



LEADERSHIP PREP

Case Study



Tennessee Charter
School Center

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Leadership Preparatory Charter School (Leadership Prep), located in Southeast Memphis, has established itself as one of Tennessee’s most successful schools for economically disadvantaged (ED) students.

Founded in 2015 by Valissia Allen, Leadership Prep began with a cohort of 88 kindergarten and 1st-grade students. Today, the school serves over 400 students, the majority of whom come from low-income backgrounds. Despite facing many challenges associated with serving economically disadvantaged populations, Leadership Prep’s students consistently perform at levels far above the state average.

Under the leadership of Ms. Allen, Leadership Prep has evolved from a traditional charter school model to a data-driven institution that continually adjusts its approach to meet students’ needs. Initially guided by a “no excuses” academic model, the team at Leadership Prep quickly

determined that this approach did not offer enough differentiation based on the varying ways students learn and grow. Leadership Prep found that their students would benefit from varying pathways allowing the school to support all types of growth, and sought to develop a more differentiated approach.. Leadership Prep began iterating on its instructional practices, moving away from a one-size-fits-all approach and implementing a more flexible, tailored learning model.

Leadership Prep’s emphasis on data-driven instruction has resulted in exceptional performance for ED students. In English Language Arts (ELA), 42% of Leadership Prep’s ED students meet or exceed standards, placing the school in the top 9% of Tennessee schools. Similarly, 37% of its students meet or exceed math standards, ranking it in the top 19% statewide.

These impressive achievements can be attributed to several key practices and policies:

- **Iterative Improvement and Strategic Innovation:** Leadership Prep continuously adapts its instruction based on student needs. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in significant shifts in many sectors, from retail and banking to housing and education. After observing the pandemic’s impact on student learning, the school realized that instruction would need to be more tailored and nimble than ever before to help students succeed. The team utilized additional funding to deepen their flexibility, such as extending reading instruction and staffing classrooms with two reading teachers, approaches that offered significant improvement in foundational literacy and math outcomes. Each year, these decisions are revisited and, if they were effective, a new area of focus is chosen.
- **Learning Enhancement Blocks:** Leadership Prep created these additional learning opportunities for students who are one or more grade levels behind, and instructors group students by grade level to offer targeted instruction 2-4 times per week, depending on grade level.
- **Intervention Blocks:** Leadership Prep implemented a unique “intervention block” during which students receive targeted instruction based on their specific learning gaps. Grouped by skill level rather than grade, students receive efficient, personalized instruction, leading to measurable improvements in ELA and math performance.
- **Professional Development and Teacher Coaching:** Recognizing that strong instruction is essential for student success, Leadership Prep provides teachers with continuous coaching and professional development. A rigorous, three-week training session before the school year begins, followed by constant support throughout the year, ensures teachers are well-prepared to meet the needs of their students.
- **Balancing Autonomy and Structure:** Leadership Prep gives its teachers the flexibility to adapt lessons to student needs, while also providing clear instructional frameworks. This balance allows for innovation in the classroom while maintaining consistency and rigor.

Leadership Prep’s success with ED students demonstrates that targeted instruction, a commitment to teacher development, and a culture of continuous improvement can close achievement gaps. With further state support

and resources, Leadership Prep’s innovative practices could serve as a model for schools across Tennessee, offering pathways to success for students from all backgrounds.

INTRODUCTION

The Tennessee Charter School Center (TCSC) is dedicated to recognizing and promoting the achievements of successful charter schools throughout the state of Tennessee.

As part of this mission, TCSC has launched the “Success Stories” series, designed to share effective strategies with educational leaders and policymakers. This case study, the third in the series, focuses on the remarkable achievements of Leadership Preparatory Charter School (Leadership Prep) in Southeast Memphis, particularly in supporting economically disadvantaged (ED) students. Through this case study, we explore the policies and practices that have contributed to the school’s outstanding performance and share insights that can inspire other school leaders and policymakers to implement similar strategies.

Leadership Prep opened in 2015 with a cohort of 88 kindergarten and 1st-grade students. Today, the

school serves 466 students, the majority of whom are from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Leadership Prep’s mission is to dismantle barriers posed by socioeconomic and demographic biases in education by providing a rigorous and supportive learning environment for all students. Despite the challenges of serving a population where 62% of students are classified as economically disadvantaged^{1 2} — nearly double the statewide average — Leadership Prep students consistently outperform their peers across Tennessee. In English Language Arts (MLA), 42% of ED students at Leadership Prep meet or exceed standards, and in math, that number is 37%. These figures place Leadership Prep in the top 9% of all schools statewide in MLA performance and in the top 19% in math achievement among economically disadvantaged students. This report aims to shed light on the specific policies and practices that have led to these impressive results, focusing on three key areas:

01

The specific strategies Leadership Prep has implemented to support ED students.

02

The challenges the school’s leadership has encountered and how they have overcome them.

03

The role of charter school model in facilitating the school’s success.

To answer these questions, interviews were conducted with Leadership Prep’s leadership and staff.³ The findings were analyzed to identify common themes and success factors, which are presented alongside supporting quotes and examples. By sharing Leadership Prep’s strategies, we hope to inspire and guide others who are working to provide students with the opportunities they deserve.



HISTORY OF LEADERSHIP PREP

Valissia Allen, Founder and Executive Director of Leadership Prep, has long understood the power of a high-quality education to transform lives, especially for students from marginalized communities.

Inspired by her own experiences and motivated by the inequities she saw in the education system, Ms. Allen initially pursued a career in education. After a brief period as a classroom teacher, she decided to attend law school with the goal of holding low-performing schools accountable for their failings.

However, during her time as a public defender, Ms. Allen noticed a recurring issue: many of her clients lacked basic literacy and numeracy skills, which limited their ability to engage with the legal system and improve their circumstances. This realization marked a turning point for Ms. Allen. She began to see that addressing educational inequities was crucial to breaking the cycle of systemic injustice and poverty. “I realized my legal work was chipping away at a wall that needed to be torn down,” she said, emphasizing her decision to refocus her efforts on creating equitable educational opportunities.

With support from Building Excellent Schools (BES), an organization that helps educational leaders launch schools in underserved areas, Ms. Allen founded Leadership Prep in 2015. Initially, the school followed the “no excuses” model, focusing on rigorous academic programming without functionally recognizing that children grow differently and need varying pathways of support. After five years of implementing this model, Ms. Allen and her leadership team realized that it was not fully addressing student needs, particularly for their mid- and low-performing students. Recognizing the limitations of the “no excuses” model, the school transitioned in 2021 to a more tailored approach. This change has proven to be pivotal, with Leadership Prep now emerging as a top-performing school for ED students in Tennessee.



Valissia Allen
Founder & Executive Director
of Leadership Prep

LEADERSHIP PREPARATORY CHARTER SCHOOL



POLICIES AND PRACTICES

ITERATIVE IMPROVEMENT AND STRATEGIC INNOVATION

Leadership Prep’s success stems from a continuous commitment to refining instructional practices based on student needs. While the school’s current achievements may seem like an overnight success, they are the result of consistent adaptation and improvement. One significant turning point was the COVID-19 pandemic, which, like for many schools across the country, led to notable learning loss, particularly in foundational literacy skills such as phonemic awareness.

To address this, the school used pandemic-related funding to extend reading instruction in K-5 classrooms. By staffing each classroom with two reading teachers, Leadership Prep provided targeted instruction to specific student groups who needed support in key areas. This approach

not only addressed immediate learning loss but also set the stage for future success in both reading and math.

Now that reading and math achievement are high, the school is shifting focus to improving science instruction. Leadership Prep has hired a science coach to support teachers in delivering high-quality, engaging science lessons. Even in these early stages, the school has already begun to see improvements in student science scores. This continuous cycle of goal-setting, innovation, and iteration ensures that Leadership Prep is always striving to meet the evolving needs of its students. As one leader put it “we aren’t a school that rests on its laurels. We’re always looking for ways to do better for our students by going beyond where other schools might stop.”

LEARNING ENHANCEMENT BLOCKS

Each year, the Leadership Prep team carefully identifies students who would benefit from additional instruction in specific areas, using benchmark assessments to identify learning gaps. Based on these assessments, students are grouped by specific skill deficits rather than by grade and are provided targeted instruction during a designated “learning enhancement block.” This block allows teachers who are particularly strong in specific skills, such as phonemic awareness or vocabulary development, to work with students who need help in those areas. By focusing on skill level rather than grade, more students can be reached by a single teacher in their specific area of need. By ensuring students receive instruction that is tailored to their precise needs, the school optimizes both time and resources. This practice has been crucial in boosting student performance across the board.



POLICIES AND PRACTICES

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND TEACHER COACHING

Leadership Prep prioritizes the professional growth of its teachers through regular coaching and intensive professional development. Each staff member is assigned a coach who provides ongoing feedback and support. Before the school year begins, teachers participate in a two- or three-week professional development program tailored to the school and team needs for the coming year that covers key areas: alignment with the school’s mission, instructional content, and classroom logistics.

During the first week, staff focus on the school’s mission and core values, reinforcing their commitment to equitable education. In the second week, teachers delve into curriculum planning, tailoring lessons to their students’ specific needs and modifying instructional strategies to address learning gaps. The third week emphasizes classroom management and routine-building, ensuring that students can transition smoothly through the school day without losing valuable instructional time.

This foundational training is complemented by continuous professional development sessions throughout the year. As one teacher described it, “It’s not just about getting better—it’s about pushing ourselves to be the best for our students.” The combination of personalized coaching and ongoing development has fostered a strong, reflective teaching culture at Leadership Prep.

BALANCING AUTONOMY AND STRUCTURE

Initially, Leadership Prep followed the strict instructional model provided by BES. Over time, however, school leadership realized that greater instructional flexibility was needed. In 2021, Leadership Prep redefined its approach, striking a balance between structure and autonomy. Teachers are now empowered to choose from several high-quality curricula and adapt lessons to meet their students’ needs.

Leadership Prep’s leadership provides a framework for lesson planning, using the Gradual Release of Responsibility model, which gradually shifts the learning responsibility from the teacher to the student. This model provides structure while allowing teachers to make adjustments that better serve their students. With the curricula provided and the instructional template, teachers then work together with the guidance of coaches to enhance the content provided to them. This work happens during the second week of their intensive beginning-of-the-year professional development and continues throughout the year. Teachers may find that texts are not rigorous enough or not relevant to their students and supplement them with their own. Or if formative assessments questions are not well-written or rigorous enough, teachers will rewrite these assessments. According to the schools’ CEO, “this has helped teachers get really good at understanding state tests, unpacking state standards and getting to know how to help students show that they understand the material.”



CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

TEACHER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

Recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers is a challenge for all schools, including Leadership Prep. This is particularly true because many of Leadership Prep's most effective educators come from non-traditional teaching backgrounds. The school has worked diligently to help these teachers meet certification requirements, which often involve additional coursework or testing. To alleviate financial burdens associated with certification, Leadership Prep has secured private funding to support teachers in this process for associated costs such as Praxis test fees, study material costs, and application fees. However, state-level flexibility in certification requirements and increased funding for costs associated with certification pathways could further assist in addressing these challenges, particularly for those from non-traditional teaching backgrounds.

SCHEDULING AND TIME MANAGEMENT

One of the school's most successful innovations—the learning enhancement block—requires significant time during the school week, with students enrolled in Learning Enhancement blocks missing two or three enrichment blocks per week. However, enrichment activities are a priority for Leadership Prep, which recognizes the significance of these activities particularly for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. To accommodate this, Leadership Prep offers a longer school day to ensure enrichment activities, such as art and physical education, are included in the schedule. The school also offers after-school enrichment programs, provided in partnership with community organizations as well as by teachers who receive a stipend. These programs provide additional opportunities for student enrichment, another way the school seeks to balance academic and extracurricular programming.

GROWING MULTILINGUAL LEARNER POPULATION

Leadership Prep has experienced a significant increase in its Multilingual Learner (ML) population, which has introduced new requirements for accommodating these students effectively. This growth has been partly driven by word-of-mouth recommendations from families who appreciate the supportive environment Leadership Prep offers. For many families for whom English is not the primary language, the school has become a welcoming and affirming place where their cultural and linguistic needs are acknowledged. To enhance their ability to support ML students, Leadership Prep has partnered with another school known for its success with ML students. This collaboration involved observing classroom practices and engaging in peer dialogues to exchange best practices. This year marks the implementation of the insights and strategies gained from this partnership, as Leadership Prep seeks to refine its approach to meet the needs of its growing ML community more effectively.

BENEFITS OF THE CHARTER MODEL

The success of Leadership Prep can be attributed in large part to the advantages provided by the charter school model, which offers flexibility and autonomy not typically available in traditional public schools. This flexibility has allowed teachers to select from a range of approved curricula and adapt them to better suit the needs of their students, thereby enhancing the quality of instruction. Additionally, the charter model has enabled Leadership Prep to tailor the school's schedule to implement innovative programs such as Learning Enhancement Blocks, which are crucial for addressing the diverse learning needs of their students. As a charter school, Leadership Prep is able to constantly evaluate strategies and make changes quickly throughout the school year if needed, which can be difficult to accomplish within the structure of a traditional school district, even at the school level. The ability to tailor educational approaches and create specialized programs has been instrumental in Leadership Prep's achievements, underscoring the value of the charter school framework in fostering effective and responsive education.



CONCLUSION

Leadership Prep’s impressive success with economically disadvantaged students demonstrates the power of innovative, data-driven practices, coupled with a commitment to teacher development and a continuous improvement mindset. By providing targeted instruction through learning enhancement blocks, fostering a culture of professional growth, and strategically balancing autonomy with structure, Leadership Prep has created an environment where students from all backgrounds can thrive.

Despite ongoing challenges with teacher recruitment, retention, and scheduling, Leadership Prep has proven resilient and adaptive, showing what is possible when a school is given the freedom and support to meet the needs of its students. This case study highlights Leadership Prep’s journey and offers practical insights for other schools looking to close achievement gaps and uplift economically disadvantaged students. With additional state funding and support, Leadership Prep has the potential to expand its impact even further, providing a model for success that can be replicated across Tennessee and beyond.



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ENDNOTES

- 1 Tennessee Department of Education, Data Downloads – 2023 - <https://www.tn.gov/education/districts/federal-programs-and-oversight/data/data-downloads.html>
- 2 For a student to be identified as economically disadvantaged they must be direct certified via SNAP or TANF.
- 3 We interviewed Leadership Prep’s principal, RTI Coordinator/K-2 Coach, Director of Data and Intervention, and Elementary School Principal.

