

Denver Public Schools



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

NOVEMBER 2009

INTRODUCTION

The Charter Schools Act requires the District School Improvement and Accountability Council (District SIAC) to review Charter School applications. This responsibility was delegated to a subcommittee. This report is the result of that process for the 2009-2010 school year. The persons who participated in a portion or all of the subcommittee work included the following:

Sherry Eastlund, District SIAC Subcommittee Co-Chairperson
Paula Ortlieb, DPS Parent, Chair of District SIAC, Subcommittee Co-Chairperson
Marsha Gonzales, Denver Council PTSA, District SIAC
Leo Smith, Community, District SIAC
Dr. Jesse Sutherland, Community, District SIAC

After the subcommittee received the 5 charter school applications, it engaged in a series of meetings in which it interviewed the applicants of the three schools who have not previously been interviewed by the subcommittee and discussed the merits of each application.

In late October, the subcommittee presented District SIAC with a progress report including an overview of its recommendations. The complete report was presented to District SIAC by electronic means in early November for their comment, and the full council indicated its support for the report.

Criteria and Analytical Process

In reviewing charter school applications, 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 that results in high levels of academic achievement. To meet this test, the school must, of course, also be functionally sound, both in terms of its educational program and its financial operation.

This test remains of critical importance and represents an initial condition that must be met before any charter application will be successful in gaining our recommendation. However, the District has embarked on a policy not only of continually adding multiple new schools of widely differing types to coexist with traditional neighborhood schools but of also dictating the location of these new schools. Because of this change of policy, District SIAC has concluded that other factors are also of vital significance to whether a proposed school should be granted a charter.

Among these additional issues are the following:

- The relationship between the proposed charter school and other nearby schools, especially when the proposed school will be co-located with an existing school;
- The relationship between the proposed charter school and any educational management company or similar parent entity that will be involved in the school's operation;
- The relationship of the proposed charter school and other District schools that are designed to serve students of a particular type or demographic character;
- Enrollment policies that may affect the access of neighborhood families to nearby schools;
- The existence of alternative arrangements, such as creating a performance school, a contract school, or redesigning an existing program that would address the circumstances underlying the proposed charter.

Recommendations

Janus International Academy

Janus International Academy would initially be a K-8 school with ultimate expansion to K-12. It would be open to all students but would place its primary emphasis on serving recent immigrants to Denver, especially those from Mexico, Africa and the Middle East. One feature of the school would be an 8-week required summer session in which students would receive intense English language immersion for 40 hours each week.

This application has a number of deficiencies. Salaries for teachers are set at a meager \$35,000 for the academic year and, although the applicant indicated teachers would receive additional pay for the two month summer session, such funds are not listed in the budget. The deductions for PERA and for PCOPS obligations as listed in the budget are not in the required amounts. The applicant indicated that each classroom would be staffed by two teachers – one regular and one ESL, but that substantial cost is not reflected in the budget. The school intends to become a pre-IB school, but staff development funds and other costs for such program are not budgeted. The applicant indicated that the school would attempt to hire teachers that already have IB training, but the budget does not reflect additional pay to compensate such staff for this specialized background.

Further, for the targeted population transportation to the school from throughout Denver would be vital to its success. However, the applicant indicated only as “hoping” that transportation could be provided by the District. Yet, nothing is budgeted to reimburse the District for that service and the applicant has not contacted the transportation department about the issue.

Also, of critical significance to the subcommittee, the District presently provides a well-designed educational program to immigrant students at Place Bridge Academy, as well as similar programs at Merrill and South High. We see no advantage in the proposed charter over these existing programs.

Accordingly, the subcommittee unanimously recommends that the charter application of Janus International Academy be denied.

Denver High School of Medical Science

This application proposes the creation of a high school designed to prepare its students for careers in the medical field to be located in southeast Denver. The school is planned to offer a full high school curriculum with a special focus on science and mathematics. The school would seek to guide its students to pursue, after completing their high school degree, a wide range of medical occupations ranging from insurance coding technicians to physicians and nurses. A key proponent of the application presently operates a private school that provides vocational training for a variety of medical careers.

The subcommittee has a number of concerns about this application. Of major significance, we are not convinced that the school, even if successfully formed, would offer a program that is substantially different than a student could obtain in any comprehensive Denver high school. Indeed, there are DPS schools, such as DSST or the new Math and Science Leadership Academy, that would provide a student with a superior preparation for a medical career.

Second, there appear to be major problems with the proposed first year budget. To achieve a positive final balance, it postulates obtaining grants and "Intervention Resources" in amounts that are far from certain. Also, its proposed salary for each teacher in the 2010-11 school year is a penurious \$36,000. Nor does the budget indicate the required 3% TABOR reserve.

Other items of concern arise from the absence of parental or community support for this type of school in southeast Denver and from a curriculum that lacks specificity.

For these reasons, the subcommittee unanimously recommends that the charter application of the Denver High School of Medical Science be denied.

Girls Athletic Leadership School

This application is for a 6-12 college preparatory school for girls that uses an experiential learning educational program with elements of wellness or health integrated throughout the curriculum.

This application represents a modified version of the application that was submitted to DPS last spring. At that time a majority of the subcommittee recommended that the application be approved; however, District staff opposed granting the application and the Board of Education denied the application as then formulated. As we did last spring, the subcommittee generally finds the proposal to be for a truly innovative and well researched program that has strong leadership. It has the potential to provide a desirable choice for some Denver families. Further, the concerns about the single sex nature of the school are addressed in the new application by a legal opinion, and, notably, the proposal now budgets for a starting teacher salary of \$43,000 – a significant increase over the amount budgeted last spring.

As a result, it is now the unanimous recommendation of the subcommittee that the charter application of the Girls Athletic Leadership School be granted.

Global Village Academy

The proposed Global Village Academy would be an elementary school designed with a primary focus on providing its students with the opportunity to become fluent in either Mandarin Chinese or Spanish. This language instruction would be provided through an immersion model that, in essence, replicates a school now operating in Aurora. This application essentially duplicates one that was presented to the District last spring. At that time the subcommittee did not make a recommendation either to approve or deny the application. Although generally supportive of the concept of providing intensive world language instruction to elementary students, members had some concern about the excessive amount of instructional time spent on the second language at the expense of instruction in English. Other members believed it would be more appropriate for the school merely to expand its operation in Aurora, instead of starting another school in Denver. Also, the inadequacy of budgeted teacher salaries (an average of \$37.5 K in 2010) was to at least one subcommittee member a fatal flaw in the application.

Upon further consideration, including especially the continued community interest in and support for the school, all members of the subcommittee, save one, now favor the granting of this charter. The one dissenter remains unconvinced that the school can fulfill its mission while providing inadequate compensation to its instructional staff.

Accordingly, the recommendation of the subcommittee is that the charter application of Global Village Academy be granted.

Independence High School

This application is for the establishment of an alternative education high school to be focused on students that are either drop-outs or likely to become so. The school would enroll approximately 200 students next fall and would provide a curriculum designed to prepare students to pursue a college education but would also emphasize vocational choices and work opportunities.

This application presented a dilemma to the subcommittee. We are acutely aware of the need for alternative educational programs that would address the unacceptably high drop-out rate in DPS, and this proposal, even though having some weaknesses, does show promise in that persons with strong backgrounds in dealing with the targeted population are involved. However, even if successful, this school would assist only a negligibly small percentage of the Denver youth who need an alternative educational opportunity.

District SIAC believes that the needs of the Denver community for alternative educational opportunities for secondary students are not well served by the present system of soliciting charter applications. At best, that process results in schools with a very small enrollment being located in a random and uncoordinated pattern throughout the city, whereas the large numbers of dropouts calls for a systematic district-wide approach. It is not sufficient to occasionally send one lifeboat to save a handful of teenagers when what is needed is full armada of schools and resources.

Accordingly, District SIAC strongly recommends that, instead of merely granting or denying this charter application, the Board and the District should form a task force consisting of the backers of the present application and others in the Denver community to design and implement a concerted comprehensive strategy to reduce the number of dropouts and improve graduation rates throughout DPS. That strategy could consist of systematically establishing schools such as the proposed Multiple Pathways Center, or like Independence High School, either as charters or contract schools, or could be directed at providing additional resources and programs in existing schools.

Additional Issues

In our previous report last June (see Appendix A), we noted issues that need resolution concerning the continued establishment of charter schools and their co-location with existing schools. We again urge that these issues be addressed by the Board and District. One of these issues we think is of particular importance to be resolved before the many new schools are opened in 2010.

With one exception, DPS charter schools admit children living anywhere in the District through a lottery process that provides no preference to families that live in the neighborhood near the charter. The result of this process is that, even if a highly

desirable charter school begins operation in a particular neighborhood, the families living there cannot be assured that their children will be able to attend that school. This is in stark contrast to families who live near traditional DPS schools and are therefore given preference in enrollment in those schools. We consider this result to be divisive and to be a cause of hostility towards the District. The difficulties presented by this situation will become more acute as families seek to secure enrollment of their children in the charter schools that are perceived to be high performing and that are scheduled to begin operation next year.

Hence, District SIAC recommends that the Board take needed action, either through seeking changes in the Charter School Act or through charter provisions with individual schools, to assure that families in geographic proximity to charter schools will be accorded enrollment preference in those schools.

Appendix A – Excerpt from District SIAC Report of June 2009

Beginning in the Spring of 2008, the Board and District embarked on a process of seeking to open new schools through a yearly RFP process that invited persons inside and outside the District to create diverse schools to be placed, at the administration's discretion, in locations throughout Denver. That policy may eventually prove to be successful in enhancing overall student achievement of DPS, but any definitive answer to that question is years away. What does seem totally apparent to the subcommittee, however, is that it would be extraordinarily unwise to continue year after year to add school after school to Denver neighborhoods without full public understanding and support of the ultimate vision that the District seeks to realize. Indeed, the RFP process is already beginning to appear to be some type of sorcerer's apprentice that continues blindly to dump new schools on astonished and recalcitrant neighborhoods.

District SIAC strongly recommends that the RFP process should be suspended until the Board and the District engage in a full, open, and genuine public discussion of the future of DPS. That discussion should address multiple issues, including the following:

- What does the Board foresee as the ultimate goal of this redesign of the District, i.e., in ten years, what percentage of DPS schools will be traditional neighborhood schools, charter schools, performance schools, and innovation schools;
- What specific policies and resources will be provided to support traditional neighborhood schools as they compete with new schools;
- How will the District maintain a consistent curriculum throughout the District so that students are not disadvantaged by moving from one neighborhood to another;
- What changes in transportation policies will be necessary to assure equitable access of all students to schools throughout the District;
- What enrollment policies should be required of new schools so as to assure that families living nearby will be able to enroll in any new schools added to their neighborhood;
- Given the long time line before most of the proposed new secondary schools will actually be enrolling student in upper grades, what assistance will be provided to schools serving the present generation of secondary students;
- What steps should the District take in order to evaluate and/or develop community support for proposed new schools *before* a new school is located in a neighborhood and what role should a lack of community support play in deciding to establish a new school in a given neighborhood.