



# Chattanooga Girls Leadership Academy

## Case Study



Tennessee Charter  
School Center



CHATTANOOGA  
GIRLS LEADERSHIP  
ACADEMY

UNLOCKING A WORLD OF POSSIBILITY

## Executive Summary

Since 2003, charter schools have provided Tennessee parents and students with high-quality, flexible educational opportunities. Now in its twentieth year, Tennessee's charter sector has shown tremendous promise as these public schools have utilized the flexibility inherent to the public charter school model to find innovative ways to meet student needs.

While we often see great success stories among Tennessee's public charter schools, we don't often see detailed studies on what it took to reach those levels of success. This report is the first in what we hope will be a series of studies that can begin to address this gap. Specifically, we conducted an in-depth case study with one of the highest performing charter schools in the state: Chattanooga Girls Leadership Academy. This school stands out for several reasons. Not only did CGLA have the highest ready-graduate rate in the state among all public high schools and a TVAAS score of 5 in 2022, but its college-going rate for the class of 2021 was in the top 33% of all public high schools and in the top 17% of high-poverty schools. As this last point suggests, what makes these accomplishments even more impressive is that more than half of CGLA's students are economically disadvantaged.

Our hope is that through this work, we can not only highlight the great work being done by one of our member schools, but also share some of the policies, practices, and strategies that have helped them achieve such great success. In doing so, we hope to inspire and empower other school leaders and policymakers to strive for such excellence in their communities.

### **Key Takeaways from CGLA's work to prepare students for graduation, college, and career:**

- School turnaround, particularly in high-needs, low-income communities is possible with currently available resources. However, sustainability requires increases in funding - whether from the state, philanthropic or otherwise.
- A data-saturated school community is key to making informed, personalized decisions both for staff and students.
- Ensure school schedules allow for supplemental instruction for all students that can be tailored to individual needs. In the case of CGLA, in addition to required RTI instruction, all students receive high dosage Tier 3 instruction in an RTI framework.
- Culture is key! Establish a culture that promotes college and professional success, In the case of CGLA, this includes college-focused discussions, adult and peer mentoring relationships including professional mentorships, college visits, and a school-wide focus on the ACT
- Help students focus on what is possible: Support identity formation for students as scholars by focusing on possibility and providing a physical environment scholars take pride in
- Emphasize a growth mindset and personal responsibility through regular meetings with teachers that allow students to understand their own

benchmarking data and participate in identifying areas of growth and strategies while teachers also ensure they are tailoring instruction based on individual student needs

- Identify and remove barriers to success: In the case of CGLA, this includes hosting a FAFSA night for families to receive support on completing applications, providing funding for students to take the ACT multiple times, ensuring all students have access to a wifi hotspot at home, and offering an on-campus medical clinic

## Introduction

In 2023, the Tennessee Charter School Center (TCSC) created its first High School Changemaker Charter Schools List<sup>1</sup>, which was built based on analysis of TVAAS scores, Ready Graduate rates, and College Going rates for all public schools in Tennessee. The list revealed that one of Tennessee's highest performing schools on these measures is a public charter school that overcame early struggles by identifying strategies to offer girls in Chattanooga, Tennessee, the opportunity of an incredible learning environment. This case study, developed by the TCSC team, seeks to identify and share practical analysis of this school's pathway to success through qualitative research methods.

Founded in 2009, Chattanooga Girls Leadership Academy (CGLA) is an all-girls public charter school in Chattanooga, Tennessee serving just over 350 students in grades 6-12. CGLA was recently recognized for its academic accomplishments by the Tennessee Charter School Center through placement on the High School Changemaker Charter Schools List. Not only did CGLA have the highest ready-graduate rate in the state among all public high schools and a TVAAS score of 5 in 2022, but its college-going rate for the class of 2021 was in the top 33% of all public high schools and in the top 17% of high-poverty schools. As this last point suggests, what makes these accomplishments even more impressive is that more than half of CGLA's students are economically disadvantaged.

CGLA's student demographics are not unique in Tennessee. However, their students' academic and postsecondary outcomes are; which begs the question: "What is CGLA doing differently?" This report attempts to answer this question with the goal of sharing

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<sup>1</sup> To qualify for the Charter School Change Maker List, schools must have met the following criteria:

**Overall awards** - Must have ranked in the top 25% on at least one of the following compared to all schools in the state: 2022 ready graduate rates, 2021 college-going rates, four-year changes in ready graduate rates, five-year changes in college-going rates. Additionally, schools must have earned a 4 or 5 on TVAAS in 2022.

**High poverty schools** - must have ranked in the top 25% on at least one of the following compared to all schools where > 50% of students were economically disadvantaged in 2022: 2022 ready graduate rates, 2021 college-going rates, four-year changes in ready graduate rates, five-year changes in college-going rates. Additionally, schools must have earned a 4 or 5 on TVAAS in 2022. Additionally, schools must have earned a 4 or 5 on TVAAS in 2022.

**Rising stars** - For schools that did not enroll 12th graders in 2022, we used the following criteria: Must have enrolled at least 30 students in 2021-2022, received a TVAAS score of 4 or 5 in 2022

successful practices with other school, district and state leaders. Specifically, this report focuses on the following questions:

1. What policies and practices has CGLA implemented that help students prepare for college or a career?
2. How is CGLA making these practices sustainable?
3. What challenges have CGLA leadership faced in pursuit of these goals? How were they overcome?
4. How does being a charter school, specifically, support CGLA's mission?

To answer these questions, we interviewed several of CGLA's leadership, staff, and students.<sup>2</sup> These interviews were recorded and analyzed to identify common themes. These themes are reported here with supporting quotes and examples<sup>3</sup>. It is our hope that this report will not only highlight the exceptional work being done at CGLA, but that it will inspire and empower others who seek to provide students with similar opportunities.

## History

In 2009, Chattanooga Girls Leadership Academy opened its doors to 75 girls in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grades. Born out of a desire to provide the rigor of a private girls' school to some of Hamilton county's most underserved communities, CGLA has always emphasized rigor and college-readiness. That said, as a public charter school CGLA not only accepted all students but were often asked to take students who had not been successful in Hamilton County's traditional district schools. Additionally, teaching staff were not prepared for the level of work required to turn around students' academic performance and the school leadership was not able to adequately support staff and students. This resulted in a chaotic learning environment that was not serving students well. As a result, CGLA's performance during its first few years was low. So low, in fact, that CGLA was put on the State Priority List and was at risk of being shut down within one school year. To avoid closure, CGLA's board sought a strategic leader with experience in school turnaround. Shortly after, Dr. Elaine Swafford was appointed as principal and in 9 months, the school had been removed from the priority list and was no longer at risk of closing, and in fact was placed on the Reward List the next year for

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<sup>2</sup> Interviewees included the board president, school CEO, two teachers and one former student. Interviews lasted approximately one hour. Interviews were reviewed by the research team for emergent themes using open coding. The research team then conferred to either confirm or disconfirm these themes. The team then reviewed interviews and spoke with school leadership to find additional evidence to triangulate and confirm our findings. Finally, all reporting was reviewed by school leadership to ensure that we painted an accurate picture of CGLA and that their words were captured correctly. We offer our heartfelt thanks to our study participants. Their candor and passion made this project possible. We are honored to showcase the excellence and hard work of these individuals.

<sup>3</sup> When reading this report, it is important to remember that we cannot say for certain what is causing the outcomes we observe. That said, the themes we report here were common in our interviews. In addition, most of them make sense or align with the academic research literature on this subject.

growth. Today, CGLA serves over 350 students and by all measures is an exceptional school that equips girls for success in college and beyond.

## Policies and Practices

Although we were initially drawn to the specific policies and practices at CGLA, our interviews revealed that much of CGLA's success is the result of broader strategic goals and values. By using these goals and values as guideposts, CGLA leadership create and adapt policies and practices that are best suited to their students and community. In this section, we summarize some of the most prominent goals and values and show how they are implemented in specific policies and practices.

### Whatever it Takes

"Whatever it takes" is a mantra among CGLA leadership. This approach, drawn from school turnaround expert Robert Dufour, means that all CGLA staff go the extra mile to ensure that every student succeeds. At CGLA, this approach plays out as an intense focus on identifying and then providing the specific supports individual students need to succeed. This takes on many forms. As a first step, Founder and Board Chair Dr. Sue Anne Wells says that the school starts with each girl at her own level – staff **meet every student where they are**. Data is central to this. At the beginning of every year, CGLA staff review students' TNReady scores from the previous year. These scores then determine placement and instructional focus for the coming year. Not only are teachers expected to know their students' scores from previous years, but they must also be **familiar with each student's benchmark assessment scores throughout the year**. These scores are used in regular one-on-one meetings with students throughout the year and provide guidance as teachers and students work together to chart a path toward proficiency. These conversations not only help with student-level accountability but also help educators identify any challenges a student might be having outside of school as well, one teacher shared. According to school CEO, Dr. Elaine Swafford:

*"We took it from the private sector. It's like a bonus. If you perform at a high level we want to reward you. Who doesn't like getting a bonus at work, students also love being incentivized."*

This focus on data as a tool extends to students, who use the awareness of their own areas of strength and challenge to identify areas where they might ask for extra tutoring or devote extra focus. This mindset allows students to see learning as a constant process, not a static set of skills they either possess or lack, a perspective that not only serves them as they continually improve throughout high school, but as they move into a college environment, where their success becomes much more dependent on self-directed learning and motivation.

CGLA has also restructured their schedule to ensure that all students have the support they need to be successful. Because many of CGLA's students enter school



performing below grade level, a typical RTI-based schedule would not reach enough students. “Your schedule dictates your success” is a guiding principle among CGLA leadership and they will not allow a standard schedule to get in the way of their mission. Instead, on top of the required RTI instruction, CGLA requires all teachers in all subjects to teach 45 minutes of supplemental “fundamentals” in reading and math, in addition to subject-specific lessons. This ensures that **all CGLA students receive the equivalent of a high dosage of Tier 3 instruction within an RTI framework.**

### **Focus on College and Career**

From the very first day a girl enters CGLA, she is immersed in a **culture that promotes professional and college success.** Although CGLA takes other academic and personal outcomes seriously, a student’s trajectory beyond high school is the primary focus of the school. In the earliest grades (6<sup>th</sup> grade at CGLA), students take part in **college-focused discussions.** Where would they like to go to school? What professions would they like to enter? These conversations start early and are led by both faculty and students in **adult and peer mentoring relationships,** and are also impacted by regular access to internships and job shadowing in the fields students are curious about.

One teacher recounted a class where all the girls were struggling to focus because of concerns about what dorm life would be like. The teacher set aside the academic content for the class and led an impromptu question and answer session for students. Many students at CGLA are the first people in their families for whom college is a possibility. Connecting with a teacher who had been to college was comforting for many of the girls and provided one of the many touchpoints that help students see college as a real option after graduation.

CGLA’s focus on college and career ramps up in the older grades with formal activities like **college visits.** In the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, every girl starts school a week early to discuss what will be required as they chart a path toward college and to visit at least one school. These visits help make college a reality for students and help calm any fears they might have about what college is like.

In addition to college visits, CGLA girls in upper grades are paired with a **professional mentor** from the community. Mentors come from a variety of organizations and represent diverse professional roles. CGLA girls meet with their mentors once a month and are invited to visit their workplaces. This focus on professional life helps students see the trajectory beyond college and gives them roles to aspire to that may be less common in their communities. In many cases, the mentor/student relationships continue beyond high school and mentors become sounding boards and advocates for students throughout life.

One of the more unique practices that prepares students for postsecondary is a **school-wide focus on the ACT.** As a gateway to many postsecondary institutions, success on the ACT is critical for girls who aspire to going to college. As a result,

success on the ACT is woven throughout CGLA's culture. For instance, not only are teachers required to teach to the Tennessee State Standards, but they must also incorporate the ACT standards into every lesson. Additionally, every student is required to take an ACT prep course. School leadership has also created "clubs" for students who achieve high scores on the ACT, which have become competitive among students. These students are celebrated publicly and receive cash prizes to honor their success. Students are also encouraged to take the ACT as many times as necessary with the school paying for each administration. Again, the focus on the ACT does not replace the state's test or standards but receives as much if not more attention given its role in CGLA's mission: preparing girls to be successful *after* high school.

## Identity Formation

CGLA students are called smart from the moment they enter the building. This is done by all faculty and staff and is intentional and instills a **scholar identity** in students. Many of CGLA's students are behind academically when they enter CGLA. Further, many students do not have close relationships with adults who have been to college. As one might imagine, this makes envisioning themselves as college graduates difficult for many CGLA students. By teaching all students that they are scholars, school leadership is helping CGLA's girls realize that they are capable of more than they previously thought was possible. According to one student:

*"CGLA is a world of possibility. You see girls doing all sorts of cool things like robotics, and every day they start with a time dedicated to silent reading!... And there are so many opportunities like visiting college campuses and rigorous courses."*

CGLA's building also helps students realize all they are capable of. As one teacher put it, "at my interview, I thought 'Wow! **This is the most beautiful campus I've ever seen.**'" According to staff, this is intentional. By creating a beautiful and safe place for students to learn, students feel valued – that they are worthy of such a nice place and that what they do in the building is important. In short, the building helps students aspire to do and be great things.

When a girl enrolls in CGLA, they are entering a **mentor-rich environment**. According to Dr. Elaine Swafford, this is intentional:

*"We take them to these places so they can see what they can be. Once they see what they can be, then they realize 'I need to go to college.' 'I need to do well on the ACT.'"*

Not only are teachers expected to build personal relationships with students, but school leadership also goes to great lengths to know and mentor every student. This is supported by CGLA's small class sizes which keeps many students from "falling through the cracks." The educators at CGLA take the time not only to teach academics but also life skills that prepare students to stand out as they advocate for themselves: timeliness,

etiquette, public speaking and presentation skills, the significance of which became clear to one student after she went to college and realized many of her peers had not received the same type of lessons. All of this is part of preparing students to advocate for themselves. This school-wide culture of mentoring along with mentors from organizations outside of CGLA helps students see that being successful in college and career is possible.

## Personal Responsibility

CGLA promotes a culture of personal responsibility for everyone on campus. This starts with school leadership and extends all the way down to students. For instance, every student has **regular meetings** with teachers where they **review the most recent benchmark data**, identify areas in need of improvement, and chart a path toward improvement. In these meetings, students are expected to take ownership over their performance and to have an awareness of their academic strengths and weaknesses. Similarly, teachers are expected to have a **strong understanding of student's benchmark performance** and to **tailor their instruction** to best meet students' needs. Just as the students meet with teachers, administrators hold teacher growth plans based on benchmark and state testing data results. At the highest level, the school leadership takes ownership over the performance and success of CGLA staff.

Among students, this sense of ownership gets expressed in the **“growth mindset.”** This framework teaches students to approach learning with intention. They are not to be passive learners but to tap into the “why” of their learning. This sense of ownership translates into self-advocacy for many students. As one student put it:

*“One of the best things that CGLA did for me was teach me to advocate for myself. They taught me to seek out opportunities; scholarships, internships. To stand up for myself if I thought that a grade wasn't right.”*

This self-advocacy goes beyond CGLA and is helping empower girls through college and beyond.

### Identify and Remove Barriers to Success

Research has shown that economically disadvantaged students face many barriers to academic success. These can include things like unreliable transportation, food insecurity, physical safety, among others. CGLA leadership recognizes this and works tirelessly to remove barriers to students' success. For instance, each year CGLA hosts a **FAFSA** morning for families where parents and students are invited to the school where they can complete the Federal Application for Student Aid (FAFSA) with support from school staff. The FAFSA can be overwhelming for many families and



CGLA's FAFSA morning ensures that every student has a fair chance at receiving scholarships and other financial aid.

If it weren't for the state's willingness to pay for one administration of the ACT for each student, many of CGLA's students would not be able to take the ACT. However, as anyone who's taken a high-stakes test knows, many students do not perform their best the first time. CGLA ensures that every girl can take the test as many times as they would like by **paying for every administration of the ACT** beyond what is paid for by the state.

In the age of COVID, access to wifi has become critical as virtual learning plays more and more of a role in public schools. Additionally, schools must use digital resources to help students compete in a world increasingly saturated with technology. To ensure that all CGLA students have access to the same opportunities and resources, any girl that needs it is provided with a **wifi hotspot in their home**. This ensures that all students have access to digital learning opportunities whether they be virtual learning or internet-based tools.

As any educator knows, students bring their whole selves to the classroom. This includes physical needs. If a family lacks access to quality medical care and a student is sick, it can be a major barrier to learning. CGLA provides an **on-site medical clinic** that students can access free of charge. The clinic is staffed with a licensed physician who is a regular feature at CGLA so that they can build trust and rapport with students. Having access to this kind of care helps remove health-related barriers to girls' academic success.

## Sustainability

Some would argue that more funds do not help with the aforementioned issues. However if the funds are appropriately designated, resources are of high importance in turnaround work. That said, CGLA saw significant improvement in its first years despite having limited resources. CGLA leadership maintains that the academic outcomes at CGLA are achievable with the resources available to most schools. As evidence, they point out that CGLA was moved off the priority list in their early years with the only additional financial resource being a state-funded School Improvement Grant (SIG). However, as one might imagine, many of the programs that CGLA currently offers require a significant amount of funding to be sustainable. This is one reason that CGLA seeks additional funding through multiple sources multiple times a year. "I know other schools that fundraise, but none at our clip," said one leader. CGLA hosts **multiple fundraisers** each year including an annual luncheon, which incorporates student awards and school successes, and an annual golf tournament, both of which raise significant funds for the school. Additionally, CGLA has **regular fundraising campaigns** throughout the year and school leadership regularly apply for **large grants**. Finally, CGLA's **board members actively fundraise** and work to connect leadership

with potential funders. The combined funds from these initiatives help make the level of support offered at CGLA possible. While raising these kinds of funds may seem overwhelming to some, school leadership feel that attracting and maintaining donors comes down to a two principles: **engaging donors** (e.g., thank yous, school tours, sending small gifts, etc.) and **showing that you are a trustworthy steward** by demonstrating and sharing success for students. School Founder and Board President Sue Anne Wells emphasized the importance of this engagement:

*“It’s so important to cultivate a relationship with donors. You have to thank them, recognize them, bring them into the school for tours, let them meet the students and make sure they feel involved.”*

Providing the level of services offered at CGLA also requires a substantial commitment of time and effort. This need is met in large part by CGLA’s board. **Selection of CGLA’s board members is strategic.** Led by the board president, each member is selected with a specific purpose/role in mind. Potential members are interviewed and onboarded, gradually taking on more and more responsibilities as time goes on. And while each member has a role to play in supporting CGLA strategically, all members are expected to connect school leadership with potential donors.

Finally, as CGLA looks to the future, planning has been key to ensure that CGLA will continue to thrive beyond the current leadership. Planning takes two primary forms. The first is **strategic planning**. This has been primarily done by the board and lays out strategic priorities for the next five years. Everyone on the board then aligns their work toward accomplishing these goals.

The second focus of planning is on **succession**. Future leaders are identified then mentored by those whom they may someday replace. Responsibilities are handed over to new leadership slowly. According to school leadership, the secret to successful succession planning is ensuring that potential candidates are hand selected and adequately prepared to succeed. One school leader told a story of how they had left a school in good hands, but did not return after leaving to mentor/support the new leader. This did not go well for the new leader or the school. By creating an intentional and phased approach to leadership succession, CGLA hopes to overcome the challenges faced in this last experience.

## Obstacles

CGLA leadership identified two consistent obstacles that they face in accomplishing their mission. The first is the **low academic performance** of students when they enter CGLA. Many of CGLA’s students enter CGLA performing below grade-level expectations. While this is an ongoing challenge, CGLA has done several things that are helping get students to perform at grade level. First and foremost, a leader was selected by the board who has a background in school turnaround.

Additionally, the entire school is guided by the “Whatever it Takes” model described above. This includes things like rigorous data analysis and reporting, individualized learning plans, small class sizes, and all staff teaching fundamental skills. It is also noteworthy that CGLA aims to take girls starting in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade as opposed to focusing on enrolling high school students. According to CGLA leadership, this is because of the time it takes to get students ready for college. When students enroll in CGLA as 9<sup>th</sup> graders, students are often too far behind to get caught up academically. By enrolling students earlier on in their academic careers, CGLA is able to take the time needed to get students performing at grade level and ready to enroll in college.

The **cost of college** is also a significant barrier for CGLA graduates. Although many students get scholarships and most students can fund their first year, funding often runs out by the second year leading some students to take a break or drop out entirely. While this problem has not been fully solved, CGLA is actively seeking corporate and philanthropic partners to fund graduates’ postsecondary education. While some of this comes in the form of direct funding, some organizations are willing to pay for students’ schooling if they agree to work for them after they graduate.

## Benefits of the Charter Model

Starting CGLA as a charter school was intentional. After researching several models, CGLA leadership chose the charter model because it combined the resources of a public district school but allowed more flexibility. This has been key to CGLA’s success. One of the key benefits of being a charter has been the ability to hire or adjust staff needs quickly. Observing teacher performance and assuring the school had highly trained and highly-performing teachers was part of CGLA’s turnaround story. In order to be removed from the priority list, the newly appointed administration used the transformation model of hiring to assure that teachers were high performing as evidenced by the outcomes of their data driven instruction. The lack of red tape allows CGLA to handle staffing decisions quickly and intentionally.

Additionally, CGLA benefits from the flexibility afforded to charter schools by selecting curricula that best meet their students’ needs. The impact of this is greater because CGLA can access district resources (e.g., curriculum, instructional assistance, etc.) but is not bound to them. This flexibility allows CGLA to meet students where they are while also offering services/coursework that are far beyond what is offered at other schools.

## Closing Thoughts

Many people think that providing a world-class education for students from diverse backgrounds in urban American cities is impossible. CGLA is proving them wrong. With some of the highest ready graduate and college-going rates in the state, CGLA shows all of us what can be done when strong, intentional leaders think outside of the box. What’s more, CGLA is providing this world-class education in a community that’s facing many challenges. In this report, we have described, at a high level, how

this is done with the hope of empowering other leaders with the tools they need to transform their communities. Although CGLA's model requires significant resources, we must remember that CGLA experienced its greatest transformation at a time when funding was scarce. This should give us hope that while the details of CGLA's methods may be specific to them, their larger strategic goals and strategies can be applied anywhere.

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*The Tennessee Charter School Center (TCSC) is the first charter school support organization in the country that simultaneously creates and advocates on behalf of high-quality charter schools and the students and families they serve. Its vision is for all students in Tennessee to have access to a high-quality public education. Regardless of where they live, Tennessee students must have the opportunity to attend a public school that prepares them for success in the post-secondary education, college, or career of their choosing. Learn more at [tnchartercenter.org](http://tnchartercenter.org).*