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Good to Great Assessment Millennium Charter Academy

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Introduction

Millennium Charter Academy (MCA) is an independent K-6 public school located in Mount Airy, NC. It approaches education differently than most public schools by offering the community's children a non-traditional alternative in education. Its mission statement¹ exemplifies this, stating, "We will expand educational choice with an innovative student-centered environment ...". Innovation includes being the only Surry County school that employs the Core Knowledge² teaching concept. Through its independence and unique approach to education, MCA epitomizes several key tenets discussed in Jim Collins' book, **Good to Great**. Similar to the companies in the book, MCA has an opportunity to achieve breakthrough and become a great public institution in North Carolina.

The Director is an aspiring Level Five Leader who maintains an unwavering resolve to achieve sustainable results for the School. Through a disciplined hiring process, the Director strives to select the right people first. In addition, he swiftly confronts the brutal facts that are brought forward, ensuring that issues are openly discussed and problems are quickly resolved.

Although the School has not established a Hedgehog Concept, it is on the right tract to obtaining one. Furthermore, it maintains a disciplined adherence to its mission statement by using it to evaluate all decisions. By focusing on results, MCA is progressing on the flywheel and building upon each of its past successes.

¹ See Appendix for complete Mission Statement

² See Appendix for Discussion of Core Knowledge

Level 5 Leadership

To most people, the Director's calm and quiet demeanor seems to be quite the opposite of what you would expect from a dynamic success-driven leader. Level 5 Leadership (L5L) speaks of a leader that possesses the ability to move an organization from good to great. The Director demonstrates this ability through his unique balance of personal humility and professional will.

MCA faculty and staff all agree on the Director's modest and humble character. He does not place focus on his personal leadership and contributions. Rather, he credits his faculty and staff for the School's success. One faculty member noted that MCA was recently designated as an Official Core Knowledge Visitation Site³, allowing other educational institutions to visit and learn how to implement the Core Knowledge philosophy. When MCA received its designation at the national conference, the Director deflected the honor and gave the teachers credit for this achievement.

In addition to his humble character, the Director demonstrates professional will by taking responsibility and bringing quick resolution to issues that the School faces. For example, he addresses certain misconceptions about MCA that exist in the community. One faculty member noted that the Director has worked to build relationships with community leaders and invited them to visit MCA and witness firsthand how the faculty and staff carry out its mission statement.

Faculty and staff unanimously agree that the Director demonstrates an "unwavering resolve to do whatever must be done to produce the best long term results." All faculty and staff concur that the Director consistently searches for novel and innovative approaches that will move the School toward its mission. One faculty

³ See Appendix for definition of Official Core Knowledge Visitation Site

member remarked how the Director recently challenged her to research teaching methods that would improve MCA's approach to developing challenged students. Another faculty member noted that the Director consciously chooses curriculum that goes above and beyond current state standards, in an effort to stretch students to maximize their capabilities. He sets a high level of expectation for teachers, staff, students and the School overall.

First Who...Then What

Perhaps the one distinguishing characteristic that separates "good" schools from "great" schools is the quality of its faculty. In evaluating potential teachers, the Director noted that, aside from the obvious need for having "a love for children," the most important trait he seeks is "self-motivation." He believes that educators are not motivated by money, but rather by the satisfaction of developing students and having the opportunity to teach. He commented, "Though higher salaries will help keep your good teachers, they will not become better teachers because of the money." As MCA's reputation continues to build within the community, demand for teaching positions has increased. This allows the School and the Director to become more selective in the hiring process. In the past year alone, forty-five résumés were submitted without posting a single opening or advertisement. Of those, thirteen individuals were hired for teaching positions.

Although getting the right individuals on board at MCA is crucial, removing those that do not "fit" is of equal importance. This is accomplished through the use of one-year employment contracts that are reviewed annually and either renewed or allowed to expire. MCA has realized great success in regard to its recruitment and retention policy. While the average faculty turnover for the area's schools has been in the range

of 17-19 percent, MCA's turnover has been less than 5 percent. During the current Director's tenure, only two teachers have been lost due to "fit" issues.

By emphasizing fit, MCA employs faculty and staff who believe in its vision and are both capable and motivated to carry it out. The fact that teachers have a voice and are empowered to lead change indicates that MCA is not merely an organization that is set up as a "genius with a thousand helpers."

Confronting the Brutal Facts

The Director is diligent in creating a culture that encourages teachers, staff and parents to identify and bring concerns to his attention. He immediately makes a conscientious effort to determine the truth and resolve a situation. For example, the Director discussed a situation where a parent raised concerns about a teacher, stating "this is what my child says their teacher is doing and I don't like it." His internal response was that if it was true, he did not like it either, but he needed to determine the truth. Within twenty-four hours the Director had spoken to the teacher and resolved the problem.

The Director creates a culture at MCA where brutal facts can be addressed in an open forum without singling out and blaming anyone. A popular theme among all the interviewees is the Director's "open door" policy, which creates an inviting climate where truth is heard and encouraged. One topic, brought forward in 6 of the 8 interviews, is the Director's willingness to meet anytime there is a hard issue or idea to discuss. This was exemplified best during one interview in which a teacher remarked that the Director "is always available for discussion. He'll drop whatever he is doing to talk. He does not need an appointment. He has the ability to sense when something is wrong or concerning the staff."

The Director maintains an attitude closely relating to the Stockdale Paradox, stressing that he is extremely confident that the School will achieve its vision and mission and prevail regardless of difficulties. His optimism translates to the teachers and staff, which is seen in their resilience in adapting to some of the School's major issues. For example, teachers and staff have successfully adapted to limited space due to higher than expected class populations and the ongoing school expansion.

Perhaps the best example of MCA's resilience can be seen in how it faces one of its major brutal facts – funding. Unlike other public schools, MCA does not receive local and state government funding for capital projects and has the unique challenge of seeking private funding for school expansion. Nonetheless, the School is committed to overcoming funding difficulties to add a middle school wing, relying on a federal guaranteed loan and donations. To date, MCA has been able to raise enough money to undertake the first phase of its three-phase expansion project.

The Hedgehog Concept

The Director understands that the School has not clearly defined its Hedgehog Concept but realizes that MCA does have the necessary components to develop one. The Director believes he needs to work with the faculty and the Board of Directors in further developing the three circles of the Hedgehog Concept. During the interviews it was clear that MCA is passionate about educating children as exemplified in its mission statement. On the other hand, as a non-profit educational institution, MCA does not have a clear economic engine to drive it forward. The Director does, however, realize the need for key indicators for measuring success. When asked what the School can be best in the world at doing, the Director responded “We have an idea, but we have to fine tune it.”

The potential for greatness and passion for helping children learn and grow through teaching is what ultimately drives MCA. The faculty and staff go out of their way to not just educate students, but to also develop their overall character and emotional well-being. For instance, one faculty member and one parent noted that the staff volunteers its time to help with after school activities and events, showing both the children and the community its level of commitment. In discussing the differences between MCA and other public schools, one teacher stated “I have not seen the teachers at public schools put forth as much effort as the MCA staff does.” Furthermore, another faculty member explained that the teachers attend extensive training called “All Kind of Minds”⁴ that enhances a teacher’s ability to deal with learning disabilities and apply classroom discipline. Elaborating, she stated that unlike other schools that have only a few teachers trained in “All Kind of Minds,” MCA ensures that all teachers receive the training.

MCA performs well in many areas that include developing students and providing a unique curriculum. The Director highlights that “strong academics are the core of what we do,” emphasizing that it is not just the material, but how the teachers deliver it. The faculty is self-motivated and driven to deliver the best possible education, which results in highly developed students. One teacher explained that she often hears from parents that their children are over-prepared upon graduating from MCA. One particular area where MCA overshadows other schools is through its Core Knowledge curriculum. MCA is the only school in Surry County that provides this curriculum and is 1 of 38

⁴ See Appendix for brief discussion on All Kind of Minds

schools nationwide (1 of 2 in North Carolina)⁵ that have been named a visitation site to serve as an example for other schools.

Culture of Discipline

The Director implores a meticulous hiring process that measures candidates' ability to deliver material, potential to grasp the Core Knowledge curriculum, and capacity to "evolve" their teaching styles. Moreover, the Director pursues individuals who are "self-motivated and exude a high degree of discipline". Because of his subjective due diligence, a Culture of Discipline exists at MCA that is cultivated from the bottom up and does not require tyrannical oversight by the Director.

A meaningful part of this culture is the emphasis of flexibility within the classroom. While content and material serve as the framework of the learning experience, teachers are encouraged to investigate and practice alternative teaching styles that facilitate education in a fun and effective manner. A relevant example includes an innovative, dual-teacher classroom that was successfully implemented after the subject teachers researched and presented the practice to the Director.

By hiring disciplined people and providing them freedom within a framework, the Director has created a pervasive Culture of Discipline that is innate and lives within the School's walls. In addition, the Director catalyzes disciplined thought by emphasizing strict devotion to the School's mission at the individual and organizational level. In the absence of a clearly defined Hedgehog Concept, the Director and staff rely on MCA's mission to guide decision making and strategies. The Board of Directors follows this practice and evaluates all budgetary issues as to not hamper the School's mission. Due

⁵ From the Core Knowledge web page there are approximately 530 Core Knowledge schools nationwide and 28 in the state of North Carolina.

to the lack of a pronounced Hedgehog Concept, MCA's policy of disciplined action does not fully coincide with Collins' model. Nonetheless, MCA is on the right path because the Director clearly recognizes the need to be disciplined in action saying "Every decision I make relates to the mission statement, both my yeses and nos. Just because I say no, doesn't mean it's a bad idea, it just doesn't fit our mission."

Technology Accelerators

Similar to the companies in **Good to Great**, MCA recognizes technology's role and the importance of correctly assessing it within the framework of a hedgehog-like concept. In discussing its role, the Director stated that he judges technology on how it will "enhance the educational experience," making it clear that MCA does not pursue new technology just because it is the latest trend. This was further supported by half of the faculty/staff interviewees, which expressed similar sentiments. In fact, the School has only recently made its first technology upgrade since its inception. During the interviews, the faculty and staff discussed three of these upgrades that met the Director's criteria and illustrate the role of technology at MCA.

The first upgrade was to provide personal laptops to the faculty. This has helped to both prepare lessons for the class and improve teaching techniques through the use of additional software tools. Additionally, two Internet-accessible desktop computers were installed in every classroom, which provides flexibility for teaching computer-related topics and student research. Prior to this year, the classes used the School's computer lab, which had limited availability. Along with the classroom computers, each

class received an interactive Smart Board⁶ that allows both students and teachers to interact with computer-based content without crowding around a small monitor.

Although it might be too early to measure the impact of the new technology, the faculty has noticed some immediate benefits. One teacher exclaimed that it has been a huge success allowing for more creative and advanced teaching styles. Another noted that with the smaller class sizes, she is able to involve the entire class in computer-led instruction without going to the lab. Consequently, the upgrades have increased teacher effectiveness and, in some ways, enhanced the educational experience – the ultimate goal.

The Flywheel

The first indication that MCA is on the flywheel relates to the Director's Level Five Leadership qualities. Similar to what Collins discusses in **Good to Great**, the Director is not interested in flashy programs that showcase his leadership abilities. Rather, he is more interested in results that require a quiet and deliberate process. In discussing the School's various initiatives, the Director acknowledged that he never does anything on a grand scale. Elaborating, he said, "This (achieving our vision) is an ongoing process that never stops ... it is a part of the natural process." One teacher highlighted the Director's focus on results, stating that his choice for curriculum went above and beyond state standards. Furthermore, the results-driven mindset can be seen in the way MCA downplays the importance of test scores (short-term measurement) and focuses on the more important long-term result of education and development. Out of 8 interviews, 4 interviewees never mentioned test scores in measuring success and 3 made a point to state that scores did not define success. In fact, everyone shared the sentiment that the

⁶ A Smart Board is an interactive computer display that is installed at the front of the classroom.

real measure of success focused on the child as an individual. One teacher defined MCA's long-term goal best when she said, "Success in the classroom is the total development of the student, that is, to prepare them for the challenges that are going to be faced down the road or in the next grade. To hear parents say that their student was over-prepared for the next grade (middle-school) is very encouraging."

Another sign that MCA is advancing the flywheel is through its ability to maintain consistency, building each new success on past successes. Being named a Core Knowledge visitation site, building a reputation that attracts quality teachers and seeking fresh approaches to issues such as teaching challenged students are all steps in this process towards greatness. Another example can be seen in the Director's view of how the School's expansion will allow MCA to build upon its past success in educating students, stating "it is going to accelerate the School because we are going to get to continue the education of the children with our philosophy."

Recommendations & Conclusions

While the Director possesses most of the Level 5 Leadership traits, he acknowledges that he does not have a succession plan. A potential solution may evolve through the creation of an Assistant Director position. In filling this role, MCA could seek to identify and promote a current faculty member who demonstrates the necessary skill set or choose to hire someone from the outside. In either case, the School should identify someone who shares the same passion for its mission.

MCA's lack of a "Hedgehog Concept" is where it differs most from the tenets of **Good to Great**. The Director has acknowledged that the School needs to identify one, stating that he needs to discuss the three circles with the faculty and then take their concept to the Board of Directors. MCA currently fulfills one circle, demonstrating a

clear passion in what it is accomplishing, yet it still needs to identify and complete the other two circles.

The Director needs to lead the faculty and staff through a process to determine what MCA is the best in the world at doing. It was apparent from the interviews that MCA does multiple things extremely well, but it should focus on doing one thing better than anyone. MCA should consider the Core Knowledge curriculum, which stood out during the interviews as something fairly unique that MCA does well.

The final circle requires more discourse. As defined by Collins, the “Economic Engine” is difficult to determine for a non-profit organization like a school. In fact, Collins acknowledges this in his recently published addendum to **Good to Great**⁷ stating that there is no underlying economic drive – the analogy to profit per “x” – that applies across all social sector organizations. He further states, “The whole purpose of the social sector is to meet social objectives, human needs and national priorities that cannot be priced at a profit.” (p19) To help better define this circle, he introduces the concept of a “Resource Engine” and offers the following critical question: “How can we develop a sustainable resource engine to deliver superior performance relative to our mission?” (p18) Collins discusses Charter Schools saying, “The resource engine (for charter schools) depends heavily on political skill and maintaining public support.” (p21) Therefore, instead of determining its economic engine, MCA needs to identify a resource engine relative to its mission statement that promotes its continued success. This, along with its passion and being the best at one thing, will provide MCA with a solid Hedgehog Concept.

⁷ **Good to Great and the Social Sectors** (all pages referenced in this section refer to the addendum)

MCA meets most of Jim Collins' criteria and is on track to becoming a "great" institution. Through the continual application of its existing hiring practices and the development of a Hedgehog Concept, MCA will be well poised to combat the examples of hierarchy and mediocrity that Collins presents in his book. Over the next several years, MCA must focus on not tripping over its own successes or becoming complacent. Equally important, MCA must only pursue growth that embraces its existing mission statement and to-be-developed Hedgehog Concept. By maintaining a clear vision and well defined purpose, MCA undoubtedly has the capacity to progress from Good to Great.

APPENDIX

Mission Statement⁸

Millennium Charter Academy is a public school whose classroom is the community, which invites parents, teachers, students, and the community to collectively challenge each child to achieve superior academic standards and to develop the highest moral character. We will expand educational choice with an innovative, student-centered environment producing life-long learners equipped with the knowledge and critical-thinking skills necessary to become leaders in the 21st Century.

Core Knowledge⁹

Core Knowledge is based on ideas presented by E. D. Hirsch, Jr. in his well-known books, **Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know** and **The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them**, and further developed by the foundation he established in 1986.

Core Knowledge tries to develop cultural literacy in a way that is systematic but leaves room for creativity for both teacher and student. In each grade, students are exposed to a broad range of historical, scientific, and cultural topics that build on one another to prepare them for later educational success. This wide array of subject matter not only develops cultural literacy but also builds the strong vocabulary necessary for true reading comprehension. *THE CORE KNOWLEDGE SEQUENCE: CONTENT GUIDELINES FOR K-8* provides the basis of the curriculum and presents a detailed outline of the content to be taught from kindergarten through grade eight.

An interdisciplinary approach in the same grade can build a sense of community in much the same way that common knowledge can bind the larger society together. Students can also understand the shared dimensions of knowledge, how subjects relate to one another and build over time as well as how history influences contemporary events. They can command the necessary vocabulary to comprehend the complex subjects that lie ahead as well as the increasingly complex world around them.

Official Core Knowledge Visitation Sites have met the requirements to be an Official Core Knowledge school and are designated as model schools for others to visit and see Core Knowledge in action.

Official Core Knowledge Schools have made a serious commitment to Core Knowledge. They are implementing 80% or more of the *Core Knowledge Sequence* and have a goal of implementing 100%.

All Kinds of Minds¹⁰

The All Kinds of Minds' mission is to help students who struggle with learning improve their success in school and life by providing programs that integrate educational, scientific, and clinical expertise. The primary goal is to educate teachers, parents, educational specialists, psychologists, pediatricians, and students about differences in learning.

The programs have been developed by Dr. Mel Levine and his colleagues based on scientific research and over thirty years of clinical experience. They provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how all kids learn.

All Kinds of Minds enables students (K-12), their parents, and teachers to understand why they are having difficulty in school and provides the language and tools to develop a concrete, practical action plan to help them succeed.

⁸ Taken from Millennium Charter Academy's web page www.mccademy.com

⁹ Taken from the Core Knowledge Parent's Brochure found on the Core Knowledge web page www.coreknowledge.org

¹⁰ Taken from the All Kinds of Minds web page www.allkindsofminds.org