

**Denver Public Schools**



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

**NOVEMBER 2011**

## **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 subcommittee. This report is the result of that process for Fall 2011. The persons who participated in a portion or all of the subcommittee work included the following:

Sherry Eastlund, District SIAC, Co-Chair  
Valentina Flores, Ed.D., District SIAC  
Mary Franza, District SIAC  
Dorolyn Griebenaw, District SIAC, Secretary  
Rita Montero, District SIAC Co-Chair  
Jacqui Shumway, District SIAC  
Jesse Sutherland, M.D., District SIAC

The subcommittee would like to thank Wendy Chi for her technical support in the review process.

After the subcommittee received the three charter school applications on October 6, it read and discussed each application prior to engaging in a series of interviews with all applicants. Following the interview, the merits of each application were discussed.

On October 25, the subcommittee presented District SIAC with a progress report including an overview of its recommendations for the new charter school applications. District SIAC adopted the resolution supporting the work of the subcommittee.

## **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 resulting in high levels of academic achievement. To meet this test, the school must 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 the recommendation of District SIAC. However, the District has embarked on a policy not only of continually adding multiple new schools of widely differing types of curricula, length of day, length of year and various grade levels co-existing with traditional neighborhood schools; but of also dictating the location of these new schools. Because of this change in policy, District SIAC has concluded that other factors are of vital significance in evaluating 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;
- 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.

## **New Charter School Recommendations**

### ***Four Winds Indigenous Charter School***

The application is for a 9-12 high school that utilizes a comprehensive, indigenous-based curriculum integrated with DPS and State Content Standards focused on Native American (First Peoples) students, college preparation, community engagement and leadership. The proposed school will initially be housed in a building on 5th and Bannock serving 60 students. The applicants have been working with the Native American community.

The District SIAC Subcommittee believes this school would provide an alternative opportunity for indigenous students. However, the subcommittee struggled with the idea of the spiritual basis of culture and its relation to religion. In addition, the proposed school leader has accepted other employment, which leads the committee to question the school's capacity for leadership.

There is also the concern that the educational program is not completely developed. Although the subcommittee was informed in the Four Winds Indigenous proposal that a holistic curriculum would be developed at a future date, it was difficult for this committee to make an informed judgment on an educational program of study for high school students, when only philosophical and social theoretical underpinnings for a curriculum were provided. In addition, the ELA program for English Language Learners appears to be insufficient.

**Therefore, it is the recommendation of the subcommittee that the application for Four Winds Indigenous Charter School be denied for the 2012 school year.**

***Monarch Montessori of Denver***

This application proposes to open a K-5 Montessori Elementary School in the old Samsonite Building in Far Northeast Denver. The applicants currently operate a private Montessori school in the same location that serves children six weeks of age to six years of age. The school will deliver an authentic Montessori program that includes a rigorous, hands-on curriculum, multi-aged groupings, self-paced studies and a research-based educational model. All teachers will be trained in Montessori instructional methods. The school proposes to open as a K-3 school and grow to be a K-5 school in three years. The application includes letters of support for the school.

The subcommittee believes that proposed Montessori educational program would provide an opportunity for the students and families in Far Northeast Denver. Although the application is requesting a K-5 charter, it became apparent during our interview with the applicants that they intend to operate both the charter school and the private school as the same entity, which would make accounting and employment issues easier to address. The subcommittee believes this arrangement would provide too many opportunities to co-mingle private and public funds and resources (a problem that the District has encountered a couple of times with charter and contract schools).

Recruitment and enrollment processes are additional concerns. The recruitment efforts need to be focused on Far Northeast communities outside of Stapleton, to ensure that the pool of applicants submitted for any lottery will reflect the diversity of Far Northeast Denver. Additionally, there is a concern about the Monarch Montessori requirement that all kindergarten students attend a full-day kindergarten program. In order for the program to be open to all students, kindergarten must be available to all kindergarten students at no charge.

**The subcommittee recommends the Monarch Montessori Charter School of Denver, the K-5 charter school, be denied unless or until the following conditions are met:**

- 1. The public K-5 charter school and the private Pre K school be operated as two completely separate entities;**
- 2. The applicants must submit a recruitment plan likely to ensure diversity, to be approved by the District, prior to opening; and**
- 3. The required full-day Kindergarten be made available to all Kindergarten students at no charge.**

***Sims Fayola International Academy***

This application is for a 6-12 college preparatory school for boys that uses an integrated, project-based learning instructional model. Sims Fayola will implement an International Studies curriculum starting in grade 6, a pre International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum in grades 9 and 10, and an IB curriculum in grades 11 and 12 that is research-based and proven to be effective. The applicants also have been holding

informational meetings in Far Northeast Denver and have letters of support from the community.

The subcommittee has concerns about the legality of the single-gender nature of this school. In addition, during the interview process the Sims Fayola applicants indicated that they would wait three years before submitting an application for IB status. The subcommittee feels strongly that Sims Fayola must apply for and be accepted to implement the official IB program for the appropriate grade levels. The IB application must be made expeditiously so the entering 9<sup>th</sup> grade class will have the opportunity to earn the IB diploma. Otherwise, parents and students will be misled into believing they will experience an authentic IB program. Although the subcommittee has concerns, the proposal appears to have an effective, well researched program, experienced leadership, and it has the potential to provide a desirable option for some Far Northeast Denver families.

**As a result, it is the recommendation of the subcommittee that the charter application of the Sims Fayola International Academy be approved for a three-year charter with the condition that the school apply immediately to become an official IB program so as not to mislead parents and students.**

## Additional Issues

First, the District SIAC has recommended over the years the approval of many charter school applications (proposed or successfully implemented) which were developed in accordance with rigorous educational models that are research-based and proven to be effective. However, Denver Public Schools needs to make a concerted effort to support, fund and improve traditional DPS schools. High achieving neighborhood schools give all students the opportunity to be academically successful and their families' reason to remain in the District. The School Performance Framework and the Unified Improvement Planning process should be used effectively to evaluate and improve both charter schools and traditional schools.

The District and the Board of Education must acknowledge, with the increase of charter, performance, innovation and contract schools, many neighborhood schools are suffering from reduced enrollment and reduced course offerings. Both should make a dedicated effort to support, fund and improve the programs in neighborhood schools to earn the trust and support of all Denver communities.

Second, many of the applicants indicate they will be hiring Teach for America teachers and others who may have little or no teaching/classroom experience. The committee cautions first-year charter schools not to hire many first-year teachers without classroom and direct instructional experience.

Finally, the committee reiterates the following previous concern: 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. This process 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.

The District needs to put a hold on opening new schools until there is a plan to resolve issues of equity across the District and can ensure that all schools receive the support they need. There must be a clear vision and path to improve all schools.

District SIAC strongly recommends that the RFP process 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 which are listed below.

- 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?

## District SIAC – Fall 2011 Charter School Report

- 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 so that students are not disadvantaged by moving from one school/neighborhood to another?
- While the District has implemented the Success Express in some areas, changes in transportation policies will be necessary to assure equitable access for all students to schools throughout the District.
- 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, while maintaining a neighborhood-school-of-assignment priority.
- Given the length of time before most of the proposed new secondary schools will be enrolling students in upper grades, there needs to be a detailed discussion regarding the assistance that will be provided to students left behind as part of the old school that do not have access to the new school program.
- Steps should be taken by the District to evaluate and/or develop community support for proposed new schools **before** a new school is located in a neighborhood. These steps should include community support as part of the decision making process when deciding to establish a new school in a given neighborhood.
- What appears to be an unwritten practice of pushing out academic and socially challenged students must be examined and addressed in all schools.