

Chatham Park Brings New School Without the Choice

by Tommy Johnson

Thales Academy, a chain private school promising “a high quality, affordable education,” is planned to open in Chatham Park next fall. It offers a surprisingly low tuition but to do so it avoids accreditation and has no cafeteria, auditorium, or bus system. Most notably, it lacks the resources necessary to accommodate students with behavioral conditions or learning disabilities.

Thales currently enrolls 2,200 students across the state at six locations. Robert Luddy, prominent political donor and CEO of CaptiveAire Systems, a commercial ventilation company, started the school in 2007. He founded the schools to give parents and students “exit,” or a way to “bypass the existing industry,” as he told Reason.com.

Thales aims to be a viable financial alternative to public schools by offering markedly lowers tuition prices. A Thales education costs \$4,800 for Pre-K, \$5,300 for Kindergarten through fifth grade, and \$6,000 for sixth through twelfth grade. For comparison, Durham Academy’s grades 9-12 tuition is \$25,170 and in 2015-16, North Carolina spent over \$8,000 per pupil. According to Thales’ mission statement, its goal is to maintain excellence while streamlining efficiencies. To complete this balancing act Thales has to make some sacrifices.

First, Thales Academy lacks accreditation. The purpose of accreditation is to assure a school’s quality to parents and students and to assist the school in improvement. In North Carolina, accreditation comes from one or more of six independent agencies, ranging from regional and religiously affiliated to national organizations. Being accredited means a school consistently meets the agency’s standards. Accreditation, however, is not for Thales Academy.

“The accreditation process does not align with Thales Academy’s mission and prevent Thales from maintaining our standard of the highest quality of education,” reads Thales’ website. Thales maintains that the “bureaucratic requirements” place an unnecessary strain on staff and teachers.

This concern for overburdening teachers is carried over to Advanced Placement classes, which give students a chance to earn college credit and/or place out of college classes in high school. Thales offers just four of these “because they require time consuming and expensive teacher training and often lead to teaching for the test.” Thales offers AP Calculus, AP Spanish Literature, AP Latin, and AP Physics. If students want to be proactive in biology, economics, or any of the other AP course offerings, they can take a third-party course in addition to their Thales workload. Third party courses usually costs several hundred dollars.

For both accreditation and Advanced Placement, Thales argues that it can maintain high academic standards despite skimping the costs of AP teacher training and accreditation. Similarly, it boasts that through “direct instruction” it can handle larger class sizes and, consequentially, fewer teachers. Direct instruction is a form of teaching where students are divided into classes based upon student performance on placement tests. The logic with direct instruction is that when students are in classes with peers of relatively similar abilities, they require less individual attention. According to Reason.com, “Luddy is proud of having large classes because it demonstrates efficiency.” It has a 26:1 student-teacher ratio compared to the 15:1 ratio in traditional public schools.

This push for efficiency results in Thales lacking several key accommodations. Thales does not have buses or bus drivers: they rely solely on parents to provide students with rides to school. It has few staff members, no cafeteria (students eat their lunches in classrooms), and no auditorium. To keep

costs and staff low, Thales also discriminates on the basis of emotional issues, behavioral issues, and learning disabilities.

On its Admissions page, Thales has the following nondiscrimination statement: “Thales is open to any student regardless of race, creed, gender, or economic status. Thales Academy makes reasonable accommodations for children with physical disabilities.” The full statement, which can be found in the student and parent handbook, is more telling: “Thales does not have the personnel or the facilities to effectively address the needs of children who have emotional or behavioral problems or who have learning disabilities that require special programs.” If your student requires a more individualized education as a result of dyslexia, cerebral palsy, or any other condition that falls under this blanket term, they will be unable to go to Thales Academy.

Thales Academy is coming to Chatham as a result of Chatham Park. Unfortunately, Chatham Park’s motto of “Many Choices. One Place.” does not apply to everyone in the case of Thales. The school excludes the most marginalized students to offer a cheaper education to others.

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