

NC ACCESS BEST PRACTICES



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

Marketing and Recruitment

Community Engagement

Clearing Up Misconceptions Through Strategic Marketing

Implementation Description



After some successful festivals and parades in the fall of 2019, Tillery Charter Academy (TCA) in Biscoe, NC had big plans for in-person marketing and recruitment events before the Coronavirus interrupted their progress. Being the only charter school in their area has sometimes made recruitment feel like an uphill battle against community perceptions. For example, all of their marketing materials prominently feature the fact that they are tuition-free because most people in their area incorrectly assume that “charter” implies a cost to attend. The staff at TCA have a real passion to build connections and communicate effectively to clear up these misconceptions within their community. Research shows that consistent messaging and proactive communication is critical to successfully market school offerings and opportunities to local families (LeRoy, 2018; Reform Support Network, 2014). So, when they were no longer able to host the in-person events due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they developed and pursued virtual and print marketing strategies. All of the school’s marketing strategies for the 2020-2021 academic year were planned, implemented, and measured for their individual levels of success with the help of a marketing consultant TCA was able to contract through their NC ACCESS subgrant funding.

About This School

Tillery Charter Academy

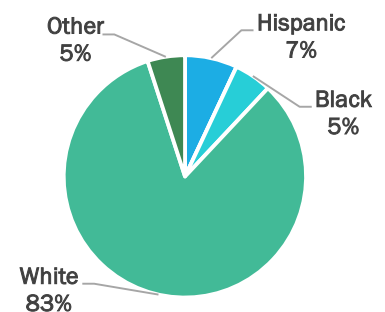
We are a free public school open to all NC students offering a classical style of education, a rigorous curriculum, and a focus on our three core values - courage, respect, and the spirit of adventure. Our mission is to provide a rigorous classical education with high academic and personal expectations that inspires students to be productive and thoughtful citizens in their communities and beyond.

Year School Opened: 2019-20

Grant Awarded: 2019-20

Initial Grade Levels Served: K-3

2020-21 Student Demographics



% ED Student Population: 44%

Urbanicity: Rural / Biscoe, NC

Persons in Poverty (Montgomery County)⁹: 16.1%

TCA staff have found the most success using their Facebook account to reach new families and keep in touch with current ones. They post regularly to highlight enrollment details, upcoming meetings, and in-person events at the school once students returned, such as the 100th Day of School and a recent visit from the Easter Bunny. The school's principal even starred in a series of informational videos where she explains more details about the school's education program and student support services, such as their school lunch program, aftercare options, and free bus transportation. In December, while students were alternating between virtual and in-person learning due to the pandemic, the school's Facebook account was used to promote school unity, including a holiday spirit week, which provided the opportunity for all students share in the fun of dressing up like candy canes and movie characters. According to Karen VanAusdal, the senior director of practice at the Collaborative of Academic and Social Emotional Learning, or CASEL, these activities *"keep traditions and build supportive environments even when the class is scattered well beyond the classroom walls"* which has been shown to be an essential element of nurturing student's social emotion well-being (Prothero, 2020). The school staff also used Facebook Live to host virtual tours of the school. These tours gave potential families an opportunity to hear more about the school from staff and to see the large classroom sizes, which aligns with social distancing practices. They are now working toward adding in-person tours by appointment, but the success and convenience of the Facebook Live tours may ensure that virtual tours continue to be an option for families moving forward.

In response to the pandemic, TCA also facilitated four Zoom meetings where potential families could speak with teachers and current families at the school. Word-of-mouth has been their primary marketing tool, especially among Spanish-speaking families. This lines up with findings from the Education Policy Center, which found that *"While both Latino and non-Latino parents used social networks to inform their choice process, Latino parents relied more heavily on the word of mouth of friends, families and coworkers"* (Education Policy Center, 2015). These virtual meetings proved to be another example of the positive impact of word-of-mouth, and the praise of the current families served as free advertising for the TCA experience. School staff also continued to keep in touch and strengthen relationships with current families throughout the summer and into the fall with ClassDojo and email communication. While most of these virtual communications are currently only offered in English, a feature was added to their website so that those needing translation could instantly receive translated content. TCA continues to design more of their marketing materials with Spanish-speaking families in mind because people of Hispanic or Latino origin comprises 15.6% of the population in Montgomery County, which is higher than the state average of 9.8% However, of the current students enrolled at TCA only 6-8% are Latino or Hispanic, which is lower than the state average (United States Census Bureau, 2021). The school recognizes this gap and is proactively trying to address it in effort to serve more students and families that may face an educational disadvantage due to the language barrier.

Virtual marketing wasn't the only marketing strategy TCA completed in the 2020-21 academic year. The largest, quite literally, non-virtual marketing tool they implemented was a strategically placed billboard. Billboards are a proven way to reach large numbers and a broad demographic of people (Wroblewski, 2018). Tillery selected the location of the billboard based on the fact that it faces a local ice cream shop, which is visited by many local families – especially during the summer. They also purchased advertising space in a local newspaper, as many of their students are being raised by grandparents, who are less likely to use social media and more likely to get a weekly paper. Bilingual marketing materials, including yard signs and brochures, were also produced in an effort to reach Spanish-speaking in their community. Lastly, the school chose to engage in a proven direct marketing strategy by mailing postcards to a target audience who were chosen *"based on specific demographics, such as ages, genders, or income groups"* (Dwilson, 2021).

Results

TCA experience increased enrollment to the point that they had to start a waiting list and are close to exceeding capacity in their current space. There were 99 students enrolled in the 2019-20 school year, 83 students in the 2020-21 school year, and 144 students enrolled for 2021-22. TCA now has full class sizes for each grade level and hopes to continue this trend of growth. In fact, they added third grade during the 2020-2021 school year, and have enrolled students for next year's fourth-grade class.

Out of all of their virtual marketing platforms, they found Facebook to be most effective for their target audience. They also found that the physical signs they placed around the community were relatively effective, and some families even mentioned that they applied for enrollment specifically because they had seen the signs and were interested in learning more about the school.

Challenges

Transitioning to virtual marketing was definitely an adjustment, and TCA staff were disappointed that they were unable to carry out in-person events that had worked well the previous academic year. However, they have had success with new approaches such as the billboard and Facebook Live tours of the school.

Future Modifications

Though they plan to do more in-person recruitment as the state allows, they are likely to continue their use of the school Facebook page, virtual tours, and print media. Virtual tours are specifically worth continuing because some low-income families may not have reliable transportation or may have members that often carry more than one job. Virtual tours would allow participation for those who may be excluded from in-person tours due to their work schedule or a lack of transportation.

Building relationships with Spanish-speaking families within the community and increasing the amount of bilingual content (virtual and non-virtual) is one of their goals for the future. A virtual tour conducted fully in Spanish is the next milestone in this effort.

Critical Components

Getting Started

NC ACCESS funds made it possible to hire a marketing consultant, who did research on their behalf to better target their marketing efforts to reach educationally disadvantaged families in their region who have school-aged children at home.

Ongoing Supports

TCA will continue to provide opportunities for prospective families to visit the school in-person and/or virtually and to engage with staff during those visits.

Equity Connections

There is a very high percentage of Spanish-speaking families in Montgomery County, and this demographic typically relies primarily on word-of-mouth when making decisions about their child(ren)'s

schooling (United States Census Bureau, 2021; Education Policy Center, 2015). Since the school was unable to connect in-person with Spanish-speaking families during the pandemic, increased bilingual marketing efforts helped TCA reach these families within their community.

Older adults who may be the primary caregivers of their grandchildren are less likely to see and respond to social media posts, but they are among the top groups for responding to targeted mailing responses (Dwilson, 2021). Commissioning a newspaper advertisement and mailing postcards were effective ways to reach this population.

Some families in the area do not have access to transportation, which can pose a barrier when it comes to school choice (Valant, 2018). Providing virtual tours is helpful for families without transportation, and if the family decides to enroll at TCA, they are able to receive support via the school's transportation program.

Research

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