

About AYLA

The Alamance Youth Leadership Academy (AYLA) is a leadership program of the Alamance Chamber supported by strong partners, including the Elon University Center for Leadership, Alamance Community College, and Alamance-Burlington Schools.

The goal of the Alamance Youth Leadership Academy (AYLA) is to empower youth through the connections of civic engagement and leadership development for a greater Alamance County.

Founding members identified middle school as a time of critical personal development and an opportunity to engage area seventh and eighth graders in leadership and service. The vision is to inspire and create a foundation for leadership that will follow students into high school and beyond. The program began in the Fall of 2007 with two area middle schools. AYLA currently serves over 200 seventh and eighth graders in ten public, independent, and charter middle schools in Alamance County.

The model includes a weeklong summer experience hosted by the Elon University Center for Leadership, school-based chapter meetings that take place during the school year, and quarterly joint events hosted by the Chamber's AYLA Advisory Board. Developing and implementing a school improvement plan, focused on community engagement, recognition, and creating a kind and positive school climate, is at the heart of the learning experience.

AYLA activities help students gain:

- The ability to identify, develop, and exercise leadership skills
- The ability to work in teams
- The confidence and ability to speak well in public
- Problem-solving skills
- Communication skills
- Organization and facilitation skills
- Motivational skills
- Relationships with students from other schools



Responsibilities

Participating schools are responsible for:

- Providing a staff person(s) who will oversee school-based meetings, as well as coach students in order for them to learn leadership skills, meeting facilitation, and project management
- Selecting students in good standing who represent a cross-section of the student body, have demonstrated the potential to lead, and are willing to commit fully to this program
- Collaborating with students to initiate reasonable, well-planned programs for change
- Sustaining the program for at least two years

The Alamance Chamber and AYLA Advisory Board are responsible for:

- Working with the Elon Center for Leadership and Alamance Community College to plan and implement joint events and workshops to assist students in the development of leadership skills
- Providing financial support for the summer program and joint activities
- Making available volunteer liaisons to assist school personnel with communication, program management, and sustainability

Student participants are responsible for:

- Attending the summer experience (rising seventh graders)
- Remaining in good standing with their respective middle schools
- Attending at least 80% of all meetings
- Participating actively in all projects



School Information and Expectations

Chapter Selection

In 2025 - 2026, AYLA serves every public middle school, as well as a selection of independent and charter schools. Chapters are added as funding and available space have allowed for additional growth. Schools are chosen through an application process. Participating schools commit to working with the AYLA Advisory Board to create a sustainable program that benefits student participants, their school, and the community.

Once selected, the participating school will be asked to distribute student applications and select the participants for their chapter. The maximum number is 12 students per grade level beginning with a seventh-grade cohort. By the second year, there should be a seventh- and an eighth-grade cohort - the original group and a new class of seventh graders. The groups can partner or work independently on one or more school projects. Cohorts for independent schools can be a little smaller (7-8 students) based on the size of the class. Student candidates should demonstrate leadership potential, be in good standing with his/her school, and commit to participating in all AYLA activities.

Student Selection

Each school is responsible for selecting their student participants through a competitive application process. In the application, students express their interest in becoming a part of AYLA and identify what they can contribute to the group.

Chapter Meetings

Each school determines a structure for their chapter meetings that fits their schedule and culture. Some schools meet weekly while others meet bi-weekly. Some meet before school, some during the lunch hour, while others meet after school or during a designated extracurricular block in the school day. All AYLA cohorts must meet at least twice a month.

The chapter focus should be to create a positive school culture in partnership with school leadership. During this process students should have the opportunity to:

- Identify and develop personal strengths and skills
- Work as a team
- Plan and execute a project
- Practice organization and facilitation skills
- Learn to solve problems
- Lead meetings
- Speak publicly

While not required, many chapters have organized events and fundraisers to help accomplish large-scale projects. These student-led activities further enhance their leadership and project management skills. Additionally, some chapters have organized and led broader community service projects for their student bodies. Many schools use their AYLA students in other leadership

roles, including that of student ambassadors. Best Practices for AYLA chapters are being drafted and will be available upon request by October 2025.

School Advisors

Each school chooses a member of their faculty and/or staff to serve as the school's AYLA advisor. Schools develop their own model of staff leadership with some schools having a single advisor while other schools choose co-advisors. Co-advisors may work together to facilitate the whole group or choose to divide their responsibilities by grade level. The volunteer advisor(s) commits to:

- Supporting the vision of AYLA
- Coordinating the selection of each new AYLA cohort
- Facilitating collection of student forms for Summer Institute
- Overseeing chapter meetings with a commitment to assisting students in the development of their leadership skills and the implementation of their school project
- Attending and participating in joint events with their students

Joint AYLA events also serve as an opportunity for school Chapter Advisors to network, share best practices, and offer guidance to the Advisory Board.



The AYLA Model and Curriculum

The AYLA program includes:

- A weeklong summer program for rising seventh graders hosted by the Elon University Center for Leadership
- School-based chapter meetings that take place during the school year facilitated by a school faculty advisor
- Three joint events hosted by the AYLA Advisory Board in conjunction with the Elon University Center for Leadership and Alamance Community College (These activities take place off campus during the school day. AYLA funds cover the cost of these events including transportation and substitutes for the advisors.)
- An Eighth Grade Capstone Luncheon (Again, all related costs are covered.)

Summer Institute

The AYLA experience begins with participation by the rising seventh graders in a summer program hosted on the Elon University campus by the Elon University Center for Leadership. Typically held in June, the program begins on Sunday evening with a parent/guardian orientation and student meet and greet, and it ends mid-day on Friday. Typical program hours are Sunday from 3:30 - 5:00 p.m.; Monday through Thursday from 8:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.; and Friday from 8:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. Directed by Center for Leadership staff with facilitation provided by Elon University students, AYLA students participate in large and small group sessions. Activities include:

- Identification of leadership styles
- A team building challenge experience
- The FISH! Philosophy of motivating your team and your peers
- Character education focusing on courage, perseverance, respect, kindness, self-discipline, and integrity
- Faculty presentations on time management, presentation skills, and respecting diversity
- The initial development of ideas for creating a positive school culture, including creating a plan that has three focus areas: **Community Engagement** (think canned food collection drive at a school sporting event), **Recognition** (of students and staff at school), and creating a **Culture of Kindness/Positive School Climate**

Elon student facilitators are part of the Adventures in Leadership program. They are chosen through an application and interview process, they undergo a background check, and they receive intensive training prior to the summer. These students serve as inspiring and energetic role models!

Included at the end of this handbook is a Summer Institute Overview and Review of the FISH! Philosophy for 2025.

*For **School-based Chapter Meetings**, see the section on School Information and Expectations for a description of the Chapter Meetings and the role of the School Advisor.*

Joint AYL A Events

Three times a year, the AYL A Advisory Board, in conjunction with the Elon University Center for Leadership and Alamance Community College, hosts joint events inviting every AYL A chapter to participate. The invitation extends to the seventh and eighth grade cohorts. The purpose of these events is to:

- Provide workshops that help students as they continue to develop skills needed for effective leadership and project development
- Provide a forum for the exchange of ideas among AYL A student leaders and AYL A faculty advisors
- Build relationships among students from across Alamance County
- Introduce students to current community leaders
- Receive regular updates regarding school improvement work

Workshop topics are designed to help students develop skills for project implementation and personal success. Workshops are differentiated in a two-year cycle, designed to help students build skills and cover a broad range of topics. Also incorporated into these events is the opportunity to meet student and community leaders who share their professional experiences and leadership lessons.

The Elon events are planned and organized in partnership with the Elon University Center for Leadership and their student *Isabella Cannon Leadership Fellows*. This partnership gives this selective group of university students a “lab” experience to plan and execute their own leadership project. AYL A students benefit from the experiences and activities these advanced student leaders have gained and from the passion and energy they bring to the table. It is a community Win-Win!

The curriculum focuses on Problem Solving, Communication Skills, Being a Role Model, and Motivation, in alignment with the NC Portrait of a Graduate, and can include the following potential topics:

- | | |
|---|--|
| • Working as a Team | • Self-knowledge |
| • How to Run an Effective Meeting | • Characteristics of a Good Leader |
| • Goal Setting | • Your Role as a School Leader |
| • Event and Project Management | • Great Leaders as Great Communicators |
| • Budgeting and Fundraising | • Fairness and Justice |
| • Marketing and Media – <i>Telling your AYL A Story</i> | • The Courage to Speak Out |
| • Public Speaking | • Preparing for High School and Beyond |
| • Listening | |

These events are held on regular school days with permission of school administration. They are held at various sites in the community based on the ability to find a large space and sufficient breakout rooms to accommodate an event that includes 200+ participants. The events are held from 9:15 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. to accommodate public school bus routes.

The events are provided at no cost to the AYLA chapters. The AYLA Advisory Board through the Alamance Chamber provides lunch and covers the cost of all materials for each session and reimburses schools for the cost of bus transportation and substitute teachers. For reimbursement of these expenses, ABSS advisors should follow district policy. All other invoices should be submitted to:

Alamance Chamber, Attn: Logan Savits
PO Box 450
Burlington, NC 27216

The Eighth Grade Capstone Luncheon

A fun event that has become a tradition that the schools and community anticipate is the Eighth Grade Capstone Luncheon. Held in the Spring, this event celebrates the commitment of the eighth graders to the AYLA program and offers some unique experiences that will serve them well during their high school journey. Held at the Alamance Country Club, AYLA students learn and sharpen business, table, and social media etiquette skills; practice social conversation skills including introductions, meeting new people, and appropriate topics of conversation; and techniques for a successful interview. Distinguished community leaders are invited to join them for lunch, giving the students an opportunity to practice the skills they have just learned. Community leaders look forward to this opportunity to have lunch with students and to hear what is on their minds. Everyone leaves smiling.



Program Outcomes

See the included pre-survey (page 8) to be used with students at the beginning and reflection questions (page 9) to be used with students at the end of their AYLA experience. The pre-survey helps us define important opportunities for learning and expected growth and the reflection helps us determine if we are helping students reach those benchmarks.



Alamance Youth
Leadership Academy
by alamance chamber™

Pre-Survey

Name: _____

School: _____

1. Define Leadership. Write a brief description of what you think leadership means.
2. Leadership Qualities. List three qualities or characteristics you believe are important for a good leader.
3. Leadership Examples. Name one person you consider a good leader and explain why you think they are a good leader.
4. Personal Strengths. What are your three strongest qualities or skills that you think would help you as a leader?
5. Areas for Growth. What is one area or skill you want to improve to become a better leader?



Alamance Youth
Leadership Academy
by alamance chamber™

AYLA Eighth Grade Reflection Questions

Demographic Questions:

- | | | |
|--|-----|----|
| • Did you attend the 7 th grade AYLA camp at Elon University? | Yes | No |
| • Did you transfer to a new school / AYLA chapter this year? | Yes | No |

Additional Questions:

List three things your AYLA chapter did to improve your school:

What was the hardest part of implementing your AYLA chapters improvement project or other programs at your school?

What leadership skills did you learn through participating in AYLA? (circle up to 5)

Being Prepared	Flexibility	Collaboration
Listening Skills	Communication	Motivation
Conflict Resolution	Problem Solving	Creativity
Role Modeling	Time Management	Delegation
Decision Making		
Other: _____		

What skills from the list above do you still need to develop as you move into high school? (pick 2 – 3)

2025-2026 AYLA Timeline

June 15 - 20, 2025 –Summer Program for Rising Seventh Graders

Elon University Campus

October 8, 2025 – AYLA Advisor Meeting

4:30 – 5:30 pm

Alamance Chamber

Joint meeting dates for the 2025-2026 School Year will be distributed to all schools (Principals and Advisors) and the AYLA Advisory Board no later than this date

Friday, November 14, 2025 – Joint AYLA Event

9:15 a.m. - 1:30 p.m.

Elon University Campus

January 15, 2025 - School Applications distributed to middle schools that currently do not participate in AYLA (*Tentative and only with approval of the AYLA Advisory Board*)

Friday, February 6, 2026 – Joint AYLA Event

9:15 a.m. - 1:30 p.m.

Alamance Community College Campus

***Student Recruitment Information and Parent Packets distributed at the February Joint AYLA Event.** Chapters will develop their own student recruitment program and selection process, though best practices are provided, with a deadline of April 2, 2026 to have a cohort selected and parent packets collected.

Friday, March 13, 2026 – Eighth Grade Capstone Event

9:15 a.m. - 1:30 p.m.

Alamance Country Club

Thursday, April 2, 2026 – Each school will have made their rising 7th grade cohort selections and submitted copies of those selected student applications and Parent Packets to the Chamber.

Friday, April 17, 2026 – Joint AYLA Event

9:15 a.m. - 1:30 p.m.

Elon University Campus

Friday, May 1, 2026 – Requests open for AYLA Certificates for graduating eighth graders for presentation at school-based awards day programs.

Friday, May 8, 2026 – Make-up day in case of inclement weather

AYLA Chapter Advisors**Alamance Virtual School***Tonya Dobson*

Tonya_dobson@abss.k12.nc.us

Jonie Edmunds

Jonie_edmunds@abss.k12.nc.us

Broadview Middle School*Demia Johnson*

Demia_johnson@abss.k12.nc.us

The Burlington School*Kristi Tanner*

ktanner@theburlingtonschool.org

Abby Wilkerson

awilkerson@theburlingtonschool.org

Clover Garden School*Sarah Nikola*

SarahNikola@cgsnc.org

Graham Middle School*Lynell Brown*

Lynell_brown@abss.k12.nc.us

Hawfields Middle School*Ryan Leonard*

Ryan_leonard@abss.k12.nc.us

Southern Middle School*April Ferguson*

April_ferguson@abss.k12.nc.us

Jakob Miller

Jakob_miller@abss.k12.nc.us

Turrentine Middle School*Suzanna Howard*

Suzanna_howard@abss.k12.nc.us

Renah Mitchell

Renah_mitchell@abss.k12.nc.us

Woodlawn Middle School*Jennifer Warren*

Jennifer_warren@abss.k12.nc.us

Western Middle School*Tomika Davis*

tomika_davis@abss.k12.nc.us

Jeanette Gray

Jeanette_gray@abss.k12.nc.us

The AYLA Advisory Board

The AYLA Advisory Board meets once a month to guide the development and expansion of the AYLA program. This board maintains the vision of AYLA, constantly evaluates the success of the program, oversees the implementation of the joint events, and secures funds to support the program as described. Advisory Board members include but are not limited to Chamber leadership, Elon University faculty, staff, and student leadership, AYLA school leadership, Leadership Alamance Alumni, and AYLA parents.

Current Advisory Board members are:

- Emily-Lynn Adkins, Chief Communications Officer, Alamance-Burlington School System
- Cayce Becker, Student, Elon University Center for Leadership
- Allison Gant, Executive Director, Blue Ridge Institute
- Jenna Heydt, Community Affairs Coordinator, Labcorp
- Teresa Mansfield, Community Affairs, Labcorp
- Logan Garrison Savits, Director, Leadership Development & Education Partnerships, Alamance Chamber
- Tierza Watts, Director, Elon University Center for Leadership
- Brandon “Bo” Williamson, Youth Program Coordinator, Alamance Community College
- Meredith Willis, Student and Family Services Lead School Counselor, Alamance-Burlington School System

2025-2026 AYLA Advisory Board Meeting Dates

All meetings will be held at 12:30 p.m. in the Alamance Chamber Board Room unless otherwise announced.

August – No Meeting

September 10, 2025

October 1, 2025

November 5, 2025

December – No Meeting

January 7, 2026

February 4, 2026

March 4, 2026

April 1, 2026

May 6, 2026

June 3, 2026

July – No Meeting

Alamance Youth Leadership Academy (AYLA) Elon University Summer Institute

Institute Theme: The Fish Philosophy! & School Culture



What is the FISH! Philosophy

The FISH! Philosophy was developed in the late 1990s by John Christensen, inspired by the vibrant, positive energy at Seattle's Pike Place Fish Market. The philosophy is centered on four simple principles: **Play**, **Make Their Day**, **Be There**, and **Choose Your Attitude**. It emphasizes creating a fun, supportive, and engaging workplace where employees are empowered to bring their best selves to work. By adopting these principles, organizations can foster collaboration, improve morale, and enhance customer service. The FISH! Philosophy has since been embraced globally in businesses, schools, and communities to promote positivity and teamwork.

AYLA School Plan Focus Areas:

- **Community Engagement** (examples: canned food / winter gear collection drive at a school sporting event, partner with PTA to do a school grounds clean up event, adopt a Senior Program (letter writing & have AYLA members deliver and visit as a field trip), host a community talent show, fundraise for a local cause, etc.)
- **Recognition** (examples: Organize and host "appreciation days" (Custodial / Teacher / Student / Administrator / Bus Drivers, etc.), work with school administrators to choose and recognize the student of the week or month at assemblies or school events where lots of people are gathered)
- **Positive or Kindness Based School Climate** (examples: create and put up posters around school with leadership, kindness, attitude, being present, being a good friend type quotes, Host an art project like a Kindness Tree in the cafeteria for 1 week, Host a School Claps Program, Host a Random Acts of Kindness Day, Ask for an AYLA member to participate in morning announcements 1x a week to give a positivity quote or tip)

What happened at the AYLA Summer Institute:

Over the 4.5-day program, students experienced a full workshop on each of the 4 FISH! Philosophy theme areas. They also participated in team builders, art activities and exercises / reflection related to all 4 areas to support their growth as young leaders.

Additionally, students participated in 5 separate time blocks where they were asked to brainstorm how, and where, they could infuse the FISH! Philosophy into what their AYLA chapter will do this year.

- Students generated ideas for how to live out each theme.
- They brainstormed action ideas for how they could fulfill each of the three AYLA chapter focus areas (keeping the FISH! Philosophy in mind).
- They set SMART goals (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-bound)
- They refined their ideas and created a suggested plan of action which was presented the last day of the institute.

Recommended AYLA Chapter Next Steps

We suggest you begin your AYLA year by discussing the FISH! Philosophy components. Have the 7th graders share what they learned about each of the 4 areas and have the 8th graders share how they implemented or observed the impact of the 4 areas at your school last year.

1. Have your entire chapter repeat the process of brainstorming actions / activities they can do as an AYLA chapter to infuse the FISH! Philosophy in the school environment
2. Have the 7th graders share their suggested plan
3. Ask the 8th graders to provide feedback
4. Have the entire group then author a new joint plan to infuse the FISH! Philosophy into the three themes of community engagement, recognition, and positivity / school kindness culture
5. Create a calendar of events or actions for the fall and spring
6. Begin working with your students to plan and execute each event, action, or activity



AYLA Summer Institute, Elon University