

**U.S. Department of Education**  
**2019 National Blue Ribbon Schools Program**

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[X] Public or [ ] Non-public

For Public Schools only: (Check all that apply) [ ] Title I      [X] Charter      [ ] Magnet      [ ] Choice

Name of Principal Ms. Melanie Jiskra  
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., etc.) (As it should appear in the official records)

Official School Name Aspen Academy  
(As it should appear in the official records)

School Mailing Address 14825 Zinran Avenue  
(If address is P.O. Box, also include street address.)

Savage      MN      55378-4557  
City      State      Zip Code+4 (9 digits total)

County MN

Telephone (952) 226-5940      Fax (952) 226-5949

Web site/URL https://aspenacademymn.org/      E-mail connie.gayle@aspenacademymn.org

I have reviewed the information in this application, including the eligibility requirements on page 2 (Part I-Eligibility Certification), and certify, to the best of my knowledge, that it is accurate.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date \_\_\_\_\_  
(Principal's Signature)

Name of Superintendent\*Dr. Connie Gayle      E-mail connie.gayle@aspenacademymn.org  
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other)

District Name Aspen Academy School District      Tel. (952) 226-5940

I have reviewed the information in this application, including the eligibility requirements on page 2 (Part I-Eligibility Certification), and certify, to the best of my knowledge, that it is accurate.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date \_\_\_\_\_  
(Superintendent's Signature)

Name of School Board President/Chairperson Misty Schutrop  
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other)

I have reviewed the information in this application, including the eligibility requirements on page 2 (Part I-Eligibility Certification), and certify, to the best of my knowledge, that it is accurate.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date \_\_\_\_\_  
(School Board President's/Chairperson's Signature)

The original signed cover sheet only should be converted to a PDF file and uploaded via the online portal.

*\*Non-public Schools: If the information requested is not applicable, write N/A in the space.*

## **Part I – Eligibility Certification**

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The signatures on the first page of this application (cover page) certify that each of the statements below, concerning the school’s eligibility and compliance with U.S. Department of Education and National Blue Ribbon Schools requirements, are true and correct.

1. All nominated public schools must meet the state’s performance targets in reading (or English language arts) and mathematics and other academic indicators (i.e., attendance rate and graduation rate), for the all students group, including having participation rates of at least 95 percent using the most recent accountability results available for nomination.
2. To meet final eligibility, all nominated public schools must be certified by states prior to September 2019 in order to meet all eligibility requirements. Any status appeals must be resolved at least two weeks before the awards ceremony for the school to receive the award.
3. The school configuration includes one or more of grades K-12. Schools on the same campus with one principal, even a K-12 school, must apply as an entire school.
4. The school has been in existence for five full years, that is, from at least September 2013 and each tested grade must have been part of the school for the past three years.
5. The nominated school has not received the National Blue Ribbon Schools award in the past five years: 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, or 2018.
6. The nominated school has no history of testing irregularities, nor have charges of irregularities been brought against the school at the time of nomination. If irregularities are later discovered and proven by the state, the U.S. Department of Education reserves the right to disqualify a school’s application and/or rescind a school’s award.
7. The nominated school has not been identified by the state as “persistently dangerous” within the last two years.
8. The nominated school or district is not refusing Office of Civil Rights (OCR) access to information necessary to investigate a civil rights complaint or to conduct a district-wide compliance review.
9. The OCR has not issued a violation letter of findings to the school district concluding that the nominated school or the district as a whole has violated one or more of the civil rights statutes. A violation letter of findings will not be considered outstanding if OCR has accepted a corrective action plan from the district to remedy the violation.
10. The U.S. Department of Justice does not have a pending suit alleging that the nominated school or the school district, as a whole, has violated one or more of the civil rights statutes or the Constitution’s equal protection clause.
11. There are no findings of violations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in a U.S. Department of Education monitoring report that apply to the school or school district in question; or if there are such findings, the state or district has corrected, or agreed to correct, the findings.

## PART II - DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

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Data should be provided for the most recent school year (2018-2019) unless otherwise stated.

### DISTRICT

1. Number of schools in the district (per district designation):
- 1 Elementary schools (includes K-8)
  - 1 Middle/Junior high schools
  - 0 High schools
  - 0 K-12 schools
- 2 TOTAL

### SCHOOL (To be completed by all schools)

2. Category that best describes the area where the school is located:
- Urban or large central city
  - Suburban
  - Rural or small city/town
3. Number of students as of October 1, 2018 enrolled at each grade level or its equivalent in applying school:

Grade	# of Males	# of Females	Grade Total
PreK	0	0	0
K	45	44	89
1	49	42	91
2	48	41	89
3	29	42	71
4	37	34	71
5	32	36	68
6	26	19	45
7	11	12	23
8	16	11	27
9	0	0	0
10	0	0	0
11	0	0	0
12 or higher	0	0	0
<b>Total Students</b>	293	281	574

\*Schools that house PreK programs should count preschool students **only** if the school administration is responsible for the program.

4. Racial/ethnic composition of the school (if unknown, estimate):
- 0 % American Indian or Alaska Native
  - 7 % Asian
  - 8 % Black or African American
  - 1 % Hispanic or Latino
  - 0 % Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
  - 81 % White
  - 3 % Two or more races
  - 100 % Total**

(Only these seven standard categories should be used to report the racial/ethnic composition of your school. The Final Guidance on Maintaining, Collecting, and Reporting Racial and Ethnic Data to the U.S. Department of Education published in the October 19, 2007 *Federal Register* provides definitions for each of the seven categories.)

5. Student turnover, or mobility rate, during the 2017 – 2018 school year: 14%

If the mobility rate is above 15%, please explain.

This rate should be calculated using the grid below. The answer to (6) is the mobility rate.

<b>Steps For Determining Mobility Rate</b>	<b>Answer</b>
(1) Number of students who transferred <i>to</i> the school after October 1, 2017 until the end of the 2017-2018 school year	44
(2) Number of students who transferred <i>from</i> the school after October 1, 2017 until the end of the 2017-2018 school year	29
(3) Total of all transferred students [sum of rows (1) and (2)]	73
(4) Total number of students in the school as of October 1, 2017	511
(5) Total transferred students in row (3) divided by total students in row (4)	0.14
(6) Amount in row (5) multiplied by 100	14

6. English Language Learners (ELL) in the school: 25 %  
141 Total number ELL

Specify each non-English language represented in the school (separate languages by commas):  
Malayalam, Russian, Somali, Swahili, Kishwahili, Tamil, Telugu, Ukrainian, Urdu, Vietnamese, Spanish, Hahuatl, French, Chinese, Mandarin, Amharic, Arabic, English, Creolized, Nepali, Khmer, Cambodian, Oromo, Afan, Oromo, Oromiffa

7. Students eligible for free/reduced-priced meals: 21 %  
Total number students who qualify: 119

8. Students receiving special education services: 10 %  
58 Total number of students served

Indicate below the number of students with disabilities according to conditions designated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Do not add additional conditions. It is possible that students may be classified in more than one condition.

- |                                  |  |
|----------------------------------|--|
| <u>21</u> Autism                 | <u>0</u> Multiple Disabilities                 |
| <u>0</u> Deafness                | <u>0</u> Orthopedic Impairment                 |
| <u>0</u> Deaf-Blindness          | <u>6</u> Other Health Impaired                 |
| <u>1</u> Developmental Delay     | <u>11</u> Specific Learning Disability         |
| <u>5</u> Emotional Disturbance   | <u>21</u> Speech or Language Impairment        |
| <u>0</u> Hearing Impairment      | <u>0</u> Traumatic Brain Injury                |
| <u>1</u> Intellectual Disability | <u>0</u> Visual Impairment Including Blindness |

9. Number of years the principal has been in her/his position at this school: 2
10. Use Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs), rounded to nearest whole numeral, to indicate the number of school staff in each of the categories below:

	<b>Number of Staff</b>
Administrators	3
Classroom teachers including those teaching high school specialty subjects, e.g., third grade teacher, history teacher, algebra teacher.	27
Resource teachers/specialists/coaches e.g., reading specialist, science coach, special education teacher, technology specialist, art teacher, etc.	13
Paraprofessionals under the supervision of a professional supporting single, group, or classroom students.	7
Student support personnel e.g., school counselors, behavior interventionists, mental/physical health service providers, psychologists, family engagement liaisons, career/college attainment coaches, etc.	5

11. Average student-classroom teacher ratio, that is, the number of students in the school divided by the FTE of classroom teachers, e.g., 22:1 21:1

12. Show daily student attendance rates. Only high schools need to supply yearly graduation rates.

<b>Required Information</b>	2017-2018	2016-2017	2015-2016	2014-2015	2013-2014
Daily student attendance	94%	95%	96%	96%	97%
High school graduation rate	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

13. **For high schools only, that is, schools ending in grade 12 or higher.**

Show percentages to indicate the post-secondary status of students who graduated in Spring 2018.

<b>Post-Secondary Status</b>	
Graduating class size	0
Enrolled in a 4-year college or university	0%
Enrolled in a community college	0%
Enrolled in career/technical training program	0%
Found employment	0%
Joined the military or other public service	0%
Other	0%

14. Indicate whether your school has previously received a National Blue Ribbon Schools award.

Yes  No

If yes, select the year in which your school received the award.

15. In a couple of sentences, provide the school’s mission or vision statement.

Aspen Academy's mission is to provide students with a well-rounded, Core Knowledge-based education which meets the intellectual, creative, and social needs of each child.

16. **For public schools only**, if the school is a magnet, charter, or choice school, explain how students are chosen to attend.

Applications are available mid-winter for enrollment the following fall. In accordance with Minnesota law, Aspen Academy holds a lottery if we receive more applications than slots available. All applications received during the open enrollment period prior to the deadline will be on equal footing for the lottery. The office begins to notify families the day after lottery regarding enrollment status/wait list number. Once a child is fully enrolled and begins attending classes, families do not need to re-enroll each year. When a family has a child who is currently registered, then any younger siblings being enrolled in the future will have preference over new families. Preference is also given to foster children and staff children.

## **PART III – SUMMARY**

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Ten years ago, a group of dedicated parents from the Prior Lake/Savage area, a suburb of Minneapolis, Minnesota, sought an academically rigorous educational option for their children. Aspen Academy was, and still is, authorized by Friends of Education (FOE), a non-profit, secular organization that is dedicated to assisting Core Knowledge schools. The founders recruited a qualified board of directors and were approved by the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) in October, 2007. In 2011, Aspen Academy received a five-year charter renewal and was eligible for building expansion, which was completed in the fall of 2017. Aspen Academy has a current enrollment of 540 students with the capacity for 670 students. Since its inception, Aspen Academy has been recognized as a “High Quality Charter School” for four years and one year for “Excellence in Reading and Attendance” through MDE.

What makes Aspen Academy successful is the daily implementation of its dynamic mission and vision. Aspen Academy strives to provide students with a well-rounded, Core Knowledge-based education which meets the intellectual, creative, and social needs of each child. We prepare students for future educational opportunities and life in a global society by creating an academically rigorous, literature-rich environment. Students are exposed to core classic literature across the content areas. For example, students read Gulliver’s Travels in third grade, Don Quixote in fifth grade, and Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar in seventh grade. Class sizes are small to ensure a sense of community is built and valued. Kindergarten through fourth grades have a capacity of 24 students per section, and fifth through eighth grades have 26 students per class.

Through the core knowledge curriculum and courses in Spanish, Latin, band, orchestra, physical education, and art, coupled with an extended learning day, Aspen Academy scholars are developing all aspects of their lives. Before and after-school care is available to families; our after-school program includes activities such as Strategy Club, Math Olympiads, Skiing Club, Knitting Club, and STEAM Club. To meet the intellectual, creative, and social needs of our students, the school welcomes the authentic learning opportunities which present themselves daily through our diverse population and high level of partnership with our families. Families share their time and talent for a minimum of forty hours per year per family. Parents have offered classes for our after-school program, including Writing Club and Pilates. Our students’ culture, ethnicity, and unique learning styles are woven into our teaching and learning daily. To prepare our scholars for future educational opportunities and active citizenship, Aspen Academy explicitly teaches and models the THINK core values: Tenacity, High Expectations, Integrity, No Excuses, and Kindness. It is through the common language and expectations of THINK values that we support the development of the whole child.

## **PART IV – CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION**

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### **1. Core Curriculum:**

#### **1a. Reading/English language arts:**

The Common Core ELA standards are the driving force for the content we teach in Reading/English language arts. To meet standards, Aspen Academy implements Core Knowledge. Core Knowledge is curriculum which systematically outlines topics to be studied by each grade level, ensuring that no gaps in instruction occur; teachers know what students have experienced in previous years and build on the common foundation to deepen and enhance additional learning. The content taught includes phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. In kindergarten, students work on understanding that symbols represent letters which each have a sound. Many read alouds are used during kindergarten, and there is a focus on sight words and starting to build word families. By second grade, students integrate all topics into their reading/English language arts. Students complete a unit of study on insects in which they research, write about, and create three-dimensional models. The content also reaches into deeper depth as students must justify if their bug is a ‘friend or foe,’ providing reasons that support their opinion. In fifth grade, curriculum content brings classic texts, such as Don Quixote, to teach theme, perspective, and narration. Students learn higher-level thinking skills through inferencing and evaluating.

Three times a year, elementary students are assessed on their early literacy skills, comprehension, and fluency. Using running records from the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System, teachers determine instructional reading levels. From the data, teachers are able to differentiate lessons and develop leveled guided reading groups to target specific skills and address standards that are not mastered. The use of informational text is the primary genre used during reading lessons. Additionally, universal screening is conducted in fall, winter, and spring for both elementary and middle school students. Students not on target for seasonal benchmarks are identified with further diagnostic testing and provided additional supports through interventions. All students undergoing interventions have their progress monitored weekly for response.

Best-practice instructional strategies are utilized to bring the curriculum resources to life for Aspen Academy scholars. This includes training for all teachers on the Teach Like A Champion/ Uncommon Schools strategies, which involve teachers implementing habits of discussion, formative assessment, cooperative learning, and project-based learning. Support staff, including Title 1 and EL teachers, push into classrooms to support guided reading groups during core instruction. Aspen Academy utilizes a balanced literacy approach and guided workshop model within the classrooms. Through use of running records, universal and diagnostic screening, and common grade level assessments, teachers use data to determine flexible groups and instructional decisions.

#### **1b. Mathematics:**

Aspen Academy follows the Singapore Math philosophy, which is defined as instruction that supports students as they move through the stages of deeper math. Teachers utilize the CPA (concrete, pictorial, abstract) approach, which allows for students to be introduced to concepts in a tangible, manipulative way and then deepens understanding and application as they progress to increasing levels of abstraction. Math content incorporates teaching of the strands, including number sense and operations, data analysis, geometry, and algebra. For example, within the algebra strand content, first graders in the concrete stage use objects and numbers to create patterns. A first-grade student might make a colored pattern of Skittles or group a specific number of items in increasing quantity. Content in third grade moves into the representational stage as students describe and create input-output rules with addition, subtraction, and multiplication by seeing the patterns of change. By fifth and eighth grades, students are into the abstract phase of the content. In the algebra strand, content includes creation of tables and rules to represent functions with tables, symbols, equations, and graphs. Specific strategies Aspen Academy teachers implement include number bonds, bar modeling, and mental math. The important component in this math instructional approach is that, at any time, students are fluidly moving between the CPA levels with



concepts. This creates a natural differentiated experience for students.

Every trimester, Aspen Academy progress monitors the mastery of standards by administering an interim assessment. Each assessment is tailored to the standards taught that trimester and is different than the previous/next trimester's assessment. The assessments are designed to be standard-specific and rigorous and provide detailed data on each student. Following the interim assessments, teachers and teacher leaders review the data and make instructional decisions. One important piece of the data meetings is planning "re-teaching" lessons for students who did not demonstrate mastery. The grade level will create and offer choices for how the re-teaching lesson(s) will be delivered. Following the re-teaching lesson(s), students are given a formative assessment to assess mastery, and the data review continues. In addition to the interim assessments, Aspen Academy utilizes the best practice of triangulating data. Students also take universal screening benchmarks three times a year, and, along with examining student work samples, the educational team is able to create an individualized learning plan for each student.

### **1c. Science:**

Our science teaching supports student interest, inquiry, and project-based learning and is aligned to the MN State science standards. With the core knowledge thread of science running through the classes, students are able to dive deeper each year into the biological, physical, and earth sciences. For example, in third grade, students dissect cow eyes. In fifth grade, they dissect fish and frogs, and by middle school, students are dissecting rats, squids, and owl pellets. Additionally, our physical building location offers a backyard pond that connects inside learning to outdoor learning. During the winter season, students in grades K-8 set out bird feeders and learn to identify and classify the different bird species through observation. Our kindergarten students sprout plants in their classroom and then plant them in the front of the school, while second graders develop an insect museum where their research and model insects are on display. Students in the middle school grades apply their learning of cross-curricular areas during the SciVentBerg Fair. This project-based learning experience includes the use of a scoring rubric aligned to standards. Sixth grade students are responsible for conceiving, building, and demonstrating an invention. Seventh graders take their unit on engineering and simple machines to a new level by drawing a blue print, building a machine, and preparing an oral presentation explaining the goal of their machine as well as the steps and simple machines used. Through these events, parents and community members join the school as competition judges. Students are assessed through rubric scores on projects, classroom assessments, and, in grades 5 and 8, state standardized science tests. The ACT Periodic assessment is administered three times a year. The data is used to determine instructional practices and curriculum development.

### **1d. Social studies/history/civic learning and engagement**

Teaching in social studies/history/civic learning and engagement incorporates the depth of rich literature from the Core Knowledge curriculum, aligned to the state standards, and allows for students to have choice in ways to demonstrate their learning. Project-based learning is the major type of instruction utilized. In first grade, students learn about Early World Civilizations and create a sarcophagus for King Tut. Second graders begin learning about the Civil War, and by fifth grade, the students present their depth of knowledge of the Civil War through the creation of a wax museum. A state float parade is designed by the third grade students; the float travels through the entire school, while staff, students, and parents line the hallways of both floors of the school to watch the parade. Sixth grade students create illuminated manuscript pages in art and then use Latin text to create their own manuscript page. The literary selections within each grade level for the social studies/history/civic learning and engagement are often set in those parts of the world and time periods being studied. Some of the texts used include *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, *King Arthur and the Round Table*, and *Animal Farm*. Assessments include rubric scoring on projects and reports, along with classroom tests.

### **1e. For secondary schools:**

### **1f. For schools that offer preschool for three- and four-year old students:**

## 2. Other Curriculum Areas:

Aspen Academy offers music, band, orchestra, physical education and health, art, technology, Spanish, and Latin as our specialist curriculum areas. All students in grades K-8 receive 50 minutes of specialists daily. There is a four-day rotation between specialist curriculum classes. All of the specialist curriculum areas integrate the Core Knowledge curriculum into their classes.

Art supports the acquisition of the essential skills of the elements of art and the principles of design. Students learn about the artists, art periods, artworks, and elements of art listed in core knowledge. For example, students study about Gustav Klimt's "Tree of Life" and his use of dots as an expression in his paintings. The students then create a pointillist style dot pattern which is displayed on the Aspen Tree Mural. Much of the core knowledge for art at each grade level complements what they are learning in history class. In February, Aspen celebrates the "Love of the Arts" night where student artwork is on display for families and the community.

Band is offered for students in fifth grade through eighth grade and meets on a daily rotation. Musicians learn about reading and writing music notation, improvisation, and composers from different eras. The middle school band also integrates the Core Knowledge history periods into their music selection, studies, and performances. Band supports state standards and essential skill acquisition every day as students perform alone and in groups. Band students evaluate music after concerts and small group performances to refine skills. Orchestra is offered before school twice a week, starting with students in third grade. Individual and group lessons are offered throughout the school day for mastery of skills.

Music is offered in grades K-8 on a four-day rotation for either 25 or 50 minutes dependent on grade level. The MN state standards define the essential skills needed to be acquired by students. Through these grades, music study and learning happens through the different eras, which align with the Core Knowledge curriculum. Students in grades K-5 are taught through a Kodaly based approach. Music history of the medieval, renaissance, baroque eras are studied. Families are invited into the music classroom for "informances." These opportunities allow parents to witness what and how music is taught and experienced.

In the fourth and fifth grades, Latin is offered for 30 minutes on a four-day rotation. During these grades, the focus of Latin instruction is on enjoyment, exploration of another language, culture, time period, and supporting general education goals. Latin specifically ties into grammar and vocabulary acquisition, which students are learning in language arts, and reinforces the Core Knowledge subjects of mythology and Roman history that were taught in primary grades, while deepening and expanding students' understanding of these topics. Students also learn about prominent Roman mythology through reading and examination of related Roman art and architecture.

In middle school grades, Latin is offered daily for 50 minutes. While there are no Minnesota state standards for Latin, the class adheres to the new American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) standards and the most recent Standards for Classical Language Learning. This means students focus on communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities. Students read from Oerberg's *Lingua Latina per se illustrata* as a base text, then enrich their understanding of the topics covered through independent research, creative projects, and discussion of archaeological artifacts and primary texts. Students use Latin to read, write, speak, and listen to level-appropriate texts and use those texts to learn about Roman culture and history. This supports Core Knowledge covered in Social Studies, for which Greco-Roman history is a major unit in sixth grade. Students meet standards for connections and comparisons through drawing connections between what they learn about the Latin language and Roman culture to what they are studying in their other classes; they are encouraged through games, assignments, and class discussion to find the similarities and differences between Romans and themselves, the Latin language and the other languages they know, and to recognize the Latin roots of their vocabulary in health, science, language arts, and other core subjects.

Our Spanish program starts in kindergarten and goes through eighth grade. Elementary students receive

Spanish instruction on a four-day rotation, and middle school students have Spanish every other day. Spanish also uses the ACTFL proficiency standards and connects Core Knowledge curriculum through teaching fables and fairy tales. By second grade, students speak Spanish the entire class period.

### **3. Special Populations:**

Our English Language (EL) students receive services both in small group settings and push-in support in classrooms. Our EL teacher also serves as our Title 1 reading teacher, so she is able to ensure EL students are getting both language and reading support. Aspen Academy does have a significant achievement gap in reading and math between EL learners and non-EL students. In 2018, 43% of our EL students in grades 3-8 did not meet standards on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCA) reading test, compared to 11% of non-EL students. In Math, 30% of EL students did not meet state standards, while only 7% of non-EL students did not meet standards. With this significant gap, the district has provided multiple professional development opportunities for our EL teacher. Some of the trainings include Tier 2 interventions, Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Schools, and Language Instruction Educational Programming. Our EL teacher connects with general education teachers to scaffold learning and previews vocabulary and background knowledge for grade-level assignments.

State assessment data in reading and math also indicates a significant gap between students receiving special education services in comparison to students who do not receive services. In reading, 41% of special education students did not meet state standards in 2018 in comparison to 10% of students not receiving special education services. In math, 38% of special education students in 2018 did not meet state standards, while 5% of students not receiving special education did not meet standards. We have prioritized the resources needed to address professional development and curriculum implementation, as well as adding additional contracted service providers to support the special education needs. The additional staff has included an ASD consultant and evaluation coordinator. Teachers attended state and local training before school started in addition to weekly meetings with a special education instructional coach and due process supervisor. Paraprofessionals also receive coaching specific to the paraprofessional role and weekly meetings with instructional coach and special education teachers.

In order to implement data-driven decision making, Aspen Academy administers universal benchmark screenings three times per year to determine students who are performing both above and below grade level. Aspen Academy has a student support team which includes the school psychologist, social worker, school counselor, general education teachers, Title 1 support staff, EL teacher, dean of students, behavior support specialist, and principal. Data is reviewed and a plan is determined which includes evidence-based early interventions for academics, social, emotional, behavior, and executing functioning skills.

Students who are performing below grade level qualify for Title 1 services for both reading and math. These students meet in small groups, both in the classroom and out of the classroom, on targeted skills and are progress monitored for their response to the intervention. Students who demonstrate response continue with intervention, while those demonstrating little to no response will be discussed by the student support team again. It is through this team that students are referred for possible special education evaluation. The high number of parent volunteers that serve Aspen Academy also support special populations, either with those below grade level or exceeding grade level. Parents have led advanced math groups as well as working one on one with a student practicing sight words or letter names.

The same process of data review determines students who need extension opportunities to challenge their academic skills. Aspen Academy offers accelerated math courses and also differentiates within the classroom for varying student needs.

## PART V – SCHOOL SUPPORTS

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### 1. School Climate/Culture:

Community is synonymous with Aspen Academy. Community begins with new staff being given an orientation the week before all staff return. During this time, veteran staff mentors join the new staff to support and help acclimate them to Aspen Academy. Throughout the year, all staff are a part of peer coaching. New staff work with the district instructional coach on a weekly basis, and veteran staff have peer coaches that meet twice a month. Not only are staff mentored, but younger students are mentored by the upper grades. For example, fourth grade students connect with kindergarten for reading buddies, while middle school students are ambassadors for new students joining Aspen Academy throughout the year. Many of our middle school students are also assigned a younger student to mentor throughout the year. They spend time one on one to help build confidence, reduce anxiety, and let them know the ‘big’ kids are there for them.

This past year, Aspen Academy faculty and staff participated in the Top 20 Teacher training, which focuses on the importance of creating a culture of safety and trust to develop the potential of students and staff and identifying the four components that create a healthy and effective school culture. This training has been instrumental in creating a positive school climate. Many of our teachers are continuing this learning through their self-selected Professional Learning Community (PLC) focusing on Top 20 Teacher.

Students’ feedback is a fundamental building block to a positive culture. To gauge students’ perspectives on the school culture, the Minnesota Student Survey is administered annually to our fifth and eighth graders, and results are shared with the staff. Two of our elementary classrooms are designed to support flexible learning, allowing for student choice and opportunities for them to learn about what best meets their learning styles. The school also asks staff to participate in a climate survey. The results are shared with the staff, and action plans are developed to continue successes and develop areas that we can improve.

Our students are enveloped with support through our school counselor and social worker. We also have Juno, our therapy dog, who is by far the most popular staff member! Our middle school meets weekly to build community through restorative practice circles and mindfulness lessons. Our elementary students receive lessons on the Zones of Regulation to learn about self- management and how to support each other if a friend is in the ‘red zone’.

Through these climate and culture supports, Aspen students have a safe, welcoming, and inclusive learning community.

### 2. Engaging Families and Community:

Families at Aspen Academy are asked to share their time and talent throughout the year. We have a very active Aspen Community Council (ACC), which supports our families and school through events, activities, and fundraisers. This past fall, our families and community raised over \$70,000 for the next phase of our playground. Our ACC mentors new families during their first year at Aspen Academy to ensure everyone is welcomed and has the information they need. We also have a Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC) which meets quarterly. This group has offered family education nights on specific topics such as inclusivity for students with special needs, Autism 101, Zones of Regulation, and the benefits of therapy dogs. Aspen Academy also partnered this year with the community to bring in a Somali cultural speaker to educate staff on culture and practice, and we have been recognized by the local Optimist Club for our Youth Leadership program.

The attendance rate for parent/teacher/student conferences showcases how engaged are families are with Aspen Academy. The connections between home, school, and community contributes to the success of our students in their intellectual, social, and creative needs. Students are very proud to let us know when their parent or family member is coming in to ‘help the kids out.’ It is an expectation that families give forty hours of their time and talent through volunteering. Volunteering at Aspen Academy can occur either on

site, at home, or within community. All parent and family volunteers attend a volunteer training session which outlines opportunities for volunteering, expectations of the volunteer whether working on or off site, and the importance of the THINK (Tenacity, High Expectations, Integrity, No Excuses and Kindness) values that are practiced at Aspen Academy. Throughout the year, Aspen Academy offers prospective parent nights for the public and community, which provide information on the mission and unique characteristics of Aspen Academy.

### **3. Professional Development:**

Aspen Academy has a professional development team (PDT) which meets to plan professional development opportunities. After using data to review and create our site goal, the PDT designs the year's plan. This year, trend data showed some stagnancy in our standardized math assessment scores, so we brought in a Singapore math trainer to work with teachers. This professional development enabled the teachers to understand the philosophy of the curriculum and build resources for their classrooms. During our back-to-school workshop, we offered professional development on a variety of topics, such as our behavior management systems, including review of Envoy strategies and our THINK values, state mandated training on homeless students, data review regarding the site goal, and Top 20 Teacher climate and culture training. Within the first week of school, staff were asked to complete a survey on the topics presented during workshop week, and this feedback was used to develop further professional development plans. We continued to offer more sessions on enhancing climate and culture, as well as training on project-based learning and rubric design.

All staff are part of instructional peer coaching. Staff new to Aspen are coached weekly by our instructional coach, and returning/veteran staff members are peer-coached bi-monthly. It is through this job-embedded professional development that community is built and the shared vision of the school is spread. Peers have rich conversations that support professional growth and development. All licensed and non-licensed staff are evaluated yearly with feedback. Classrooms are open doors, which is how business is done at Aspen Academy. Our paraprofessionals also receive monthly guidance from our paraprofessional coach, and special education teachers have a special education coach specific to their needs and responsibilities.

The district supports the need to build capacity within our teacher leaders; therefore, outside professional development aligned to the PDT site goal is also encouraged. For example, with math being a site goal this past year, we had teachers attend guided math workshops, a Greg Tang workshop, and intervention training. Current administrators also continue their growth and development through trainings and cohorts that support leadership development, such as the MN Charter School Leaders Cohort, which includes a principal coach to observe and work with principal on site, the Minnesota Association of Charter Schools (MACS), and the Minnesota Association of School Administrators (MASA), which offers development for executive directors.

### **4. School Leadership:**

Aspen Academy's leadership structure includes the school board, executive director, K-8 principal, and K-8 dean of students. The philosophy of the leadership team, inclusive of executive director, principal, and dean of students, is cohesive and aligned with servant leadership. The servant-leadership philosophy focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities in which they are a part. Servant leadership shares power, puts the needs of others first, and helps people develop and perform as highly as possible. The philosophy of servant leadership contributes to the success of Aspen Academy as we are privileged to serve the students and families not only in the academic realm, but in social, emotional, and creative development.

The principal starts each day by greeting students and families as they enter the building. The connectedness of staff and families is the backbone of the school. The leadership team prioritizes the need to build capacity within staff. This is accomplished through continual professional development, being cognizant to place staff in areas of strengths. For example, a very effective math teacher was placed in a position which allowed her to impact more teachers through coaching and leading data meetings and professional development opportunities. While it was a difficult decision to pull her out of the classroom,

the number of students she has positively impacted has ultimately increased by her training of all teachers. The leadership team also collaborates with teacher committees to gather feedback, ideas, and perspectives specific to grade levels and content areas. Through the servant-leadership philosophy, teachers experience a greater sense of fulfillment. This sense of job fulfillment leads to greater job performance, with the end result being a successful educational experience for students, from academics to creativity.

## **Part VI – STRATEGIES FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS**

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When defining a single practice that stakeholders believe has been the most influential in the school's success in meeting the mission and vision, the thread that runs through all that we do every day for every student is our application of THINK (Tenacity, High Expectations, Integrity, No Excuses, and Kindness) principles.

These principles are critical components that connect the practice of how we conduct ourselves and our business to achieve student outcomes, both in school and in society. The most important link with THINK is the common language students hear at school and home.

The integration of THINK principles in all that we do, from teaching to learning, allows for the character of students to be developed. This practice views mistakes or not giving full effort as opportunities to reteach and help our students grow. Staff support students in their Re-Think reflection on choices and actions to build on these foundational character traits.

Tenacity is defined, taught, and practiced in all areas of the school. Our kindergarten students can identify tenacity when they don't give up, while our middle school students identify tenacity as the perseverance to push through challenges.

Due to the level of rigor in our academics, students deeply embrace the High Expectations principle. The belief that all students can achieve to their full potential develops self-efficacy in students which they will carry with them in all areas of life. Following each trimester, students in grades 3-8 are acknowledged for meeting the high expectations of honor roll and high honor roll requirements.

Integrity is the principle that defines who we are. It is the ability to do the right thing when no one is watching and to have the self-confidence to stand for beliefs. Integrity connects the choices students make to their ability to reach high student outcomes.

In a rigorous academic environment, there are No Excuses for not meeting expectations. The No Excuses principle connects students' ability to reach outcomes to their own choices, helping them realize they must be responsible for their actions and be accountable to themselves and others in the community. In kindergarten, this starts with students knowing that if they forgot their planner, it is because they did not put in their backpack, in comparison to "my parents did not put it in my backpack."

Kindness is the final principle. Students develop empathy and concern for others, which builds the tight-knit community of Aspen Academy. Being a good friend translates into situations where students put the welfare of others before their own. Recently, a staff member of Aspen Academy was diagnosed with cancer. A parent heard the news and partnered with her employer to have the staff member be the recipient of a financial donation. Students in the school made get well cards and presented her with the cards and check on Valentine's Day. For parents, community, and students, kindness is a priority.

The THINK principles encompass developing those critical character traits that are necessary for reaching the district's mission and vision. With the implementation of THINK principles, the explicit teaching, modeling, and practicing of the human values that make the world a better place not only leads to students reaching outcomes, but to developing agents of change who will have far-reaching positive impact in the world.