Engaging the Community

Implementation Description

Tillery Academy is located in a small rural community of North Carolina and serves an economically diverse student population. Its marketing and recruitment efforts focused on person-to-person interactions and having a presence at local events such as parades and festivals. This approach is supported by Dana Altemeyer's exploratory study findings of school marketing initiatives in Indiana which suggests that direct contact is an effective marketing strategy because "*education is a people based industry, placing emphasis on relationships*" and "*school employees rank as the number one influencer of impressions about schools.*"[1] Hosting events as well as in-person interactions are an effective means to expand a school's presence and forge positive relationships in the community.[2] In alignment with this research and approach, the school set up information tables at the local Walmart and held enrollment events at the school inviting parents into the building afterhours to meet with school staff. Another recruitment strategy that has been shown to be effective involves promoting offerings and services that are unique to a school.[3] Highlighting the school's music program and promoting a unique aspect of what the school has to offer students, Tillery invited the community to their Holiday Concert. This event was so well attended there was standing room only. The Fall Festival was another opportunity for prospective families to learn more about and tour the school. School leaders believe these activities were successful recruitment tools and will continue to invite the public to attend events at the school as a way of showcasing school programs and services. The school also plans to continue having a presence at a variety of community events where school personnel can speak with families, begin to develop positive relationships in local neighborhoods, and share information about opportunities for students and families at the school.

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

2019-20 Student Demographics
- Other 7%
- Hispanic 6%
- Asian 0%
- Black 8%
- White 79%
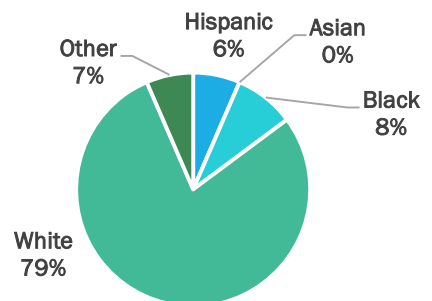
% ED Student Population: xx%

Urbanicity: Rural / Biscoe, NC

Persons in Poverty (Montgomery County)[4]: 16.7%

Building beneficial partnerships is a critical aspect of the school's marketing and recruitment efforts, which goes beyond simply hosting events and being present at community events. Tillery Academy has worked to establish partnerships with a local daycare, the Montgomery County Partnership for Children, and other organizations where they are able to share information with parents about this school option available to their child(ren). They are also working to engage with businesses, as well as the local fire and police departments, who are providing support to the school by visiting and engaging with students.

As Tillery Academy expanded their marketing and recruitment efforts into the community, they wanted to ensure that all students have equal access to Tillery Academy. The school was fortunate to utilize NC ACCESS grant funding to purchase two buses, allowing the school to provide free bus service to all who need and request it. Free or reduced lunch is also available and 60% of the student population benefits from this service. Both the school's bus service and free and reduced lunch program ensures that all students who want to can attend Tillery Academy.

Results

During the first year of this project, Tillery found that both the Holiday Concert and the Fall Festival were very well attended, but the projected enrollment numbers for year two of the project are still below capacity with 98 students currently enrolled and a school capacity of 144 students.

While many people passed by the information tables at the local Walmart giving the school more exposure in the community, few stopped to get information or ask questions. However, per the school's leadership team, a presence at other community events and inviting the community to attend school events led to an increase in enrollment.

Challenges

The school faced two primary challenges.

1. When the COVID pandemic closed schools and communities in March, several face-to-face events that were fundamental to the school's marketing and recruitment strategy had to be cancelled.
2. The school is located in a small town in rural North Carolina and it has been difficult to combat the misconceptions about what a charter school is and what it has to offer to families in the community.

Future Modifications

As the school staff prepares for year two of this project and the likelihood of being impacted by COVID, they are exploring different ways to reach families. Utilizing a variety of virtual platforms, they are planning new and current parent Zoom meetings and Facebook Live school tours.

As part of their weekly communications with parents, they will add a teacher and student of the week highlight.

Finally, in an effort to support families during the registration process, they will offer drive-through enrollment days and provide assistance as needed.

Critical Components

<u>Getting Started</u>

Finding partners in the community that can assist with marketing and recruitment is critical.

It is important to develop a clear and concise message about what the school has to offer families and the community.

Next, school leaders and advocates need to go into the community prepared and empowered to share that message. Here is an example of a simple flyer for Tillery Academy.

<u>Ongoing Supports</u>

The most critical aspect of this project is the face-to-face interaction and relationship development between school personnel and families necessitating that school leadership and staff continue going into the community, both in-person and through virtual avenues, to meet prospective students and their families.

Equity Connections

- In general, upper and middle class families have more resources and social capital with which to navigate school options for their child(ren). Families living in poverty tend to have less time and less information on which to make the same decision (Villavicencio, 2013). Therefore, if schools are serious about achieving equity in their school population, engaging the community is a necessity.

- Additionally, educationally disadvantaged families are more likely to suffer from effects of the Digital Divide. 96.5% of families with a household income of $150,000 or more have internet access, while only 58.8% of families with an income of $25,000 have internet access. Moreover, English speaking households are 20% more likely to have internet access than limited English proficiency households. (Ryan, 2016). Therefore, a school relying too heavily on a strong web presence will miss out on opportunities to reach underprivileged families with their message. They must engage with the community by being present, inviting the community in for events, networking, and canvassing neighborhoods.

Research

1.) Altemeyer, Dana M. (December 2017). *Public and Private School Marketing Initiatives in Central Indiana: An Exploratory Study*. Retrieved from https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/2022/21865/Altemeyer%20Dissertation.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
2.) LeRoy, N. (November 20, 2018). *A Comprehensive Marketing Guide for Charter Schools.* Retrieved from https://brightmindsmarketing.com/marketing-operations/comprehensive-marketing-guide-for-charter-schools/
3.) Ryan, C. "Computer and Internet Use in the United States: 2016," American Community Survey Reports, ACS-39, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 2017. Retrieved from https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2018/acs/ACS-39.pdf

4.) Mulvenon, S. *What Can Public School Learn about Marketing from Charter and Private Schools.* Retrieved from https://www.nspra.org/e_network/2012-10_trendtracker

5.) Villavicencio, A. (2013). *"It's Our Best Choice Right Now": Examining the Choice Options of Charter School Parents. Education Policy Analysis Archives, 21*, 81. Retrieved from doi:https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v21n81.2013

6.) United States Census Bureau, Quick Facts North Carolina, Retrieved from https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/NC/PST045219