

North Central Charter Essential School

Summary of Educational Philosophy

❑ **A public school open to all students from all backgrounds:**

The school's diversity is its strength where members work to find commonalities, bridge differences, and form a community. Dedicated to both equity and excellence, North Central Charter takes advantage of the rare mix of students from urban, suburban, and rural communities and educates them all to high standards.

❑ **Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and MCAS:**

External tests and externally created standards can help a school measure itself against the larger world. All students must pass the English/Language Arts and Mathematics portions of the MCAS so they are eligible to graduate. Our integrated, inquiry-driven curriculum aligns with the Massachusetts frameworks. In order to help students genuinely understand what they learn, teachers must be selective when using the frameworks. The frameworks are a starting point for determining the content of the curriculum. Where the frameworks are skill-oriented, we incorporate those skills into our internal academic standards. Where the frameworks are content-oriented, we draw from them to the extent that we can stay true to one of our founding principles that "less is more."

❑ **A school that respects students:**

This school believes in the worth and power of every single student. Students themselves are directly involved in their education, setting goals with advice from teachers and their families and figuring out how to get to those goals, progressing at their own pace. Students also build confidence and self-esteem through adventure and exploration, discovering themselves and their capabilities.

❑ **A school where all students are required to do serious intellectual work:**

All students are capable of using their minds well to accomplish high quality work if they are asked and expected to do so. The curriculum and everyday processes of the school gives students opportunities to seek understanding, explore the unknown, and wrestle with interesting and challenging problems. The students become the primary intellectual workers, learning how to think through their discoveries, actions and creations. They learn by doing, by actively engaging with the world around them.

❑ **A democratic community:**

The school relies on the commitment of all members of its community, and so all members need a voice to establish that commitment. Research has shown that student achievement improves the more the adults of a school community talk to one another and make decisions together.

❑ **An Essential School:**

NCCES employs the 10 Common Principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools to guide our practices. Essential Schools work to help students "learn to use their minds well"; emphasize depth over breadth; apply goals to all students; personalize teaching and learning; embrace the

metaphor "student as worker"; require students to demonstrate mastery through exhibition; stress unanxious expectation, trust, and decency; consider teachers as generalists with a commitment to the entire school; develop budgets that reflect Essential School's priorities; and model democratic and equitable practices.

□ **Personalized challenge and support for all students:**

With individualized instruction on literacy and numeracy, students and teachers have the opportunity to work on discrete skills, especially reading, writing, and computation. This focused skill work is different for different students and the teachers have the flexibility to configure students to their best advantage. Students take these discrete skills back into their fully integrated curriculum during the rest of the week.

□ **Focus on foundations, inquiry, and independence:**

As students move through the school from grade to grade, they are expected to move through these three aspects of learning.

□ **A school focused on what's essential:**

A school community must ultimately arrive at definitions of "essential" -- that is, what the community itself wants its students to know and be able to do when they graduate high school. North Central Charter wants its graduates to be literate and numerate. These are processes inherent in all the disciplines and the most fundamental abilities that all people need simply to function in society. Yet the world will also need thinkers, problem-solvers, and resilient, creative citizens not afraid to ask questions or take action.

□ **Good learning requires both structure and freedom:**

Each year and unit of study combines elements of structure and freedom. To learn to think hard, students need rich, significant essential knowledge about which to think. Students learn best when they pursue questions and find answers for themselves, when they actively experience the concepts they need to learn, and when they have choice and authority over what they study. Learning happens when students are engaged. Therefore, the school puts students in the middle of real experiences, focuses their attention on essential questions, sends them on expeditions, gives them real problems to figure out, asks them to design and create and build. The curriculum establishes enough structure to anchor the program and yet leaves enough freedom to allow teachers to create and to keep the curriculum open and relevant.

□ **Interdisciplinary Learning:**

The school's program will integrate academic disciplines to the greatest possible extent. Integration helps students make connections between ideas and examples that naturally go together. In working to understand another culture, they can see a piece of literature next to an episode in history and next to an artist's work. When trying to figure out how the brain works, they can look at the chemical process of nerve connections next to the biological structure of the frontal lobe and how that relates to the field of psychology. Integration allows teachers to work as generalists instead of specialists. As generalists, the teacher's main goal becomes helping students learn and understand the larger forces at work, modeling good learning for students who also must be generalists. Integration helps lower teachers' student loads. And teachers collaborate to take advantage of one another's areas of expertise, enhancing the professional culture of the school and demonstrating the power of working as a team.

❑ **Disciplinary Learning -- English, Math, Science, Social Studies, Spanish, Arts, and Wellness:**

Within an integrated curriculum, students will also learn the particular ways of seeing the world that define different academic disciplines. Artists and mathematicians sometimes have their own ways of seeing things and their own tools for exploring and expressing what they see. The school will work to hire teachers with a variety of disciplinary specialties that can design learning experiences that teach students essential concepts and specialized tools of the particular disciplines.

❑ **Essential Questions Drive and Organize the Curriculum:**

In courses and units, essential questions drive what students study. Essential questions go to the heart of academic disciplines. They have no single right answer; indeed they are rich with possibilities, which is what makes them interesting. They require higher order thinking -- analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating evidence -- in order to find answers and come to understanding. They are the questions that led to "the content" in the first place. What is community? What would it take to eliminate hunger? Is light a particle or a wave? How does math affect everyday life? Why did that writer do that? Whose America is it? Students investigate questions that are worthy of exploration instead of textbooks full of all the answers. The students' job is not to fill their heads with all the information in the world. Instead it becomes their job to take on a question and build their own understanding, their own knowledge around what they discover. It is an active process.

❑ **Advisory -- Curriculum for Identity, Leadership, and Community:**

Advisory gives every student a home base. It focuses on the following topics: leadership, conflict resolution, self-exploration, community service, and planning for college and work. Advisors use their time each week to explore personal issues, to help students examine themselves and their educational experience, and lead students in activities designed to build up their personal skills. This time is important and it counts as academic time.

❑ **Active, Experiential, Real World Learning:**

When we're able to do them, learning expeditions take students out into the world and bring the world into the classroom. They might involve adventure and focus around the natural world, or they might involve community service and involve students in the society around them. They must have tasks that require perseverance, craftsmanship, imagination, self-discipline and significant achievement. Wilderness experiences empower and challenge students in activities that reveal, test and train character. They build confidence and self-esteem. Adventure honors the potential for learning in risk, challenge, and the unknown. It provides opportunities not found in everyday life for students to make discoveries about themselves and what they are capable of. Students and teachers plan the work together, building collaborative and supportive relationships. Through such real world experience, students come to know themselves and one another better. They also develop the confidence and self-esteem to be an active participant in the world around them.

❑ **Variety of teaching and assessment modes:**

All teachers have their own style, and most schools do not dictate how their teachers will teach. Yet certain practices do lead to significant student achievement. Different students have different learning styles and teachers need to use a variety of methods to engage those different styles. Teachers need to know their students well and adjust their teaching to meet those needs. Teachers work to engage their students and meet their individual needs by presenting information in different ways and by varying the kinds of activities students do throughout the day and

throughout the units. No single mode should ever dominate. Sometimes students work in groups, sometimes individually. Sometimes students present to one another, sometimes the teacher might give a formal lecture. Sometimes the action of the class is reading and writing, sometimes speaking, sometimes moving, sometimes listening, sometimes seeing, and often times building, creating, designing, or making something.

□ **Teachers as Coaches:**

When the student learning goal is that they learn to use their minds well, teachers must coach those skills. Teachers cannot do the thinking for the students; all they can do is set the task, describe the skills, model the skills. The student has to demonstrate their use of the skills, with teachers giving feedback and instruction on how to take the next steps. That's coaching.

□ **Differentiated Instruction:**

In a diverse classroom, teachers will sometimes need to allow different students to follow different paths in their work. There might be one prompt, but students could show their understanding in different ways. At times, there might be sense in forming different groups for different levels and letting those groups move ahead together. Teachers build in flexibility and individuality so those students who are at different skill levels can enter a project from different angles.

□ **School-wide Habits of Mind:**

In every class, indeed with nearly every process of the school, we want our students to ask the following questions as a framework for thinking.

- Point of view -- From whose viewpoint are we hearing or seeing or reading?
- Evidence -- How do we know this is true? What is the source and is it credible?
- Connections -- Where have I seen this before? Or is it new?
- Significance -- Why does it matter? So what?
- Possibilities -- What if . . . ? Are there alternatives? Suppose that

As every member of the community comes to know these, the culture of the school itself begins to support such habits of mind.

□ **Performance-based Assessment -- Exhibitions and other presentations of learning:**

Teachers ask students to demonstrate what they know and can do through regular, challenging, often public exhibitions of their work. Performance-based assessments ask students to engage in a complex task, often involving the creation of a product. They put students into real world or simulated situations that require higher order thinking skills. The essence of performance assessments -- whether in the form of open-ended questions, essays, experiments or portfolios -- is that they ask students to create something of meaning. A good performance assessment taps complex thinking and/or problem solving, addresses important disciplinary content invokes authentic or real-world applications and uses tasks that are meaningful. They ask students to create a unique answer.