

MIDTOWN STEAM ACADEMY

A PreK-12 Public Choice Transformation School



DISD Choice School Proposal 2020

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS	1
SECTION I: GENERAL QUESTIONS.....	2
1. VISION AND MISSION	2
2. SCHOOL DATA PROFILE/ANALYSIS	4
3. FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT	5
4. SCHOOL CULTURE AND CLIMATE.....	6
5. APPLICANT TEAM CAPACITY	6
6. STUDENT RECRUITMENT	7
SECTION II: INSTRUCTIONAL PLAN	7
1. CURRICULUM, INSTRUCTION, AND ASSESSMENT	7
SECTION III: ACTION PLANNING EXERCISE.....	15
SECTION IV: IMPLEMENTATION PLAN AND BUDGET EXERCISE.....	16
1. IMPLEMENTATION PLAN	16
2. BUDGET EXERCISE	20
SECTION V: REQUEST AND RATIONALE FOR ADDITIONAL AUTONOMIES (OPTIONAL).....	22
REFERENCES.....	23
APPENDIX A	25
REGGIO EMILIA SCHOOLS: FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES (FROM CADWELL, 1997).....	25
APPENDIX B	26

Section I: GENERAL QUESTIONS

1. Vision and Mission

Vision

Our vision is to offer a new model for the 21st century STEAM school, in which the needs of the whole child are met through educational innovation, research-driven best practices, and strategic partnerships.

We seek to cultivate independent and lifelong learners who are able to use their knowledge of science, technology, engineering, arts and math to bring innovative solutions, ideas and perspectives to bear on complex, global issues. Our school will be known for building socially conscious leaders who are equipped with the knowledge and cognitive tools to positively impact our community, our nation, and our world.

Mission

Our mission is to provide Reggio Emilia-inspired educational experiences designed to empower and enrich students through inquiry, project-based learning, critical thinking and academic dialogue. These experiences will be engaging, rigorous and developmentally appropriate and will nurture and support the development of students' characters as well as their social-emotional and physical well-being.

Our mission is to develop good citizens and leaders with the problem-solving skills and STEAM knowledge required to address global complexities, including the pressing issues of social, economic, and environmental sustainability.

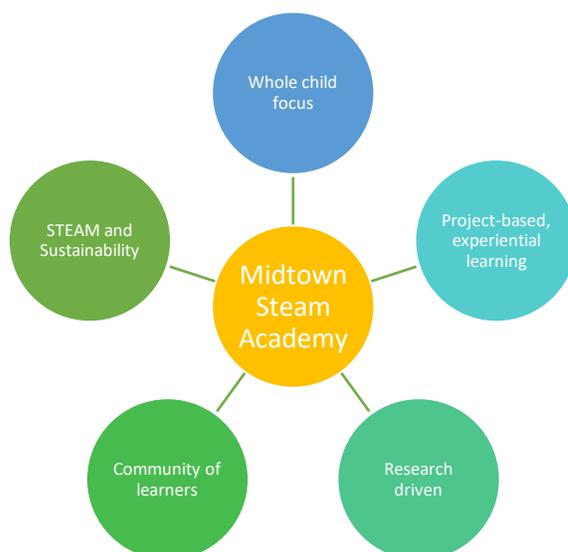
Core Beliefs

Core Belief #1	Students who question and who think critically become lifelong problem solvers.
Core Belief #2	Students should have regular opportunities to inquire, explore, reflect, create and express their learning and their ideas in multiple modalities, including: words, movement, drawing, painting, sculpture, drama, music and more. Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio Emilia Approach, referred to these modalities or expressions of learning as "Languages".
Core Belief #3:	Students should understand their role as citizens in a global society and their responsibility in helping to improve our communities and in taking care of our Earth as environmental stewards.
Core Belief #4	The nurture and development of the whole child is necessary for student success, academically and beyond.
Core Belief #5:	Students should engage in cooperative learning and academic discussions that allow them to construct new understandings and to build academic language across the content areas.
Core Belief #6	Teachers should provide guidance and facilitate learning experiences based on state standards, student interests, needs and cultural backgrounds.

Core Belief #7	In order to provide students with quality educational experiences, teachers must engage in both formative and summative assessments, which should first include performance-based and other authentic assessments designed to guide and inform instruction, inquiry-based learning, and intervention experiences.
Core Belief #8	Teachers should constantly learn ways to support students and work collaboratively with each other, parents, community partners, STEM experts, and individuals with backgrounds in the creative arts.
Core Belief #9	As students develop reading, writing, speaking and math skills, they must use those skills in authentic and purposeful ways which address both science and social studies concepts and objectives.

Organizing Principles

Based on our vision and mission, and informed by our core beliefs, the Midtown STEAM Academy is organized around the following five principles:



Whole Child Focus

We know creating a successful learning environment requires addressing a plethora of students' needs. Our school is committed to students' academic, creative, social/emotional/character, and physical development.

STEAM and Sustainability

The future demands skilled STEM workers. It also demands that our citizens and leaders be innovative, creative, communicative, collaborative and project-oriented. An arts education, broadly conceived, is the perfect complement to the more traditional, and limited, STEM education. Our school uses green technology where it can, practices important principles of sustainability, and fosters environmental stewardship.

Project-Based, Experiential Learning

Students learn best through doing and experiencing. As a Reggio Emilia-inspired school, we support project-based, collaborative learning, inquiry, and exploration within and outside the classroom for students of all ages and grade levels.

Community of Learners

Our school builds capacity by building a community of learners that includes students, teachers, parents, community members, and our university and other partners.

Research-Driven

Our university partnership means that our curriculum and instructional strategies are current, supported by research, and represent best practices and educational innovation. University faculty provide student and parent workshops, oversee preservice teacher field experiences, and provide in-service teachers with ongoing professional development. Our school sponsors faculty-led research projects that support our vision and mission.

2. School Data Profile/Analysis

In North Dallas, where the Midtown Steam Academy will be located, there are 38,000 students. However, 17,000 or 45% of those students do not attend Dallas Independent School District (DISD) schools, preferring private schools or opting into suburban school districts (Personal meeting with DISD, August 29, 2019).

Our school seeks to answer this question, in part, by providing a number of innovative features commonly associated with private schools, particularly its unique PK-12 grade configuration. Although PreK/K-8 and PreK/K-12 are the most common grade configurations in the private school sector (Jacob & Rockoff, 2011), public schools have strongly relied on the elementary, middle, and high school models for decades.

Research has sparked a renewed interest in extended grade-span school configurations. Structural school transitions, particularly moving from elementary to middle school, can cause students to experience periods of social instability, emotional challenges, and even diminished academic performance. Following school transitions, middle schoolers in particular may experience increased bullying as old friend groups dissolve and a new social hierarchy is formed, perceive a decrease in care and emotional support from teachers, and feel frustrated academically as many teachers seek to level the playing field and even out imbalances in feeder schools' academic preparation (Symonds & Galton, 2014).

Further, research indicates that students who transition from an elementary to middle school experience persistent declines in academic achievement relative to students who remain in extended-grade (K-8) schools (Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010; West & Schwerdt, 2012). Although all students experience a temporary and slight decrease in achievement during the first year of the transition to high school, students from middle schools are more likely to drop out of high school than those from K-8 schools (West & Schwerdt, 2012). Additional research suggests a direct correlation between grade span configuration and achievement, one study finds that "the more grade levels a school services, the better the students perform" (Wren, 2004, p. 9).

There is evidence that parents also prefer the more elementary-like nurturing atmosphere of extended-grade schools and the community and continuity they offer (Meyer, 2011). Presidio School, a nationally recognized Blue Ribbon School of Excellence in Tucson, Arizona, touts the community, social-emotional, safety, and academic benefits of their school's inclusive PreK-12 grade configuration and its family-

oriented ethos (Presidio Schools, 2017). In sum, evidence points to a need to reconsider how schools are structured in order to best meet the modern needs and desires of students and families.

In line with national private school trends, the Dallas private school sector offers a plethora of popular extended grade-span schools. Within the city limits alone, there are at least ten PreK-12 private schools, excluding six more that cater to students with learning differences, servicing approximately 7,000 students¹. The Midtown STEAM Academy would provide Dallas families with the district's first PreK-12 public school option.

3. Family and Community Engagement

One of the Midtown STEAM Academy's five principles is "community of learners." This highlights the value we place on building a strong community of support and shared learning that extends beyond the school's walls. The involvement of the North Dallas Chamber of Commerce and Texas A&M University-Commerce in the development and ongoing support of the Midtown STEAM Academy provides unique opportunities to engage with business partners, higher education faculty, students, and organizations, as well as communities of artists in the Dallas area.

Further, family engagement and parent involvement are vital to the development, growth, and success of our school. Parental involvement is a fundamental feature of the Reggio model. In fact, the schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy were begun by a group of parents who wanted a democratic school for their young children following World War II. Under the Reggio model, parents are respected as their child's first teacher and are regarded as partners in their children's educational journeys. In our Reggio-inspired school, the exact activities and forms of parent involvement will need to be collaboratively determined by the school and the families involved and will evolve based on needs. However, activities for this deeper level of authentic parent involvement may include²:

- Involvement in the emergent curriculum (suggesting a project).
- Collaboration with teachers to analyze documentation of projects.
- Participation on Parent Committees who meet regularly to discuss ideas to sustain the school community, help determine directions for the future of the school, and make plans to obtain or make additional resources for the school.
- Volunteering to assist in the art studio or mini-studios.
- Volunteering to assist in the learning garden
- Participation in Parent Book Clubs, a dialogue that happens after the group reads a chosen book related to education or parents' needs.
- Behind the scenes participation. This would involve such activities as a commitment to reading the newsletter sent by e-mail or sending items needed for projects or other work to school.

Surveys and focus groups will be used to measure the success of Family and Community Engagement strategies.

¹ The ten include a mix of sectarian and nonsectarian schools: Alcuin School, First Baptist Academy, Lakehill Preparatory School, Parish Episcopal School, St. Mark's School of Texas, The Covenant School, The Westwood School, The Hockaday School, The Episcopal School of Dallas, and Dallas International School. Lakehill Preparatory School spans K-12 and St. Mark's School spans 1-12 grades.

² Please see the following video for an example of parental involvement in a Reggio-inspired school: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLCzGEGzCmI>

4. School Culture and Climate

Academic Culture

Midtown STEAM Academy's academic culture is inspired by the philosophy and practices developed in the city of Reggio Emilia, Italy over the last seventy years³. This world-renowned approach informs our school culture in the following ways: the belief that students are rich with potential, curiosity, and interests and need opportunities to express their learning in myriad ways, the teacher's role is to nurture, guide, and partner with students, the physical environment, both indoors and outdoors, is considered a third teacher, and visual documentation of students' learning process is essential (Cadwell, 1997)⁴.

All school staff will receive training in the Reggio approach prior to the school's opening. In addition to professional development for teachers, a common read for teachers, parents, and other stakeholders will be used to provide foundational knowledge of the Reggio philosophy and serve as a jumping off point for discussion about how best to "re-invent" aspects of this approach in our setting for the students, teachers, parents, and North Dallas community.

Academic achievement, motivation, and personalization will be evident when students of all ages are pursuing questions of interest to them, are engaged in hands-on experiences to answer those questions, are working in partnership with their teachers, and their learning process is clearly documented throughout the school. To facilitate the strong student-teacher relationships required for this approach, we will work strategically to build relationships at all school levels. At the Prek-5 grade level, primary teachers will practice looping and stay with the same group of students for 2-3 years. Looping, or multiyear teaching, helps students' build a sense of safety, belonging, and community, deepens the relationship between teacher and student, and fosters collaboration between teachers and families (Hitz, Somers, & Jenlink, 2007). Our secondary students will be cohorted into advisory groups, known as pods, and will have daily advisory time with a dedicated advisor. Although it is conceivable that students may stay in the same cohort from 6-12 grades, at a minimum, a single teacher will stay with the same pod from 6-8 grades and from 9-12 grades.

Professional Culture

The professional culture at Midtown STEAM Academy draws from Schlechty's (2009) view of schools as a learning organization, with the primary function of designing engaging academic work for students and leading them to success in that work. Within a learning organization, students are viewed as volunteers, volunteering their time and effort, teachers are considered instructional leaders and curriculum designers, the principal is the leader of the instructional leaders, and parents are seen as partners and integral members of the school community. Guided by the belief that what matters most is the design of the work that students are given to do, schools that operate as learning organization purposefully create learning communities (small groups of people pursuing answers to questions, problems, or issues; sometimes action research) and could also be a community of learners (collections of people sharing what they learned or a common experience; sometimes a whole school).

5. Applicant Team Capacity

The North Dallas Chamber of Commerce (NDCC) and Texas A&M University-Commerce have partnered to develop a school that is engaging to parents, students, and the community with a unique

³ Although the Reggio Emilia approach is typically associated with Early Childhood education, the philosophy can apply to students of all ages. City Neighbors Charter School in Baltimore, Maryland is an example of a Reggio-inspired K-8 school: <http://www.cityneighbors.us/?q=ReggioEmilia>.

⁴ For more information on the foundational principles of the Reggio approach, see Appendix A.

educational approach. Both partners bring a wealth of experience and community connections to the Midtown STEAM Academy.

Over the past 66 years, the North Dallas Chamber of Commerce (NDCC) has excelled in bringing together stakeholders to make Dallas a better place to live, work, raise a family and build a business. As community leaders, the NDCC works with partners to bring the unified voice of local business to affect positive change in our community. During the past 4 years, the NDCC has already been integrally involved in the transformation of the Valley View/ Midtown District by helping to create a Master Plan, a mobility plan, a plan for a 20-acre City of Dallas park, and supporting landowners and developers as they develop their plans with the City.

As part of this development effort, the NDCC plans to include other civic and business organizations in the creation of a thriving school community with engagement opportunities for students and staff. The NDCC has already targeted multiple businesses to support the initiative.

Texas A&M University-Commerce brings both educational and industry expertise to the partnership. Cece Gassner, Vice President for Research and Economic Development for the university, brings over a decade of experience in economic and workforce development, regularly working with industry and other partners to forge solutions to meet a specific community's needs. She will serve as a bridge between the university and the Midtown STEAM Academy, contributing insights to make sure the area's needs are being addressed and to create future opportunities for the students, such as capstone projects, internships, and other avenues of exposure to career paths and higher education options.

6. Student Recruitment

Midtown STEAM Academy will purposefully aim to recruit students from diverse populations. We will focus on targeting students in the surrounding community as well as those who live beyond the immediate area. In addition, we will meet students where they are and help them maximize their full potential. It is our belief that an environment that sparks curiosity, meaningful experiences, and scaffolded learning all students can achieve.

Section II: INSTRUCTIONAL PLAN

1. Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Instructional Program

Our Reggio-inspired philosophy emphasizes inquiry and project-based learning. This approach assumes that all children are naturally curious and capable and is designed to engage learners of all ages, allow for self-directed and interdisciplinary learning, and foster deep understanding of a topic or problem.

Under this model, teachers design instruction to facilitate students' explorations during short- and long-term projects (one week to one year), and guide experiences of joint, open-ended discovery and problem solving (Edwards, 1998). Teachers "listen deeply" to children's thoughts and ideas, as well as analyze their products, in order to best design next steps in instruction. Teachers directly teach skills needed while also scaffolding students' learning. During preschool, children are engaged in emergent inquiry projects, which combine inquiry and project-based learning. Throughout elementary, middle, and high school, students at our school continue to engage in developmentally-appropriate inquiry and project-based learning. The content and ways of representing what students understand evolves as the students, their thinking, and their skills evolve. Students represent their learning through incorporation and integration of the arts.