

# PROJECT ELEVATE

## Concept

In honor of Reverend William Lawson, the leadership of Lawson Academy has launched Project Elevate that seeks to advance the prospects and security of our next two decades of students, just as Reverend Lawson did for the last two. It will accomplish this through improvements in the school's curriculum, efforts to prepare students for an increasingly on-line world, and strengthening our attention to at-risk students who will always make up a sizable portion of incoming classes. This year we are celebrating in a unique way and respectfully request your participation.

We seek seed funding for Project Elevate in order to establish a track record of results. With results in hand, we are confident based on past experience that we can raise public funds to support this initiative over the long term. We are also confident that our special group of teachers and other academic leaders, who stand out in the field in quality, experience, and continuity are up to the task of providing leadership to the effort. The attachment to this note describes more of our thinking on educational enhancements to be pursued in Project Elevate. Our ultimate aspiration is to increase the number of students who not only "make it through" high school, but succeed and even excel there, and are prepared to contribute beyond. But it is sobering to realize that the students coming into our program will likely not be getting better while the expectations for those graduating will keep getting higher. We as a community and a school must get better to address this inevitably growing gap.

It is hard to imagine another moment in history when the central role of education in the economic, social, and political prosperity and stability of our community is so obvious and valued by the general population. The Lawson Academy and others have an opportunity to put public education at the center of the entire community to help learners grow and develop a broad range of competencies and skills in and out of school. We know that the current pandemic has accelerated education inequality. We are genuinely concerned but believe that this is a leapfrog moment. Innovation has suddenly moved from the margins to the center of our education system, and there is an opportunity to identify new strategies, that if sustained, can help all young people get an education that prepares them for 21st century success.

We expect to recognize our progress, financially and otherwise, at a brief and private reception with the Mayor and lead donors on June 10 and a virtual production on Sunday, June 27, 2021 that will celebrate the 93rd birthday of Reverend Bill Lawson, our extraordinary founder, leader, and inspiration.

# LAWSON ACADEMY SUCCESS MODEL

The Lawson Academy (the Academy) has a proud record over the last 20 years helping middle school students (grades 6-8) recover lost learning and become ready for success in high school. Students enroll in the 6th grade often two or three years behind grade level and over 90% are considered at-risk because of previous STAAR exam failure, being retained, homelessness, being in CPS, etc.

- Student academic growth over the last five years demonstrates that students improve 1.6 grades per year.
- Analysis of Academy graduates' 9th grade scores prove that most students are on grade level as evidenced by their success in English I, Biology and Algebra I End of Course exams (EOC).
- Longitudinal analysis is underway, but our anecdotal evidence indicates that the majority of Academy graduates continue through high school and enroll in college or post-secondary education.

The vision of The Lawson Academy is to create a student-centered, collaborative learning environment in which our scholars utilize innovative learning approaches and technology to become college-ready and to develop into civic-minded, contributing members of the global community. Nonetheless, we are not completely satisfied with where we stand. We believe that Project Elevate will help us to engage learners more consistently through use of a technology-rich culture and increased emphasis on individualized learning resources including tutoring and a robust STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) curriculum. Measuring the impact of this work will be done in two important ways: 1) comparing student success through annual STAAR results (increases in the percentage of students scoring Approaches Grade Level, Meets Grades Level and Masters Grade Level year over year) and 2) increasing teaching competencies in instructional delivery, classroom management, and formative assessments.

## **More About Us**

The Lawson Academy was the first single-gender public school in Texas and is committed to providing academic and social development to young people and to help them learn to become strong adults. The single-sex format creates opportunities that do not exist in the coed classroom. Built on the African model of men teaching boys to be men, Academy students benefit from on-campus mentoring programs and access to experiential learning for arts and sciences. The school is chartered by the State of Texas to have a 1:15 teacher-student ratio and the faculty retention rate is at 93% in the 2020-2021 school year.

Most faculty have been with the Academy for 4 years or more. Improving teaching skills to serve in a hybrid environment and with a virtual audience has been challenging and the Academy continues to need professional development support.

During COVID-19, 100% of students received laptops and headphones which enabled them to continue learning within days of the national quarantine in March, 2020 (Comcast). All students receive free breakfast, lunch and supper, and weekend backpacks in partnership with the Houston Food Bank. The Academy provides transportation since many families cannot drive their students to and from the campus. Creative planning for the current school year includes engagement of a tutoring partner for math and reading to increase student mastery and Saturday STEM programs in robotics, website design, virtual reality and other areas (Chevron and Houston Astros Foundation). In alignment with various community organizations, the Academy has a rich ballet program where students attend the Houston Ballet and take ballet lessons from its former principal dancer, financial literacy for families (Frost Bank, Peoples Trust Credit Union, ValuTeachers Insurance), maritime experiential program (Port of Houston), mentoring (University of Houston and Chevron).

# PRIORITY INITIATIVES

## **Three Initiatives**

After lengthy internal discussion, we have chosen to focus Project Elevate on three initiatives. Our selection is guided partly by the impact they will make on achieving our aspiration for advancing students, but also how readily seed money financing can be replaced by public funds or narrow-interest private donors. To be as forthcoming as possible about the importance of each initiative, we have indicated a current rough estimate the proportion of annual funds available for Project Elevate would be allocated to each.

### **Initiative 1: Strengthen Teaching Capability (40 percent of total)**

Academy leadership and outside partners will develop teacher capacity for innovative instruction that engages students through targeted professional development on writing effective lesson plans, curriculum alignment for relevance and the development and analysis of TEK(S) aligned formative assessments.

When children are not in the 'room,' teachers must design lessons that move through the necessary content and are student-centered to inspire a love of learning. Staffing of a full-time Instructional Coach to give feedback on high-impact instructional moves to insure consistency across all content areas.

Virtual learning during COVID-19 has demonstrated the critical need to reimagine the school's strategy and instructional design in ways that incorporate highly personalized instruction in a distance, hybrid and in-person setting for the current and future academic years. This phase of Project Elevate will fund a Instructional Coach, (one FTE) professional development (teachers, teacher-leaders, campus leadership), software platforms (e.g., Learning Management Systems, instructional content, intervention solutions), student assessment with comprehensive data analysis and teacher incentives (performance-based bonuses).

### **Initiative 2: Expand Tutoring and Mentoring Programs (30 percent of total)**

Started in the spring of 2021, the tutoring program was initiated with campus-administered test results as the basis of student learning needs. Many students enroll at The Lawson Academy below grade level, and virtual instruction has demonstrated the importance of personalized learning so that students do not suffer additional learning loss. The tutoring program brings professional tutors who are given access to the campus' digital textbooks and teacher-directed content in the twice-weekly tutoring sessions. Conducted in Math and Reading (core content tested in all grades), these sessions are recorded for review by campus administration. **Project Elevate** will expand the tutoring schedule to begin in the fall and continue through STAAR administration in May. The mentoring program is aligned with university and business partners to provide social resources for students and demonstrates the original vision of Audrey Lawson, the school's Founder who referenced the Frederick Douglass quote "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men." The goal of the mentorship program is to reduce the number of kids who enter the juvenile criminal justice system, increase the number of kids who finish high school, increase the number of kids who attend college, and show the mentees they can achieve success in a variety of professions if they work hard.

### **Initiative 3: Intensify Math/Science Programs, electives (30 percent of total)**

A robust STEM education creates critical thinkers, problem solvers, and produces the next generation of innovators, preparing students for jobs in 21st century careers, where science, technology, engineering, and mathematics are intertwined. In partnership with faculty and alignment with STEM program providers, students will be engaged in tailored presentations on computer programming, virtual reality, website design, landscape design, energy, robotics, aviation and maritime. Teacher-assigned projects will marry STEM with core content so that students generate their own ideas and create technical solutions to problems that they identify, solve and then present to their teachers and families. As students have demonstrated excitement around TikTok and other visual forms, the Lawson Academy will implement classroom projects where, for example, students build webpages about characters in history (Social Studies), design simulated cities using mathematical formulas (Math), create movies of selected literature (English/Language Arts), and program robots that celebrate "wins" with graphics and sound (social- emotional support). The Project Elevate investment will be used to fund STEM staff (one FTE), software platforms and project planning to make every student successful with not one but multiple STEM projects each school year.

# SEED FUNDING

The Project Elevate investment is to be used as the “seed funding” to launch these Priority Initiatives. The Lawson Academy will then be able to demonstrate and prove the initiatives’ impact in generating high levels of student engagement and academic mastery. Projected Project Elevate income of \$200,000 will allow the funding of additional staff (Instructional Coach, STEM Coordinator) along with faculty professional development, experienced tutors and a number of critical platforms for general education, special education and STEM instruction.

Adoption of increased teaching capacity (Initiative 1), student assessment improvements through one-on-one tutoring (Initiative 2) and the incorporation of engaging Math/Science programming (Initiative 3) will expand the effectiveness of all core content (Math, Reading, Science, and Social Studies). In the first two years of Project Elevate, private seed funding will be replaced with Title I funding. A large portion of the current Title I grant revenues is used to fund remediation staff for math and reading. The 3 Initiatives are designed to increase teacher effectiveness which should reduce, then finally remove, the need for this remediation staff. Instead, students will be given stronger classroom instruction and one-to-one tutoring to ‘catch up’ their skills in math and reading. In this way, most of the seed money will be replaced by public or Title I funds. Of course, the start-up costs of these Initiatives will not be an ongoing expense and Title I grant funding will continue to be available because of the high percentage of students eligible for free or reduced lunch, which is why the Academy applies for Title I Grants from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) annually.







# BACKGROUND

William A. Lawson Institute for Peace and Prosperity (WALIPP) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization founded in 1996 to support local residents and to reflect the ideals of Rev. William A. “Bill” Lawson, one of Houston’s most prominent leaders. As the founding pastor of the Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church, Lawson has been one of the city’s most influential civic voices for more than half a century. He has fought for justice for people of all races and faiths. His namesake organization has advocated for disadvantaged residents, established charter middle schools, and built affordable housing for seniors. Rev. Lawson is honored with permanent tributes on the Rice University campus central quadrangle and the Plaza of Respect at Interfaith Ministries for his voice and vision. He has influenced the life circumstances of generations with his unrelenting commitment to peaceful discourse and positive societal change. WALIPP’s charter school,

**The Lawson Academy**, opened in 2002 as a unique single-sex charter school system. In 2018, community stakeholders supported a \$12 million capital campaign allowing the school to relocate from its original Texas Southern University space to a newly constructed 36,632 square foot contemporary school building at 5052 Scott Street in the historic Third Ward neighborhood. The complex includes an all-boys campus and an all-girls campus for 300 middle-school students from low-income communities. Most students who come to us have often failed in traditional classrooms and many are classified as at-risk. Our data confirms that students who remain at The Lawson Academy for grades 6, 7 and 8 will excel in high school and beyond.

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## **Lawson Academy’s operating model has four cornerstones:**

- Relevant curriculum
- Rigorous instruction
- Respect for self and others
- Reciprocity, or give and take, of ideas and talents