

CHARTER LEADERS OF COLOR **MATTER.**



Marcus Harden

Founder

Academy for Creating Excellence

I sometimes joke that I became an educator to help my middle-school self! At this time in my life, I felt like a misfit at school, my parents were getting a divorce, I didn't have an ideal relationship with my dad, and I was a 6-foot black man with a voice that sounded like Mariah Carey. I was raised by kind, strong, intelligent women, but I wasn't sure where to look for a male role model.

Before I became an administrator, I was a counselor and a teacher. This path showed me the value of educating the whole child. I also noticed many black young men struggling with learning in the school systems that existed (I ended up adopting six of my students as my own children). CJ Dancer and Willie Seals III, two of my best friends and educators in different states, witnessed similar struggle—and seven years ago we decided to address these inequities and create educational programs for young men from historically under-served populations. We started the Academy for Creating Excellence (ACE). Our pedagogy centered in love—which I call “Loveful Pedagogy”—is based on brain development in young men specifically, with an emphasis on learning through community work; healthy competition; and candid, frequent conversation.

ACE launched in 2012, offering educational workshops in Seattle. In 2016, in partnership with the City of Seattle Department of Early Learning and South Shore K–8, we hosted our first three-month Summer Learning Experience. This program became a pilot for a full school opening in 2021 in Atlanta, Georgia: the ACE Atlanta charter school.

BUILDING THE AVENGERS

In our 2018–2019 summer pilot, 98% of our students had a 100% attendance rate, and 90% of our students saw gains in both Mathematics and English Language Arts on our MAP assessment. Our students all came from a Title I school with an 80% Free and Reduced Lunch (FARL) rate.

ACE aims to prepare young men for individual excellence and world citizenship, through our core principles of FAMILY, ACADEMICS, MOTIVATION, and ENVIRONMENT (F.A.M.E.). I see the role of our staff as similar to building the Avengers. We're exposing students to innate excellence that they already have and coaching them on how to use their superpowers.

We pair real-world learning of academics skills with social emotional education. Our students learn science and math through the lens of building rockets or testing renewable energies. Every Friday we visit an amazing community partner, such as Amazon or space exploration company Blue Origin, to collaborate on a project. Emotional intelligence is taught with equal rigor. Every day starts and ends with a huddle, where we ask deep questions such as “What can family be?” or “What are our best versions of ourselves and one another?” During the afternoon huddle,

we honor a peer-elected “Champ of the Day.” The Champ stands in the middle and tells everyone their gift to the world, and the group offers five additional positive words describing the Champ’s gifts. This exercise builds positive language for men to describe themselves. Sometimes the Champ will say that he doesn’t know what his gift is. It’s moving to watch as 25 people in the room tell him why and how he is exceptional.

EXCELLENCE IN COLOR

It is so important for students to see black males in specifically academic leadership roles. Often black males are cast in the role of motivator or disciplinarian. But our black male students also need to see us as reflections of their own intellectual and educational opportunity.

I hadn’t had one black male teacher in K–12. However, I did have one black male principal: Mr. James. So when I first became an educator at 22 years old, what was my teacher persona? Mr. James! In photos of me from this period of my life, I’m dressed like Mr. James! Now I have evolved my own voice and style, but it’s very hard to be what you can’t see. And it is so important for leadership teams to reflect many different faces of success—no one person or profile can be the end-all be-all. At ACE, I want every student to see themselves in someone on staff. For this reason we also hire near-peer educators (just out of college), because we know this is important to students developmentally.

In the United States, black males constitute only 2% of teachers and only .08% of leaders across industries. Knowing how important it is for students to see themselves reflected in leadership and academic leadership—how can we bridge this gap? As part of ACE Atlanta, we’re creating a class on pedagogy, to teach young men about being educators. We must build a pipeline in order to honor the excellence in our future generations.

Academy for Creating Excellence



Location **Atlanta, GA**
 Year Opened **Launching 2021**
 Student enrollment **700 at full capacity**
 Grades served **6-13**
 Website **www.ACEAcademyATL.org**

Student Demographics for ACE pilot programs

Location	Atlanta, GA		
Year Opened	2012		
Students Served	60	Asian	10%
Grades served	7-8	Black/African-American	85%
		Hispanic/Latino	5%
	Homeless Youth	40%	
	Historically Underserved	80%	
	Students with Disabilities	40%	
	Multilingual Learners	20%	



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