



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

**JUNE 2010**

## **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 Spring 2010 new school application process. The persons who participated in a portion or all of the subcommittee work included the following:

Sherry Eastlund, Subcommittee Co-Chairperson  
Paula Ortlieb, DPS Parent, Chair of District SIAC, Subcommittee Co-Chairperson  
Jorge Merida, Community, DPS Parent and Grandparent  
Marie Meyer, DPS Parent  
Loralie Cole, DPS Teacher and Parent  
Jacqui Shumway, DPS Parent  
Wendy Chi, Community, Graduate Student CU-Boulder  
Leo Smith, Community  
Dr. Jesse Sutherland, Community

After the subcommittee members received the six charter school applications on April 16, they engaged in a series of meetings in which they interviewed the applicants and discussed the merits of each application. That part of the process extended through most of May. Besides those meetings several members of the subcommittee attended the meetings at which the applicants presented their proposals to the community. (During this process one applicant, KIPP, withdrew its proposal.)

On May 25, the subcommittee presented District SIAC with a progress report including an overview of its recommendations.

We would like to thank Carol Mehesy of the Office of School Reform and Innovation for providing the subcommittee with information and assistance during this review process.

## **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, under the process now being followed by the

Administration, 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 educational network 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 and transportation 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**

### ***University Preparatory Academy***

This application is for a K-5 elementary school in northeast Denver. The school would initially enroll 108 students in Kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade and add one grade each year until reaching full enrollment of 324 students. The school day and school year would be longer than that of traditional DPS schools. A pervasive characteristic of the school would be its emphasis on guiding and encouraging its students to be focused on achieving a college education.

The subcommittee was impressed with this application. It presented a comprehensive, thorough, and realistic plan for creating a high quality school. The applicant has made substantive efforts to inform and engage the community, and the governing board appears to have both the commitment and the expertise needed to implement the proposed school.

Members of the subcommittee had few concerns about this application. One issue that was raised was whether the new school would be too reliant upon one individual, but the governing board seems well prepared to address that matter. Some concern was also raised about the continuing budgetary reliance on a significant amount of grant funding (\$125,000 per year). However, the application

does contain contingency plans to address how a shortfall in such funding would be handled.

**The subcommittee unanimously recommends that the charter application of University Preparatory Academy be granted.**

### ***Janus International Academy***

Janus International Academy would begin as an ECE-8 school primarily designed to enroll immigrants, English Language Learners, and at-risk students. The school would add grades each year until it included grades ECE-12. Although a specific location has not been selected, the applicant is exploring the possibility of using the Union Baptist Church facility in northeast Denver. For its ELL students it would use an English immersion instructional model. Beyond its basic curriculum the applicant would seek to adapt the school to the desires of the community by including such elements as a pre-IB program. The applicant would guarantee a 95% graduation rate and would commit to forfeit its charter if that guarantee were not met by the end of its 5-year charter.

Although appreciative of the long experience and commitment of the persons submitting this application, the subcommittee finds many serious deficiencies in this application. Among these are the following:

- The applicant plans to provide DPS transportation for its students but has not contacted the transportation department and has not budgeted for the cost of such services.
- The yearly salary budgeted for teachers in the 2011-12 school year is only \$35,000 – clearly inadequate for the quality of staff that will be needed by this school.
- The applicant indicated that the Elbert County Charter School (aka Legacy Academy) is a model for the proposed school, but that school enrolls few minority or at-risk students and uses a Core Knowledge curriculum totally dissimilar from this proposal.
- Many facets of the school programs remain to be determined by seeking input from the community but, except for some discussions with one church (Union Baptist), we find little evidence of outreach to, or support by, the community.

**These concerns and others lead the subcommittee unanimously to recommend that the application of Janus International Academy be denied.**

### ***Independence High School***

This application is for an alternative school that would enroll 200 students age 14-18 who have either dropped out of high school or are substantially deficient in completing the coursework necessary for graduation. The students would be offered 5 “pathways” of achievement that would consist of: Fine Arts, Technology, Skilled Trades, Health Sciences, and Liberal Arts. As part of the vocational education provided, the school would have partnerships with unions and businesses so that the students could participate in the apprentice programs offered by such entities. The school would be located in Far Northeast Denver.

This application proposes a school which, if successfully implemented, would be a valuable addition to DPS and would be of assistance to a segment of students who presently have few opportunities to complete their high school education. Also, the subcommittee is convinced that the persons participating in the formation of this school have the commitment, experience, and expertise that are needed to work with these kinds of young people who have difficulty in a traditional school.

Further, the applicant’s recognition that this school’s enrollees may be more successful in pursuing a vocation, rather than a college degree, is a concept we support. We commend the applicant for seeking to provide this option within DPS.

Some subcommittee members are concerned that the school’s plan to form educational partnerships with unions and business is not yet fully realized. But, one such partnership with the carpenters union is in place, and we believe it likely that others will be forthcoming.

Finally, we approve of the fact that the proposed budget is premised almost entirely upon general fund revenue, rather than relying on the uncertainty of grants or donations.

One minor concern is worth noting. Presently, the proposed school is to be located in a building in northeast Denver. Given that the students who could benefit from this school live in all parts of the city, we believe it would be better if a more central location for the school could be found.

**With one dissenting vote, the subcommittee recommends that the charter application of Independence High School be granted.**

The dissenting member is concerned that the initial proposed average salary for teachers of \$35,000 per year is inadequate to attract and retain the effective teaching staff that will be a necessity for the school to be successful.

## ***Praxis Academy***

This proposal is for an alternative education secondary school submitted by Teach and Lead, LLC, with the intent that the school be available to serve the students of P.S.1 when that school's charter terminates in the Spring of 2011. The school would be focused on students with special needs and would hope to have at least 60% of its enrollees meeting such criteria. The school would like to co-locate with the schools presently in the West High facility.

District SIAC is acutely aware that the students displaced by the termination of the charter of P.S.1 will need to be aided in their transition to a new school. However, for a number of reasons, the members of the subcommittee, with one exception, are not convinced that this proposed school should be established for such students.

The first area of concern for us lies in the relationship of the school with the educational entity, Teach and Lead, LLC. To us, that relationship is not clearly defined, either as to management and financial matters or as to the extent of Teach and Lead's involvement in the governance of the school. Further, we understand the mission of Teach and Lead to be in assisting teachers and principals to obtain appropriate licensure – an expertise that is far different from that needed to operate a school.

We also note budgetary issues that give us pause. For example, besides contributions to PERA and PCOPs, the budget makes no provision for health insurance or other benefits for employees.

Nor do we believe that it would be proper for either the school or for DPS to have an alternative school co-located at the West High facility where there are already two schools in that building. Not only would it make the operating logistics for the three schools extraordinarily complex, but it also could result in the Praxis students being stigmatized by students in the other schools.

The above issues are all troubling, but the primary reason for our decision not to support this school lies in our concern that the school would be a re-creation of P.S.1. The proposed school would be focused on serving the same students, would have a similar culture, and staff from P.S.1 could be rehired as employees of Praxis. The Board's decision to close P.S.1 had District SIAC's full support, and we believe that to reincarnate that failed school would lead to the Board eventually having to make the same decision again.

**By a vote of all members but one, the subcommittee recommends that the charter application of the Praxis School be denied.**

The one dissenting member sees this school as serving special needs students who are not served well in other DPS schools, and believes that its potential in fulfilling that role outweighs any of the issues noted above.

Our recommendation, if followed by the Board, would leave unresolved the issue of providing an appropriate education to the students displaced by the closure of P.S.1. In our view, the District has a duty to do more for such students than merely issue an RFP that essentially requests members of the community to step forward with a plan to assist these students. In our Fall 2009 report concerning charter renewals, we recommended that the District establish a Multiple Pathways Center at a facility accessible by these students and to give them enrollment priority. We again make that recommendation.

### ***SOAR Schools II and III***

This application is for the opening of two K-5 charter schools, one in 2011 and one in 2012. They would be replications of the SOAR school already approved by the Board that will be opening on the Evie Dennis campus in Fall 2010. The proposed schools would also be located in Far Northeast Denver and would form a network of individually governed schools that would have a common vision and culture and that could share certain costs, such as staff development expenses. The schools would be modeled on the Future Leaders Institute that has proven to be a successful school in New York.

This application generated many issues and concerns among subcommittee members. One of our major concerns is that this application seeks to replicate a school before that school has opened and, thus, before it has a record in Denver upon which to judge its success. The SOAR school approved by the Board last year is based on a successful school in New York, but no one yet knows whether it will be similarly successful in Denver with different demographics and a different environment. Under such circumstances, many subcommittee members feel it is too risky to approve two additional schools at this time, and that to place them all in the same area of the city compounds that risk.

Another issue arises from the enrollment policies generally followed by charter schools. Those policies usually call for a lottery of prospective students who may apply from anywhere in the district. As a result, families living in close proximity to the school have no priority in enrollment. To place three such schools in close proximity may have the potential to alienate the surrounding neighborhood families when their children might not be able to enroll. That hostility could be further aggravated by the applicant's plan not to enroll new students after the October 1 count date. A corollary issue concerns what policies will be followed in regard to transportation for these schools and whether these three charter schools would



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receive additional subsidies for transportation costs when other charter schools must purchase such services from the District.

When the already approved school and the two proposed here are in operation they will form a network of schools having the same vision and culture. The governance of, and the relationship between, those schools is not clearly defined and that ambiguity causes concern to several subcommittee members. Will these three schools ultimately be a de facto mini-district within DPS? Will the establishment of an oversight governing board for the three schools impinge on the independence of the schools or result in cumbersome layers of bureaucracy that interfere with the operation of the schools? These are all questions that many subcommittee members feel should be answered before any additional SOAR schools are approved.

**Because of these concerns and others, the subcommittee, with one dissenting vote, recommends that the charter application for SOAR II and SOAR III be denied.**

The one member of the subcommittee who would recommend approval views this application as presenting the District with an extraordinary opportunity to make significant progress on a long-standing problem in far northeast Denver.