-20

Grant Awarded: 2020-21

Initial Grade Levels Served: 9-12



% ED Student Population: 28.5 %

Urbanicity: Rural / Monroe, NC

Persons in Poverty (Union County)⁵: 7.3 %

Circle Basics

Each round of the circle allows every member to have the chance to respond to the prompt posed

Only one person should be talking at any given time. Everyone else is actively listening

What is *shared* in the circle stays in the circle. What is *learned* in the circle follows us

Every member can pass. You cannot be compelled to speak

Our Advisory Norms

- **Speak from the heart** - Speak honestly and spontaneously. Trust that what you have to say is good enough.
- **Seek first to understand, then to be understood** - We are building a community. We do that by listening without judgement.
- **Say just enough** - Make yourself understood, but respect that everyone deserves the chance to share.
- **What is said in the circle stays in the circle** - Yes, it's important enough to say twice.
- **Laugh with, not at** - Vulnerability is key in a circle. There is no room for shame or embarrassment.

Next, students were reminded of the Advisory Circle Group Norms - which were researched and developed by the School Counselor and RPC - such as “*what’s shared in the circle stays in the circle*” and “*no one can be compelled to speak*”. Staff and students then engaged in ice-breaker conversations where they discussed low-risk topics, such as their highs and lows for the week or their favorite holidays. Finally, there was an in-depth discussion on the weekly topic, such as justice/fairness, emotional regulation, identity, relationships, or goal setting. For example, when the theme was identity, students were invited to discuss the difference between being “*authentic*” and “*fake*”. Facilitators created a welcoming environment for discussion by playing games or discussing sports to engage students who may have otherwise been intimidated to participate in the group dialogue, and while teachers facilitated these discussions by setting expectations and asking the initial questions, the discussions were largely student-driven. Advisory Circles quickly became a safe haven

for students who were craving a sense of normalcy during the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic and for students who typically look to school as an escape from a challenging home life (R. Caple, personal interview, May 24, 2021). Staff observed that students became more talkative and involved in their Advisory Circles as the year progressed, which resulted in discussions that often lasted longer than the allotted hour (R. Caple, personal interview, May 24, 2021).

The School Counselor and RPC regularly joined Advisory Circles to connect with students. They also collaborated with teachers to identify and support students who were not attending class or were having difficulty with virtual learning. The Counselor monitored the student’s attendance, observed their behavior, and reached out to the student privately to check-in. If necessary, the Counselor contacted the student’s family or made a visit to the student’s home to show emotional support and empower them to continue the school year. These efforts helped many students finish the school year who may have otherwise dropped out (R. Caple, personal interview, May 24, 2021). After interacting with the counselor in Advisory Circles, students began advocating for their own needs and requested appointments with her to elicit support as needed.

Results

As students became more comfortable with the school counselor through Advisory circles, the number of students scheduling appointments with her increased.

Advisory Circles also increased academic engagement in AAHS’ Educationally Disadvantaged population.

Challenges

It could sometimes be challenging to motivate students to attend or participate in virtual Advisory Circles. The School Counselor and RPC initiated contact with these students and sought individualized methods to incentivize students to stay connected with their classmates and school staff.

Future Modifications

AAHS plans to build on the success of Advisory Circles in 2021-22 by transforming it into a daily, Pass/Fail elective for all students. The school intends to utilize NC ACCESS funds to purchase AVID as a structured curriculum for this elective. Freshman and Sophomores - who have only experienced high school online thus far - will follow the AVID curriculum Monday through Thursday. Juniors and Seniors will focus on career or college planning Monday through Thursday. All students will follow the SEL-focused Advisory Circles discussion format on Friday.

The school also plans to use available NC ACCESS funds to pursue more restorative practices PD for staff through Triad Restorative Justice.

Critical Components

Getting Started

AAHS scheduled Advisory Circles by utilizing time in the academic schedule that was already set aside for homeroom. Homeroom teachers seamlessly became Advisory Circle facilitators during the ten o'clock hour by following a curriculum that was designed by the School Counselor and RPC based on their research and PD experiences. Expectations were set for students and staff through the Group Norms established by the Counselor and RPC's curriculum.

Ongoing Supports

Teachers received ongoing support from AAHS' Counselor and RPC. School leadership also decided to purchase the AVID curriculum to expand the Advisory Circles program and provide more structure and support for students and staff.

Sample Advisory Circle Presentations:

[Circle Slides - Week 20](#)

[Circle Slides - Week 26](#)

[Circle Slides - Week 28](#)

Equity Connections

School is often a safe place for children living in poverty (Penwell, 2020). When students were no longer allowed to attend school in-person due to COVID-19 safety regulations, AAHS staff connected weekly with students through virtual Advisory Circles, even making visits to the students' homes as needed to offer support. These visits provided a safety net for AAHS's most vulnerable students.

Research

1. Harper, A. (March 6, 2018). "More Students would Benefit from having a mentor". Education Dive. Accessed on June 1, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.educationdive.com/news/more-students-would-benefit-from-having-a-mentor/518472/>
2. McClure, L. (October 10, 2016). "Bringing Restorative Practices to Your School". Edutopia. Accessed on June 1, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.edutopia.org/article/bringing-restorative-practices-to-your-school-laura-mcclure>
3. Penwell, C. (May 15, 2020). "Kids need to get back in school to stay safe". *Star Tribune*. Accessed on May 27, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.startribune.com/kids-need-to-get-back-in-school-to-stay-safe/570517552/>

4. Prothero, A. (March 30, 2020). "How to Teach Social-Emotional Learning When Students Aren't in School". Education Week. Accessed June 1, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/03/30/how-to-teach-social-emotional-learning-when-students.html>
5. United States Census Bureau, Quick Facts North Carolina, Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/NC/PST045219>