



SCIENCE LEADERSHIP ACADEMY: A SCHOOL THAT SUCKS LESS



An original play by Mira Young.

Inspired by a series of interviews with Science Leadership Academy students, staff, and alumni.
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SCENE 1: ULTIMATE FRISBEE

XAVIER (freshman/sophomore, comes off as shy but opens up more as he talks more, the biggest smile)

Lights fade up on XAVIER in a frisbee uniform standing center stage with a spotlight on him.

XAVIER

My mom said I had to play a sport in high school and signed me up for ultimate frisbee... it's kind of the trademark sport at SLA so she made me play. But I'm glad that she made me play because I like the sport, I like playing, I like my- I like most of my teammates. I was kind of surprised by how much I liked playing actually. You wouldn't expect it to be fun when you hear the game. It's not always considered very athletic or professional or... it's just confusing.

(Slowly growing in excitement as the rest of the monologue continues.)

It's like if you combine football and soccer, and then you give them a frisbee, you have ultimate. It's the same way with football as you wanna get from *(points to either side of the stage as if they are the sides of the ultimate field.)* your side to the other side with the frisbee in hand. *(Mimes picking up a frisbee from the ground)* When the frisbee drops you don't stop the play, it just turns over to the other team like in soccer. *(Walks to one side of the stage, turning to face the opposite side on 'line up'.)* You start on opposite sides of the field and then you'll line up, and then whoever has the frisbee will be on defense first. You count off to see who you wanna defend. *(Mimes throwing the frisbee into the middle of the stage.)* You throw the frisbee into the middle of the field so the other team can pick it up, and then you just run off to defend your player.

(Jogs to center stage, goofily defends an imaginary offender, then returns to starting position.)

The JV team, which I'm on, we have an unbelievable record. We haven't won in four years... but the games are fun. Tournaments normally last all day and when we're not playing the game it's fun to bond with your teammates. We throw the frisbee a lot, or just talk, or listen to music. In my first tournament we played against Pennsbury – I found out recently that Mr. Lehmann went to Pennsbury. Every game against them they destroyed us. We barely scored at all. They have this obnoxious chant whenever they score. My team, we just all hate it. The thing about it is that they're so nice. At the end of the day when we're all wallowing in self-pity they're like you guys did great. Not all of the tournaments are great. Like that one we lost really badly. But I don't mind it, because I like playing. It's fun, more fun than I ever thought. My favorite moment was my first time I ever scored a point. It was a quick point, but I made it to the endzone and caught the frisbee. It was a really good moment because it was the only point we scored in the entire game.

Hesitates a moment, glancing to stage left, then exiting stage left as the lights fade, passing Lehmann as he walks on stage.

SCENE 2: THE START

LEHMANN (principal of SLA, confident and well spoken - you often hear his voice booming through the hallways of SLA and he greets students by name)

LEHMANN smiles after passing Xavier. He walks to center stage before addressing the audience.

LEHMANN

I believed we could start schools that sucked less. On some level that's really the honest truth. Lots of schools suck; they don't prioritize the students, they just throw information at the kids without teaching them how to process it, and it's sad! I was a teacher in New York City when this all started, and I worked at a school in its formative years and was part of a group of teachers who helped the school's founders with their vision. We would break down what was working at the school and what wasn't. And the really cool thing about that is, when you work in service of somebody else's vision, it kind of gives you the license to dream yourself. So I always had this idea, in my head, these thoughts... what do I actually believe about education, what do I think schools should be? It gave me the chance to dream... I wanted students to walk out of school going "oh my god my head hurts its so full of ideas." Maybe not every day, cause that would actually hurt after a while... I wanted to build caring institutions, institutions that changed our language surrounding education. We shouldn't be teaching subjects, we should be teaching kids. The change in language matters. It's not about the stuff we teach, it's about whether or not kids learn the stuff we teach. Schools should teach kids how to learn. Schools should open kids' minds to ideas and critical thinking. I mean, what if high school wasn't just preparation for real life? What if high school was real life?

Lights fade on Lehmann.

SCENE 3: ENGINEERING

GRACE (junior/senior, smarter than she thinks, her handwriting is perfect and she uses lots of color in her notes)

MR. KAMAL (engineering teacher, has a wizardly presence, teaches students because he loves it, and seems to make students laugh often)

STUDENTS 2-8

Two high work tables sit in the center of the stage, each with four stools at them. STUDENTS 2-8 sit at the tables, the seat farthest downstage is empty, and MR. KAMAL is standing just upstage of the tables. Everyone is frozen while GRACE stands downstage with a spotlight on her.

GRACE

Most of my core SLA memories take place in this CTE– in this engineering room. Only because I've kind of struggled with, like, my academic self-esteem for a really long time. And this room is where most of my biggest most impressive accomplishments took place. Definitely the whole building, women in stem, figuring things out... it's very nice to be a little bit confident in my ability to like, actually make something with my own hands. Some of the only times in this school when I feel impressed with myself is when I'm in this room...

Grace takes the empty seat and everyone unfreezes, Mr. Kamal paces the room as an awkward silence fills the air.

MR. KAMAL

No one knows the answer?

(More awkward silence... Kamal passes Grace as she whispers something, Mr. Kamal pauses.)

MR. KAMAL

Grace thinks she knows the answer

GRACE

(Flustered.) No I don't, I was lying... what are you talking about?

MR. KAMAL

Why don't you just whisper it to me?

A beat.

MR. KAMAL

I won't tell anyone what you answer...

GRACE

...fine. *(Grace leans forward and whispers in Mr. Kamal's ear.)*

MR. KAMAL

(Announcing to the class.) Grace says the issue falls under the third law of motion and she's right.

(The other students clap as Kamal gives Grace a pat on her shoulder.)

MR. KAMAL

Good job.

Lights fade until only a spotlight on Grace is left.

GRACE

(Beaming.) You lied to me, you lied.

The spotlight shuts off.

SCENE 4: FAST-PACED

MARISSA (junior/senior, put together but with dark circles under her eyes, exudes self-assuredness but is fidgety and can rarely sit still)

MARISSA enters from stage right, looks around center stage for a chair, then comes to sit cross-legged close to the front of the stage. She spreads out a laptop open to a set of slides, a notebook, pencils, colored pens, and a textbook. She begins to take notes in the notebook.

MARISSA

(While continuing to take notes, checking the slides with the textbook, and making small sketches in her notes.) I think sometimes I wish I was challenged more, um, I think SLA is a very good place for, um, self-challenge? Like for students to take the lead in their own education. But sometimes it's hard for kids who want even more of a challenge to get that because SLA's education only goes so far, like there are no AP classes no honor classes and it gets to a point where a teacher can't give you any more extra work or individual attention or push you harder so you have to find programs outside of school. And I think that, well, there's pros and cons to it. Like you get a very diverse amount of opinions and thought processes and ideas in the classroom when you're not dividing people by honors or AP classes... I mean AP classes go against everything SLA stands for but, um... I think there were moments, and a lot of moments where I wanted to be challenged and pushed more. But I do think SLA does a good job of challenging the way we think, but I think sometimes I wanted more of a challenge in the work I was doing. It just felt like there was an ebb and flow in the intensity of the work. When it was very still I found myself to be bored, but to be fair that might've been because I learn at a very fast pace and some students still needed that time to catch up and do work and stuff. I don't know.

Marissa continues to take notes. She finally comes to a stopping point, gathers up her materials, stands up, considers the audience for a minute, then exits stage right as the lights fade out.

SCENE 5: TABLE MONOLOGUE

LEHMANN

Various office doors lead off stage, some are cracked open while some remain closed. A container of cheese balls and a bag of pretzels sit open in the middle of a large oval table. A whiteboard is on the upstage wall, with the question 'how do you eat your pizza?' written on it. There are two options, 'folded' and 'flat', written beneath the question, each with a few tallies underneath in either black or green ink. LEHMANN sits at the middle of the table, facing the audience.

LEHMANN

This table... The fun thing about this table is that it was by design. Not just like we wanted a table. I mean in a sense that we intentionally created it, or at least placed it here, in the center of the offices. We wanted to create a common space. We wanted to build this super collaborative space where people would gather. Obviously a table made a lot of sense. But it's not really just a table, I think it's more than a table.

(Lehmann gets up and begins to slowly walk around the table.)

If you look at the blueprints you can see the table in the original plans. I made them draw the table in. It was a staple of the old building, although that one was a large rectangle and tucked more in the back corner of the office... in this building, I really wanted it in the center. I designed the offices around it, I mean it's basically the center meeting area... when I first got to design the main office space, I started off with the table and then worked on the offices. I mean it's the heart of the office. Every year, there are kids nicknamed the table children; the ones who always hang out in the office with us doing work, sleeping, eating, whatever. It doesn't feel as though we have a strict divide between students and staff. I mean we have students that are practically staff. Our secretary retired in the middle of the year, and for a while one of our students would come in during her free periods and take calls. The table has hosted card games played between staff and students, friendly debates, prom planning meetings... and we've recreated it. In every SLA you have to plan for the table.

Lehmann gets up, heading towards an office door while the cast for the Pizza Table Discussion scene trickle in. Student 1, Martin, and Solloway pour snacks onto a napkin on the table. Jeremy places himself at the middle of the table.

SCENE 6: PIZZA DISCUSSION

MR. LATIMER (calculus teacher, hates Christmas but loves the sixers, magically makes students love calculus)

MR. SOLOWAY (school counselor-in-training, the perfect sidekick for Ms. Siswick the school counselor, talks sports with all the students)

MR. AMES (quiet demeanor, but well spoken once he gets speaking)

JEREMY (coordinates everything, although his title should be 'advisory memo sender', is the SLA mascot in his own way, runs everywhere)

MS. MARTIN (health/gym teacher, keeps squishmallows in her room for tired kids, gives out blankets during winter fire drills, but you still don't want to be on her bad side)

STUDENT 1

STUDENT 2

The cast sits or stands around a large oval-shaped table. Various office doors lead off stage, some a cracked open while some remain closed. A container of cheese balls and a bag of pretzels sit open in the middle of the table. Some people sitting at the table have paper napkins with some of the food laid out on them. A whiteboard is on the upstage wall, with the question 'how do you eat your pizza?' written on it. There are two options, 'folded' and 'flat', written beneath the question, each with a few tallies underneath in either black or green ink. Mr. Ames walks in, considers the board, and makes a black tally under folded. He walks towards the table as student 2 enters and considers the board.

STUDENT 2

What if you don't eat your pizza in either of these ways—

JEREMY

—Do not tell me you're a fork and knife girl. That is not allowed.

STUDENT 2

I don't use utensils! I just rip my slices into smaller pieces so it's easier to hold in my hand—

JEREMY

—nope, no, nope. I don't want to hear it.

MR. AMES

I'm a folding guy, but my wife – keep in mind she's from Europe – will take a fork and knife...

(Jeremy audibly groans, some people chuckle at his response.)

MR. AMES

(chuckling) ...it gets worse. She scrapes everything off the pizza and eats it separately before cutting the pizza slice itself up and eating it in bites.

MR. SOLLOWAY

That's insane. I'm just a basic folding guy. I mean most people just fold it in half right? And eat it like that?

A grumble of confirmation.

JEREMY

There is only one right way to eat pizza. That is folding it. It's criminal to eat pizza with utensils.

STUDENT 2

I don't use utensils though!

JEREMY

But you make pizza confetti! I'm not sure I can speak to you anymore.

MR. SOLLOWAY

So you just rip it up into little pieces? With your hands?

STUDENT 2

It's not confetti, it's more like thirds. It's just easier to eat that way!

MR. LATIMER

(Laughing softly.) It's really not a huge deal, everyone eats pizza differently. I mean I get the grease off my pizza by flipping it over and pressing it into the box.

(A beat.)

MS. MARTIN

Oh you just opened a whole new can of worms. I'm just a dabber myself...

STUDENT 1, STUDENT 2, JEREMY

Same.

MR. SOLLOWAY

No no, you have to drain the oil off so you can dip the crust in it! It's the best part!

STUDENT 1

No the point of getting the oil off is so you don't have to eat it. Why would you dip it then?

MR. AMES

Am I the only person who does like, a shot of grease? Like you drain the grease and then drink it?

STUDENT 1

Now that's gross!

JEREMY

(About to lose it at this point.) That can't be real, that's criminal too. How can you do that?

MR. AMES

It's good! I want to enjoy it!! So I just take a shot of it!

JEREMY

I can't do this! You know what, the next whiteboard poll will be about pizza oil, but I will not listen to any more pizza atrocities at this moment.

Jeremy goofily huffs off as the lights fade out and everyone returns to side conversations.

SCENE 7: DIFFERENCE COMPARED TO PRIVATE SCHOOL

HAYLEY (freshman/sophomore, high energy yet attentive, her big eyes make you feel like she sees everything)

JEREMY

6-10 ADULTS (a tour group Jeremy is leading around SLA, each with a name tag on and notebook and pencil)

Lights up on HAYLEY who sits in a plush chair on stage right reading a book. JEREMY is talking to the group of adults who have formed a semi circle around him on stage left.

JEREMY

(Turning to Hayley.) Hayley!

(Hayley looks up.)

JEREMY

Can you come over here for a sec and talk about SLA for a minute? Just like give an idea of what SLA has been like for you and what makes it unique from other schools maybe.

HAYLEY

Sure. *(Gets up and walks to Jeremy and the group.)* Uh, I guess the biggest difference between my old school and SLA is the diversity. *(Addressing both the group of adults and the audience.)* I went to private school my whole life. My old school was like, 90% white so it was like, a certain socioeconomic grouping, and SLA is just so much more diverse. We have more teachers that look like our city, and I feel like Mr. Lehmann tries to make everything inclusive and enjoyable. I don't hate it anymore! I used to hate going to school every day and now I don't hate it. Obviously, I don't feel like getting up at 6:30 every morning but like, it's not like 'oh my god I have school tomorrow' it's like 'cool I get to go be with my friends and do work.' I feel like I'm not wasting my time anymore, I feel like I'm learning about things that I can use in real life. Like I'm learning about the COVID vaccine... we're actually learning about different types of vaccines, like mRNA vaccines and how vaccines actually help our immune system. Having teachers that feel like, actually care about us and having teachers that make us enjoy learning what we are being taught makes me excited to come to school. There are definitely advantages of going to, like, a private school with lots of funding. Like we don't have everything, like a theatre program or swimming pool or fancy art studio. But I also think that the student body is so cool, there's a spot for everyone. I mean we have a debate team, robotics, a climbing club, school sports... I don't know it feels like we have so much and there's so much welcome at SLA. Like if there isn't a club and you want one you just start it, and the teachers are always game to help. I feel like SLA students are good at creating the things SLA doesn't have but they want... like with the climbing club, some kids wanted to start it and Mr. Symonds helped out and now SLA has a partnership with The Cliffs, a climbing gym near school. SLA just feels like a very accepting and student-oriented place. Like the teachers check in with us, they seem very human, like they aren't just teachers. There's something really nice about how friendly administrators are with students, like it allows the students to hang out in the office and get support which I didn't have

at my middle school and my middle school was pretty good. And Mr. Lehmann knows, like, everyone's names... we feel like a big kinda messy family with broken-up parts.

(The group of adults give Hayley an awkward round of applause.)

HAYLEY

(To Jeremy.) Was that good, is there anything else I should talk about?

JEREMY

No that was great! Thank you.

Lights fade out as Hayley returns to her chair and goes back to reading while Jeremy leads the group of adults off stage, exiting stage left.

SCENE 8: IEP

SCOTT (junior/senior, high energy sweetheart, rambles a lot but just likes to talk to people)
MS. MENASION (has the energy of a water spirit which makes sense because she's also the swim coach, and has a very gentle and calming presence)

MS. MENASION sits at a desk that lays diagonally across the stage facing stage right. She sits at the desk on her computer. SCOTT rolls out in a spinning chair from stage right. He pushes himself up to Ms. Menasion's desk, bumping into it to get her attention.

MS. MENASION

(Looking up.) Hi Scott, how are you doing?

SCOTT

(Immediately getting flustered.) So I recently found out that we have to dissect cats in Anatomy class. Like I knew we were doing dissections and I was actually excited for that but I didn't know we were doing cats in specific. *(Scott is not a still sitter, he is constantly spinning and constantly fidgeting with the spinning chair.)* I can deal with dissections! It's nothing to do with, like, the grossness or anything. It's just that I have three cats so it's a very sensitive thing for me. I love cats, and I really really really love my cats! I don't wanna cut open cats! I don't wanna see people open cats! I really really don't want to do it but I really want to stay in the class and I don't... I just don't want to have to dissect cats. Not when I have my own at home that I love—

MS. MENASION

—breathe, ok? We can figure this out. And no part of you feels up for dissecting cats?

(Scott immediately starts to shake his head no at a fast speed.)

SCOTT

No no no I can't—

MS. MENASION

—and you don't have to! Ok... what if... *(A beat.)* Ok. How about we use your Individualized Education Program to make some accommodations so you're still able to participate in the class? We can use it to make it the class a bit easier for you and find an alternative dissection that might be a bit easier.

SCOTT

Yea, yea. That sounds great! Does that work? Like, can that really get me out of dissecting the cat? Because I don't even really want to be in the room for that. I really really don't want to see anyone else dissecting a cat either I don't think I can deal with that!

MS. MENASION

Scott the point of your IEP is to help you. It's to work with your teachers to adjust their curriculum to make school easier for you because you learn differently. We'll just talk to Mr. Henkel and figure out something else for you to dissect. Does that sound ok?

SCOTT

Yea that sounds good! Really good!

MS. MENASION

Alright, I'll send out some emails...

(Ms. Menasion returns to her computer as Scott rolls off stage, exiting stage right.)

SCOTT

(To himself while exiting.) Maybe I can dissect a pig, or maybe a baby goat?

Lights fade out after Scott exits.

SCENE 9: TEACHING AT SLA

ESTEY

Lights up on ESTEY, sitting center stage at a desk, sorting through papers.

ESTEY

How I teach is more important than the subject I teach. A big part of SLA is the ethic of care. We relate to our students first and foremost as people. That was what really got me into special education in the first place, but it felt like SLA was doing that better for everyone than some schools were doing just for kids with IEP's. I learned more as a teacher in three months of student teaching at SLA than I did in three years of teaching at another school.

One thing that SLA does well is that I constantly feel challenged to be a better teacher. I have colleagues here who show me things I never considered doing and students who push back and show me new ways to teach. You have to be willing to get feedback from students because they're willing to tell you when you're not teaching the class as well as you could, and you have to hear that. That experience, coming from a school that just patted you on the back and solidified the idea that you were a good teacher, was very painful. But it solidified to me that it was a meaningful, painful lesson that I wanted in my life.

As a special education teacher I always have to work with other teachers, because I'm responsible for a student but then that student goes off and has classes with all these other teachers and at the end of the day I still have to type up paperwork about how they're learning. SLA definitely values special education. My colleagues listen to me a lot, they listen to my feedback and actively seek out my feedback and that's shockingly rare at other schools. We also have shared planning times, so like all of the math teachers have a shared prep time when we all don't have a class and can talk about how we want math to go, and every department has that. There's constantly work done by the school to make school better for the students.

Lights fade on Estey as he returns his attention to the papers on his desk.

SCENE 10: SLA IN COLLEGE

SLA STUDENT

STUDENT 1

STUDENT 2

The three girls sit at a cafe table with mugs of coffee and half-eaten pastries on little plates. Student 2 fidgets with her mug, the SLA student picks at non-existent crumbs on her plate. The three girls are caught up in a simple 'get to know you' conversation.

STUDENT 1

(To SLA student.) So where did you go to high school?

SLA STUDENT

I went to a school called Science Leadership Academy.

STUDENT 2

I've never heard of that, what's it like?

SLA STUDENT

It's a weird hippy project-based school... like there were totally no exams at all, like no finals or midterms or anything. The evaluations were based on projects or creative work rather than some final, written thing.

STUDENT 2

Oh huh, cool. I wish I didn't have to take finals in high school.

STUDENT 1

Hasn't adjusting to college midterms and finals been hard then?

SLA STUDENT

Last semester I only had one class that had an exam, but it definitely is like a learning curve to teach yourself how to recall all that information. I would say it's just different because I'm used to a different way of thinking if that makes sense... it hasn't been too bad. I can imagine though if I had tons of exams it would be harder to teach myself how to balance that and do well on them and everything.

STUDENT 1

Did you like it at least? The school not the exams!

SLA STUDENT

Oh definitely. The whole mentality of students as people, like seeing there's a person behind a grade instead of just a random number is really nice. We're such a strong community... we had this whole mess happen with our building, there was asbestos in our new building so we were in and out of different school buildings... it was actually super powerful, like a group of students

coming together, like... both Franklin students, the school we shared our building with, and SLA students all talking about how it affected all of us and how that made us stronger as a community. I don't think any other school besides SLA could manage the whole mess we went through.

STUDENT 2

Oh jeez that sounds awful. How did you guys go to school if there was, uh, whatever you called it? That stuff is toxic right?

SLA STUDENT

Yeah it's really bad for you. We ended up staying for a few months in the school district's building, (*Chuckling.*) it was actually funny... they didn't deal with the problem and it came back and became their problem... but my grade had to do all our classes in this synagogue across the street from the building we were in. And it was so annoying because we had to walk back and forth between buildings and they still wouldn't let us stop to get food!

STUDENT 1

Did you guys ever get to go back to your old building?

SLA STUDENT

Yeah... just in time for COVID and then we had to go online. I think I did school in four different locations that year. Our original school building, the school district building, the synagogue, then from home when COVID hit.

STUDENT 2

Oh shoot guys it's almost 2:20, we should start walking to class.

The three girls get up, gather up their things, and exit off stage left as the lights fade out.

SCENE 11: LEHMANN AND JEREMY

JEREMY
LEHMANN

The back half of the stage is taken over by rows of folding chairs facing the audience, and a podium sits right in front of the chairs on stage right. Graduation caps, flowers, and folders with speeches are strewn across the chairs, and blue and white confetti is spread across the entire stage. Lehmann and Jeremy stand center stage, a few stragglers are present but slowly leaving.

(A beat. The two look at each other, holding eye contact as the last person walks off stage.)

LEHMANN

It's seeing these students come together and believe in something and work hard towards it and see the power it has in their lives... that's it, that's the thing that gets me. Every year.

JEREMY

Yup... these students really make you proud.

(A beat.)

LEHMANN

Well, there's another 125 wonderful people we've turned out into the world.

Lights fade out.