

Acton Academy

Acton Academy is a learner-driven community comprising a series of micro schools that serve grades 1-12. Acton Academy encourages children to plan their school days and manage their own time. The academy engages students in real-world projects, educational gaming or quests, and Socratic discussions in multi-age classrooms. It focuses on the “Hero’s Journey” of each student – helping students develop their academic skills while seeking their calling in life.

Acton Academy opened its first location in 2009 in Austin, Texas, and has since opened 25 additional campuses, including 5 international locations. Acton Academy plans to open numerous additional campuses in 2017 across the United States and in various countries around the world.

The Program

Classes at Acton Academy bear little resemblance to a traditional school environment. Students are grouped in studios that correspond to school divisions (i.e., K-5, 6-8, and 9-12) and they learn within these groups in a single classroom: 36 students in the elementary studio, 36 in the middle school studio, and between 36 and 48 students in the high school studio.

Students are supervised by adult “guides” who serve as a support resource for students, rather than as traditional teachers. Guides are responsible for leading students in Socratic discussions and they facilitate time set aside for individual student learning. Students are expected to resolve problems on their own. Guides do not answer student questions directly; instead, they ask students questions to help them explore and understand topics deeply.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Students decide what they want to learn and how they will go about learning
- Students create and enforce their own constitution governing the classroom environment
- Unique expansion model allows entrepreneurs to start their own Acton Academies



TUITION & FEES 2016-2017 (Texas):

\$5,000-\$10,000

As compared to...

Median independent day tuition & fees in Texas (2016-2017)

Grades 1-5: \$19,268

Grades 6-8: \$21,130

Grades 9-12: \$24,013

Although Acton employs some guides from traditional teaching backgrounds, the school finds that people from other types of backgrounds (including entrepreneurs and parents) can be effective guides and they may prefer the unconventional approach to learning at Acton Academy.

Acton believes that every child deserves to find a calling that will change the world and the school seeks to provide students with skills and experiences that will help them find that calling. Students often engage in apprenticeships to develop practical skills and to find what kinds of work they are called to do.

The Acton school year is 11 months long to maximize learning time. The schedule is divided into trimesters. Learning at Acton is both personalized and student-driven. Students decide what they want to learn and they put together an action plan for how to learn it. Each student is given several hours of individual learning time each day. They are provided online tools such as Rosetta Stone or Khan Academy to facilitate their learning. During this time, students are allowed freedom to allocate the time they spend on various core subjects (math, reading, writing) and they also decide which learning tools to use.

“Young heroes” celebrate the mastery of tools, skills, and character by earning badges, assembling portfolios, and taking part in public exhibitions. Parents use badges to track academic progress in core skills like reading, writing, math, spelling, and character development. Electronic and hard copy portfolios capture rough drafts, photos, video, and other creative work. Public exhibitions at the end of most “quests” allow students to present work not only to parents, but also to experts, customers, or the public for a real-world test.

Community is fundamental to the Acton experience. The single-room approach ensures continued student interaction, and students create and enforce a constitution and an honor code each year to govern the classroom environment. This teaches students vital skills in governing and community building. Acton also provides ceremonies and activities designed to engage students in their school communities. This encourages students to push each other to work hard and to hold themselves and each other accountable for their education. Acton officials report that some students advance two to two-and-a-half grade levels a year because they are so engaged.

The Business Model

Acton Academy has a unique expansion model: rather than managing each school directly, Acton provides guidelines to individuals or groups seeking to start their own Acton Academy. Aspirants submit applications to Acton. Once accepted, they can begin opening their location. Each location has considerable autonomy over tuition and academic practices, but each is required to run weekly customer satisfaction surveys

with school parents. If these results fall below a certain level, Acton has the right to pull the name from any of its locations.

Most of the schools in the Acton network are not-for-profits and tuitions depend on each school's location and offerings. Also, while every Academy is different, most locations are funded entirely on tuition: no fundraising, no fees, and many schools turn down philanthropic donations.

This business model is made possible by low operating expenses. Per pupil expenses at Acton's first location are around \$4,300 annually. Since students are supervised by adult "guides," the school requires fewer adults than many other schools. Most locations have one guide per studio.

Acton hopes to be able to open 50 to 100 schools a year and even more if demand remains strong. Acton Academy founder Jeff Sandefer believes that creating more schools around the world will allow the Acton schools to innovate even more quickly.

"I think the most important thing is that the entire school is based on a Hero's Journey and that we believe every child deserves to find a calling that will change the world." – Jeff Sandefer, Founder, Acton Academy

Lessons Learned – Takeaways for Your School

- A central goal of Acton Academy is to help students find their calling in life. Consider what programs/services your school offers to guide students in pursuing a career or life path. Are there additional opportunities to help students explore their interests or to connect them with professionals in relevant fields?
- A student-centered approach is one of the key characteristics of Acton Academy. When students are active participants in building their own learning experiences, they are highly engaged. How do you engage your students? What roles do students play in defining and structuring their learning experiences at your school? What are the most successful student-led school initiatives?

Noteworthy

- According to Edsurge, Acton students gain almost three grade levels worth of knowledge per year on average.
- Acton Academy owners trade ideas between schools to try and build off each other's best practices. This is not formally required, but often happens informally through email.

Sources

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