

Denver Public Schools



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

JUNE 2011

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 Spring 2011. The persons who participated in a portion or all of the subcommittee work included the following:

Sherry Eastlund, District SIAC, Co-Chairperson
Earleen Brown, District SIAC
Valentina Flores, ED.D. District SIAC
Dorolyn Griebenaw, District SIAC, Secretary
Jacqui Shumway, District SIAC
Dr. Jesse Sutherland, District SIAC

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

After the subcommittee received the nine charter school applications on April 18, it engaged in a series of meetings in which it interviewed all the applicants and discussed the merits of each application. That part of the process extended through May. Also, in late May, one applicant, Simple, withdrew its application.

On May 24, the subcommittee presented District SIAC with a progress report including an overview of its recommendations. 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, 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 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 and year and various child grade levels 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;
- 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

West Denver Prep (2 middle schools)

The applicant presently operates schools in Denver that are proving to be successful in producing high levels of student achievement. Indeed, some of these applicants' schools have outstanding levels of success with students, including many at-risk students and English Language Learners. This record of success has led to these applicants having parental support and has enhanced the standing of the District throughout Denver and beyond.

They have shown an impressive track record in DPS. Therefore, District SIAC believes that replication of these schools within the District would be of great value to the community.

Accordingly, District SIAC recommends that the application for two West Denver Prep Middle Schools be granted a three-year approval for the schools to begin operation in 2012.

West Denver Prep SMART (High School)

The applicant for this school is the same successful applicant described in the above section. The application intends to create a rigorous, relevant, liberal arts high school program, in Southwest Denver, based on high standards, structure and accountability. A strong, experienced leader has been identified and there is support from the community and current families in the existing West Denver Prep middle schools.

The committee did express some concern regarding the first come /first served enrollment policy which would likely give an unfair enrollment advantage to the West Denver Prep's middle schools students. This might result in few new students not being able to take advantage of the program.

Given the record of success, strong leadership and community support of the West Denver Prep network of schools, the District SIAC recommends the application for West Denver Prep SMART School be granted a three-year approval.

KIPP Sunshine Peak Elementary School

The applicants of this application also have a successful record of operating achieving schools. The application would establish a Southwest Denver, K-4, elementary school with a rigorous academic program based on high expectations, a backwards planning curriculum approach, data-driven instruction, a strong school culture and a longer school day and year. In addition, all students would learn Spanish. Granting this application would establish a K-12 KIPP feeder pattern to serve students in Southwest Denver where KIPP schools have been successful and have community support.

Some members of the committee have concerns about the length of the school day for K-2 students; the comments made during the interview that all students, including students of various Asian cultures, would be

bilingual/bicultural; and the elementary students being housed in the same building with high school students (Rishel).

Nevertheless, the District SIAC recommends the KIPP Sunshine Peak Elementary School application be approved for a three-year charter.

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 are 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, the subcommittee feels strongly that Sims Fayola must apply for and be accepted to implement official IB programs for the appropriate grade levels. 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.

Miller McCoy Academy for Mathematics and Business

The applicants are in the process of establishing a network of schools (an EMO) and propose to replicate a successful school that presently serves urban males in New Orleans, Louisiana. The school will use a single-gender approach based on brain-based research and an understanding of how boys learn. The school will implement a culture of scholarship, vision, heart, and innovation that will provide students with self-confidence and self-awareness.

The majority of subcommittee members believe that this program is realistic and will provide an additional educational approach for males and their families in Far Northeast Denver. Others have a concern that, at the time of our interview, all members of the founding board and the proposed charter school board were neither from Denver nor Colorado and there is little community support. In addition, some members question the strength of the ELA services for English Language Learners (ELL), as the New Orleans school does not have experience in meeting the needs of an ELL population. Finally, the subcommittee has concern about the legality of the single-gender nature of the school.

Nevertheless, the recommendation of the subcommittee is to approve the Miller McCoy Academy application for a three-year charter.

Elements Academy

The application is for an academically rigorous, Pre K-5 school with a focus on health and wellness in Far Northeast Denver. The applicants plan to partner with Rocky Mountain Center for Health Promotion and Education. The school will use a backwards planning approach to curriculum and will include many school reform elements such as data to drive instruction, a strong school culture (DREAM), blended learning, focus on math and literacy, a longer school day and school year and a 3 week summer staff development session. The application includes community support for the establishment of the charter school.

The subcommittee's main concern is the lack of strength of the ELA program and that the proposed approach might not be the most effective way to meet the needs of English Language Learners, especially in the early grades. There is also concern that the proposed principal does not have enough leadership experience, as a principal, to start and lead a brand new charter school. Additionally, there may be too much emphasis on the health and wellness curriculum, rather than academic achievement. However, one member believes that the proposed educational program could be effective and could provide another elementary option to students and families in Far Northeast Denver.

Accordingly, the District SIAC subcommittee recommends that the application for Elements Academy be denied.

Rocky Mountain Preparatory School

The application is for an academically rigorous, Pre K-8 school in Southwest Denver. The school will use a backwards planning approach to curriculum and will include many school reform elements such as data to drive instruction, a strong school culture (RESPECT), focus on math and literacy, a longer school day and school year, and a three-week summer staff development session. The application indicates that 280 intent to enroll forms and 38 letters were received which indicate community support for the establishment of the school.

While some members of the subcommittee believe the school will be successful, other members had concerns about the strength of the ELA services; a budget that is dependent on grants to provide salaries for the fellows (slated to be assistants with no mention of their training) who are responsible for a third of the blended educational program; and the partnership with Mile High Montessori that would locate and incorporate an existing preschool program as part of the school.

Thus, the District SIAC subcommittee is unable to make a recommendation as to approve or deny the Rocky Mountain Preparatory School application.

Additional Issues

First, the District SIAC has recommended the approval of many charter school applications (proposed or successfully implemented) that are based on rigorous educational models that are research-based and proven to be effective. The committee believes that these new schools will be high achieving and will provide students the opportunity to be successful. 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 that many neighborhood schools are suffering from reduced enrollment and reduced course offerings with the increase of charter, innovation and contract schools. Both should make a dedicated effort to support, fund and improve the programs in neighborhood schools to obtain the trust and support of all Denver communities.

Second, many of the applicants indicate they will be hiring Teach for America teachers which may or may not have any teaching/classroom experience. The committee cautions first-year charter schools not to hire many first-year teachers without classroom 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. 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 like that of

a sorcerer's apprentice that continues blindly to place new schools upon astonished neighborhoods.

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?
- 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 school/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?
- What will the various proposed enrollment zones do to families and neighborhoods?
- Given the length of time 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?