**Location:** Five Stars Academy is located in the small town of Santa Clara, in the Province of Coclé, about 100 kilometers west of Panama City. It is a town divided by the Pan-American Highway, with one half on the beach side and the other half facing a mountain range. The half where the school is found includes beach homes and a small fishing and tourist village

**The Property:** We rent a property halfway between the highway and the beach. In the last three years, while continuing to use the home as a Pre-K classroom, we have also 6 buildings with a capacity of 10 classrooms, a teachers’ workroom, a hydroponic garden, and a chicken/rabbit hutch. Five of these buildings are made from recycled shipping containers. All buildings have access to high-speed internet and air conditioning.

**Students**: Five Stars Academy started with five students in 2011 and has grown to 90+ students over the ten years. It is a K4 to Grade 12 school, Grades 10-12 being added in the last four years. Maximum classroom size is a fluctuating number sometimes going as high as 14 students but the average class size is less than 10.

Amongst the 90+ students, 25 different countries are represented along with as many as 8 different languages, with all students becoming bilingual and many trilingual.

The school’s population lives as far away as an hour plus, but the majority are within 15-30 minutes. While these communities have transient populations defined by the mining, tourist, and seasonal-expat populations, we also have some permanent populations formed by stable expat, local businesses, Panamanian, and European residents. Parents in these communities, who want an academic curriculum, send their children to FSA.

**Staff**: There are three Administrator/Owners. Under normal circumstances, there are nine full-time teachers, two part-time teachers, one assistant, and two support staff. The three Department Heads are drawn from the nine full-time teachers; the Director, MC, is a teacher as well as an owner/administrator.

The nine full time teachers are either hired directly from the United States and Canada, are Panamanians or a Panamanian blend who had studied in the USA and returned home. Because of the few numbers, each teacher has a variety of responsibilities outside the classroom and needs a collaborative attitude. These added responsibilities are offset by the reduced workload generated by the small class size.

YouTube Vide: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVZioOobb5I>

**Goal #1: Mission:** To continue our work towards our school **mission**. “In cooperation with parents and community, Five Stars Academy will provide **creative** and **challenging** programs that will empower all learners to make **thoughtful** and **informed** choices and become assets to society as they realize their unique **potential**.”

We are continually examining our academic abilities and who we are best positioned to serve. We have found that we appeal most to those families who desire academic excellence and are also interested in partnering with us as part of their child’s education.

**Strengths**

* **With our small size, we are able to adapt quickly to changes and needs.**

The obvious example of that has been the massive overhaul in moving from an in-person school to online delivery of the curriculum starting in March 2020. The overhaul was a response to the shutdowns that required one day of intense collaboration. A Thursday was spent bringing our in-person teachers into the online world. We were back up and running on Friday via Zoom. Parents of the youngest students were given tools to help their child actively participate. We were able to respond efficiently and effectively – in 24 hours – to move our entire system online. Once we return to the classroom, elements of what has been learned will be kept now that teachers and students are adept at learning online.

Beyond the rapid digital response, Five Stars has been creative and quick in other areas:

* + We created another four-square space over a weekend, when demand required it.
  + We built a play house over night for the littlest ones.
  + We painted chess boards and tic tac toe on many of the picnic tables, in response to a volunteer providing free lessons in chess.
  + We constructed a new bathroom during a vacation in anticipation of a growing need.
  + A music teacher couple was given a chance to expand their business by providing lessons to students after school on campus.

Just a few examples of quick action to address the needs and requests from our students.

* **Classical/traditional education integrated with creative teaching. (e.g. Macbeth and Butterfly Gardens)**

We pride ourselves in a traditional education integrated with creative teaching. We have successfully integrated more traditional standards and material that include the classics for novels, using textbooks, using workbooks, with innovate styles of teaching to help our kids develop out of the box thinking. Some good examples include:

* + the butterfly garden
  + bringing animals into the classroom to motivate student learning
  + Semester long projects such as teaching survival skills to the middle schoolers, high schoolers playing a stock market game with the winner awarded a small cash prize, hydroponic gardens, and school beautification that includes painting designs on the containers.
* **Personalization**

Personalization at our school is top priority. With our teachers, we emphasize responding to, and valuing, various learning styles. Some examples include:

* + Traditional essays paired with a digitally designed plot analyses.
  + Posters paired with a verbal commentary.
  + A middle school collaborative Spanish/English newsletter distributed school-wide.
  + Partner reading– outside of the classroom with nature.

While students must develop skills in traditional learning formats, those who are visual non-verbal learners or have interpersonal intelligence know what they have to express is valued.

**Challenges**

* **Limited number of families living in our area with the financial means to afford a private school.**

For the expats in our area, many of them choose to homeschool or “unschool”. In addition, in our remote area of Panama, an economically challenged area where the average wage is less than $300 per month for the typical family, we appeal to a limited number of Panamanians.

* **Preserving commitment to personalized education as we grow.**

We were tested a few years ago when a large copper mine brought an influx of ex-pat families to our area. We were able to quickly adjust and maintain our personalization. Their presence has been welcome as we have found these families willing to participate and volunteer in so many areas. And while we do strive to grow and expand, we also are well aware that the quality of education cannot be sacrificed for the financial gain.

**Goal #2: Academic:** Strengthen curriculum and better monitor progress, with special

emphasis on science, math, and foreign languages. Continuously develop opportunities for students to distinguish themselves in areas of particular interest or ability. Expand knowledge and use of digital resources.

**Strengths**

* **Ability to pivot to a fully online curriculum.**

As mentioned in an earlier slide.

* **Approved as an AP Level 2 school.**

In years past, all of our AP courses were required to be online through 3rd parties. In addition, students had to travel 2 hours to take their AP exams in a school in Panama City. Having approved AP teachers for Spanish and Psychology for this current year, the next logical step was to try to get approval to actually provide the exams on site. After quite a process, AP approved us as an AP Level 2 school in September 2020. Our students can now take the AP exams closer to home.

* **Finalizing partnership with K12.com and Keystone**

Due to our small size, our elective course offerings have been limited in the past. With a partnership, our high school students will now have access to a large variety of electives and AP courses to fill in where we are not able to. We will roll this out in June 2021.

* **2019 was our first graduating class. Average ACT score of 26/Multitude of university options.**

The average ACT score in the U.S. is 20.4. Our average ACT is 26 which is around the 85% percentile. You may have also seen in our school profile, the numerous universities our 8 graduates from 2019 and 2020 have been accepted to. It’s been a fun and exciting process to watch our kids move on to the next chapter.

* **Installation of fiber optic internet.**

In November of 2020, we finalized the process of adding fiber optic internet to our school. This will be extremely important once we start to migrate back to in-person teaching. Much of the backbone of our curriculum will continue to stay online.

* **Approved as a candidate for accreditation by Cognia!**

**Challenges**

* **Financial constraints of small school.**

You will see the financial constraints as a recurring theme in many of our challenges. I will touch a bit more on these constraints in upcoming slides.

* **How to teach elective courses (i.e. art, music, other) to students within the confines of teacher comfort and expertise.**

We will roll out our online partnership for the high schoolers beginning June 2020 and watch closely to address needs and make changes as called for.

In addition, we have developed creative solutions such as:

* + Parent Volunteers for Art, Spanish, and French
  + For music, we have partnered with a musician couple to offer after school music classes.
  + Close location to the Buenaventura community that has a sports club and offers lessons in tennis, swimming, dance, horseback riding.
  + One mom offers surf lessons and has what could probably be called the Five Stars Academy surf team because of so many talented kids.
* **Internet and electrical outages.**  
  As Panama continues to grow the infrastructure continues to improve. Some of this is out of our control but we would like to continue in reducing our carbon footprint by adding solar capability at some point. This would help with the electrical outages.

**Goal #3: Community Service: Expand student involvement and opportunities in the local and global community.**

**Strengths**

* **Partnership with JLM**   
  Five Stars Academy understands that experiencing different cultures changes and deepens students’ views of their surroundings and of the world. Our students are provided the opportunity to participate in community service through our partnership with JLM Foundation.  Activities include building homes, offering camps for economically disadvantaged children, dental clinics, during this time – feeding programs for those families having a difficult time, and Christmas gift distribution in the local communities. While most of the community service occurs in Panama, our students have also participated in community service in Haiti, the DR, and Nicaragua.

We realize the importance of exposing our students to current events across the curriculum in order to deepen our students’ awareness and understanding of our rapidly changing world. We require a minimum of 15 hours for community service per academic year for each high schooler but many of our kids, in normal circumstances, complete 60, 80, 100+ hours in a year.

* **Lots of local opportunities to volunteer**
  + Spay the Strays
  + Austism Awareness with surfing
  + Turtle revilatization
  + Recycling programs.
* **Faculty, parents, and students committed to community service.**

We have large groups always willing to go away for a weekend to commit to community service. One parent last year led the recycling effort of our Grade 2 classroom. Whenever donations are requested – gifts for poorer communities at Christmas, clothes or bedding for the mountain homes, financial donations – the response by our parents is inspiring.

**Challenges**

* **Financial constraints and limited opportunities to raise money**

Fundraising in Panama is not like fundraising in the U.S. There are limited dollars here to raise. So in order to still participate, all of our volunteers must pay their own way (food and travel), be prepared to sleep in tents, bathe in the rivers, and then make a small financial contribution.

* **Travel and transportation into remote parts of Panama and other countries**

Oftentimes, the areas that need the most assistance are in very remote areas. These may be accessible only by 4 wheel drive and sometimes, only by horse. We have one community we work with that is 4 hours by horse back and is accessible only in the dry season. It happens to be the hometown of one of our Panamanian part-time Spanish instructors as well.

In addition, we would like to continue to expand our community service initiatives to include service learning tied to the curriculum. For example, read, learn and study about the importance of a clean Earth and tie that into our beach community cleanups and recycling program.

This next year, we would like to include marine biology in our science curriculum (coral preservation, sea turtles) and then work with local groups out in the field to understand how to make a difference.

You can also find more information about our community service in a document titled “Community School” in the workspace.

**Goal #4: Instructors and Training:** Attract and retain quality teachers. Expand opportunities for an enhanced professional development program; just as we are committed to “the conversation between student and teacher,” we will expand on the commitment to “the conversation between teacher and teacher.”

**Strengths**

* **Variety of ways to recruit very talented, highly trained and experienced teachers.**

We have found very successful ways to attract top instructors from the U.S. and Canada. We have a minimum teaching requirement of 5 years but most teachers have anywhere from 10, 20, 30 years of experience teaching. We rely heavily on their previous experience and training and combine that with our philosophy to be able to offer a top-notch program at Five Stars Academy.

* **Numerous online training courses and workshops to complement our teachers’ experiences.**

One of the most recent examples has been training through Savvas/Pearson for online curriculum and through Cognia – the Eleot system. This year, especially, organizations have expanded their free training programs, some of which we have been able to take advantage of.

* **Constant communication via text and in-person (under normal circumstances) to allow for collaborative teaching**

While on campus, we are constantly in communication with one another and developing creative and fun ways for kids and teachers to collaborate. While distance has made this a bit more difficult this year, we have relied heavily on our texting groups to keep everyone in the loop and answer questions on the fly about student learning, curriculum or any other issues that may arise

In addition, because we are so small, each teacher has a variety of responsibilities outside the classroom and needs a collaborative attitude. These added responsibilities are offset by the reduced workload generated by the small class size. Parents contribute to the school by enriching the curriculum with their first language proficiency (French or Spanish in this case), their artistic talents (building drama sets for our semester-end program or volunteering in elementary classrooms to run the art program), or with their time and skills – volunteering where there’s a need.

**Challenges**

* **Maintaining consistency as teachers often have limited stays in Panama.**

Unlike other international schools, we require just a one-year commitment (that can be extended when desired). Many of our teachers are on sabbatical or have a limited time commitment in Panama. We always encourage and happen to locate amazing teachers excited to come teach for a few years but many are not able to relocate permanently. In addition, because of our small school size, it actually works in our favor as teachers rotate themselves out so our kids can experience different types of teachers and instructions.

* **Limited budget to invest in more involved training.**

This will come in time and so far, we have been fortunate enough to attract amazing well-trained teachers while supplementing training with free seminars or other open classes.

**Goal #5: Physical Environment:** Create a physical environment that improves the efficiency, cohesion, and beauty of the campus, and cultivates a safe, supportive, and secure learning environment.

**Strengths:**

* **Limiting carbon footprint. Using recycled shipping containers.**

As part of daily life at Five Stars Academy, our students are connected with the Earth.  Students care for the animals, learn to grow fruits and herbs in our garden, understand how to use plants on the property as a source of health and repair.  They live the life of reduce, reuse, recycle every day by attending class in recycled shipping containers.  They have ongoing projects, such as using old parts to create energy sources that can be used to power lights at Five Stars Academy or provided to families in the mountains who have no electrical source. We would like to install solar panels at some point but right now the investment in the infrastructure is a bit too high.

* **Hydroponic gardens, butterfly garden, fruit and medicinal trees (mango, avocado, cinnamon tree, and more), small playgrounds and soccer field.**

The fun starts when mango season begins. We have trees dropping juicy fresh mangos for 2 or 3 months out of the year. When kids complain of a stomach ache, the first order of business is to go pick a few leaves from our cinnamon tree to make a hot tea. We have planted our hydroponic garden off to the side leaving open a small field for soccer or other games. In a back garden, by the rabbits and chickens, the Grade 3 last year built a butterfly garden. The kids learned about the plants and flowers that attract the most butterflies and loved the butterflies that showed up almost immediately.

* **We have hosted pigs and goats. Currently raising rabbits and egg-laying chickens.**

Working and caring for animals has proven to build self-confidence. Our students have worked with many different kinds of animals and when possible, the animals (such as rabbits) are brought into the classroom as positive reinforcement when doing classwork. One amazing aspect about living in Panama is all of the animals at our fingertips. Kids are exposed to all kinds of reptiles, insects, farm animals and they learn how to care for and respect them.

**Challenges**

* **Current property has limited space to expand and limited outdoor area.**

We will continue to watch the trends and we have been speaking with potential partners who would be interested in moving the location of the school to a much larger area. But at this point, we are still fine in our current location with some room still to expand.

* **Finding an outside source to equip classrooms with updated technology.**

The ideal situation would be to find an organization or company who would be willing to provide laptops or other updated technology on a regular basis. However, the truth is we have enough of the basics, families have equipped their kids with the necessary equipment for online learning, and the opportunities to supplement curriculum online has grown tremendously. Our high-speed fiber optic internet will also be a huge leap to keep us online at school.

* **Challenges of a developing country – internet and electrical outages, road protests, distance for many of our students.**

The internet and electrical outages are occurring less frequently but when it happens, it can stop the entire school day. And in the past we have had to send children home early. Without electricity, the classrooms begin to heat up and that also means we lose our water source.

**Goal #6: Financial**: Develop a financial model that attracts the broadest pool of qualified applicants; reduces dependence on tuition; and adequately funds FSA’s programs and the goals of this strategic plan.

**Strengths:**

* **Academic excellence appeal.**

We appeal to those families who are looking for a challenging academic curriculum and personalization.

* **Financial independence achieved in the past few years.**

For the first few years, we financially carried the school when it was required. Around 2017, we were able to pay back personal loans and operate independently.

**Challenges**

* **Remote location of Five Stars Academy.**

We are still considered remote even though the area has grown dramatically in the past 10 years or so. The main part of this beach area is a town called Coronado about 30 minutes down the road. The reality is that our location can work in our favor to attract those who are truly committed to academic excellence and not just the school that is closest to their home. We have some families commuting 45 minutes to an hour or more each way to be a part of our school.

* **Pricing point.**

We are probably the most expensive school outside of Panama City but still a fraction of the cost when compared to those schools in the city. We have to walk a fine line in our pricing and balance our investment in teachers with attracting enough families who can afford the tuition.

* **Developing interest from outside companies to support.**

Once the dust settles after the current situation and companies figure out their financial position, we are interested in appealing to the mining