


PATHWAY TO SUCCESS:

Sciotoville Elementary Academy focuses on meeting the needs of its rural community

By Ellen Belcher



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Sciotoville Elementary Academy (SEA) is unique among Ohio charter schools. Drawing in kids and families from Appalachian Ohio, it's one of the few charters located outside of the state's urban communities. It illustrates what's possible within charter schooling for educators, families, and an entire community—who came together to save their school by transforming it into a public charter school.

As you'll read in the profile below, the tight-knit, familial culture of the school makes it a warm and nurturing place. Upon visiting, it's immediately evident how deeply Principal Foresta Shope cares for each child and teacher; she's the sort of person you want to clone for your own family. But these tight bonds do not come at the exclusion of high expectations for all children, no matter their family income or home circumstances. In fact, Foresta might tell you that she expects so much of everyone precisely because she cares so much. After leading an enthusiastic group of second-graders in a writing prompt, wherein each child was expected to type multiple sentences at the top of a Word document on a personal laptop, Foresta matter-of-factly shares that they're working toward multiple paragraph essays. It's what's required on the state tests—plus, it's good to write early and often and to require students to support their views with evidence. The lofty expectations are backed up by intense support and feedback: the children share their mini-essays with Foresta and she types in personal feedback and tips for strengthening their writing. She does this for each and every child.

Every so often you come across leaders, educators, and schools that challenge your views about what children are capable of—and consequently how big you should dream for them. Sciotoville Elementary Academy is such a school. There is much to be learned from it, for educators and leaders in any type of school but especially for anyone wanting to make a lasting difference for children living in poverty.

— JAMIE DAVIES O'LEARY
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PATHWAY TO SUCCESS

Bill Shope still gets upset thinking about a sports banquet he attended his senior year in high school. It was 1979, and Sciotoville's East High School was then part of Portsmouth City Schools, situated in rural southern Ohio not far from the bank of the Ohio River. Though he can't remember what he ate, Shope said he and his classmates were served leftovers from the basketball banquet at the larger Portsmouth High School just a few miles down the road.

"We got food left over from two days before," said the human resources consultant and reporter for *The Scioto Voice*, who also serves as the board president for the Sciotoville charter school.

As people in Sciotoville tell it, their children historically have gotten Portsmouth's leftovers—from textbooks to sports uniforms. That belief, they say, was the impetus for creating Sciotoville's two start-up charter schools.

In 2000, the Portsmouth school board announced that, as part of a new building plan, Sciotoville's East High School would close. According to its school board, Portsmouth—then a community of not quite 21,000—couldn't afford high schools in Portsmouth and in Sciotoville. (Despite its name, Sciotoville is not its own town; it was annexed to Portsmouth decades ago.) That decision was the last straw for the community.

Sciotoville residents took charge. East High School alums and parents went door-to-door rousing opposition. Bill Shope and his wife, Foresta, who had just moved into a home next to East High School's forlorn football field, joined the cause. They helped call meetings that attracted as many as 400 people to plan how to save the 100-year-old town treasure.

Deal-making, rather than despair, ruled the day. East High's supporters told Portsmouth authorities that they were willing to campaign for the district's upcoming bond issue to fund construction of new schools—in exchange for a lease with an option to buy East High School.



Principal Foresta Shope talks to a student about his essay.

Passage of the bond issue was by no means assured. The Appalachian community was besieged by unemployment and generational poverty, problems made infinitely worse because Portsmouth had become an epicenter of the opioid epidemic. Both sides believed a tax levy would be a hard sell.

Once a deal was struck and the levy passed, East's supporters quickly waded through Ohio's thicket of rules regarding start-up charter schools. Bill Shope was central to the effort and became the school's first board president, a position he's held for 17 years.

Lacking everything from books to desks, volunteers scooped up supplies and texts that East was discarding. After a summer of painting, fixing up and setting up, a combined high school and middle school opened in the fall of 2001, accepting students in grades 7-12. In time, 5th and 6th grade classes were added. Then, in 2008, Sciotoville Elementary Academy (SEA) was launched just around the corner from the high school, in the parking lot of Sciotoville Christian Church.

Foresta Shope, the elementary school's principal, said Sciotoville families pushed to create SEA because they believed their children weren't being prepared well at the Portsmouth public elementary school in Sciotoville. (Portsmouth City Schools was invited to respond, but didn't.)

What parents say they value most is the school's sense of family and its connections to the people of Sciotoville.

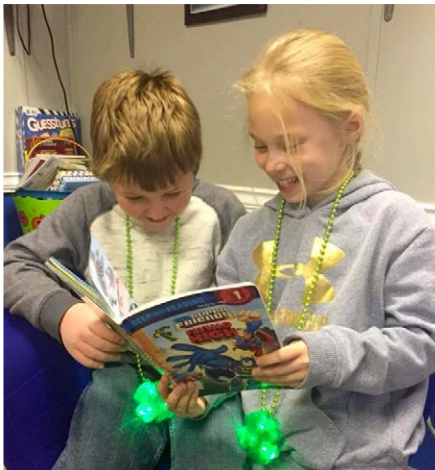
With the creation of SEA, a fierce competition for students ignited. A spacious and modern Portsmouth City elementary school—built with proceeds from the bond issue that overwhelmingly passed in 2001—is located less than a mile away from SEA. The two schools currently enroll similar numbers of pupils. East Portsmouth Elementary School has 190 students in Preschool through 6th grade, including 160 students in K-5. SEA enrolls 157 in K-5.

Like other charter school advocates across the state, Bill Shope laments that Ohio doesn't allow charter schools to receive local property tax dollars. "They're getting our community's taxes and not having to spend any money toward educating our kids."

Portsmouth schools spend almost \$12,500 per pupil, more than 70% of which comes from the state.

"accelerated" or "advanced" on state proficiency tests. But aggregate test results, which can swing dramatically from year to year because of the small number of children in each class, are just one element of the school's appeal.

What parents say they value most is the school's sense of family and its connections to the people of Sciotoville. Donnie Evans' daughter, Arabella, is in 2nd grade at SEA, and his son Anderson will start kindergarten there next year. Teachers and students already know Anderson, who was diagnosed with Ewing sarcoma, resulting in the right side of his skull being removed. To help the Evans family with medical bills, faculty and students sold "Anderson's Army" bracelets. Foresta sports hers every day, along with another for a 4th-grader who is recovering from a liver transplant.



"We are so incredibly proud of these 2nd graders: Brandon for meeting his AR goal and Makenna for taking the initiative to help him reach his goal!"



SEA has a focus on technology. Every child has a Chromebook. All classrooms have smart boards.

The per-pupil spending is about \$9,000 at SEA, including all state and federal aid. Like other Ohio charter schools, SEA must dip into its operations funding to pay for facilities costs.

It shows. SEA is a tight cluster of four modular buildings with six crowded classrooms. The halls are cold in winter and the bathrooms are across the parking lot in the church. Parents, kids and teachers wish they had a better space. But the school is theirs.

Foresta Shope is proud of the school's test scores, which are trending upward. She also points out that a fair number of the school's children are defying the Appalachian high-poverty stereotype and scoring

"When my son was diagnosed, the love that was poured out to us was out of this world," said Evans. "As soon as Foresta heard, she said, 'If there's anything you need, we're at your disposal.' ... The whole school rallied behind us. They took donations. They made him (Anderson) the honorary team captain at the high school football games. They refer to him as the Son of Sciotoville."

Evans, an amputee who is studying to become a chemical dependency counselor assistant, said he and his wife, a nurse, like that SEA is encouraging students to plan for college and a career. (Just 15% of adults over age 25 in Scioto County have a bachelor's degree

or higher, according to U.S. Census Bureau data.)

“We live in a poor county. We don’t have a lot of kids that go on to college,” Evans said. “At SEA and at the high school...they push you to want to succeed. My daughter wants to be a principal now (because of Mrs. Shope).”

Sandra Pack has experienced SEA as a 1st-grade teacher and a parent of two. Her daughter has a severe form of epilepsy and requires a personal aide, which SEA provides. “We’re very close with our students,” she said, adding that she appreciates that each classroom teacher has an aide and that the school has three full-time intervention specialists.

A single mom, Pack, who is in her fourth year at SEA, earns about \$33,000 annually. “It really hurt me financially at first (to take the job),” she said. “But my kids are happy here. I think the school board is doing an excellent job to get our pay close to the other public schools in the county. All of the teachers who are here are here for the kids. None of us are here for the pay.”

Pack, who gave gift bags with a blanket, two books and “magic reindeer food” to each of her 29 students at the holidays, also likes the school’s focus on technology. Every child has a Chromebook. All classrooms have smart boards.

Jon Stapleton, who was a senior at East when it became a charter school and whose wife Ashlee is a 3rd-grade teacher’s aide at SEA, said the couple chose the school for their 8-year-old twins because “when my kids are there, they’re going to be taken care of.”

Lettie Johnson, whose twin boys went to SEA and now attend East High School, said, “They (the SEA staff) welcome anybody, and they treat them as their own.” She recalls that, when her children were in 1st grade, they were allowed to move to the 2nd-grade classroom if they had already mastered a concept.



“If you felt your child wasn’t getting what he needed, the teacher would pull him aside and give him more challenging work,” she said.

Johnson, who is on SEA’s elected school board, said teachers and staff are quick to respond to the physical needs of students, providing hats, gloves, scarves, coats and food. Every Friday, more than a third of students receive backpacks with food for the weekend from a local anti-hunger foundation that serves schools across Scioto County. During the run-up to the holidays, the local Scioto Shoe Mart fitted 60 children for shoes, an annual tradition in an area that was once home to a half-dozen shoe factories and the largest shoelace maker in the country.

Parents and others say Foresta Shope, who formerly taught language arts at the combined middle and high school, is a powerful force at SEA. “She’s demanding of her staff,” said Bob Workman, 74, a school board member who with his brother retired early in 2000 so they could focus full-time on helping East High School get charter status.

Shope, the effervescent principal, who has been known to sing “Let It Go” in the hallway, said her focus is on mastery and reducing remediation. “We really encourage the mindset of extra time and extra practice,” she said.

“If you want to be a better reader, you have to know your sight words....We talk about mastery of learning. (We ask), ‘What do you need extra time and

extra practice on?’...They buy in to that whole idea that your job is to learn.”

Students alternate taking STAR Assessments every week in math and reading to track which concepts they fully understand, and they follow their trend lines carefully. Justina, a second-grader, pointed to her STAR math results, noting, “If I go up any more, I’ll be doing multiplication.”

“If you want to be a better reader, you have to know your sight words.... We talk about mastery of learning. (We ask), ‘What do you need extra time and extra practice on?’...They buy in to that whole idea that your job is to learn.”

— FORESTA SHOPE



Despite limited resources, SEA prioritizes field trips as an integral part of the educational experience. Here, the second grade class visits the Newport Aquarium in Newport, Kentucky.

The week before last year's holiday break, Michelle Kurtz's 2nd-grade students created traps to catch gingerbread men. First they designed a blueprint. The following day, they built their devices with only supplies they could find in their classroom, and the third day they assessed what worked.

Down the hall, Stephani Dunks' students were doing presentations about "Hatchet," by Gary Paulsen. One of her 5th-grade students is reading on a 12th-grade level; another is struggling with sight words.

Twelve-year-old Jaylyn, who wants to be an emergency room doctor, said she loved the chapter book. Asked what she thinks about SEA, she said, "We have a little bit of a talking problem." Then peering earnestly over her glasses, she added, "But doesn't every kid? I love Mrs. Shope. The first day of school, I wore glitter hair spray, and she wore big ol' bling earrings. She's really fun to be around."

Nine-year-old Phoenix said he wants to be a chemist. In recognition of his good work, he had been sent to the office to pick a prize from Foresta Shope's treasure chest. He opted for a kazoo over Chinese finger traps, toy snakes and hand clappers. After giving Phoenix a quick lesson in kazoo playing, Foresta Shope asked, "Do we need to call Mom (to celebrate)?" While she dialed, she asked, "What are we doing over break?"

"Studying and reading every day but Christmas and New Year's Eve," Phoenix said.

While money at SEA is tight, school leaders manage to take each class on a trip every year. The younger students go to museums and out for lunch; 5th-graders travel to Washington, D.C. The trips, Foresta Shope said, are emblematic of what SEA aspires to be.

"The majority of our kids come from generational poverty," she said. "They're not exposed to what the world has to offer. That was my hope in starting this place—we can expose kids to what a school should be."

The Shopes, whose youngest son attends East High School while a granddaughter is in 4th grade at SEA, live in Sciotoville directly across the street from East Portsmouth Elementary. Their home is painted gray and trimmed with bright blue awnings—SEA's and East High School's colors. Bill Shope said officials have approached Portsmouth City Schools about merging SEA and the local public elementary school, but only if their school remains a charter. (Bill Shope recuses himself from personnel matters related to his wife.)

So far, Portsmouth school leaders have declined SEA's overtures, prompting SEA to apply for a \$2.5 million competitive Community Schools Classroom Facilities Grant that the school did not receive. The grant would have helped pay for construction of a new elementary school.



5th graders finishing off their science lesson by making slime! Great way to start Spring Break!

“We’ll build right across the street (from Portsmouth’s elementary school),” Bill Shope said, referencing property the school board has bought. “Without our school, our community wouldn’t have the little it has.”

Rick Bowman, superintendent of East High and SEA, said he’s hopeful that one day soon Portsmouth and his schools will find a way to work through their differences. He said Portsmouth City’s superintendent deserves credit for resolving critical issues, specifically busing problems, for his students. But he notes that Portsmouth’s elementary school in Sciotoville is just over half full, even as his elementary students are being taught in trailers. “It’s been all about the adults for 100 years,” Bowman said. “If the adults will think about the kids, the decisions will be easier.”

SCIOTOVILLE ELEMENTARY ACADEMY

Home District: Portsmouth City School District (PCSD)

Enrollment: 131

Grades Served: K-4

School Principal: Foresta Shope

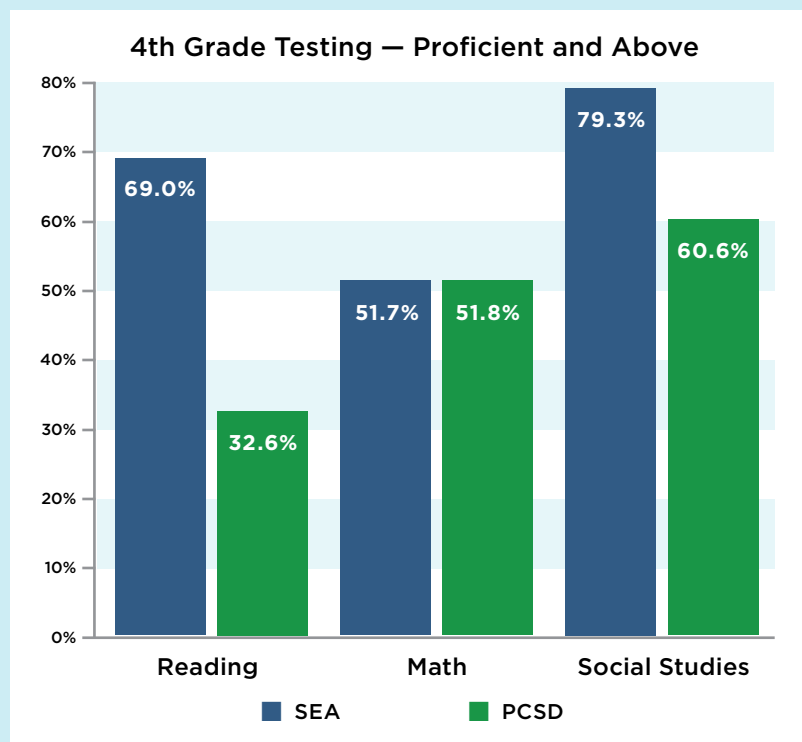
Opened: 2008

Percent Economically Disadvantaged: 100%

Percent White: 89.1%

Performance Index Grade: C

Value Added Overall Grade: B



The data for this section are based on Sciotoville Elementary Academy’s 2016-17 school report card. The school has since expanded to serve grades K through 5. Data were compiled by Madison Yoder.

Big Numbers
 From the right, every three places in a number
 PERIOD. This chart shows the ONES period,
 THOUSANDS period, and the MILLIONS period.

MILLIONS			THOUSANDS			ONES		
Hundred Thousands	Ten Thousands	Thousands	Hundreds	Tens	Ones	Hundreds	Tens	Ones
+	8	7	9	2	3	1	5	4

When you write a number, insert a
 COMMA between each period.

Big Numbers
 I read a number that has more than three
 digits. I start with the period on the left. Say the
 number in the period as a unit, followed
 by the number in the period. Do the same
 for the next period. End with the
 word "and".

Write the number?
 Six hundred forty-eight million,
 seven hundred ninety-two
 thousand, three hundred fifteen!

Word Problems

What is a WORD PROBLEM?

Micky's family drove for five days to reach Montana. Every day, they spent seventy-five dollars on hotel rooms, forty-two dollars on gas, and fifty-five dollars on food. How much did they spend in all?

Here are math meanings of words we use:

Terms	Meanings	Example
and	add	Important information: for = multiply and = add in all = total All the word numbers become them to real numbers. Number $5 \times 7 = 35$ 375 87
per	divide	
each	divide	
over	add	
product	multiply	
fraction	divide	
for	multiply	
of	multiply	
left, remaining	subtract	
in all, total	add	
to, less, etc.	subtract	

Fantastic Fraction shares
 $\frac{2}{3}$ of her pizza and
 has $\frac{1}{3}$ left over.

