



**THE DISTRICT SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT AND  
ACCOUNTABILITY COUNCIL (SIAC)  
RECOMMENDATIONS AND COMMENTS  
TO THE BOARD OF EDUCATION**

**ON**

**CHARTER SCHOOL APPLICATIONS**

**JUNE 2, 2014**

## **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 the SIAC review process for spring 2014. The persons who participated in a portion or all of the committee work include:

- Sherry Eastlund, Community Person
- Don Griebenaw, Community Person.
- Dorolyn Griebenaw, Community Person
- Karl Luce, Community Person
- Roger Kilgore, Community Person, *District SIAC Co-Chair*
- Meg Schomp, Parent
- Dr. Jesse Sutherland, Community Person
- Kristen Tourangeau, DPS Parent, *District SIAC Co-Chair*

After the committee received the fourteen 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 27, 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.

This report is divided into two sections. The first section addresses our recommendations regarding the individual applications. The second section offers additional recommendations related to the charter school process.

Thanks and acknowledgement are extended to Joe Amundsen of 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.

### **Proposed New Charter School Recommendations**

Following are the District SIAC recommendations for each individual application. Our recommendations are based on whether the application indicates that the school has a reasonable chance of success. However, with this number of applicants, many targeting the same areas, we do not believe that every school given a positive review be approved without considering the overall effects on the school system as a whole.

#### ***Banneker Jemison STEM Academy (K-5)***

The Banneker Jemison STEM Academy proposes to convert a public K-5 Hope charter school in Near Northeast Denver to a Denver charter school. According to its application, the school's focus would be Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math for a population that is 67% FRL, 10% SPED, and 27% ELL. The educational program uses a Core Knowledge curriculum, Open Court reading program, and Saxon/Everyday Math program. The application identifies an experienced educational leader and the applicants already have a facility at 2940 Curtis St. in the Five Points/Curtis Park area in Denver.

The proposed school leader offers solid experience in elementary education and the institution has a record as Hope Online. The academic program is good and there appears to be community support. The low cost of the facility may permit more resources to go to the students in the classroom.

It is a concern that the Call for Quality Schools does not cite a need for additional seats in this area.

*It is the recommendation of the District SIAC that the application for Banneker Jemison STEM Academy charter be approved for the 2015-2016 school year.*

#### ***KIPP Colorado Elementary (ECE-4)***

The KIPP Colorado charter school network proposes to open an ECE-4 elementary school in Far Northeast Denver that will be a feeder school to the existing KIPP 5-8

school. According to its application, the school's focus would be college prep for a population that is 92% FRL, 10% SPED, and 40% ELL. The application seeks to replicate the culture of the existing KIPP elementary schools in the national KIPP network.

The applicants have researched and visited several established KIPP elementary charter schools to determine the best elementary practices, including curricula, which are included in the new school application. The application included 98 intent-to-enroll forms.

KIPP Colorado operates two middle schools in Denver with SPF ratings above average for DPS middle schools. KIPP has a strong board that can provide experienced oversight. Although KIPP Colorado has not yet operated an elementary school, it is reasonable to expect that the leadership and organizational strength has a high probability of success.

*It is the recommendation of the District SIAC that the application for KIPP Colorado Elementary charter be approved for the 2015-2016 school year.*

### ***KIPP Montbello Collegiate High School (9-12)***

KIPP Colorado proposes to open a 9-12 high school in Far Northeast Denver that will be a receiver school to the existing KIPP middle school. According to its application, the school's focus would be college prep for a population that is 92% FRL, 10% SPED, and 40% ELL. The application seeks to replicate the culture of the existing high school.

KIPP Colorado operates a high school that is rated green and two middle schools in Denver. KIPP has a strong board that provides experienced oversight. It is reasonable to expect that the leadership and organizational strength has a high probability of success.

*It is the recommendation of the District SIAC that the application for KIPP Montbello Collegiate High School charter be approved for the 2015-2016 school year.*

### ***Near Northeast Community Engagement Center (6-8)***

The applicants propose a 6-8 middle school serving a population that is 97% FRL, 12% SPED, and 63% ELL in Near Northeast Denver. The school would be an intentional partnership between community organizations, the University of Colorado at Denver, and the district, utilizing a personalized learning approach, with an interdisciplinary, project-based curriculum. The school leadership will consist of a three-person team responsible for: 1) culture, climate and community; 2) curriculum and instruction; and 3) vision and strategy.

The school day will consist of learning blocks and learning labs. Free before and after school programs will be provided by the community partners. During the three three-week breaks and the six-week summer break, students may participate in day programming provided by community partners.

Access to education expertise at CU appears to be a plus, but this is not a certainty.

At this time, the governing board is constituted of persons associated with CU Denver, but proposal is to find an additional three community members. It is planned that three board members will mentor the three identified school leaders.

District SIAC believes this application is ambitious and innovative including its emphasis on concept of school/community partnerships. However, the committee has several concerns. First, the academic program has been unsuccessful in other charter schools (PS1) in the district. Second, the governance model also has certain problematic elements. The application indicates that initially the staff will be CU employees rather than an independent organization. There is no evidence in the application that CU Denver is committed to this application institutionally. Furthermore, during this transition period staff will be responsible to CU Denver rather than to the charter school board.

An additional governance issue relates to the problematic role of the board relative to the school leadership. It appears fraught with conflict for the same persons who mentor staff to also be in a position to objectively evaluate staff. Having a spouse on the board and a spouse as a school leader could generate problems. These do not appear to be best practices.

Finally, the budget does not seem to be a foundation for success. The applicant has assumed a district startup grant that it is our understanding is not available to Charter schools and there is apparently no Tabor reserve fund set aside. The program depends on various community groups to provide support, but there appears to be no commitments from those community groups. In addition, the Call does not identify new seats in this neighborhood as a need.

Overall, we would encourage further development of the concepts and resubmittal in a future cycle.

*It is the recommendation of the District SIAC that the application for NNECEC charter be denied for the 2015-2016 school year.*

### **REACH (ECE-5)**

The applicants propose a full inclusion ECE-5 elementary school serving a population that is 57% FRL, 30% SPED, and 27% ELL in Near Northeast Denver. The full inclusion model was developed by Sewall Child Development Center, which serves typically developing students and students with a wide range of students with disabilities. The board is comprised of community members with strong educational expertise and has identified an experienced educational leader to be principal. At the time of our interview, there were 115 intent-to-enroll forms.

The applicants have been working with the District to determine how the funding would work for special needs students that DPS typically serves in Center programs.

DPS does not currently offer a full immersion model for the proposed population and this applicant has a well framed application. The proposed leadership and governance structure is strong. The budget appears comprehensive.

*It is the recommendation of the District SIAC that the application for REACH charter be approved for the 2015-2016 school year.*

### **Rocky Mountain Prep at Hampden Heights (ECE -5)**

The applicants propose to open a personalized learning, ECE-5 charter school serving a population that is 75% FRL, 10% SPED, and 50% ELL in the new Hampton Heights elementary school in Southeast Denver. The school would be a second Rocky Mountain Prep Charter also located in Southeast Denver. The first school has not developed to its full grade level serving only through 2<sup>nd</sup> grade in the 2013-2014 school year. According to the applicant, the current school has a wait list of 250 students.

Consistent with our recommendations in previous years, SIAC does not recommend attempting to “replicate” an existing school that is not fully built out with a documented track record. On that basis this application for a replication is premature. In addition, the proposed school has the same program as its nearby sister school, therefore, it does not expand the choices available to families in the area.

*It is the recommendation of the District SIAC that the application for Rocky Mountain Prep at Hampden Heights be denied for the 2015-2016 school year.*

### **Roots Elementary (K-5)**

The Roots applicants propose a rigorous, personalized learning K-5 elementary school serving a population that is 80% FRL, 15% SPED, and 40% ELL in Near Northeast Denver. Students will be served in multi-age groupings of 100 that share a physical space referred to as a “grove.” Staffing for a Grove will include two coaches (one is special education certified), two core teachers, one specials teacher, one ELA teacher, and a Teaching Fellow. Within the Grove, students work independently, in small groups, on computers, or individually with a teacher or fellow according to the student’s learning plan. The school will have an extended school day and year. The charter board has reported over 200 intent-to-enroll forms.

Part of the intent of the Charter school law is to explore new ideas and this program is an innovative partially self-directed, mixed aged, self-paced program. The applicant has identified an enthusiastic leader with limited experience in education and school management.

A concern is the District has not identified the needs for new seats in the Near Northeast area. In addition, recruiting teachers that can be effective in this unique environment may be an additional challenge.

*It is the recommendation of the District SIAC that the application for Roots be approved for the 2015-2016 school year.*

## **SEED High School (9-12)**

The applicants of Seed High School propose a 9-12 college prep and career focus school serving a population that is 50% FRL, 10% SPED, and 25% ELL in Near Northeast Denver. The educational program will primarily be a project-based approach to liberal arts core subjects and a range of classes and internships related to careers in Sustainable Energy/ Engineering/ Design and related fields. SEED will nurture student's self discovery and self motivation. The governing board will seek funds from the traditional charter granting agencies and businesses, firms and individuals who have an interest fields related to Sustainable Energy/ Engineering/ Design.

Although the District SIAC supports a school with a rigorous academic core program that partners with Sustainable Energy/Engineering/Design and related fields, the committee has concerns with this application. First, there is no evidence beyond letters of general support for the concept of the school that solid partnerships have been developed with businesses in the engineering related fields. Therefore, business support for classroom activities and internships for students appears speculative. Second, the budget depends on private and foundation funding that has yet to be secured. Third, a topically focused school design such as this tracks students in a single direction leaving no option but to leave the school if the student's interests change. This single topical focus also leaves the school vulnerable when professional interests change.

Finally, the enrollment process appears to be designed to foster an exclusive environment by setting several hurdles for prospective applicants where they could be encouraged to look elsewhere. The application process includes required submittal of personal recommendations and academic records. The process also includes a required orientation session and interview. We do not believe that this application process is consistent with the value of serving all students and may be inconsistent with the state Charter Schools law.

*For the reasons outlined above, the District SIAC recommends that the application for the SEED High School be denied for the 2015-2016 school year.*

## **Southwest Denver Community School (6-12)**

City Year Inc. and the Center for Social Organization of Schools (CSOS) at John Hopkins University propose to provide a 6-12 charter school at Kepner in Southwest Denver. According to the application, the proposed school focus would be for "deep" learning and the development of "21<sup>st</sup> century" competencies for a population that is 80% FRL, 12% SPED, and 45% ELL. The applicants currently have 170 intent to enroll and community support forms. The school will have an extended school day, individualized learning plans, and a team of well-trained young adults (City Year Corps members) to provide students with extra supports, role modeling, and one-to-one tutoring before, during, and after school.

City Year Inc. and the Center for Social Organization of Schools at John Hopkins plans to form a wholly owned subsidiary of City Year Inc. (The New School Division of City Year, LLC) to provide services to schools and districts. The charter school governing board intends to contract with the new educational service provider for City Year corps members and managers, leadership and instructional training and coaching, instructional materials, and a range of back office operational consultative services, including payroll services, annual budget planning, procurement of instructional materials and supplies. Neither City Year nor the Social Organization of Schools at John Hopkins is currently operating schools. However, City Year currently provides City Year corps members that work with students in eight DPS schools.

We have two concerns with this application. First, the accountability for the school between the various organizations – City Year, CSOS, Johns Hopkins, and the New Schools Division – is unclear. Long term financial commitments appear speculative. Second, none of the proposed Board members seem to have connections the southwest Denver community.

*It is the recommendation of the District SIAC that the application for Southwest Denver Community School be approved for the 2015-2016 school year ONLY for grades 6-8. The high school program is not developed to a sufficient level to approve and the organization has no track record at running schools.*

### **STRIVE Prep Far Northeast Elementary School (K-5)**

The STRIVE Network of Charter Schools proposes to open a K-5 elementary in Far Northeast Denver that will be a feeder school to the existing STRIVE Prep school. According to its application, the school's focus would be college prep for a population that is 80% FRL, 10% SPED, and 43% ELL. The application seeks to replicate the 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 offers 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. Unlike the first STRIVE elementary application; the educational program is completely defined in this application. While the educational program appears to be rigorous and assumes a long day, it appears the structure of the long day has been modified to be more appropriate for young students in the primary grades.

*It is the recommendation of the District SIAC that the application for STRIVE Prep Far Northeast Elementary charter be approved for the 2015-2016 school year.*

### **STRIVE Prep Far Northeast High School (9-12)**

The STRIVE Network of Charter Schools proposes to open a 9-12 high school in Far Northeast Denver that will be a receiver school to the existing STRIVE Prep school. According to its application, the school's focus would be college prep for a population that is 80% FRL, 10% SPED, and 43% 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. It is reasonable to expect that the leadership and organizational strength has a high probability of success.

*It is the recommendation of the District SIAC that the application for STRIVE Prep Far Northeast High School charter be approved for the 2015-2016 school year.*

### **STRIVE Prep Southwest Middle School (6-8)**

The STRIVE Network of Charter Schools proposes to open an additional 6-8 middle school at the Kepner site in Southwest Denver. According to its application, the school's focus would be college prep for a population that is 90% FRL, 10% SPED, and 47% ELL. The application seeks to replicate the culture of the existing schools.

The STRIVE network operates several successful middle schools in Denver and has a strong board which provides experienced oversight.

*It is the recommendation of the District SIAC that the application for STRIVE Prep Southwest Middle School charter at Kepner be approved for the 2015-2016 school year.*

### **Westside Academy (K-5)**

The Westside Academy application proposes to convert a public Hope Online Charter School chartered through Douglas County Public Schools to a Denver Public School charter school serving a K-5 student population that is 90% FRL, 10% SPED, and 40% ELL. The school will be located in a church at 810 Knox Court in West Denver. The leader of the proposed school will be the leader of the present Hope school and pastor of the church.

The school will offer Open Court Reading, Saxon Math, Study Island computer stations, before/after school tutoring, and free summer break remedial school, chess, and tennis. The leadership will contract with a consultant for training and support for teacher observations, culture building sessions, classroom modeling, staff interviews, and advertising.

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. There are concerns about whether the proposed school leadership has the appropriate training and experience to open and sustain a school. Consulting with educators from PODER, an on-line school in Wyoming, does not seem appropriate nor efficient.

In addition, the applicant has stated that “religious teachings or activities would not happen during the school day, but there may be some before and after school.” While many schools successfully operate in churches, District SIAC believes, in this case, it may be difficult for the school to maintain the separation between church and state.

*Although the District SIAC believes in the mission of Westside Academy, there are too many concerns, at this time, to approve this school. Therefore, the recommendation is to deny the charter for Westside Academy to open for the 2015-16 school year.*

### **Youth Build Charter School of Denver (9-12)**

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. According to the applicant, there is presently a significant waiting list of at-risk students wishing to enroll in the Mile High Youth Corp 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 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 application notes that the school will receive in-kind services from the existing organization.

In addition, the applicants have identified a strong educational leader that has experience with the proposed project-based educational approach.

The District SIAC believes that the mission of this school has merit and the partnership with and support of Mile High Youth Corp will provide work experiences and apprentice opportunities which will enhance the likelihood of the needs of at-risk students being met. Also, the committee believes the identified leader is capable of successfully implementing the proposed educational program.

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.

*It is the recommendation of the District SIAC that the application for the Youth Build Charter School of Denver be granted for the 2015-2016 school year if the District and the applicants can agree upon reasonable educational outcomes by which this alternative school can be measured.*

## **Other Recommendations**

In addition to our school-specific recommendations, the District SIAC offers several observations and recommendations related to the larger Charter school process.

### ***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 emphasis has been on Charter schools reproducing themselves and forming their own independent networks.

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 question 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 charters 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, more than 20 charter schools have opened. Currently there are 43 operating charter schools in DPS, which represent 23% of the schools in the DPS portfolio, yet they only serve approximately 15% of the students.

Based on the statistics above, it is the belief of the District SIAC that DPS 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 DPS, 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 detrimental 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 DPS 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 DPS 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***

The Board of Education's response to the charter and performance school applications should consider 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. We recommend the Board of Education consider the overall strategic interests of all of our students in the approval of new schools.

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.

### ***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 Colorado General Assembly, the Denver 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 our 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