

# Equity, Inclusion, & Safety: Career Academies as a Laboratory for Positive School Environments



# Small Learning Communities Create a Culture of Acceptance

Ninety-six percent of American teenagers say anxiety and depression are a problem among their peers.<sup>1</sup> Ninety percent of American teenagers report bullying is a problem.<sup>1</sup> With increased stress and mental health conditions exhibited by high school students, it is critical schools find ways to create healthier and safer learning environments so students can succeed in the classroom as they enter adulthood. By fostering small learning communities with a culture of acceptance and belonging in high schools, NAF academies are building a foundation for students to thrive in the classroom, workplace, and community.

From NAF's nearly 40 years of experience, we have seen firsthand the benefits small learning communities offer to students. A recent in-depth, peer reviewed case study conducted by researchers at the Ohio State University and the University of South Florida affirmed this experience.<sup>2</sup> The researchers performed a qualitative assessment of a Distinguished NAF Academy of Information Technology in the Southeastern region of the United States, and found a unique culture that fosters inclusivity, a sense of belonging, and a welcoming environment for students to thrive. This school is a highly regarded NAF academy and has 653 students.

This research team performed a comprehensive review of the Academy, including a five-day site visit; over 70 interviews with school leadership, business and industry partners, mentors, and community members; classroom observations; and off-site visits. The researchers found the school exhibited "a unique culture of acceptance and that students felt a strong sense of belonging, regardless of their backgrounds, sexual orientation, or cultural differences."<sup>2</sup>

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**"I stepped on campus, it felt like I was home, felt like I was with family.  
Kids know what they're doing, know what they're gonna do in the future."**<sup>5</sup>

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Academy student

There was a commonality among students that fostered a welcoming and safe environment. "Nerd" or "geek" culture was embraced.<sup>2</sup> This inclusiveness extended across demographics including LGBTQ students and students with disabilities who thrived in the Academy.

Some educators and parents interviewed raised concerns about the lack of social skills many students exhibited. Given the small size of the school, teachers and administrators know the students well, and took individual steps to address these concerns. For example, the Academy included mock interviews in seniors' capstone projects and banned laptops at school social events like pep rallies.<sup>2</sup> NAF academies ensure the development of soft-skills, or interpersonal skills, are prioritized in tandem with course curriculum.

## About NAF

NAF academies are small, focused learning communities that fit within and enhance high school systems. NAF academies use rigorous, industry-validated career-relevant curricula that incorporate current industry standards and best practices, literacy strategies, and STEM integration. NAF's approach is centered on a continuum of work-based learning experiences beginning with career awareness activities, progressing to career exploration activities, and culminating in career preparation activities, including paid internships. NAF academies help students acquire valuable workplace skills and see their education as a step toward long-term career options.

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**“He was a square peg in a round hole and he just didn’t fit in at his regular high school. [He] loves it here because he’s really into the technology part.”<sup>2</sup>**

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Academy parent

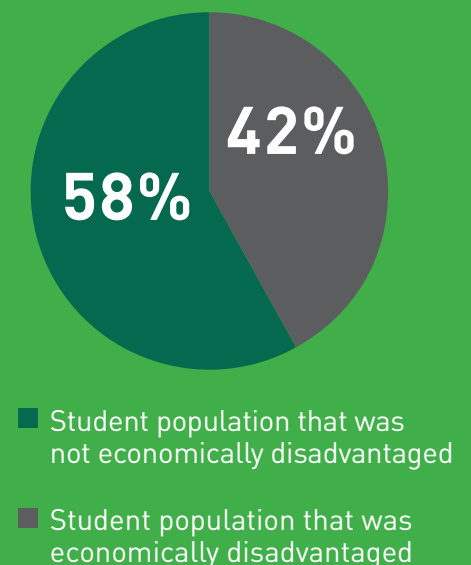
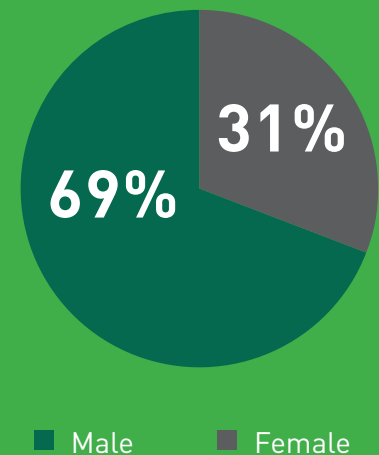
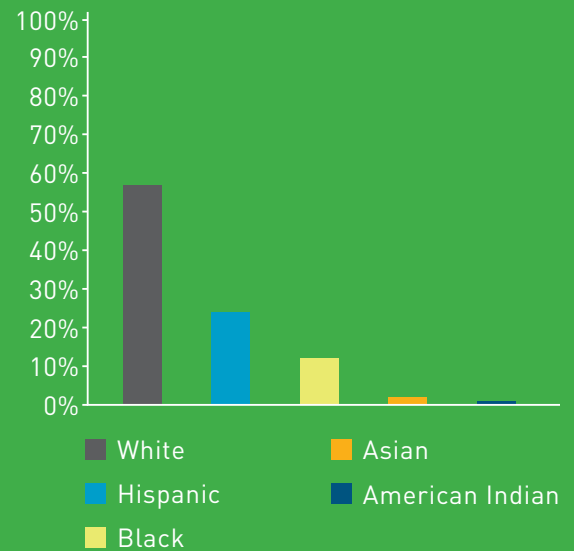
## Thoughtful Design Leads to Powerful Outcomes

A culture of acceptance can be attributed to a few factors that were carefully considered by NAF. First, NAF encourages all academies to operate using an open admissions enrollment policy. Students at the Academy in the case study entered via lottery system to gain admittance. Notably, since the application did not require achievement measures as a criterion for entry, this provided equitable access for students who may have otherwise not been able to attend this particular Academy of Information Technology. Students must maintain a 2.5 GPA and good behavior to stay in the Academy.<sup>2</sup> NAF promotes open enrollment for its academies to maximize every student’s chance at a successful future and focuses on high-need communities to reach ethnic and racial minority and female students.

Another factor that contributes to the culture of acceptance is small classroom size. According to the National Education Association, there are “proven long-term benefits of reducing class sizes,” including “achievement gains and higher graduation rates.”<sup>3</sup> Not only did the Academy have smaller class sizes, they also had a robust group of supporters outside the classroom including business and industry representatives, parents, community members, postsecondary partners, and mentors. These adults provided individualized attention to students who were struggling and helped ensure that none of the students fell through the cracks.

Finally, all students who attend the school are part of the Academy. This shared interest in information technology contributed to the culture of purpose. Students felt a sense of belonging when at school and can support one another in shared pursuits. These strategic approaches contribute to a thriving and healthy learning environment for all students.

## Demographics of the Academy<sup>2</sup>





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**“The community here is really supportive about what you do and everyone accepts you the way you are. They don’t tolerate bullying at all. Everyone can be whoever they want here.”<sup>5</sup>**

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Academy student

One of the biggest successes noted in the case study is that the Academy virtually eliminated bullying within its classrooms.<sup>2</sup> Nationwide, bullying can have effects on students that extend far beyond their time in school. In addition to “internalizing problems, in particular diagnoses of anxiety disorder and depression,” students who are bullied, “have lower educational qualifications, [are] worse at financial management, and earn less than their peers even at age 50.”<sup>4</sup> Building a bullying-free environment is a key factor in long term student success, happiness, and even financial success in adulthood. Overall disciplinary issues have declined as well and the Academy has seen higher rates of graduation. In the 2017-2018 school year, the Academy outpaced the district’s graduation rate by 20%, as 98% of their students graduated in four years compared to 78% in the district at large.<sup>2</sup>

NAF academies demonstrate that thoughtful design in school systems can tackle some of the greatest challenges students are facing today.



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**“Social bullying wasn’t a big deal here. I don’t remember fights. It never happened. You never heard about severe cases of bullying, and if it did happen, whoa! Watch out for that bully... it’s just not accepted here by the teachers and by the students.”<sup>2</sup>**

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Academy alumna

### Citations

<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Center. (2019). Most U.S. Teens See Anxiety and Depression as a Major Problem Among Their Peers. Retrieved 6 December 2019, <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/02/20/most-u-s-teens-see-anxiety-and-depression-as-a-major-problem-among-their-peers/>.

<sup>2</sup> Fletcher, E., Warren, N., & Hernandez-Gantes, V. (2019). The high school academy as a laboratory of equity, inclusion, and safety. *Computer Science Education*, 29(4), 382-406. doi: 10.1080/08993408.2019.1616457.

<sup>3</sup> National Education Association. “Class Size Reduction: A Proven Reform Strategy.” NEA, [http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/PB08\\_ClassSize08.pdf](http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/PB08_ClassSize08.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Wolke, Dieter, and Suzet Tanya Lereya. “Long-term effects of bullying.” *Archives of disease in childhood* vol. 100,9 (2015): 879-85. doi:10.1136/archdischild-2014-306667.

<sup>5</sup> Interviews with Academy students as part of ongoing research.