

Curricula at Education Service Network's Premier Academy

The primary instructional tool for all three campuses is Apex Learning digital curriculum. Coursework in Apex Learning is supplemented by a variety of teaching materials and instructional processes, which offers students different modes of learning to enhance their knowledge in required subjects.

In addition to Apex Learning, all students learn from OdysseyWare online curriculum, as well as textbooks; video-based instruction, and a literacy program. Joliet high school students also learn from traditional classroom instruction for Math and English; and a Capstone Project.

These curricula offer students from various needs and ability levels a variety of ways to succeed. We believe that alternative education students can succeed in a structured environment, with an overlapping curriculum and a low teacher-to-student ratio.

The online coursework includes most subjects studied by middle and high school students. Because students come to Premier throughout the year, student coursework must be suitable to different student grade levels, abilities, and timeframes. Premier Academy uses a "prescriptive" form of software to allow students an opportunity to demonstrate prior knowledge in subjects. The curriculum includes a pre-test for each subject, and assigns the appropriate coursework for a student's academic skill level. Students have an opportunity to "test-out" of material they have mastered and to move forward and focus on areas in which they have a knowledge gap.

Textbooks and accompanying materials (i.e., workbooks, visual aids and outlines) offer students another resource for learning. Largely, these materials are meant to supplement coursework offered in the online curriculum. Many students find books and visual aids helpful in the learning process. Further, like all teaching tools, online curricula do not fulfill all the requirements that a referring school district requires from their students. Thus, textbooks are used to fill those gaps.

Educational videos have also been integrated into the program. Premier Academy Middle and High Schools use the Safari Montage video system. Safari Montage is a video on-demand service whereby students have immediate access to educational videos from their computers. The educational videos available through Safari Montage come from a variety of respectable educational video companies and non-profit organizations. These include: A&E Home Video; BBC; Monterey Home Video; National Geographic; PBS; Schlesinger Media; and Scholastic, among others. Videos relevant to the subjects that students are studying are incorporated into the curriculum for each course. Again, this is supplementary to the online curricula. Before a student begins his or her work online, they will first watch a video that will provide background information, just as a teacher would do in a traditional classroom. In this way, the curriculum will be more effective for students as they will have an avenue to learn further information and apply knowledge through a series of exercises.

In order to redesign and strengthen our program to meet the needs of students, Math and English are taught in a traditional classroom. The high school staff believes that Math must be learned in a classroom because of the logic and sequential aspects of understanding and applying key concepts. English skills must be reinforced and mastered because of the need to read and write in other subjects. When students understand the

basics of these two subjects, the knowledge and various skills developed have an immediate impact on the ability to learn other subjects.

Students are grouped into ability levels and in accordance with local school graduation requirements to form instructional classes. Staff has designed classes for students who have shown low achievement, regular achievement and advanced achievement. Premier Academy also includes a literacy program for students in all grade levels. Research has shown that youth who read regularly succeed at higher rates than those who do not. Students read required novels and novels of their choice. During the course of reading, students complete quizzes and participate in discussions to show retention and understanding. When students finish a book, they are required to create a report with two components. First, students describe the novel they have read—a general book report. Second, students write an analytical essay describing the purpose of the book and how it relates to their lives. The school has had great success with this program and it has led to a spike in “reading for fun” among the student population. The lasting effect of the literacy program, therefore, is that students will continue to read for leisure and strengthen their reading levels, which immediately affects their success in other coursework.

Finally, students in Joliet Premier’s high school program are required to complete a Capstone Project. This project will be designed by the student with the help of his or her instructor. Again, each student has a different course load so each project will be different. The purpose of this project is to give at-risk youth a conceptual framework from which they can visualize what they have learned over the course of a semester. This has two major benefits. First, because at-risk youth generally do not “see the point” of school, the Capstone Project will lead them to a sense of accomplishment through synthesis. Secondly, the ownership and responsibility involved in this project affords students an avenue to “see the point” of education, which will lead them to pursue other academic endeavors.