



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

ON

CHARTER SCHOOL APPLICATIONS

JUNE 5, 2012

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 spring 2012. The persons who participated in a portion or all of the subcommittee work include:

- Sherry Eastlund, District SIAC, Co-Chairperson
- Valentina Flores, ED.D., community member
- Roger Kilgore, community member
- Jacqui Shumway, DPS parent
- Dr. Jesse Sutherland, community member
- Kristen Tourangeau, DPS parent

After the subcommittee received the five charter school applications on April 9, 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 29, 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 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 District SIAC is whether adding the new school will strengthen the district as a whole over the long term and is it compatible with the efforts of other public schools in the community.

Five charter applications were reviewed. In addition, the District received six applications for new "performance" schools. A late request was for the District SIAC to

review these applications, but this was not possible because of the short time frame. In the future, it is the District SIAC's intention to review all new charter and performance applications.

New Charter School Recommendations

Academy 360

Academy 360 is a proposed charter school in the Far Northeast Region targeting grades Early Childhood Education (ECE) – 5. According to its application, the school would focus on health and wellness using an expeditionary learning model for a population that is 70-90% Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL), 10% Special Education (SPED), and 50% English Language Learners (ELL).

The board is composed of individuals with a diverse set of skills that are helpful for management, but has no apparent connection to or representation from the community it is proposing to serve.¹ The proposed school leader has two years of teaching experience and no experience in school leadership positions. However, the proposed leader is a fellow with Get Smart Schools. Both the applicant board and the proposed school leader acknowledged the need to “hire around” the school leader with a director of curriculum and instruction.

The subcommittee noted that the application did not address how the expeditionary learning model would be integrated with the school emphasis on health. The subcommittee also identified concerns about the integration of the expeditionary learning model with specific strategies for addressing the needs of English language learners (ELLs). In addition, there were few specifics of how the health and wellness focus would be integrated. The application did not show any partner commitments for the health clinic, the nurse/family partnership, the baby to college program, etc.

With respect to finances, an expense budget for a health clinic was provided, but no revenue sources were identified. During the interview, the applicant stated the school may serve primarily as a referring entity and that donations for potential partners are anticipated. The school budget relies on private grant income in year 0 and location in district-owned facilities. Contingency plans are not identified should one or both of these assumptions prove to be inaccurate.

It is the recommendation of District SIAC that the application for the Academy 360 charter be denied for the 2013 school year.

Downtown Denver Expeditionary School

The Downtown Denver Expeditionary School (DDES) is a proposed charter school in downtown Denver targeting grades K – 5. According to its application, the school would

¹ At the June 4, 2012 board special session, the applicant brought two new board members who were apparently from the Montbello community.

District SIAC – Spring 2012 Charter School Report

employ the expeditionary learning model with an emphasis on arts-integration and mathematics for a population that is 50% FRL, 10% SPED, and 25% ELL.

The board has strong ties to downtown and the proposed school leader appears to have the experience and skills needed to successfully develop and run a new school. There also appears to be strong community support for the school.

The budget for the school appears to be sound except for two important items. First, two non-DPS facility sites have been identified, but neither (including one for \$1/year) carry firm commitments from the land owners. Although the written application states that the applicant is not considering district-owned facilities, the applicant does wish to engage in such discussions. Contingency plans for locating the school are not apparent.

Second, the budget for year 0 includes \$3,000,000 in “contributions and donations.” The source of this “donation” is apparently from the District based on the sale of DPS land adjacent to the Children’s Museum. A contingency plan is not apparent should that money not be forthcoming. Furthermore, District SIAC believes it would be inappropriate for the District to “donate” capital sales proceeds.

Finally, it is not clear from the “Call for Quality Schools” that there is a need for a new elementary school in this area. Two turnaround schools (Gilpin and Greenlee) are nearby with available seats. Also nearby are Valdez Elementary and a new charter school, University Prep, both with available seats. Whittier and Polaris at Ebert are also a short distance away. Although the applicant is proposing an expeditionary learning model, which is not offered at these other schools, several other school options are available.

It is the recommendation of District SIAC that the application for the Downtown Denver Expeditionary School charter be approved for the 2013 school year if two conditions are satisfied: 1) the applicant can demonstrate a sound financial plan without the \$3,000,000 donation and 2) the District can demonstrate that it has specific plans to achieve high performance for the two nearby turnaround schools and that there is a need for the proposed school.

Highline Academy Northeast

Highline Academy Northeast is a proposed charter school in the Northeast Region targeting grades K – 8. According to its application, the school’s focus would be college prep for a population that is 50% FRL, 10% SPED, and 20% ELL. The application seeks to replicate the Highline Academy Charter School in southeast Denver.

The board is experienced in running the existing charter school in southeast Denver which is currently rated as a “green” school in the School Performance Framework (SPF). However, there appears to be limited connection between this board and the community that the replication proposes to serve. Since specific locations for the school have not been identified, little community support is evident.

The proposed leader for year 0 is an experienced principal having served in that role at the existing school. However, he will be transitioning to the role of Executive Director over both schools, leaving the school leader position for year 1 uncertain.

As a replication, the applicant proposes to use the same curriculum used at the existing school. The applicant notes that the existing school serves a diverse population of students from around the world. However, the student population goals for the new school are higher than the existing school: FRL (32% to 50%), SPED (6% to 10%), and ELL (11% to 20%). Depending on the ultimate location, the proposed goals may be on the low side, particularly for FRL and ELL. For this reason, District SIAC is concerned that use of the same curriculum and strategies for a different student population may not be a true replication.

Finally, the northeast region encompasses diverse neighborhoods in the near northeast and far northeast. More specificity is needed on the eventual location to not only evaluate potential for success, but also compatibility with other school choices.

It is the recommendation of District SIAC that the application for the Highline Academy Northeast charter be approved for the 2013 school year if the following conditions are satisfied: 1) the applicant clearly identifies a target location and demonstrates community support, 2) the applicant develops a plan for adapting their ELL curriculum for a different population than is being served at their existing school, and 3) the District demonstrates that introduction of the school in its new location is compatible with plans for excellence at the other schools in the vicinity.

Richard Milburn Academy

Richard Milburn Academy (RMA) is a proposed charter school in southwest Denver targeting grades 6-12. According to its application, the school's focus would be to serve at-risk underachieving middle and high school students for a population that is 85% FRL, 15% SPED, and 50% ELL. The application seeks to replicate high schools they operate in Florida and Texas. RMA does not operate middle schools; therefore, the middle school component cannot be considered a replication.

Representatives from the board who are in Florida and Texas have experience administering these schools. However, only one person from the Denver metropolitan area is currently identified on the local RMA board. Based on the application and interview, there is no other connection to Denver or the communities of the Southeast Region. No school leader has been identified.

It is also not clear if a board is currently in place with whom a charter contract could be signed. An EMO is contemplated for school administration functions. Milburn Online, a subsidiary of Nonpublic Educational Services, Inc. (NESI), is planned for the online component of the program.

RMA proposes to use DPS curriculum and blend classroom and online methods for delivering content. The proposal is not clear on the specifics of how this is accomplished, but RMA does understand its student population.

The application identified two potential locations (both in Lakewood, not Denver) for the school, but expressed interest in a DPS-owned facility. In addition, the proposed budget is incomplete with blanks in major categories such as instructional benefits and salaries for supporting staff. The latter may be planned for the EMO, but this is not clearly specified. It is not clear that the plan will be successful.

It is the recommendation of District SIAC that the application for the Richard Milburn Academy charter be denied for the 2013 school year. However, RMA does address a clear need for addressing the at-risk population in Denver and identified by the Call for New Quality Schools. The District may wish to consider entering into a contract school relationship that provides the District with more flexibility to define a productive relationship with this provider. However, the District is cautioned that RMA has not previously served a middle school population.

West Denver Prep SMART Northwest

West Denver Prep SMART (Science, Math, Art) Northwest is a proposed charter school in northwest Denver targeting grades 9-12. According to its application, the school's focus would be college prep for a population that is 92% FRL, 10% SPED, and 45% ELL. The application seeks to replicate its existing schools; however, the existing schools are all middle schools. West Denver Prep (WDP) will open its first high school in the fall of 2012.²

WDP operates several successful middle schools in Denver and has a strong board providing experienced oversight. Although, WDP has not yet operated a high school, it is reasonable to expect that the leadership and organizational strength has a good probability of success.

An educational program is nearing completion for the first WDP high school anticipated to open in fall of 2012. The experience at this school will be informative to the development of curriculum for the northwest school.

The Call for New Quality Schools does not identify a need for 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 application notes that location in a DPS-owned facility is desired and the budget does not allow for the contingency that it is not located in a DPS-owned facility.

District SIAC is aware that the District is facilitating meetings about the placement of this proposed charter school at the North High campus. Not only does this process presume granting of the charter, but it does not first ask the question "What does the North High community need to thrive and how do we achieve that?" In addition, what is the research-based evidence that co-location of two schools serving the same age cohort in the same building provides a net benefit to the District as a whole?

It is the recommendation of District SIAC that the application for the West Denver Prep SMART Northwest charter be approved for the 2013 school year if the following conditions are satisfied: 1) the District demonstrates that it has specific plans to achieve high performance in the existing seats available in northwest Denver and that another high school in the vicinity is needed and is supportive of those plans, 2) through a

² Per Alyssa Whitehead-Bust at the board special session June 4, 2012, West Denver Prep was required to submit a standard, rather than replication, application because no data were yet available on the West Denver Prep high school scheduled to open fall 2012.

process of community engagement, the District demonstrates broad community support for the new school, and 3) the District acknowledges that this is not a replication as the operator will not have an operating high school until the fall of 2012, and takes the necessary steps, including potentially postponing approval, to verify that the educational program is tested and research-based.

Other Recommendations

The board and District have a responsibility to over 80,000 students enrolled in various programs throughout the city. In accordance with our recommendations for individual applications as described above, District SIAC believes that some of these school applications could be a net positive for our students. District SIAC has also identified concerns that some applications, if poorly implemented, could result in a net negative for our students.

Beginning in the 2008/2009 school year through the upcoming 2012/2013 school year, the District will have opened 43 new schools: 22 charter, 15 performance/innovation, 4 magnet, and 2 district-run. That is more than 8 schools per year. The two district-run schools, Trevista and Place Bridge, were opened in the 2008/2009 school year. Trevista is now undergoing a second turnaround process.

The practice of not opening district-run schools raises a concern that the District has the self-perception that it has lost the capability to effectively identify community needs, develop and implement relevant educational programs, hire and retain school leaders, and develop a cadre of motivated teachers that are effectively supported in their craft and treated as professionals. This concern extends to the District's confidence around its ongoing commitments to existing district-run schools.

District SIAC also recognizes that there is understandable excitement and optimism about new buildings, new programs, and new schools. However, what was once new will become old and the issue of sustainability becomes more important. How the District manages its existing district-run schools is an important indicator to how capable the District is in creating excellent sustainable schools.

Because of these concerns, District SIAC recommends that the board consider whether "district-run" is a positive term among administration, principals, teachers, parents, and the community. District SIAC recommends that the board take the necessary steps to make "excellence" and "district-run" synonymous.

Another recommendation of District SIAC is to improve the review and decision process for new schools. In the current cycle, the Call for New Quality Schools was issued on January 19th of this year. Applications were due April 9 and interviews by DPS staff were conducted in early May. District SIAC understands that public comment is scheduled for June 14 and the board is scheduled to vote on the applications on June 21. This is a condensed time frame.

District SIAC believes that community engagement, featuring active listening on the part of the District, would be beneficial for: 1) the process of developing the Call for New Quality Schools, 2) the evaluation of the need for specific applicants in each community, and 3) the integration of public comment into the outcome. District SIAC does not

District SIAC – Spring 2012 Charter School Report

believe that a single public comment period at district headquarters one week before the board makes its decisions is consistent with the intent of the charter school law (22-30.5-107(2)) for the board to “hold community meetings in the affected areas or the entire school district to obtain information” to assist the board in making its decision. District SIAC recommends a more open and thorough process. Creating and sustaining high quality schools is a marathon, not a sprint.

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