

## Chattanooga School for the Arts and Sciences

865 East Third Street

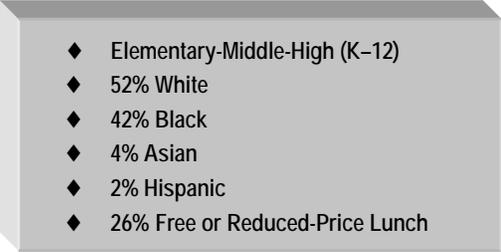
Chattanooga, TN 37403

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The Chattanooga School for the Arts and Sciences (CSAS) is a K–12 magnet school in Hamilton County, Tennessee offering a college-preparatory liberal arts education to each member of its diverse student body. The Paideia philosophy—the school’s theme—makes a rigorous curriculum accessible to students of all backgrounds to empower them to pursue postsecondary education and

develop as life-long learners. When CSAS was founded in 1986, it was the first school in the district to offer a single-track curriculum that requires all students to take the same core classes and prepare for postsecondary study. “We believe that the best education for the best kids is the best education for all kids,” says Barbara Jordan, CSAS principal. “We don’t say only some kids are capable of doing high level work, and we don’t track kids.” There are no qualifying admissions criteria to attend CSAS. Admission is done on a first-come, first-serve basis, and an emphasis is placed on supporting students of all ability levels to meet the school’s high expectations.

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- ◆ Elementary-Middle-High (K–12)
  - ◆ 52% White
  - ◆ 42% Black
  - ◆ 4% Asian
  - ◆ 2% Hispanic
  - ◆ 26% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch

### Requiring College-Preparatory Curriculum for All Students

The CSAS curriculum aims to develop well-rounded and intellectually curious students through its required program of academic and elective courses. Academics are the focus, and all CSAS students graduate meeting or exceeding the entrance requirements of highly selective colleges. Every student, for example, takes either French or Spanish from kindergarten through senior year, which means CSAS graduates are proficient in a foreign language and meet the foreign language requirement for even the most competitive of postsecondary institutions. Advanced science electives in geology, physiology, chemistry, and physics are also offered in addition to the four years of mandatory lab science. CSAS offers 20 electives in the visual and performing arts, and the school has well-established band, string instrument, choir, and theater programs.

The school’s schedule is designed to support seminar- and project-based learning, giving students the extended time they need to focus deeply on their learning. The academic year is divided into a 4 x 4 block schedule, in which students complete four courses each semester, one of which may be an elective or community service. Each course meets for 85 minutes, four days a week, with courses on Wednesdays shortened to 60 minutes to accommodate a 90-minute seminar period, during which all students meet in grade-level groups for Socratic Seminars that have been carefully planned by teams of teachers.

## **Making Effective Use of College-Readiness Assessments**

Since all students are expected to attend college, the college advisory process begins early and includes the use of assessments to signal college readiness. All students take the preliminary ACT assessments: beginning in the eighth grade with the EXPLORE test and following up with the PLAN test in tenth grade. As required by Hamilton County, all junior students must take the ACT. CSAS also requires that all juniors take the PSAT.

Mandatory assessments are helpful for ensuring all students are prepared to meet entrance requirements for selective schools and scholarships, and because they are used early on, they also serve as useful tools for determining students' college-readiness skills. Teachers adjust instruction where they see gaps, having aligned their curriculum to the ACT standards. Staff also develops individualized academic plans for students who do not achieve the ACT benchmark scores for college readiness. Interventions such as before- and after-school tutoring and special college-readiness skills courses help students address deficiencies in particular areas.

The school's advisory program helps to ensure that each student achieves academic success and is on track to complete the rigorous graduation requirements and attend college. Each student is paired with a faculty advisor who monitors the student's academic progress and social well-being, assisting the student with guidance or directing a student to a particular service as needed.

Twice during their high school career, CSAS students are required to exhibit mastery of knowledge and skills in front of staff and family members: for the Scholar's Journey, required for promotion to the eleventh grade; and for the Senior Project, which is required to graduate. The Scholar's Journey consists of a portfolio documenting ninth- and tenth-grade coursework, a final portfolio of revised and exemplary assignments, and a roundtable presentation that includes a personal essay, reflection on their learning, and an analysis of their PLAN assessment results. This process helps students identify work habits, life skills, and other practices that signal readiness for college, as well as engage families in discussion around postsecondary plans.

The Senior Project is a chance for students to demonstrate that they are independent learners who have mastered skills and habits needed to manage work and pursue academic interests. To graduate, students must complete this exit project, which includes: a 10- to 12-page research paper, documented time spent with an expert in the student's chosen field, 30 hours of related community service, the creation of a tangible product, and two culminating presentations.

## **Exposing Students to College Opportunities**

A unique program that supports CSAS students with their college-going aspirations is a mandatory college trip that takes place during the fall semester of junior year. The week-long college immersion experience is designed to expose students to a range of colleges, for example, urban, public, private, historically Black, and highly selective. Students also experience campus life, meet with college admissions staff, financial aid officers, and CSAS alumni, and reflect on their visit with CSAS staff and peers. Students begin planning for this trip beginning in tenth grade, when they research colleges and universities. They prepare questions for their visit and complete reflection activities to help them solidify preferences and next steps for college entry. This hands-on experience helps to broaden students' perspectives and encourages students who are

first in their family to attend college to consider options beyond the local community college or four-year university.

Another goal of the college trips is to prepare CSAS students to be educated consumers about their postsecondary options so they are more likely to find a good match and be successful in college. As Assistant Principal Cindy Dees explains, “Our students know where they feel comfortable, what they like and don’t like. And that’s one of the reasons why we have the highest percentage in the district of students who are at their same college their sophomore year.”

The week-long trip takes students to 6 or 7 different campuses in a region, and costs between \$250–\$450 per student. Families provide scholarships and organize fundraising events to ensure that all students can participate in this CSAS signature program, no matter what their financial circumstances.

### **Managing the College and Financial Aid Application Process**

Another innovative strategy for helping students complete the necessary steps for college entry is managed by the College and Career Counselor. CSAS processes all of the seniors’ college applications to ensure that all students apply to at least one college. Systems are put into place so that the steps for college entry are routine, predictable, and explicit for all students, even for those who will be first in their family to attend college. Students are required to put together a senior profile that serves as an aid for teacher recommendations and personal essays. A special college application folder provides a consistent, methodical protocol for students to submit college, scholarship, and enrichment program applications for processing by the school office. Information contained in the folder allows for convenient access if needed by a school or agency.

To help manage all students’ progress with the multiple steps and variables involved in applying for college and financial aid, software package and district communication systems are used to keep track of students’ progress and update families. Check points are also built in along the way; if a request for transcripts has not been logged by February, a letter goes out to students and families requesting an update on college plans and offering support.

### **Providing Consistent Signals About College Expectations**

The importance of preparing for college is a clear and consistent message communicated to students, as reflected by one student’s comment: “When you get to this school, there isn’t the option of if you go to college. There’s the options of where are you going to college.” The hallways are lined with college banners representing the various postsecondary institutions attended by the most CSAS graduates.

At an annual awards ceremony, the principal announces each senior’s postsecondary plans as well as scholarships earned. As one African American student reflected, having this experience as a freshman helped him realize the school’s mission and the impact of this school culture on his own future: “It was like all these seniors that I knew... they were all going to college. It showed me what I could do, and that feeling never left me.”

Parents are also given the same message—that their child can and will attend college—and effort is made to dispel fears and myths about college access and cost. Staff uses parents of alumni to engage current parents in discussion about opportunities and resources available, as well as the benefits of different types of college experiences.

**Success**

Each year, about 95–98% of graduating CSAS students attend college, with over 80% attending four-year institutions and around 20% attending other selective schools. According to a study of Hamilton County high school graduates through the Public Education Fund, CSAS students return for a second year of college or university at the highest rate in the county—88%.