

Our Schools: Former Teachers and Board Members Say Charters Run By Accel Schools Are Designed To Fail

A March 23 article written by Jeff Bryant reveals some startling information about Accel Schools.

The Pansophic Learning enterprise was started by the former head of K12 Inc. Corporation, Ron Packard. (Mr. Packard was being paid in the range of \$5 million annually when he left K12 Inc.)

Accel Schools seems to be the management arm of Pansophic Learning.

Accel operates more than 54 charters, 46 of which are in Ohio. If Jeff Bryant's information about Accel Schools is even close to being accurate, Ohio taxpayers and most of the students enrolled in those schools are in harm's way.

Inside the chaotic charter schools run by a for-profit company

Former teachers and board members say charters run by Accel Schools are designed to fail.
By Jeff Bryant -March 23, 2022

It didn't take long for Tasha Stiles to realize there was something very wrong with the school where she had just started teaching.

First, there was her rushed orientation to the school, Toledo Preparatory Academy, an early kindergarten through eighth grade charter school in Toledo, Ohio, operated by for-profit charter chain Accel Schools. She told Our Schools that her training during orientation in August 2020 consisted mostly of one workshop on "basics," which included how to record attendance and enter grades. There was no school handbook or written guidelines about student discipline practices or instructional protocols.

She said that the school had the appearance of a bare-bones operation, with very little decoration on the walls, empty classroom shelves with no books or instructional materials, heavily worn flooring and furniture, a rickety staircase that students and staff had to use daily, and drafty classrooms with insufficient radiator heating, which, on cold days, kept students shivering even in their coats.

Although Stiles had mostly taught social studies in her career, she told Our Schools that at Toledo Prep, she was told to teach math in grades five through eight. To help with lesson planning, she was given binders that contained the Ohio math standards and some student math workbooks, for which there was no teacher's edition for grade eight.

She was told that students were expected to spend most of their instructional time on their Chromebooks, which the school supplied for in-school use only, and that students needed to be working on i-Ready, a digital software program for reading and mathematics, for at least 30 minutes per class period. The school didn't seem to have any other curriculum materials available.

Administrative staff made promises of books and supplies that never arrived or, if they came, were never dispersed to classrooms. Stiles eventually resorted to using online learning tools like Khan Academy videos, which were free online, but school administrators disapproved of her using them.

"I had eighth graders who were reading at kindergarten level," she told Our Schools. She also observed that there were students at Toledo Prep who struggled with English but had no consistent help from specialized support staff. What few support staff there were came from outside agencies that provided services, such as counseling and mental health, mostly online. A lone special education teacher with responsibility for all exceptional students in the building was "stretched very thin," Stiles said.

The most reliable support staff in the building proved to be the tech support service from a company called Pansophic Learning, which happens to be the parent company of Accel Schools.

There was no school nurse, Stiles recalled, adding that, as COVID-19 raged across Ohio, students generally didn't wear masks, and the school did no contact tracing when students or staff got sick with the virus. One day, a student came to her with bloodied knuckles, and Stiles went in search of the school's first-aid kit, which turned out to be empty. The next day, Stiles came to school with Band-Aids that she'd purchased with her own money. Word about this got around, and students would come to her whenever they needed Band-Aids.

The few student clubs and after-school activities the charter school offered were all canceled after a student, following a TikTok trend, damaged a bathroom.

Students were frequently suspended by the school's administrative staff, often for reasons that weren't clear to her. "Rules were made up on the fly," she said. One week she counted and realized that 20 students had been suspended by the school staff.

The school also enforced a rigid student ranking system, placing students in hierarchies based on their academic performance and discipline issues. Students at the top of the hierarchy were called "eagles," students in the next rank below were labeled "doves," and students called "larks" included those who were struggling with learning or behavioral issues. Students in the bottom rank, who were currently serving in-school suspensions, were called "turkeys," until complaints by parents of students prompted the school to change the label to "phoenix."

What substituted for a rich academic program at the charter school was its near-constant emphasis on test prep. “Everything was focused on testing,” Stiles said. “I had never taught in a school where there was so much emphasis on testing. While I was there, there were three whole days devoted to nothing but mock testing.”

Stiles quit after working only three months at the school, but the experience left her very frustrated and deeply concerned about the students. “I can’t pretend to not see what I saw there,” she said.

What Stiles didn’t know when she took the job at Toledo Prep was that she had stepped into a school that emulates what has become a growing practice in the charter school industry.

As an ongoing investigation by Our Schools has revealed, a substantial sector of charter schools, particularly those operated by for-profit operators like Accel Schools, are at the forefront of a wave of charter operations that follow an investor-driven business model borrowed from retail, health care, and manufacturing sectors.

In the charter school application of this business model, struggling schools are cycled through a series of private entities that, in turn, strip the schools of resources, run them at bare-bones costs, and reap whatever assets that remain before handing the schools off to the next private operator, or shutting them down completely.

In business and investment circles, the model is often defended as “an important economic function” to either “revive” struggling enterprises, or “reallocate” resources that have been invested in failed enterprises to more productive endeavors.

But in the case of Toledo Prep, and other charter schools practicing this business model, although the business consequences might be fine for the charter operators and their investors, the children caught up in this investor-driven enterprise often have their education significantly disrupted, or even permanently impaired, perhaps with lifelong impact.

Portfolios of failed charters

Stiles, who earned her master’s degree in education at the University of Kentucky, had been teaching since 1998, mostly at schools outside the United States. When she returned to the United States in 2020, she started looking for work in Ohio.

She was attracted to charter schools because she wanted the challenge of teaching academically challenged students, and Ohio state law generally guides charters to locate in urban or “challenged” districts.

Stiles, who identifies as white, had previously taught mostly in private Islamic schools—she practices the Islamic faith and wears a hijab—where students were often more affluent and better supported than most of their peers. She believed she could have a bigger impact on students who were more disadvantaged.

What Stiles only later came to learn is that Toledo Prep had a previous life, with a different name, a different operator, and a different authorizing agency that held the permit allowing the school to operate—which, in Ohio, is called a sponsor.

According to two leading business registration services, the building at the address now occupied by Toledo Preparatory Academy—824 6th St. in Toledo, Ohio 43605—had previously been occupied by Aurora Academy, a charter school sponsored by, according to state records, the Buckeye Community Hope Foundation (BCHF), an Ohio nonprofit that has long sponsored a number of charter schools in the state.

It's not clear who operated Aurora Academy before it became Toledo Prep, but according to a 2018 report by the Cleveland Plain Dealer, the school was acquired by Accel Schools around the same time Accel was buying up charter schools that had previously been operated by White Hat Management, a for-profit charter management organization (often called a CMO).

White Hat was one of a number of CMOs, according to a 2013 analysis by Policy Matters Ohio (PMO), that had a history of using a loophole in state charter school laws to open new charter schools in the same locations where a previous charter had been closed due to poor academic results. A case study that was part of the analysis by PMO showed that White Hat opened a “new” charter school, Southside Academy in Youngstown, “within days” of a school at the same street address being closed due to poor academic performance.

Both BCHF and White Hat had earned high ratings in the Ohio Department of Education's 2015 evaluation of charter school sponsors and management firms, the Cleveland Plain Dealer reported. However, the article also noted that the Cleveland Transformation Alliance, an alliance of local businesses and organizations that advocate for high-quality schools in Cleveland, wasn't “convinced” with those ratings, finding flaws with BCHF's “school quality issues” and the “track record” of its associated management companies, which included White Hat.

Whether or not BCHF took this criticism to heart is difficult to assess, but it certainly made a turnabout in its performance evaluation of Aurora Academy.

In its 2016-2017 annual report, the foundation rated Aurora Academy as meeting or exceeding performance levels in all its evaluation categories but one—academic. However, the foundation's performance report for 2018-2019 lists the school as falling short of the

foundation's acceptable academic and fiscal performance levels, and the report indicated the school was among five of its charter schools that would be closed at the end of the 2018-2019 school year.

As the Akron Beacon Journal reported in 2018, White Hat Management started closing its schools, beginning in 2014, as families of students opted for other schools for their children as a result of "years of low test scores and soaring high school dropout rates." Charter schools run by White Hat Management, the report further noted, were "among the lowest performers in the state" and "were plagued from the start with allegations of padded enrollment and skirting accountability."

Although the exact date that Accel bought Aurora Academy is unclear, a state registry of charter schools (which are called "community schools" in Ohio) in 2017 indicates Aurora Academy was being operated by Accel Schools, with BCHF continuing as the school's sponsor.

But by 2019, state documents indicate that Accel had changed the name of the school where Aurora Academy had been located to Kenmore Preparatory Academy dba (doing business as) Toledo Preparatory Academy. The school's new sponsor was the St. Aloysius Orphanage.

Toledo Prep is not the only Accel school that's been similarly rebranded to cover up its troubled past.

"Worse than I expected"

Carol Burris, executive director of the Network for Public Education, reported in the Washington Post that Accel and Pansophic Learning also bought the holdings of Cambridge Education Group, another defunct for-profit charter operator. Those acquisitions included Buckeye Preparatory Academy in Columbus, Ohio, which was also sponsored by BCHF.

Like the rebranding of its school in Toledo, Accel changed the name of Buckeye Preparatory Academy to Capital Collegiate Preparatory Academy, and the St. Aloysius Orphanage became the school's new sponsor.

Also, like Toledo Prep, Capital Collegiate's academic program appears to be makeshift at best.

"There was no curriculum," Tisha Brady, a former teacher and board member at Capital Collegiate, told Our Schools. Much like Accel's Toledo school, teachers at Capital Collegiate generally relied on the i-Ready software platform as their only instructional resource, which was loaded onto the students' Chromebooks.

"Students got very little to no direct or group instruction," Brady said. A set of textbooks she found sequestered in the library had to be returned to the library after each use. New

resources that were promised by the school's administrators often never materialized or turned out to be not what was promised, including "smartboards that turned out not to be smartboards," she said, but were, instead, whiteboards, which are a fraction of the cost and have much less usefulness for teachers.

Teachers at Capital Collegiate got few, if any, instructional guidelines, Brady recalled, and very few of the school's rules were written down.

Also, just like in Toledo Prep, teachers were encouraged to be harsh disciplinarians, and testing was a virtually nonstop activity in the school. Weekly assessments were called "street races," said Brady, and more intensive evaluations, called "rallies," were held every three weeks. Students were given incentives, such as pizza parties, to do well on the tests.

The specialist who worked with the school's exceptional children was "brand-new," Brady said, and struggled in the position. "There was no effort to inform parents of their children's special needs at the beginning of the school year," she said. "Many of the children with learning disabilities who should have had a [federally required] Individualized Education Program did not get one until April," leaving these students' special education needs unaddressed for nearly the whole school year.

Brady, who is also an adjunct professor at Columbus State Community College, taught third grade at Capital Collegiate from August 2019 to April 2020. When she left her teaching position, she was hired by the school's board as a compliance officer to observe how well Accel's management practices aligned with state guidelines.

Her assessment of Accel's management was, "It was worse than I expected. Board meeting announcements, agendas, and minutes were never [publicly] posted. No [meeting] notices or minutes ever went out to the media or [were posted] on social media."

According to Ohio's Sunshine Law, public school boards are required to post notices of when board meetings will occur, provide agendas to the public, and keep and distribute meeting minutes. Although Ohio charter schools are exempt from scores of state regulations related to public schools, the state's Sunshine Law is not among the exemptions, according to an analysis by the Ohio Legislative Service Commission and the Ohio General Assembly.

Also, Brady said that whenever she made inquiries with Accel personnel regarding her concerns about how students were being educated, "Accel personnel frequently said, 'We'll get back to you,' but they never did."

Another Capital Collegiate former board member who spoke to Our Schools was Rhonda Whitfield. Whitfield, who works as a fraud prevention representative at Discover Financial

Services, was on the board from January 2019 to November 2021 and also served as the school's treasurer.

Whitfield told Our Schools that board meetings with the school's administrative staff and, occasionally, the Accel regional manager were "generally uninformative," and that Accel officials repeatedly failed to hand over documents related to the financials or the academic goals of the school.

Although board members asked for documentation of learning plans and achievement trends, the only achievement data they ever received were from the student scores on assessments taken through i-Ready. Accel staff tended to respond to board members' inquiries with "verbal" assurances that were "hard to pin down," according to Whitfield.

Whitfield said she also expressed her concerns to Accel officials about the lack of curriculum resources and instructional materials in the school, and that, as treasurer, she frequently processed bills for curriculum supplies and textbooks but rarely saw those supplies being used in classrooms.

While the school's website has pictures of colorful classrooms with shelves stocked with books and learning materials, Whitfield shared with Our Schools photographs taken in the school that show bare-bones classrooms with empty shelves, while newly purchased materials, some still in their shipping containers, can be seen stacked in storage.

"It was chaos," was how she summed up her recollections of how the school was run. When she left the board, the school was \$48,000 in debt, she told Our Schools.

Profit by chaos

Every school in the Accel network claims on its website that the school is "accredited by Cognia for meeting the highest standards of education in ongoing third-party review."

Cognia, formerly AdvancED, is one of the largest regional K-12 accrediting associations in the U.S. and also provides student assessment and teacher professional development services. Although the nonprofit has been around for more than 120 years, "[m]uch of how Cognia works and the people behind the nonprofit are a mystery to the general public," and it is "without government oversight," according to the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, which looked into two school districts in Georgia that were being subjected to a review by Cognia.

Also, there's really no definitive proof that Cognia accreditation is a guarantee of high quality. Back in 2011 when Cognia's accreditation services were branded as AdvancED, the nonprofit gave accreditation to a chain of 17 Life Skills charter high schools operated by White Hat Management—schools that graduated only 5.2 percent of their students. These schools were

eventually closed or were sold to other charter management companies, the Associated Press reported in 2018.

In writing this report, Our Schools left an inquiry on Pansophic Learning's website asking for the company to comment on criticisms made by its former employees and board members. As of this writing, there's been no reply. But in the company's defense (and to the nation's shame), there are likely many public schools that are as chaotic and bereft of resources as these Accel schools are.

Public school teachers have been known to vent their frustrations over the conditions in their schools by posting snapshots on social media of tattered old textbooks and broken furniture in their schools. And stories of schools functioning under chaotic conditions abound, especially during the pandemic.

However, in the case of public schools, no one is profiting off a poorly resourced, chaotic school, while Accel Schools and Pansophic Learning are no doubt planning on a big financial haul.

"Accel's growth has been fast-paced," Carol Burris reported in her Washington Post article. "It now manages 73 charter schools (brick and mortar or online) in Arizona, California, Colorado, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Washington, and it is attempting to open schools in West Virginia."

Furthermore, while problems with under-resourced and badly managed public schools can be blamed on school or government officials, who've been either irresponsible or inept, the pattern at schools managed by Pansophic Learning and Accel are following what appears to be a clearly intentional and well-thought-out business plan.

That, at least, is the conclusion Tisha Brady has reached. "For the types of schools Accel purchased," she observed—struggling schools like Aurora Academy and Buckeye Preparatory Academy—"they knew the kind of problems they were going to face. For them not to have detailed academic or behavioral plans is unconscionable."

She suspects that Accel's management of its schools is entirely intentional. She expects that the schools, should they continue to show poor performance, may "get into trouble, and the state smacks down." But even so, "new board members will be brought in, most of the teachers will be gone, [and] maybe the schools [will] get a new sponsor and new names. And the process starts all over again."

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