

**Denver Public Schools**



**THE DISTRICT SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT AND  
ACCOUNTABILITY COUNCIL (SIAC)**

**RECOMMENDATIONS AND COMMENTS  
TO THE BOARD OF EDUCATION**

**ON**

**CHARTER SCHOOL APPLICATIONS**

**JUNE 2013**

## **Introduction**

The Charter Schools Act requires the District School Improvement and Accountability Council (District SIAC) to review charter school applications. These responsibilities were delegated to a committee. This report is the result of that process for spring 2013. The persons who participated in a portion or all of the committee work include:

- Sherry Eastlund, Community Person
- Valentina Flores, ED.D., Community Person
- Dorolyn Griebenaw, Community Person
- Roger Kilgore, Community Person, *District SIAC Co-Chair*
- Jacqui Shumway, DPS Parent
- Dr. Jesse Sutherland, Community Person
- Kristen Tourangeau, DPS Parent, *District SIAC Co-Chair*

After the committee received the six charter school applications, it read and discussed each application prior to engaging in a series of interviews with all applicants. Following the interview it discussed the merits of each application.

On May 28, the committee presented the District SIAC with a progress report including an overview of its recommendations for the new charter school applications. The District SIAC adopted the resolution supporting the work of the committee.

## **Criteria and Analytical Process**

In reviewing charter school applications, the District SIAC's principal test has consistently been whether the proposed school is likely to be successful in providing its students with an educational environment resulting in high levels of academic achievement. To meet this test, the school must be functionally sound in several ways as described by the following criteria:

- Education program: Is the education program research-based and has it proven effective for the target population?
- Community support: Is there strong evidence that there is broad community support for the school?
- Governance: Does the board have the needed skills and experience to start and maintain the school? Is the board connected to the community? Are the necessary governance policies and procedures in place?
- School leadership: Does the proposed school leader have the needed skills and experience in organizational management and academics to start and maintain the school? Is the experience relevant to the community to be served?

- Finance: Are the projected income and expense streams reasonable? Are contingency plans in place if some assumptions are not realized? Is the school sustainable over the long run?

A second test considered by the District SIAC is whether adding the new school will strengthen the district as a whole over the long term and whether it is compatible with the efforts of other public schools in the community.

Six charter applications were reviewed. In addition, the District received six applications for new “performance” schools. These applications included: Dunkirk Elementary (application withdrawn), High Tech Elementary, High Tech Early College Middle School, Legacy Options School, Denver Performance School, and the Sewell Inclusive Elementary School.

Thanks and acknowledgement are extended to Joe Amundsen of the Office of School Reform and Innovation (OSRI) for his tremendous assistance in providing multiple sets of applications, copies of the Call for Quality Schools, essential resource material, as well as prompt responses to our many questions and requests.

## **New Charter School Recommendations**

### ***Aman Steam Academy***

The Aman STEAM Academy proposes a K-8 charter school in near northeast Denver. According to its application, the school’s focus would be Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math for a population that is 70% FRL, 10% SPED, and 25% ELL. The educational program uses a problem-based learning approach with integrated instruction, a balanced reading program, Singapore math, personal learning plans, looping, and an extended school day and year. The school will develop community and business partnerships to support and bring relevance to its Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math curricula. Aman STEAM has 90 letters of intent to enroll.

The District SIAC has concerns that the curricula do not appear to be completely developed, and that the proposed English Language Acquisition Program is not consistent with the new 2012 Consent Decree. In addition, there are concerns about whether the proposed school leadership has the appropriate training and experience to open and sustain a school.

*The District SIAC committee did not reach a consensus on this application. Therefore, the District SIAC asks the Board to further investigate the concerns identified prior to making a final decision on the application for the Aman STEAM Academy charter.*

### ***DSST VI***

DSST is generally considered to have a positive record with high school students and recently has expanded to the middle school level. DSST offers a contemporary, rigorous curriculum and solid professional development for educators. The services offered for ELL’s do not appear adequate or are not explained well in the application.

When the District embarked on the path of offering charter schools as options within DPS, the promise of this strategy was that successful innovations in charter schools would be applied, as appropriate, to other schools throughout the district. As the Board of Education considers approving charters for a sixth and seventh DSST, it is relevant to ask if the District is capable of such replication within its current administrative structure, or if it is satisfied with a single charter organization subcontracting to serve an increasing segment of the secondary school population. It is also relevant to ask if the STEM model is in danger of reaching a saturation point in terms of the District's intent to offer a variety of options for Denver families.

*It is the recommendation of the District SIAC that the application for both DSST Middle VI and High School VI charters be approved for the 2014-2015 school year with the condition that a recruitment process and ELA program be developed to better attract English Language Learners and that DSST raise its minimum inclusion percentage of ELL's to at least 33%. We also recommend that the District and the Board of Education review the District's own capabilities for running its schools versus outsourcing that responsibility.*

## **DSST VII**

See comments for DSST VI.

*It is the recommendation of the District SIAC that the application for both DSST Middle VII and High School VII charters be approved for the 2014-2015 school year with the condition that a recruitment process and ELA program be developed to better attract English Language Learners and that the District and the Board of Education review the District's own capabilities for running its schools versus outsourcing that responsibility.*

## **STRIVE PREP Elementary**

The STRIVE Network of Charter Schools proposes to open a K-5 elementary in southwest Denver that will be a feeder school to the existing STRIVE Prep middle and high schools. According to its application, the school's focus would be college prep for a population that is 90% FRL, 10% SPED, and 40% ELL. The application seeks to replicate the rigor and culture of the existing schools.

The STRIVE network operates several successful middle schools in Denver and has a strong board which provides experienced oversight. Although the STRIVE network has not yet operated an elementary school, it is reasonable to expect that the leadership and organizational strength has a high probability of success.

The applicants have researched and visited several successfully established charter schools to determine the best elementary practices, including curricula, which are included in the new school application. However, the educational program is not completely defined in the application. While the educational program appears to be

rigorous and assumes a long day, the District SIAC is concerned that it may not be appropriate for young students in the primary grades. We are not aware of the research basis for this strategy.

The Call for New Quality Schools does not identify a need for elementary school seats in southwest Denver, though it does point out that many of the existing seats are not located at high performing schools. The application notes that locating in a DPS-owned facility is desired and the budget does allow for the contingency that it is not located in a DPS-owned facility.

*It is the recommendation of the District SIAC that the application for STRIVE Prep Elementary charter not be approved for the 2014-2015 school year, but rather the application for a STRIVE elementary school be resubmitted with an age-appropriate, completely- defined, educational program for 2015-2016.*

### ***Uhuru School for Authentic Learning***

Uhuru School for Authentic Learning proposes an ECE-5 charter school in far northeast Denver, opening with ECE, kindergarten and first grade in 2014 and adding a grade each year over three years. According to its application, the school's focus would be college prep for a population that is 88% FRL, 11% SPED, and 44% ELL.

The school will use a backwards-planning process based on Common Core Standards and data-driven instruction to provide a rigorous, authentic (relevant) education that cultivates independence, critical thinking, and an enduring love of education. The needs of English Language Learners will be addressed using a sheltered English immersion approach using a Sheltered Instructional Observation Protocol. All students will have art and physical education. The school proposes an extended school day and year, and will foster a strong professional development program. The budget is complete. At this time there are 146 letters of intent and adequate letters of support.

The District SIAC committee was impressed with the proposed school leadership, but has some concern that the sustainability may be dependent upon one or two people. An additional concern is that there are no letters of support from the surrounding community in which the school wants to locate. In addition, a concern was raised in the discussions that the various elements of the proposed curricula might not complement each other.

*It is the recommendation of the District SIAC that the application for Uhuru School for Authentic Learning be approved for the 2014-2015 school year.*

### ***Youth Build Charter School of Denver***

The Youth Build Charter School of Denver application proposes to open a northwest Denver, alternative, diploma-granting, high school for at risk students ages 17-21, for a population that is 95% FRL, 17% SPED, and 14% ELL. This school will provide an educational experience that will work in unison with Mile High Youth Corps which

currently provides education (GED program), work, career preparation and personal development for an at-risk population. There is presently a significant waiting list of at-risk students wishing to enroll in the Mile High Youth Corps program.

The application proposes an educational program rooted in project-based learning, authentic assessments, and learning applied to real world issues. The educational program is currently in place in fifteen California alternative schools. The educational program is designed around nine “mesters” with a two-session day, which will give students flexibility in enrollment that meets the at-risk population’s many needs. Teachers will receive 120 hours of professional development annually.

The Call for New Quality Schools does not identify a need for alternative high school seats in northwest Denver, though it does point out that many of the existing seats are not located at high performing schools. The Call does identify a need in southwest Denver for intensive pathway seats. The proposed school location is in the existing Mile High Youth Corps building at 1800 Federal, which is near the boundary between northwest and southwest Denver. The application notes that the school will receive in-kind services from the existing organization.

The District SIAC believes that the mission of this school has merit and the partnership with and support of Mile High Youth Corps will provide work experiences and apprentice opportunities, which will enhance the likelihood of the needs of at-risk students being met. However, there appears to be no evidence that the California educational program would meet the District and State student outcomes defined in the respective SPF reports. The applicants said in the interview that California alternate schools were not held to the same outcomes that Colorado requires. In addition, a concern was raised in committee discussions that the proposed project-based, high school, educational program is similar to the educational programs used at PS-1, Skyland, and Venture charter schools that are either closed or being closed.

*It is the recommendation of the District SIAC that the application for the Youth Build Charter School of Denver be granted for the 2014-2015 school year if the District and the applicants can agree upon reasonable educational outcomes by which this alternative school can be measured.*

## **Other Recommendations**

### ***The Promise of Charter Schools***

Charter schools were introduced to the district as a means for experimentation and innovation with the promise that lessons learned would be broadly applied to all schools. This promise has not been fulfilled and it is becoming evident that the strategy is to replace existing schools with new charter or innovation schools across the district. The District SIAC is concerned about the number of charter schools in the district and whether their presence has helped spur innovations at the district-run schools. Furthermore, we are interested in whether the addition of each new school strengthens the district as a whole over the long term, and whether the focus of the new school is

compatible with the efforts of other public schools in the community to serve the needs of the students in that particular community.

While charters state in their applications that they will accept students with an entire range of capabilities, it is the concern of the District SIAC that the student bodies of charters do not reflect the same composition of students as those of neighboring traditional schools. This composition is not directly related to simply the numbers of FRL, minority, ELL, and SPED populations, which can make schools appear comparable. For example, FRL, ELL, and SPED students represent a spectrum from mild to great need and this range is masked in the overall statistics. Also not represented is the degree of family support and motivation. Some students have highly motivated families who will spare no effort, including supplying the necessary transportation resources, while other students are limited to the school down the street due to a lack of resources. This phenomenon results in a self-selection of students based on family motivation, a phenomenon not captured in demographic statistics.

These disparities make it difficult to ascertain whether each charter school would serve a particular population well, and whether the introduction of the charter school's "best practices" would be successful in the traditional setting, since the two populations are different. Underlying this is the concern that families who seek out a charter school are more likely to be invested in their child's education and have a higher likelihood of providing the resources to support this effort.

In order to provide a background for evaluating our concerns, we reviewed the history and development of charter schools in DPS. A brief summary of this history follows.

Seven charter schools were established from 1995 – 2000. Four of these seven schools (57%) continue to operate today.

From 2001 – 2009 twenty charters were opened. Of this group, fourteen (70%) continue to operate. All told, of the initial twenty-seven charter schools, nine schools have been closed, which translates to one out of three schools or 33%.

Since 2009, 22 charter schools have opened. Currently there are 40 operating charter schools in DPS, which represent 22% of the schools in the DPS' portfolio, yet they only serve 13% of the students.

Based on the statistics above, it is the belief of the District SIAC that the District should be cautious when approving a charter school to add to its portfolio of schools without fully understanding the cumulative effects of previous charter approvals. If one out of three charter schools fail, this should be of grave concern to the District, as the establishment of a charter school disrupts the balance of schools in a community for the charter's initial three to five years while it is developing its student population. Then, if the charter closes after these five years, the displaced students return to the pool, and must be absorbed by the remaining schools, which again upsets the balance. This opening and closing of schools has a tremendous impact on the community, which depends on stable schools as one of its pillars.

Furthermore, the objective of having "best practices" and/or "innovative teaching" at charter schools move into the curricula and instruction at traditional public schools has not been achieved. The idea that charters would not only offer a superior education, but

also act as a catalyst for improved learning at district-run schools has not materialized in DPS.

Lastly, although the District has an office which monitors charter school performance, the District SIAC does not believe that the schools are being sufficiently monitored to ascertain true performance, the level of teacher development and retention, the equity of student admittance and the level of student retention, as well as the quality of school leadership and the continuity thereof.

The District SIAC suggests that the District refrain from issuing a Call for New Quality Schools for a period of time until an adequate evaluation of the success of charter schools, in their varying roles within the district's portfolio of schools, can be completed. In its stead, the District should continue to follow the application timeline in the Charter Law (22-30.5-107 C.R.S.) until such time that the evaluation is complete. We believe this will protect the exclusive authorization status of the District. In addition, the lessons learned from this evaluation should be identified and the successful ones applied district-wide. We think that this strategy would result in faster increases in student performance than is being experienced with the current approach.

### ***Meeting District Needs***

Ideally, the Board of Education's response to the charter and performance school applications considers the overall health and sustainability of the district as a whole. The district identifies its needs for new seats in its Call for New Quality Schools. It also notes needs for higher quality seats at existing schools. The latter is generally used as the reason to approve new schools where new seats representing expansion are not needed. Rather than supporting and improving new schools, this further stresses schools in the community. The following table (Table 1) summarizes the needs for new seats in the Call and matches the applicants with those needs.

We recommend the Board of Education consider the overall strategic interests of all of our students in the approval of new schools. Some highlights from the table for consideration include:

- The Call identifies a need for 500 new elementary seats in the far northeast at the bond funded Dunkirk facility. After withdrawal of the Dunkirk Elementary application, two schools seek to serve this population. Approval of both applications would provide for too much capacity in this area or imply an intention to close other existing programs.
- The Call did not identify a need for middle school seats though the Evie Dennis campus is being expanded (bond-funded). Approval of the High Tech Middle School would provide excess capacity or imply an intention to close other existing programs.



- The Call identified the need for new elementary and middle school seats for the TIF-funded Conservatory Green facility. Approval of all applications for this need would result in over-capacity or imply an intention to close other existing programs.
- The Call identified a need for middle and high school seats at the 900-seat bond funded new facility at Northfield. Only one applicant – DSST VI – applied. No district-run options were developed in response to the Call. **This is in conflict with the Board of Education established policy that “the district must propose at least one district-run school as a potential occupant for new bond-funded facilities.”** (Page 15 – DPS’ Call for New Quality Schools)
- The DSST VII (middle and high school) application offers approximately 900 seats, but does not specify a preferred location. No additional unmet needs are identified in the Call. Approval of this application would likely result in over capacity in the area and may imply the intent to close other existing programs.

It is also our recommendation that the Board of Education review the community participation activities conducted by the District to determine community interests in the types of programs being offered by the applicants.

**Table 1. Comparison of Call Needs and Applicants.**

Region/Level	Number of New Seats Needed (facility)	Applicants	Seats	Type
Far Northeast/Elementary	500 (Bond-funded Dunkirk)	Uhuru School for Authentic Learning	514	charter
		Dunkirk Elementary <sup>1</sup>	514	performance
		High Tech Elementary	518	performance
Far Northeast/Middle School	None (Evie Dennis campus expansion)	High Tech Middle School	243	performance
Far Northeast/High School	None	None		
Far Northeast/Intensive Pathways	200	Legacy Options School	300	performance
Near Northeast/Elementary	900 <sup>2</sup> (TIF financed Conservatory Green)	Aman STEAM Academy	450	charter
		Denver Performance School (K-8)	872	performance
		Sewell Inclusive	300	performance
Near Northeast/Middle	300-500	See Denver Performance School (above)		
Near Northeast/High	(900 seat bond funded Northfield)	DSST VI (middle and high schools)	420 (M) 485 (H)	charter
Southwest/Elementary	None <sup>3</sup>	STRIVE Prep	514	charter
Northwest/Intensive Pathway	None <sup>4</sup>	Youth Build	120	charter
Southeast/Elementary	None <sup>5</sup>			
No location specified		DSST VII (middle and high schools)	420 (M) 485 (H)	

<sup>1</sup> Application withdrawn.

<sup>2</sup> Elementary and middle school seats.

<sup>3</sup> Many existing schools are crowded.

<sup>4</sup> Needs are identified in adjacent Southwest Denver.

<sup>5</sup> Call notes that analysis is ongoing. A new elementary school for this region was approved in the 2012 bond (Hampden Heights).

## ***Endorsements by Public Officials***

Our review of charter applications over the years has seen an increasing trend for our elected officials to submit letters of support in favor of an individual charter school application. These officials come from the state general assembly, the city council, and other offices. Often times, the letters of support are form letters signed by the official, suggesting that there is no particular knowledge about the application itself or the needs for schools in a particular area.

While we don't think there is anything illegal in such a practice, the District SIAC believes that it is an ill-advised (and often ill-informed) intrusion into the district decision-making process and the scope of the responsibilities of the elected Board of Education. In many cases, it is simply a political statement in favor of a generalized educational strategy.

## **Glossary**

ECE – Early Childhood Education

ELL – English Language Learner

EMO – Education Management Organization

FRL – Free and Reduced Lunch

SIAC – School Improvement and Accountability Council

SPED – Special Education

SPF – School Performance Framework

TIF – Tax Increment Financing