



# Citizens' Academy

Cleveland, OH

Principal: **Jennifer Taylor**  
Superintendent: **Perry White**  
School type: **Charter**  
Grades served: **K-5**

**320** Student enrollment

**83.0** Percent economically disadvantaged

**>98.0** Percent non-white

**15.5** Percent of students with disabilities

**10** Teachers' average years of experience

**\$39,847** Average teacher salary

**\$10,902** Total expenditure per pupil

## *First Impressions*

A sense of order, efficiency, and purpose immediately stands out at Citizens' Academy. The principal and staff greet students and chat with parents as they drop off their children; a Citizens' staff member even opens the car door for students during this morning ritual. Inside, there is remarkably little horseplay among the more than 300 tidily uniformed students as they hustle to get to class.

"I was astonished at the interaction between teachers and students, the order, and positive behavior. I was sold immediately," said parent Shamika Clark, recalling her first impressions of Citizens' from an unannounced visit to scope out the school she had heard about from friends. A staff member said that upon arrival, new teachers to Citizens' are "floored" by the order, respect, collaboration,

SOURCE FOR CHARTS: Ohio Department of Education interactive Local Report Card, 2008-09; reading and math calculations performed by Fordham Institute, see endnote 11.

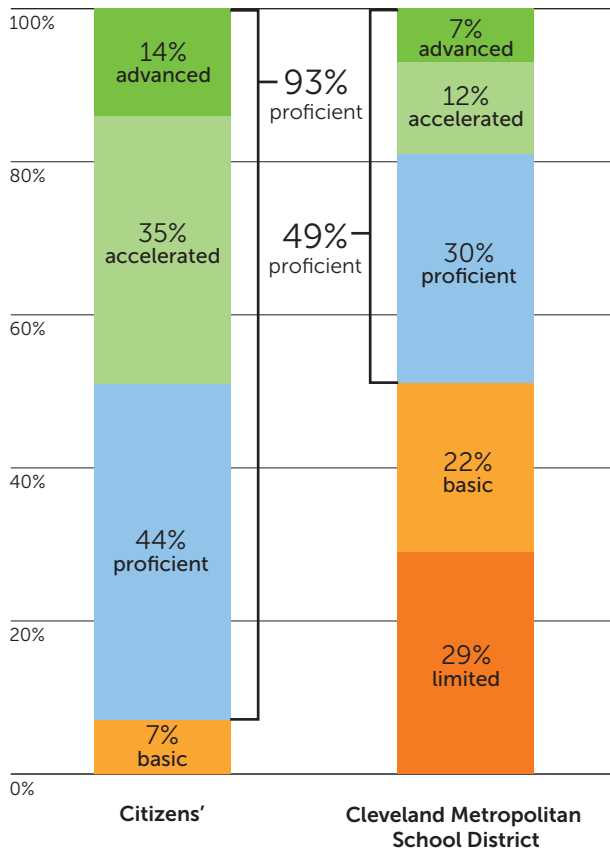
and positive interactions between students and staff compared to previous school experiences.

— *“I was astonished at the interaction between teachers and students, the order and positive behavior. I was sold immediately.”* –Shamika Clark, parent

Maintaining this order requires careful teacher recruitment. The comprehensive interview process (which includes teaching a full lesson) was “severe,” said Intervention Specialist Kim Peterlin, but “I liked



### Reading



Percent of students by reading proficiency level, 2008-09 (Citizens' vs. district)

it, so I knew if offered a position I would jump at the chance to come here.” Instructional Assistant Alan Pratt, a long-time social servant of older youth with serious behavioral issues, also has vivid memories of his first impression of Citizens’. “I had never seen so many kids behave so well without force or sedation,” he said. Because of the good behavior he witnessed, he wasn’t sure initially that he was needed at this school. He has since grown fond of his role and realizes he is part of a tremendous team sharing a common commitment to kids.

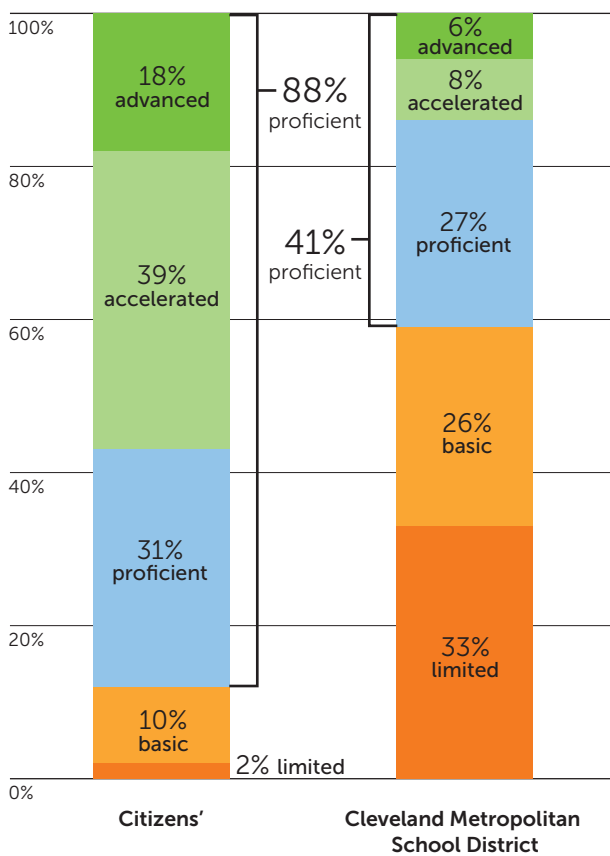
So what exactly are the key ingredients to this remarkable success story that generates such distinct first impressions? School founder and Executive Director Perry White emphasized that “we are not excuse makers—the first excuse in any situation leads quickly to the next excuse.” He also noted that the school works hard to avoid apologetic or limiting attitudes that lead to lower goals and expectations.

## From Chaos to Excellence

The story of this 10-year-old charter public school in Cleveland includes its ascent from the state academic rating of “Academic Emergency” in its dismal first year, to its current lofty rating of “Excellent.” In fact, Citizens’ no longer compares itself with the Cleveland Metropolitan Schools or the ratings of the state’s eight largest urban districts, as it vastly outperforms them. In 2009, 92 percent of Citizens’ students scored proficient or higher on the state reading test, dramatically outperforming the district, where only 49 percent of students achieved proficiency. The school does equally well in mathematics: 88 percent of Citizens’ students scored proficient, compared to just 41 percent of students in the district.<sup>11</sup>

While the school’s launch in 1999 was not terribly auspicious, the leadership was quick to make big changes. “At first, we didn’t understand the fundamental importance of structure. But in time we imagined a culture of high expectations into life-giving existence,” Mr. White explained. In doing so, faculty and staff scrapped their lax approach to discipline and quickly realized that improving student achievement was going to require continuous

### Math

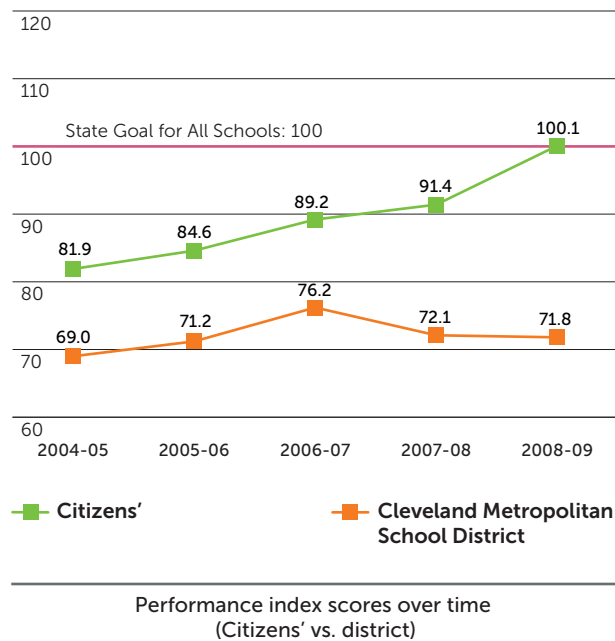


Percent of students by math proficiency level, 2008-09 (Citizens' vs. district)





## Performance Index



improvement and tweaks to the school's operations and curriculum.

—● *“The first excuse in any situation leads quickly to the next excuse.” – Perry White, founder and executive director*

Another change Mr. White made was adding more learning time. Early on, Citizens' leadership gambled and decided to discontinue bus service from the local public school districts in exchange for full control of the design of their school day—one that included an extra hour for instruction. Their hope was that parents, most of whom have limited financial means, would be willing to bring their children to Citizens'. Even on a snowy, slick day during the February school visit for this project, student attendance was as high as ever—proof positive that parents at the school are willing to make whatever sacrifices are necessary for their children to benefit from added learning time.

## The Mission

The mission of Citizens' Academy is straightforward: “To produce learners who exemplify academic excellence and responsible citizenship.”

In practice, the mission has required faculty and staff to be relentless in their pursuit of daily, weekly, and yearly student progress. For instance, the school's curriculum includes two hours per day of both literacy and mathematics. Short-cycle assessments provide regular achievement data to help ensure that students are on track and to help teachers make needed adjustments to flexible learning groups (students grouped by ability). To winnow the numbers of students needing remediation, Citizens' has focused significant resources on the earliest grade levels. For instance, a speech therapist spends time with kindergartners in order to help build their literacy, and a K-1 “bridge” classroom was created for kindergartners not quite ready for first grade.

Teachers demonstrate an ongoing effort to individualize instruction and minimize any waste of precious class time. For instance, in a first-grade math class, Megan Brickweg's students practice double-digit addition using small whiteboards. Every student has one, raising it high in the air to show his or her answer. With the individual white boards, Ms. Brickweg can instantly see who has answered correctly or who may need more help. And as Citizens' Director of Academics Margie Hirschfeld explained, this method is quick and effective. In a typical classroom, all students wait while one student answers a problem. “That's a waste of time for the other students,” she said.

## The CA Way

An outgrowth of the school's mission and the staff's ongoing efforts are the high expectations for everyone. Formally, these expectations are dubbed the “CA



Way.” For students, that means the expectation that they will attend top-notch middle and high schools upon leaving Citizens’. It also includes encouraging all students to believe that college is a realistic goal. “Emphasis early and often is a good thing,” said the mother of Khalil, a fourth grader. The college pennants of every teacher’s alma mater(s) are featured on their classroom doors, and the hallways are festooned with pennants from dozens of colleges and universities. Mr. White said it took about three years for this focus on college to really catch on but claims it is now a “palpable” focus for students and their families.

For teachers, the CA Way is embodied in the pursuit to improve the quality of their teaching. Instructional coaches and administrators spend ample time in classrooms—at least one day *per week*. Coupled with the quick pace of the day, Ms. Hirschfeld explained, Citizens’ is a more challenging place to work than

many schools. “It requires teachers to be on their game all the time,” she added. Even so, teachers at Citizens’ clearly appreciate working at the school. Second-grade teacher Alyson Gilbride pointed to the collaboration among staff as a major advantage. A block schedule, grade-level teams, and frequent feedback from administrators both encourage and require lesson-sharing and teamwork. “I don’t know what I’d do if I was working alone,” Ms. Gilbride said.

—● *“It requires teachers to be on their game all the time.” - Margie Hirschfeld, director of academics*

Teamwork is also evident at the administrative level. Mr. White and his leadership team are working hard to create a sustainable leadership structure—one that does not depend on the charisma or abilities of one



person. Instead, Citizens' leadership team includes Mr. White, interim Principal Jennifer Taylor, an assistant principal, and a few others. The idea is to create a leadership system that is both self-perpetuating and insulated (as much as possible) against turnover and external factors.

### *All Kids Are Our Favorites*

The CA Way is most evident, however, in the classrooms—in the firm yet nurturing interactions among the teachers, staff, and students. Fourth- and fifth-grade teacher Allison Lentz, who worked at

another charter school before Citizens', noted that such consistent expectations were not in place in her previous school. Part of the secret to maintaining those expectations involves reaching out to parents. Teachers are expected to communicate with parents regularly in order to meet the goal of 100 percent attendance at parent-teacher conferences. The sense of close-knit community that results from this type of effort makes it easier for both her and her students to succeed.

—● *“We do what we say we are going to do.”* —Principal Jennifer Taylor

Finding teachers to meet the high expectations at Citizens' is not easy. The rigorous teacher interview process signals to all who inquire that they will never work harder than they will at Citizens' and that a major part of the school's success lies in the intentional formation of a growing core of adults who do everything in their power to make sure that their students excel. “We don't have problems here, we only have challenges,” Instructional Assistant Pratt said, summing up the “no-excuses” culture of the school. This mindset also is evidenced by teachers' outreach to parents and their desire to “seek optimal professional closeness rather than optimal professional distance” from one another, Mr. White explained.

Citizens' Academy has traveled a revealing path in its decade-long history, emerging from plenty of trial-and-error to rank among the few elite urban public schools in Ohio. It consistently achieves remarkable success because, as Principal Jennifer Taylor said, “we do what we say we are going to do.”