

Liberty Common Charter

Tailoring an Education to Fit

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Four years after wrangling that included a two-year trial, state-level appeals and a lawsuit by local school district officials against parents trying to launch a charter school, Liberty Common School in Fort Collins, Colo., hastily opened its doors in September 1997 to beat a deadline in a converted toothpaste factory.

Eleven years later, Liberty boasts 570 students who are taught a locally-tailored version of the Core Knowledge Foundation curriculum that “is very successful for us,” said Headmaster Russell Spicer. “It is laid out clearly. I know exactly what every one of my students is learning at every grade level in the six core areas: science, math, English, history, art and music.”

With a \$4 million annual budget, which is about 78 percent what other schools in the Poudre District receive, Liberty has expanded in steps. In addition to more building space, it has two gymnasiums, a performance hall and athletic fields. Liberty holds a top-level (AAA) bond rating. Its students are leading performers on the Colorado Student Assessment Program tests.

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The school, which employs 30 teachers among its 50 employees, has won the state’s John J. Irwin School of Excellence recognition, which honors Colorado schools with students scoring in the top 8 percent academically, every year since the award began in 2003. Liberty also was named a Blue Ribbon School by the U.S. Department of Education and recognized as a National Charter School of the Year by the Center for Education Reform.

“We have a pay-for performance-plan that rewards teachers for sustained excellence. Excellence is our standard for everything that we do.”

~Russell Spicer

Core Knowledge is the heart of the school. The curriculum was chosen by early promoters Dr. Randy Everett, a Fort Collins urologist, and his wife Ruth Ann, who had pushed for parental choice in education and a solid, content-knowledge driven learning environment. It was instituted when the school opened on a two-year trial basis in 1993 as the Washington Core Knowledge School and resumed when the school reopened under its current name in the abandoned Colgate factory.

Core Knowledge weaves knowledge that is lasting and which ties into history, Spicer said. It follows a sequenced



Before kids discover what's out there, teachers need to discover what's in there.



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About Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA)

The Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) is a national not-for-profit educational services organization that provides research-based educational growth measures, professional training, and consulting services to improve teaching and learning. The organization's mission is simple: partner to help *all* kids learn.

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NWEA partners with more than 450 charter schools throughout the U.S., including Liberty Common Charter School.

Partnering with NWEA in September 2006, Liberty Common Charter School uses MAP to assess more than 94-percent of its students in reading, math, language and science, gaining a comprehensive and accurate picture of student achievement.

In addition to Liberty, NWEA partners with more than 3,400 education agencies and serves nearly 4 million students worldwide. Additionally, its Growth Research Database, the most extensive collection of student growth data in the country, provides a rich source for the study of academic achievement.

Contact and other information is available at:
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progression that builds upon students' previous knowledge without excessive repetition. At ninth grade, students leave Core Knowledge and follow a specially designed program that builds upon the Core Knowledge curriculum and prepares them for the transition to high school.

Spicer cites the breadth of knowledge his own children, two Liberty graduates and one eighth-grader, have achieved. "My kids have gone through art and music appreciation," he said. "I can play various pieces of Classical music, and they can tell me who the composer was, the time period, what was happening politically and geographically where the person was. What they know ties in contextually to what they are learning in history and literature and in other areas. It's just amazing to me."

After working a few years in public school and seeing the bureaucracy involved with them, Spicer was interested in pursuing other, creative ways to educate children. "When I saw the opportunity to come to this school in 1999 and read up about the school, I was very intrigued by what it offered and the approach that it took."



Spicer cites Core Knowledge founder Eric Donald Hirsch, English professor emeritus at the University of Virginia and education-system critic. “Hirsch held the premise that as a nation we’ve gotten away from kids being immersed in knowledge and knowing a lot about a lot.”

Core Knowledge, he said, provides a road map, but implementation is left to teachers, who are free to “beg, borrow and steal” from methods that work. Students read from the Classics, do mathematics using Singapore Math, and study English using Shurley Grammar (K-3), Michael Thompson Grammar (4th – 9th), and Writing With Structure and Style. “We have a pay-for performance-plan that rewards teachers for sustained excellence,” Spicer said. “Excellence is our standard for everything that we do.”

The approach, he said, pays off when it comes to standardized testing: “We don’t teach to the tests. We think our curriculum does that for us. The only thing that we do is expose the kids to the formalities of the testing process so they don’t lose points because they didn’t understand what instructions ask them to do.” In addition to mandatory state testing, Liberty uses the Northwest Evaluation Maps to gage student performance. Alpine Achievement Systems is the data mining service that is used to provide detailed, comprehensive testing data reports for the teachers and administration. This information assists in setting educational goals for the students.

Teachers must understand their subjects thoroughly, Spicer said. To meet federal standards for being highly qualified in Colorado, teachers submit transcripts showing sufficient credit hours in their areas or they must pass the state’s Place certification test.

The term ‘Singapore Math’ refers to *Primary Mathematics*, a series developed by the Singapore Ministry of Education in the early 1980s, and distributed in the United States since 1998 by SingaporeMath.com. *Primary Mathematics* was the sole elementary mathematics program in Singapore schools for over twenty years, a period during which Singapore’s fourth and eighth grade students placed first for mathematics in three rounds of the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, or TIMSS. Like all countries that have performed well in international testing in mathematics, Singapore’s core curriculum at the elementary level calls for fewer topics, taught to mastery, with students typically prepared for algebra and geometry going into grade seven. By comparison, the US results in TIMSS indicate mediocre achievement in grade four and a decline in overall student performance by grade eight. The steadily increasing interest in the Singapore Math program on the part of US schools would seem to suggest a growing desire to reverse those trends.

Not surprisingly, many of the early adoptions of *Primary Mathematics* as a core curriculum in the US took place in charter schools. The well-deserved reputation for rigor, and the desire on the part of charter schools for an elementary mathematics curriculum that represents an alternative to those already in wide use in the US, made *Primary Mathematics* an attractive option. In 2003, SingaporeMath.com created and began distribution of the US Edition, adapted with mostly cosmetic changes from the 3rd Edition used in Singapore. The US Edition is used in dozens of charter schools across the US, including Liberty Common School, in Fort Collins, Colorado. While SingaporeMath.com will continue to distribute the US Edition titles, they have recently come out with a Standards Edition of *Primary Mathematics*, specifically aligned with California standards, and now approved by the California and Oregon State Boards of Education for their respective adoption lists.



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"I've hired a number of teachers who have not gone the traditional teacher-education route," he said. "There are many colleges that do a good job preparing teachers, and there are some really good teachers who come from those programs, but we've also seen teachers who come out of these teacher-education programs not really prepared to teach. They don't know their content really well. In our interviews, we have a very extensive process in which we ask very content-specific questions. Due to the thoroughness of this process we are confident that our teachers know their content."

Students are constantly exposed to the school's approach to discipline. Liberty's "character education program" is guided by seven Foundation Stones: respect, cooperation, citizenship, integrity, perseverance, self control and responsibility. Hallways are labeled with the Stones as if they are street names, Spicer said. "We try to weave character education throughout the school's entire culture," he said. "We try to model good character, which, in turn, adheres to the Foundation Stones."

Students also attend a monthly character-building assembly. A recent one stressed citizenship, with guest speakers from the American Red Cross telling how teamwork helped them get through the stress of dealing with a tornado in a nearby community.

"Students know they are expected to behave, that they are in school to learn," Spicer said. "We do have a dress code that helps set the mind on the day. We address concerns quickly if they come up." Students can be nominated by teachers to receive a foundation stone award, he added. Winners carry home a certificate, as well as a letter to their families to thank them for their efforts with their children.

Learn more about the school by visiting its Web site (www.libertycommon.org); or read about the school's early years (www.libertycommon.org/news/whats_happening_now/documents/TheHistoryofLibertyCommonSchool_000.pdf).



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