

## COMMENTARY

# State of Ohio's grade game casts academy in unfair light

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Aaron Lusk is a failure.

At least that is how the Ohio Department of Education describes his school.

If his school is a failure, you can bet damn well that he would take responsibility.

Mr. Lusk is the principal of the Maritime Academy of Toledo. The state recently handed out its annual report cards, and the Maritime Academy received a big, fat F.

"It's a punch in the stomach," Mr. Lusk says.



From left, Casey Meeker, Charles Boisselle, Principal Aaron Lusk, Peyton Knapp, and Nadhira Hunter discuss the Maritime Academy of Toledo.

But it's really a sucker punch, because the grade was delivered based on lousy data. The state said the Water Street charter school graduated one student last year. Mr. Lusk shakes a manila folder. "It's all here," he says.

The folder holds evidence that 28 students graduated last year. The report says no Maritime students were in the College Credit Plus program — more than 70 actually were. Mr. Lusk admits it was a reporting error on the school's part, but the corrections were reported to the state well before the report cards were released. The response from the state was a collective shrug. Better luck next year.

It doesn't sit right with Mr. Lusk. These are his kids. He knows the names and faces of all 300 of them. He knows the progress he sees. A lot of the students come from Point Place, Washington Local, even the suburbs. The school teaches students from fifth

grade to 12th. There is an emphasis on training for maritime occupations, culinary services, and marine environmental services, but many students just need the attention that a smaller school can afford them.

"We will get kids who fall through the cracks or who have behavioral issues. We can give them the attention they need because we are so small," Mr. Lusk says.

Before Mr. Lusk took over as principal three years ago, the school had a discipline-first attitude. The academy brings together students from all socioeconomic backgrounds, and the melting pot often turned combustible. There were 177 out-of-school suspensions in the 2013-2014 school year. Marijuana was easy to find in the building, Mr. Lusk says.

That is no longer the case, according to the principal, and out-of-school suspensions plummeted to 30 last year. Mr. Lusk believes there will be fewer this year.

"We do not focus on the negative here, but I want the kids to learn to take responsibility," Mr. Lusk says.

He told a story of putting two kids in a room for three hours, just so they could learn to talk to each other with respect. Sometimes that is not so easy when kids come from different worlds.

As Mr. Lusk shows off data of dramatic performance improvements in reading from middle schools last year, a group of students comes into his office, each dressed in their blue uniform tops.

“I don’t think it’s fair,” Nadhira Hunter says when I ask her about the school’s failing grade. “This school is the best school I’ve ever been to. The others never worked with me.”

Casey Meeker is planning a career in the Marines. He is in the 10th grade, from Sylvania: “I love it here. Mr. Lusk cares about us more than most schools would. There aren’t as many students, so they care more.”

Charles Boisselle is headed to the Army. His prior counselor said he should go to the Maritime Academy.

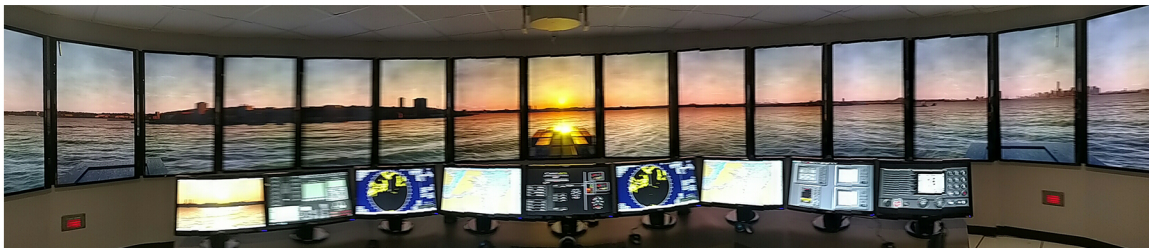
Peyton Knapp is in the school’s Coast Guard auxiliary unit, meaning she can participate in Coast Guard rescues and other duties. She is planning for a career in the Coast Guard when she graduates. She got a C once in art class, something about a miscommunication with the teacher. There have been no other non-A’s.

It would be easy to believe that Mr. Lusk stacked the deck, hand-picking the top students to tell the local columnist all the right things. But he didn’t. There was a list on his desk of more than 50 students who wanted to talk, to say how the Maritime Academy has changed their lives.

Mr. Lusk’s patience comes from previously teaching autistic students for seven years. His discipline is from serving in the Marines from 2001-2005. His unit was in Anbar Province, the site of some of the most intense fighting during the Iraq War.

As he and his students lead the way to a secondary building that houses one of only two maritime simulators of its kind in the country, Mr. Lusk walks with a noticeable limp, his knees worn out from fixing tanks and other heavy armor in the desert.

“I always tell people that being in Iraq and the war is nothing compared to being a principal or teacher,” he says, chuckling. “The stress level is so much higher as a principal.”



The next stop of the tour includes an attempt to pilot a 500-foot container ship through the San Francisco Bay. The simulator contains 18 panels circling the room. The Golden Gate bridge and Alcatraz prison are in the distance. The size of the waves varies, depending on the depth of the water and wind speed, which can all be seen on the bank of computers in the control room. Students put the computers together as part of a class project. The multitude of images from the panels is sensorially overwhelming. It feels as though the floor is swaying.

Jerry Bowman, who teaches the technical courses and is the school’s IT director, proudly says that there are 25 ports that students can drive ships through to learn about the realistic dynamics of each. Soon, there will be simulations for ports in all the Great Lakes.

One final educational stop takes us to a dock along the river, where Peyton and Charles conduct tests on the water. The Maumee River water apparently is not nearly as clear as it should be. No big surprise there. Mr. Lusk and his students theorize that it is from the algae, but also maybe because of the dredging of the river.

The diversity of activities that the students are involved in is fascinating and seemingly neverending. After returning to the office, I tell Mr. Lusk and the students good-bye.

Kashari Morgan stops me and refuses to allow me to open the door myself. She grabs the door: “Thank you for coming to see us. I hope you have a wonderful day.”

Failing? I don’t think so.

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