

TEACHING AT FALLS LAKE ACADEMY

Thank you for your interest in teaching at FLA! North Carolina charter schools are laboratories for leading-edge innovation and school reform efforts, and we here at FLA are proud to be one of the schools that is helping to lead that effort. The FLA Board of Directors and administration are committed to establishing and growing an educational program that will eventually be identified as a “go to” program for teams who visit operational sites for ideas and models to consider in planning their own programs.

Before continuing in the application / interview process, you should be advised that ***we do not do things the way most traditional schools do them.*** The FLA staff are actively engaged in designing and implementing instructional, assessment, and support systems that incorporate those “best practices” identified and proven by current research to most completely and effectively prepare students for college, for the workplace, and for life in the global society of the 21st century. ***Our staff engages in the development of authentic and alternative methodology in every aspect of classroom instruction and assessment and in student support services.*** For that reason, it is absolutely crucial that FLA teachers and staff members know and embrace certain professional expectations prior to employment. Please read the following sections carefully and ***make certain you can both agree with and enthusiastically incorporate*** these tenets into your own professional practices.

Instructional Program Standards

1. ***Research-based Best Practices ONLY.*** FLA teachers are not free to use pedagogical techniques or methodology that isn’t proven by research to be effective, no matter how much they might like them. Only those research-based best practices that have been solidly linked to increased student learning or cultural dissemination are allowed. Within grade- and age-appropriate parameters designed and adopted by our teachers, *the following instructional and assessment practices are examples of the kind of teaching and learning practices which characterize the learning in every class:*

- Study-unit syllabi detailing every student assignment and every due date.
- Project-Based Learning activities involving active engagement by every student and resulting in student-led project presentations to gatherings of parents every instructional quarter.
- Development of Showcase Portfolios, which are presented at semester’s end in Student-Led Conferences.
- Written reflections on study units and assignments, graded and included in portfolios [the “Interactive Notebook” is a prominent example of this type of system].
- Credit recovery systems for failed or incomplete work [“Error Analysis,” etc.].
- Authentic assessment activities only – homework and tests are used only in those ways proven by research to *actually work* in increasing student learning. [Be careful, as you read this, that you know what the research actually says – it’s not what most teachers think.]
- 3-tiered research-proven “best practice” assessment system: Diagnostic, Formative, Summative.

2. ***Engaged learning.*** Classroom instructional methods must be based on best practices as identified and proven by current research. ***Traditional didactic lecture and text-based teaching is to be kept to an absolute minimum, if used at all.*** All learning events and activities are designed to lift students’ understanding to the highest possible levels, such as those outlined in Bloom’s “Learning Taxonomy.” Learning events and activities must *“emphasize depth over breadth”* and *“inquiry-based learning over rote memorization.”*

3. ***Integrated curriculum.*** Our educational program will eventually be developed collaboratively with the faculties of all three levels: elementary, middle, and high school, so that individual course curricula are integrated to the fullest extent possible, facilitating both intellectual transfer and creativity development. Teachers design learning events and activities that lead students to demonstrate an *understanding and appreciation of connections among disciplines and contextual relevance of study.* Traditional classroom instructional methods often do not meet this requirement; our teachers are required to develop methodology based on current research-based best practices.

4. **Relevance.** Our teachers are expected to design learning activities which actively demonstrate *greater relevance between the ‘work’ of students and the “real” world. Assigned readings and projects are designed that connect to students’ identities.* In addition, assigned *projects and assessments ask students to make meaning of knowledge, apply it, and create or construct new knowledge.*

5. **Academic rigor.** Within age- and grade-appropriate parameters designed by our staff, all student coursework assignments are expected to engage students in active, in-depth learning through *sustained writing and revision* in all grades and subject areas, *collaborative project-based learning, interdisciplinary curriculum integration, intellectual inquiry, Paideia-style seminars and discussions, and development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills.* In addition, all learning events and activities must be aimed at the *development of academic skills and personal habits that lead to social competence and understanding of self in society as well as academic success in the classroom.*

6. **Technology use.** *Student ability to use all aspects of technology* is a major FLA objective. The use of technology as a tool in learning is not only encouraged, it is absolutely required. Learning events and activities must be designed to facilitate as much student use of technology as possible, and to lead students to the highest possible level of familiarity and competence in such use. [NOTE: The incorporation of this standard in our program design will be limited in our first few years of operation, until our budget allows for the purchase of sufficient classroom technology to fully address it.]

7. **Differentiated instruction.** Teachers are encouraged to *actively solicit student input* into the design of instruction and assessment to the extent that a significant portion of each student’s learning experiences is accomplished using activities and methods consistent with his/her individual learning style preferences. Again, this is subject to age- and grade-appropriate parameters designed and adopted by our teachers.

Assessment and Grading Procedures

Authentic assessment is our overriding standard. Assessment events and activities are designed to measure actual, definable, demonstrable knowledge and/or skill(s) gained from the learning events and activities with which they are connected. Active student engagement is the norm.

1. **Three-tiered assessment program.** All FLA teachers assess and evaluate student learning within a specific 3-tiered assessment program:

Diagnostic: Assessment and evaluation of student progress and level of learning prior to instruction.

Formative: Ongoing assessment as learning progresses.

Summative: Final grade in the course (see #6 below).

2. **No penalty-based grading.** Penalty-based grading (defined as grading practices which start students at an assumption of 100% subject mastery and deduct points for mistakes and/or deletions in assessment activities) are not used at FLA with one exception: those traditional tests which are designed to acquaint and train students with the testing format(s) used in state-mandated End-of-Grade and End-of-Course tests. All other grading is based on rubrics which designate level of subject mastery benchmarks.

3. **PBL presentations and Student-led conferencing.** Once each quarter, all FLA staff members train their students in and facilitate the presentations of student projects to their parents. In addition, students participate in *student-led conferences* at the end of each of the two semesters, wherein each *individual* student presents to his/her parent(s) his/her *showcase portfolio*, demonstrating knowledge and skills acquired over the course of the quarter.

4. **State accountability testing.** Regardless of other instructional and/or assessment components, all students must take *and pass* the NC End-of-Grade (and high school End-of-Course) tests in order to be recommended for promotion and/or credit. Teachers typically include just enough traditional testing in their assessment design to familiarize students with the format and enable them to feel comfortable using it to demonstrate knowledge.

5. **Multiple assessment methods.** Students are subject to a *variety of assessments* in order to give every possible chance for them to demonstrate what knowledge and skills they've gained and/or developed. Teachers are expected to design a significant portion of their learning events and activities so that students will occasionally have a choice of two or more assessment avenues by which to earn credit for those events and activities.

6. **Rubrics.** Teachers develop rubrics for all assessments which give students specific benchmarks of excellence to aim for. Grade benchmarks are used in all grade levels, specifying which rubric levels (in combination over the course of each grading period) are necessary to attain which grades. *Revision* of work products originally deemed marginal or worse is integral to this process and is actively encouraged in all classes.

7. **Final course grades.** **In every case, without exception, final course grades are required to be clear pictures of what the students know and can do in the subject area at the end of the semester, NOT merely averages of assessment grades accumulated during that time.** It is entirely conceivable that students can carry low "averages" in a given course but pass with high "A" grades if they end the semester demonstrating A-level course knowledge and skill for the coursework.

Community Service and Civic Education

In addition to a commitment to the **Instructional Program** and **Assessment and Grading Procedures** outlined above, all FLA staff members are involved in the teaching and supervision of a community service program requirement for every student. This program is still under development, largely designed by the FLA teachers and their students at each grade level. Through participation in this program, students will be expected to learn and demonstrate high levels of community and civic engagement and awareness.

Professional Requirements

Demonstrated love for students and unhesitating willingness to put students' best interests ahead of teacher's own convenience and/or preferences.

Unhesitating commitment to teaching based only on Research-Based Best Practices, with no "pet" techniques or methods that are not proven by research to increase and/or advance student learning.

Enthusiastic embrace and incorporation of these **Instructional Program** and **Assessment and Grading Procedures** elements into classroom practices.

Enthusiastic participation in the development and maintenance of our professional learning community, including frequent professional collaboration with colleagues, team-based design and teaching, mentoring, peer coaching, and program evaluation activities, and willing participation in professional development and training events and activities, including occasional summer training as well as periodic staff development activities throughout the school year outside of class time.

Willing participation in quarterly parent presentations, community service supervision, and other after-hours events.

Student counseling and tutoring as needed, both during and outside school hours.

Service on committees, teams, and task forces.

Willing, enthusiastic coordination and supervision of co- and extracurricular student organizations, events, and activities (academic competitions, field trips, etc.).

The Bottom Line: 5 Basic Principles We Live and Operate By

- 1. KIDS FIRST.** First means first. We meet the kids' needs first, even when doing so takes us away from our pet beliefs, traditions, comfortable practices, expectations, and/or conveniences.
- 2. RELATIONSHIPS REQUIRED.** Every staff member is expected to develop and maintain close, caring, personal relationships with the kids they teach *and* with those kids' parents. No exceptions. If a particular kid pushes our buttons, then we deactivate those buttons and find a way to connect, we don't just throw away the relationship with that kid. We do the work needed, because we don't expect kids to behave like adults; that's our role.
- 3. MANDATORY RELEVANCE.** Everything we do points our kids toward productive life and work. If we can't clearly answer the question, "How can my kids use what I'm teaching them today?", then we change what we're teaching until we can answer with positive examples.
- 4. RESEARCH DICTATES PRACTICE.** If it hasn't been proven by research to work, we don't use it, regardless of how many decades it's been accepted practice. If it *has* been proven by research to work, we *do* use it, even if it is contradictory to our own experiences and preferences.
- 5. AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT ONLY.** FLA students are assessed and evaluated on their accumulated knowledge and demonstrated skill levels (what they know and can do), not on whether or not they get it in on time or exactly right the first time. Final course grades represent as closely as it is humanly possible to measure the actual percentage of knowledge and/or skill level attained by the student after a year's worth (elementary, middle) or semester's worth (high school) of study of the subject content.

Can you embrace our philosophy? If so, please consider applying to teach at Falls Lake Academy, a place where community and education combine to celebrate each child's ambitions so that their full potential can ***TAKE FLIGHT!***

"Let not many of you become Teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such, we shall incur a stricter judgment."

- James 3:1