

Seashore Learning Center

CORPUS CHRISTI

After years of failed attempts to establish a public elementary school on Padre Island, Seashore Learning Center opened as a private school in 1995. The passage of charter school legislation offered the school an opportunity to become a public school, and in 1996, it became one of the first 20 open-enrollment charter schools in Texas. Serving kindergarten through sixth grade, the school focuses on providing students a strong basis, both educationally and socially, for their future endeavors. Driven by the needs of the local community, Seashore Learning Center is “dedicated to developing self-esteem, confidence, and social skills in each individual student while providing a foundation for a child’s high level of academic achievement.”

Student Characteristics

In 2001–02, Seashore Learning Center enrolled 139 students at its Padre Island facility. The majority of these students are White (79 percent), with small percentages Hispanic (17 percent) and other (4 percent) ethnicities. Compared to the state average (51 percent), Seashore serves a small proportion (30 percent) of economically disadvantaged students. Approximately 7 percent of the school’s students qualify for special education services.

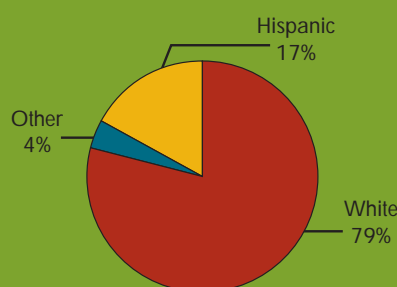
School Characteristics

Seashore Learning Center students follow a traditional school calendar, attending classes 177 days per year. School days are relatively short, with classes from 7:45 a.m. until 2:30 p.m. Administrators strongly believe that uniforms help create an equitable environment and limit self-consciousness; therefore, they are mandatory for all students.

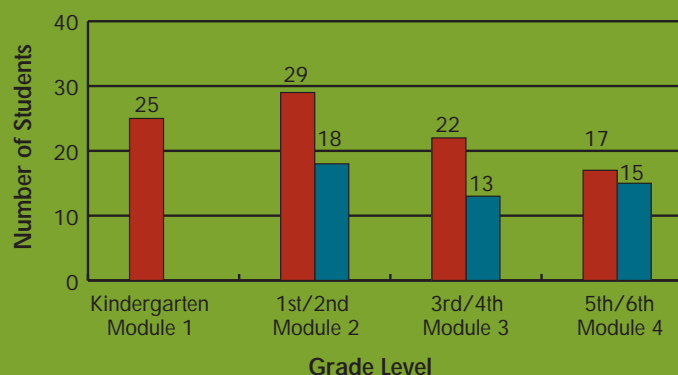
Seashore employs a small teaching staff (nine teachers) and has a student-to-teacher ratio of 15 to 1. All teachers are required to be certified, and 11 percent have advanced degrees. Most faculty (66 percent) have between one and five years prior teaching experience, and in 2001–02, Seashore employed no first-year teachers.

The Seashore director describes her role as much like that of a principal—“guiding the school forward in educational terms, staff development, [and] student progress;” however, she notes, that it has a business aspect as well. Although the governing board makes the final decision regarding personnel matters, the director and teachers work together in hiring new staff. “Generally, it has been a collaborative effort for the personnel decisions. It is not just me making a decision and

Student race/ethnicity: AEIS 2001–02



Student Enrollment in Seashore Learning Center: AEIS 2001–02



choosing people,” says the director. Typically, the school has few problems recruiting qualified applicants. The director reports that the school received more than 200 applicants for available positions last year. The director, however, informs potential candidates that teaching positions come with high expectations: “One of the types of teachers that we may attract are those teachers who taught with regular public education and think they are coming to an easy option, but actually when they get here, it is not, and it is very important for me to let them know that.”

Teachers report that professional development is expected and enthusiastically supported by the director. They mention attending sessions on everything from math assessment to service learning and technology training. “There are people who are leaving here for training constantly for something,” says one teacher. “I would say at least once a month somebody is getting trained for something.” Although teachers are not required to attend a specific number of professional development sessions, most believe that the expectation of ongoing learning is part of the school’s philosophy. “The teachers here feel the need for that because of the type of philosophy we have here, and the way we conduct our program here...you have to be innovative.”

Educational Program

The educational program at Seashore Learning Center differs from that of most traditional public schools in a number of ways. With the exception of kindergarten, students are grouped into multi-age “modules.” Kindergartners are separated into their own module due to their social and cognitive needs.



The three remaining modules are formed by combining two traditional grade levels (i.e., 1–2, 3–4, 5–6). The Seashore curriculum integrates the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) with E.D. Hirsch’s Core Knowledge components. Teachers work together to design thematic units that incorporate all subject areas.

Instructionally, hands-on learning is highly encouraged, and students are expected to take responsibility for their own learning. “It is not a case of sitting down and the teacher provides all this information... There is a lot of very active learning where students go into situations,” says the director. To meet the needs of multiple ages and grade levels, teachers utilize heterogeneous instructional groups and homogeneous interest groups that help students learn from one another. To facilitate this type of learning, students are not seated in desks in rows but rather at tables in groups. Though teachers are given curricular guidance, they have autonomy to design classroom activities that will best meet the needs of their students. “We can provide the TEKS to the teachers and say there is your guidance,” explains the director, “but how they actually bring that to life is through cooperative learning, is through the hands-on activi-

School Characteristics

Founded	1996
Grades	K to 6
Enrollment	139
Daily schedule	7:45 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.
Days of instruction	177
Student attendance rate	96%
Student dropout rate	N/A

Source: 2001–02 AEIS report.

School Staffing

Number of teachers	9
Student-teacher ratio	15 to 1
Beginning teachers	0%
Teacher average years experience	6.9
Teacher turnover rate	58.3%
Teachers with no degree	0%
Teachers with advanced degrees	11.0%
Average teacher salary	\$28,177
Average campus administrator salary	\$28,000
Average central administrator salary	\$45,320

Source: 2001–02 AEIS report.

ties...all of that really brings it to life. And equally, I think our kids are encouraged from the moment they step into school to be independent learners.”

Students also are encouraged to take responsibility for their learning through the assessment process. Instead of report cards or progress reports, every nine weeks students lead a parent-teacher conference to demonstrate their knowledge and abilities. Students and teachers present portfolios of the student’s work, and students exhibit skills they have learned during the nine-week period. In addition to being a useful assessment tool, teachers say these conferences help keep them accountable. One teacher commented, “It really forces me to be very accountable...we have to have everything pulled together.” Besides these student-led conferences, teachers also use other assessment tools such as skills checklists, rubrics, artwork (for younger students), and informal observational assessment.

At Seashore, lunchtime is also an important part of the educational program. Students bring lunch from home and eat family-style at small tables complete with placemat, cloth napkins, glass dinnerware, and silverware. While eating lunch with their class, teachers reinforce table manners and etiquette. After lunch, students clean their tables and wash their own dishes. Although this approach is sometimes challenging for younger students, teachers believe the experience teaches valuable lessons. Some teachers even incorporate aspects of the lunch process, such as sequencing and nutrition, into their instruction.

Overall, teachers report that discipline problems are rare at Seashore. The vast majority of students are very motivated and eager to learn. When questioned about the policy for office discipline referrals, teachers indicate that no referral form exists because it has never been necessary. Teachers add jokingly that the only challenge they experience is students occasionally talking amongst themselves, usually about class projects. Teachers say students are so used to talking and working together in groups that when it comes time for them to work independently, they have to be scattered around the classroom. On the rare occasion a student does not comply with class rules or does not participate in class, teachers simply have the student talk with the director or one of the lead teachers. Teachers report that parental contact is another method they sometimes use to address student discipline problems. In most cases, the mere threat of parental contact is sufficient to solve the problem. “If you even say, ‘I’m going to call your mom,’ they are perfect the rest of the day,” comments one teacher.

Parental Involvement

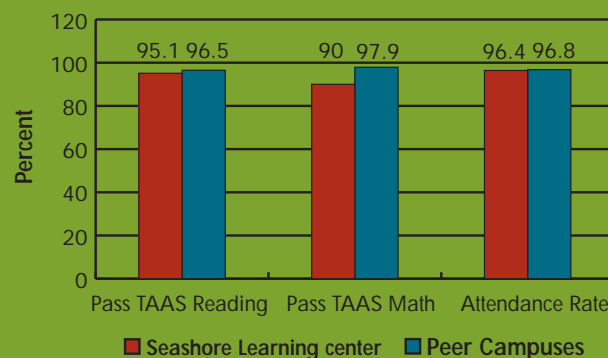
In addition to student-led conferences, parents are involved in Seashore Learning Center activities in a variety of ways. Parents are expected to participate in one of four committees: curriculum support, fundraising, maintenance, or curriculum instruction. Many parents also help daily with the lunch program, monitoring students in cleaning and washing dishes. Annual events, such as a winter tea, also are held for parents. These events support the school’s fundraising efforts and promote

School Finance

Per-pupil expenditure	\$5,099
Per-pupil for instruction	\$2,467
Local revenue	14%
State revenue	83%
Federal revenue	3%

Source: Actual financial data for all funds, PEIMS 2001–02.

Comparison of Performance for Seashore Learning Center and Peer Campuses: AEIS 2001–02



parental involvement. Teachers also report that parents assist in the classroom by running errands or completing tasks such as making copies. Teachers say parents come several times a week asking, “What can I help you do?” In fact, some teachers say parents’ eagerness to help contrasts dramatically with their previous schools, and they had to become accustomed to it when beginning at Seashore. “That was one of the hardest things for me to get used to,” reports one teacher, “because I was used to having to do everything completely on my own.” Overall, teachers say the level of parental involvement at Seashore not only helps them but also ultimately benefits students educationally: “We can actually focus more on the instruction instead of all of the paperwork and red tape.”

Governance

The board of directors for the school’s sponsoring entity—Island Foundation, Inc.—acts as Seashore Learning Center’s governing body. The foundation was created by a group of parents and community members working to establish an elementary school on Padre Island. Parents remain an important part of the governing board, with one elected parent member and a parent liaison. Board members come from a variety of professions including business, medicine, nonprofit, and education. The governing board’s primary responsibilities relate to budgeting, policy issues, and fundraising. The board also hires the school’s director. Although the Seashore director is not a member of the board, she reports on the school’s activities and events at monthly meetings. She believes this level of interaction not only helps keep her accountable for the school, but also offers her guidance in leadership.

Accomplishments

Since its founding, Seashore Learning Center’s unique approach to elementary education has produced positive results. Seashore has never earned an accountability rating below Recognized, and in 2002, received an Exemplary rating. As the school’s director simply states, “The results speak for themselves.”

Given that Seashore students are accustomed to hands-on activities and assessments, teachers say, for many students, the challenge of the TAAS was the format of a paper-and-pencil test rather than the content. “The challenge for our kids...was sitting that length of time doing those tests. That really is a challenge, I mean if you ask them to set up an experiment, they will do it in a heartbeat, but because the test makes them sit for that length of time; that is the challenge for them.” Apparently, Seashore students overcame this challenge—on the most recent TAAS administration, 100 percent of students in two of the four reported grade levels passed both the reading and math subtests.

When questioned about the success of the school, board members and administrators say the support of the community is a key component. “Everyone is very passionate about their quality of life—about their family, about their children, about doing things the right way,” said one board member. “I think Seashore is just a fine example of that.”

Campus Accountability Rating

2000	Recognized
2001	Recognized
2002	Exemplary

Source: 2001–02 AEIS report.

TAAS Percent Passing

	TAAS Reading			TAAS Math		
	2000	2001	2002	2000	2001	2002
Grade 3	85.7	91.7	90.5	71.4	83.3	76.2
Grade 4	100.0	100.0	100.0	93.8	78.9	90.9
Grade 5	94.7	100.0	100.0	95.2	100.0	100.0
Grade 6	94.7	100.0	92.9	100.0	94.1	100.0

Source: AEIS reports.