

Supporting Neurodiverse Learners through Ethical School Design: The Magic City Acceptance Academy as a Model for Inclusive Education

Matthew Fifolt, PhD
Department of Health Policy and Organization,
School of Public Health
University of Alabama at Birmingham

D. Keith Gurley
Department of Human Studies,
School of Education and Human Sciences
University of Alabama at Birmingham

Abstract

The Magic City Acceptance Academy (MCAA), a charter school in Homewood, Alabama, was founded in 2021 by Birmingham AIDS Outreach to support students—particularly LGBTQ+ youth—who have faced bullying or exclusion in traditional schools. Serving grades 6–12, MCAA provides a brave, inclusive, and affirming environment, with specialized support for neurodiverse students and those with social-emotional challenges. Key features include a sensory room, trauma-informed curricula, restorative justice practices, a therapy animal, and a Wellness Suite. The school's physical design promotes well-being with single-stall, gender-neutral restrooms and the absence of locker rooms. Despite legislative challenges, MCAA remains committed to equity, diversity, and student wellness, illustrating how universal design and inclusive practices foster belonging, safety, and academic success for all students.

Key Words

neurodiversity, social-emotional learning, inclusive spaces, trauma-informed curriculum, restorative justice disciplinary practices

Introduction

The Magic City Acceptance Academy (MCAA) is a charter school in Homewood, Alabama, a suburb of Birmingham, for students in grades 6 through 12. The school was founded by Birmingham AIDS Outreach (BAO) in 2021 in response to their growing concerns that students who identified as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ+) were failing in school or dropping out due to bullying, harassment, or violence, which students often attributed to queer or other marginalized identities (Fifolt, Gurley, White, 2024b; Kosciw et al., 2022).

MCAA's original mission statement was to empower all learners to embrace education, achieve individual success, and take ownership of their future in a brave, LGBTQ-affirming learning environment (Fifolt, Gurley, White). Due to state and federal statutes, MCAA's Board of Directors elected to combine its mission and vision statements in 2025 to comply with evolving legislation. It now reads:

The Magic City Acceptance Academy will motivate and prepare students in grades six through twelve by providing an exceptional, innovative, and quality-driving education. MCAA's purpose is to engage students who have dropped out, are not thriving in traditional schools, or are enrolled in home-school programs. MCAA will provide a positive learning environment for all students to succeed. (Magic City Acceptance Academy, para. 1).

Despite wording changes, school personnel remain dedicated to providing students with the highest-quality education in an environment that is respectful, affirming, and diverse.

Previously, our research team demonstrated that students who identify as LGBTQ+ or *other* are frequently vulnerable to harassment in the public-school setting (Fifolt, Gurley, White, 2024a; Fifolt, Gurley, White, 2024b). We concluded that, despite protections by school policies, students who are singled out as different from their mainstream peers frequently face higher risk for peer victimization. In this context, the category of *other* includes individuals with unique learning needs.

In this Commentary, we revisit selected themes from our previous studies of MCAA to describe the innovative ways in which MCAA supports students with exceptionalities, including neurodiversity and social-emotional needs. As such, we depict MCAA's school environment as well as programs and policies as examples of best practices that could be replicated in other school settings. Finally, we demonstrate that strategies of a highly ethical school, like MCAA, benefit *all* students, not just those with unique identities or learning profile (Fifolt, Gurley, White, 2023b; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016).

Background

As a charter school in Alabama, MCAA is a public school and, therefore, part of the public education system in the state; it is open to all students who meet basic residency requirements for public school enrollment in Alabama. MCAA's charter status allows it to operate independently of certain state regulations to meet the needs of its students. In exchange for this flexibility, however, MCAA must meet a high level of accountability or risk losing its charter (Prothero, 2018). When MCAA opened in 2021, it registered 204 students. During the 2024-2025 academic year, MCAA enrolled more than 350 students. Despite the submission of a high-quality charter school application, including funding

commitments from BAO and a grant from New Schools for Alabama, MCAA faced significant challenges in securing a charter.

After multiple attempts, BAO retained an attorney and submitted a letter requesting an appeal to the Alabama State Charter School Commission decision to deny a charter based on BAO's allegations of discrimination by the Commission. To avoid a potential lawsuit, the Commission reconsidered BAO's application and, ultimately, approved its charter application. We provide a full account of the fraught charter application process in a case study published elsewhere (Fifolt, Gurley, White, 2024b).

In December 2020, MCAA founders immediately began work on renovating an old office building into an energizing space for students, faculty, staff, and administrators. However, even before the school opened, MCAA founders envisioned it to be different from traditional school settings.

Early in the planning process, school leaders convened two focus groups of LGBTQ+ youth and asked them to design their *ideal school*, including features that would either enhance or detract from their school experience. These students identified attributes from their previous schools that triggered their anxiety or diminished their opportunities for creativity and learning; and designers integrated their ideas into the blueprint for MCAA (Fifolt, Gurley, White, 2024a).

Innovative School Environment

Focus group participants noted that locker rooms and public restrooms in their previous schools made them feel anxious, as these were frequently areas in which bullying occurred (Fifolt, Gurley, White, 2024b). Previous authors have described locker rooms and public restrooms as *invisible* or *hidden spaces* that hold potential for peer-victimization (Kaufman

& Baams, 2022; Kosciw et al., 2022; Park et al., 2020). Similarly, such spaces may lead to anxiety and avoidance behavior among students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Francis et al., 2022; Lu et al., 2022).

Lu and colleagues (2022) suggested that modifications to the school environment can lead to a more equitable and humane experience for students, especially those with exceptionalities. Guidance from the American Institute of Architects suggests that inclusive restroom spaces, including non-gendered single-user restrooms, can offer a more dignified approach to the traditional experience with better student health outcomes (Jacobs et al., 2024, para. 1).

In response to student concerns, MCAA added multiple, single stall, non-gender-specific restrooms to each of its three floors and eliminated locker rooms altogether. One of the designers observed that students in traditional schools rarely use showers in locker rooms, even when they are provided. School officials concluded that removing locker rooms would eliminate one unnecessary stressor for students. However, recognizing the unique challenges of their student population, MCAA added laundry facilities and a roll-in shower for individuals with physical disabilities and those who may be unhoused (Fifolt, Gurley, White, 2024b).

School officials observed that transitions between classes can also cause student distress and anxiety. Therefore, MCAA eliminated traditional hallway lockers by relying primarily on digital books. For students who are neurodivergent, particularly those with ASD who experience processing differences, noise, crowded spaces, locker combinations, and unstructured transitions can lead to increased levels of stress (McDougal, 2023; Sideropoulos et al., 2024). Likewise, MCAA

replaced the digital bell with a more calming chime to signal the transition between classes.

Sensory room

One of the most distinctive and restorative spaces at MCAA is the sensory room, a small, sound-insulated room for students to reset. Once again, focus group participants were outspoken about the need for an inclusive space for students who may feel overwhelmed or overstimulated. The room includes soft lighting with a repeating color light panel, textual contrast, a water feature, and manipulatives to help students calm their breathing (Fifolt, Gurley, White, 2024a).

In a recent systematic review, Yi and Heidari Maten (2025) observed that a sensory room, or multi-sensory environment (MSE), benefits students by reducing agitation, aggression, self-injury, arousal, and stereotype behaviors while decreasing distress, anxiety, and depression.

A systematic review of qualitative and mixed methods studies of adolescents and adults with ASD revealed that adaptations to social and sensory contexts were crucial in supporting students in secondary school environments. One key finding was the use of sensory spaces which “provided a respite during the school day in which autistic students found comfort and an opportunity to recuperate” (McKinlay and colleagues 2025, p. 572).

Therapy animals

We further observed that positive sensory experiences were associated with therapy animals in schools (McKinlay et al., 2025). Therapy animals and school pets provide a range of benefits to students including reduced anxiety and stress, improved social skills, sensory support, and emotional regulation (Rehn et al., 2023). MCAA has one service dog, Fire Lily, who was trained to support

individuals with disabilities (Roverchase Foundation, 2025). However, MCAA also welcomes multiple other dogs, typically between six and eight each day, in administrative offices and classrooms that belong to teachers, administrators, and staff.

In a previous study, one MCAA student described Lemon, the school counselor’s dog, as a calming influence for her when she and the counselor talked (Fifolt, Gurley, Evans, 2026).

Inclusive programs and policies

As part of the public school system, MCAA must meet all state mandates regarding curriculum and assessment standards for secondary students in Alabama. However, MCAA’s charter provides school leaders with a higher level of autonomy in decision-making regarding curriculum, student discipline, and budgets. For example, MCAA elected to implement trauma-informed curriculum and restorative justice practices for student discipline, differentiating it from many traditional school settings (Gurley, White, Fifolt, 2024c).

Trauma-informed curriculum

A trauma-informed curriculum recognizes that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can undermine a child’s sense of safety, stability, and bonding with others. As such, trauma-informed schools “seek to increase awareness of trauma exposure and trauma symptoms, build supportive school and classroom communities, teach children social-emotional skills, and counteract biases and harsh disciplinary practices that can re-traumatize and cause further harm to students” (Herrenkohl et al., 2021, p. 7).

According to Fang and colleagues (2022), neurodiverse students, including those with ASD, are at greater risk of experiencing interpersonal trauma as compared to their typically developing peers. In a research

synthesis, Kalisch and colleagues observed that interpersonal trauma can “profoundly impact the mental health of neurodiverse children, as characterized by the onset of depressive symptomology, self-injurious behavior, and post-traumatic sequelae including intrusive thoughts, distressing memories, and sleep disturbance” (Kalisch et al., 2024, p. 733).

Craig (2017) noted that a trauma-informed curriculum focuses on self-efficacy, emotional awareness, affect regulation, and prevention while also providing students with access to mental health supports. Further, it allows students to explore their own strengths and identities and develop meaningful, positive relationships with adults and peers.

In a previous study, we identified multiple protective and promotive factors from the Youth Thrive framework that MCAA demonstrates through its strengths-based, trauma-informed curriculum and support, namely youth resilience, school connections, knowledge of adolescent development, concrete support in times of need, and cognitive and social competence (Gurley, Fifolt, White, 2023a; Harper Browne et al., 2015).

Restorative justice

Likewise, MCAA has implemented restorative justice principles to guide its student discipline practices. Unlike traditional disciplinary structures that rely on punitive actions, including suspension and expulsion, restorative justice focuses on mediation and agreement through which students are challenged to understand how their actions may affect others and why they may have taken those actions (Payne & Welch, 2018). This approach emphasizes the re-establishment of community within the classroom and school-wide settings as quickly and responsibly as possible.

As we previously observed, a trauma-informed approach in the classroom requires an environment in which students feel safe, both physically and psychologically (Fifolt, Gurley, White, 2024a). In this case, safety is based on a predictable classroom environment where students feel respected, validated, and heard. In this way, restorative justice and trauma-informed discipline recognizes the role of trauma in behavioral situations and identifies restorative solutions to promote healthier behaviors in the future (Gurley, White, Fifolt, 2024c; Pickens & Tschopp, 2017).

Related empirical literature suggests that restorative justice practices contribute to reducing exclusionary discipline, enhance communication and relationships, and foster inclusive school cultures that accommodate diverse learning needs (Darling-Hammond, 2023; Lodi et al., 2022).

Restorative justice and trauma-informed practices focus on understanding the underlying causes and antecedents of students’ behaviors, teaching social-emotional skills, and promoting accountability through restorative conversations. These activities may be especially helpful to neurodivergent learners as conversations prioritize empathy and mutual understanding (Darling-Hammond, 2023; Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018).

Social and emotional support

MCAA faculty and staff are dedicated to supporting the social-emotional growth of their students. Furthermore, MCAA administrators are committed to hiring and retaining several full-time staff members whose sole purpose is to address, support, and strengthen student mental health and personal wellness (Fifolt, Gurley, Evans, 2026). These staff positions include two full-time social workers and a full-time mental health professional, who is also a

certified social worker. For MCAA, this represents a student-to-wellness staff ratio of approximately 1:116.

The School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) recommends a ratio of one school social worker per 250 students (School Social Work Association of American, 2024). In its 2024 report, the SSWAA reported that no state meets this benchmark recommendation, with some states reporting significant disparities relative to the recommendation, including California (1:6,132), Texas (1:13,604), and Alabama (1:8,615) (School Social Work Association of America, 2024).

In addition to these full-time mental health professionals on staff, MCAA also employs two full-time academic counselors, Exceptional Education staff members, and a full-time nurse. Furthermore, MCAA partners with the JBS (Jefferson-Blount-St. Clair Counties) Mental Health Authority which, in Fall 2024, assigned a full-time mental health therapist, located full-time at MCAA. MCAA students and their families also have full access to the Magic City Wellness Center, a full-time medical and mental health clinic which is separate from MCAA but also operated by BAO.

Wellness suite

In several of our previous studies, MCAA students, faculty, and staff described the importance of the Wellness Suite in providing mental health support for students (Gurley, Fifolt, White, 2023a; Gurley, Fifolt, White2023b; Fifolt, Gurley, Evans2026). In addition to receiving counseling and support services from social workers, students who are experiencing stress or just having a challenging day can go to the Wellness Suite to simply pet one of the dogs or to meet personal needs (e.g., deodorant, other hygiene products) (Fifolt, Gurley, Evans, 2026). In a previous article, Kevin (pseudonym), an MCAA senior,

suggested that MCAA has “put student wellbeing in the top position where I think it belongs... Students are functioning better in environments that support them and accept them” (Gurley, Fifolt, White, 2023, p. 9). Similarly, reflecting on teachers’ responsiveness to student needs, Kevin noted that when a student needs a break from the classroom environment or just a moment to collect their thoughts or emotions, teachers allow students to “step out, go to the library, or go down to the Wellness Suite (or Sensory Room). “They understand, they let us go.” (Gurley, Fifolt, White, 2023b, pp. 10-11).

Researchers have suggested that school-based mental health interventions in secondary schools are effective at reducing anxiety and depression, especially when they are part of a comprehensive approach to student wellness (Guest et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2023).

This may be particularly important for students with learning differences since youth with developmental disabilities, including ASD and intellectual disability, are at greater risk than their neurotypical peers of developing depression and suicidality (Cook et al., 2024; Pezzimenti et al., 2019).

Considering the escalating mental health crisis in the United States (Burnette et al., 2023), establishing protective and promotive factors like student-teacher relationships, school connectedness, and sense of community, can play a significant role in ensuring student wellness and life satisfaction (Cavioni et al., 2021).

MCAA has created a culture that fosters positive mental health by empowering students to ask for and receive the help they need. Further, MCAA normalizes students’ use of noise-cancelling headphones, comfortable clothing, fidgets, and other tools to help them manage sensory overload, reduce anxiety, and

create a more comfortable and predictable environment.

Conclusion

MCAA offers a model for inclusive, ethical education that prioritizes student wellness, dignity, and safety. Through intentional design choices, trauma-informed curricula, restorative discipline, and comprehensive mental health services, MCAA has created a school culture that is responsive to student needs without sacrificing academic rigor. These strategies are not only beneficial to LGBTQ+ youth and students with exceptionalities but also the broader student population by creating a more humane, affirming, and accessible learning environment.

Rather than treating diversity and inclusion as add-ons or special accommodations, MCAA embeds these values into the fabric of its school operations. As our observations demonstrated, the school's commitment to universal design, both physical and pedagogical, promotes school connectedness, emotional regulation, and academic engagement (AlRawi & AlKahtani, 2022; Khurana, 2022; Scheffler et al., 2019).

In doing so, MCAA challenges outdated models that equate equity with lowered

expectations or tradeoffs in academic quality. Instead, it shows that schools can be both rigorous and responsive, both structured and compassionate.

As K-12 schools across the United States grapple with mounting mental health challenges, persistent educational inequities, and the urgent need for inclusive practices, MCAA stands out as a beacon of what is possible when education systems are grounded in ethics and evidence.

Its approach is not merely aspirational, but also replicable. The strategies and practices implemented at MCAA provide a roadmap for school leaders, educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals seeking to transform schools into environments where all students feel safe, supported, and capable of success.

In short, MCAA is not just a haven for LGBTQ+ youth or neurodivergent students, it is a demonstration of what education can look like when human dignity is placed at the center of school design. By fostering an ecosystem where inclusion is the norm and not the exception, MCAA models the kind of school every student deserves.

Author Biographies

Matthew Fifolt is an associate professor in the department of health policy and organization at the University of Alabama at Birmingham's School of Public Health. E-mail: mfifolt@uab.edu

D. Keith Gurley is an associate professor in the department of human studies at the University of Alabama at Birmingham's School of Education and Human Sciences. E-mail: kgurley@uab.edu

Statements and Declarations

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Prior to 2023, the authors had no conflict of interest to declare. However, the first author currently has a child who attends the Magic City Acceptance Academy, and she has a formal diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder.

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