

Taos Academy

Hybrid charter school
authorized by the state

Taos, New Mexico

GRADE LEVELS SERVED: 5-12

NUMBER OF STUDENTS
SERVED: 225

Taos Academy is a charter school located in Taos, New Mexico, which uses a hybrid learning model combining the flexibility, independence, and personalization of digital instruction with the best practices of face-to-face teaching. It was founded in 2009 and serves 225 students in a rural, high-needs area.

Although New Mexico is known as “The Land of Enchantment,” it often lands near the bottom of state rankings of educational achievement. Like some other states with extensive rural areas, many of the state’s most remote schools serve many of the

state’s most vulnerable learners. Taos Academy Charter School was founded in 2009 by two long-time New Mexico educators, Karin Moulton and Traci Filiss, as an educational option for the students of Taos County, New Mexico. Both founders felt that the promise of digital learning was not being leveraged in effective, high-quality ways to address the needs of students in this rural area of the state, and launched the school to address the existing opportunity gap.

The high alpine desert town of Taos is surrounded by the Sangre de Cristo mountains; nearby lies Taos Pueblo, the ancestral home of the Taos Pueblo tribe and one of the oldest structures in the United States. The community Taos Academy serves is considered high-poverty and at-risk, factors which greatly impact the school’s student population. For example, teens in Taos County are more likely than their peers to live in single-parent households (43% versus the state average of 38%) and 17% of Taos County children live in a home with no working parents; this is higher than the New Mexico state average of 13% and the national average of 11%.¹ Taos teens are also more likely than their peers to engage in risky behaviors, such as binge drinking.²

Taos Academy serves students across a large geographic area; some students commute up to an hour and a half by public bus in order to attend the school. TA’s student population is 68% economically disadvantaged based on FRL data and is made up of a majority of historically underserved populations. As of SY2017–18, the school’s demographics are 48% Hispanic, 47% Caucasian, 4% Native American, and 2% African-American. Roughly one in five TA students participate in Special Education programming.

Instructional model

TA’s hybrid learning model combines online and face-to-face instruction. The school offers a flexible schedule that can vary greatly depending on student and family needs. In general, Taos Academy students are required to be on campus two days a week. Middle schoolers attend on Mondays and Wednesdays, while high school days are Tuesdays and Thursdays. During their on-campus days, students attend

1 New Mexico Voices for Children, 2016 Data Book, p.31. Retrieved from <http://www.nmvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/NMVC-DataBook2016-Web.pdf>

2 New Mexico Voices for Children, 2016 Data Book, p. 29. Original data from New Mexico Youth Risk and Resiliency Survey (YRRS), 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.nmvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/NMVC-DataBook2016-Web.pdf>

Academic Advisory, English Enrichment and Math Enrichment classes. They also rotate through a series of 21st Century Learning classes including SmartLab, Global Studies, Leadership, Career Pathways, and Service Learning, all designed to offer opportunities for connection, collaboration, and authentic problem-solving.

The school recommends that students spend approximately 20 hours each week in their digital curriculum. Every Monday morning, a schoolwide report pulled from the digital curriculum helps teachers flag students whose grades drop below 70 percent. Students at Taos Academy can also earn unexcused “Academic Absences” for being behind in their coursework or for allowing their grades to drop below the 70% actual grade threshold. In cases like this, the student, family, and teacher meet to create a 30-day “Student Success Contract” to help get students get back on track. During the 30-day period, the student is required to be on campus five days a week. In addition to academics, the staff works closely with the student during this period to support them in goal-setting, building strong work habits and developing time management skills. At the end of the contract time, the student is often back on target and has learned some of the skills needed to stay there independently.

However, many TA students may be found on campus on their off-days by choice rather than by contract. The fully staffed Student Success Lab allows students a safe, structured setting for getting additional academic support and time in their studies. Middle schoolers also participate in the school’s MidSchool Plus Enrichment program, and all students are offered classes through Taos Academy’s STEM Institute. These classes, ranging from Radio Broadcasting and Journalism to Robo-Band, Kinetic Sculpture, Green Architecture, and Culinary Arts, are taught by community experts in partnership with TA teachers. Thus, the academic schedule at Taos Academy is as individualized as the curriculum—a weekly bell schedule can range from virtual status for students who are traveling or competing professionally to two days a week to a full five-day school.

The school’s flexible learning model has evolved over time. Taos Academy was founded nine years ago, at a time when blended learning was still relatively new and certainly had not made its way to rural New Mexico. The school opened its doors with five teachers and 70 students in grades 5–11; it now serves over 220 students. The school’s graduation rate consistently exceeds the state average for on-time graduation. In 2017, Taos Academy’s graduation rate was 94.3%, one of the highest in the state.³

In addition to the core course-based curriculum, Taos Academy also uses a range of supplemental adaptive curriculum to further personalize instruction and to address individual student needs. While the core curriculum allows teachers to quickly and easily see where students are struggling, the adaptive tools allow students to continue to work on grade-level content while addressing learning gaps and building towards mastery in their own unique areas of challenge. Platforms such as Moby Max, iXL, and Khan Academy let teachers track student progress and growth in skills aligned with the Common Core State Standards.

³ “Taos schools graduate above state average.” J. Moya, *Taos News*, March 8, 2018. Retrieved from <https://taosnews.com/stories/taos-schools-graduate-above-state-average>.

College and career readiness

Students at Taos Academy can begin accruing high school credits as early as 8th grade; this positions them for the school's Early College option later on. While most high schoolers take their core curricular classes in a blended format in grades 9 and 10, qualified students can also take elective courses at the nearby University of New Mexico—Taos Klauer Campus. Once in 11th grade, students with a 3.0 GPA or higher can also begin taking Dual Enrollment classes at UNM—Taos through TA's College Link program; these courses allow students to replace a traditional high school class with one from the college level. Several students from Taos Academy have received both a high school diploma and an Associate's degree at the time of graduation through the school's ECHS model. In the 2017–18 academic year, TA students logged nearly 600 college credit hours, a savings of nearly \$480,000 in tuition.

Student support

The student-teacher relationship remains at the heart of the school's design. Each student at TA is assigned to an Academic Adviser. Similar to a traditional homeroom teacher, the Adviser oversees all of student's coursework and is the first point of contact for both students and families. Each Adviser is assigned a cohort of up to 20 students in both middle school and high school. These fully-licensed teacher assist students with goal-setting, progress tracking, and metacognition. They also develop and maintain personalized learning plans that reflect students' passions and interests; narrative progress reports, in addition to the digital ones sent by the curriculum provider, are sent home weekly by both the student's Academic Adviser and the child's 21st Century teacher. "We strive to individualize student options across the curriculum," says Traci Filiss, Founder and Director of the school.

Teacher time and management

The design of Taos Academy's hybrid learning model means that students encounter a variety of learning modalities through the school day. 21st Century classes are taught in a project-based, small group setting, while Enrichment classes might use a Socratic Seminar and discussion basis for constructing arguments and supporting critical thinking in both Math and English Language Arts. Students receive individualized attention during their advisory classes and through their supplemental curriculum as well as through the many ways that the core curriculum can be modified to address diverse learning preferences, strengths, and challenges. Community-building is central to TA's model as every day starts with an all-school meeting. The schedule also allows teachers to engage professionally throughout the week, with teacher-led professional development across areas such as Social-Emotional Learning, Instructional Technology, and coaching opportunities.

Measures of success

Taos Academy's unique blended learning model has a proven track record of success. A state-chartered school, Taos Academy is one of only eight schools in the state to attain a School Grade of "A" for five years running.⁴ The school's achievement is consistent across multiple measures such as test scores, career and college readiness, and graduation rate. For example, internal data collected by TA shows that students

4 New Mexico True, *Straight "A" Express*, NM Public Education Department. August 30, 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.newmexico.org/straightaexpress/post/day-4-taos-questa/>

generally enter 5th grade at Taos Academy scoring below proficiency on PARCC in both reading and in math. At the time of graduation, TA students' PARCC averages outscore not only the state average but also national averages in both areas.⁵ Director Traci Filiss emphasizes the importance of out-of-the-box thinking to address rural and at-risk student needs: "Innovative models such as Taos Academy's demonstrate that high quality blended learning programs can truly improve outcomes in our state."

Taos Academy has been approached by the New Mexico Public Education Department to discuss possible replication of their model in other struggling areas in the state. The school and its students also partnered with the state's Blended Learning Bureau, conducting a round-table discussion about their experience as hybrid-learning students, to help officials find ways to offer students in the state virtual program more structure and support. Looking ahead, Taos Academy hopes to expand its Main Lab settings into a fully student-run technology center. TA Tech Center would be a support for local businesses and families, and would provide on-the-job training for students, staff, and community alike. ■

⁵ US News and World Report, Best High Schools Rankings, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/new-mexico/districts/taos-academy/taos-academy-12890/test-scores>