

Office of the Superintendent of Schools
MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Rockville, Maryland

June 8, 2010

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Education
From: Jerry D. Weast, Superintendent of Schools
Subject: Charter Schools Application Recommendations

Executive Summary

Montgomery County Board of Education Policy CFB, *Public Charter Schools*, and accompanying Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) Regulation CFB-RA, *Public Charter Schools*, clearly delineate the process for reviewing applications seeking to open a public charter school. The process provides for an in-depth review by a wide range of stakeholders (Attachment A). MCPS received two applications requesting approval to open charter schools in Montgomery County (Attachments B–C). Both applications were reviewed in accordance with Board of Education policy and MCPS regulation and the review panel has recommended that neither application be approved. After careful consideration of the information provided, I concur with their evaluation of the applications and recommend that the Board of Education not approve the applications.

Background

MCPS received two charter school applications on Monday, March 1, 2010, the deadline for receipt of completed charter school applications. The applicants are Global Garden, a proposed Grade K–8 International Baccalaureate (IB) school with a foreign language program component, and Crossway Community Montessori, a proposed Grade K–6 Montessori school with wraparound services. In accordance with Board of Education Policy CFB, the first step conducted in the application review process was the technical review, a nonsubstantive review that ensures that the applications are complete prior to the substantive review. Both applications were deemed complete and moved to the next phase of the process.

In the second phase of the process, an extensive review and examination of the applications, the applications were reviewed by a panel consisting of internal and external representatives. The internal representatives included staff members from a broad spectrum of offices including, among others, the offices of School Performance, Special Education and Student Services,

Curriculum and Instructional Programs; and the Chief Operating Officer as well as all three MCPS employee associations. The external panel, comprised of representatives from the Montgomery County Council of Parent Teacher Associations, the community, higher education institutions, and business enterprises, reviewed the applications and participated in developing the full panel's recommendations.

On Thursday, May 6, 2010, each applicant was invited to participate in a dialogue and respond to questions from the panelists based on the application review. The applicants were provided the opportunity to give both opening and closing statements. Both applicants participated in the question and answer session. Panelists sought clarification on a range of issues and the applicants amplified points for the panel to consider. Subsequent to the question and answer session, the applicants were given the opportunity to submit additional information based on the questions raised by the panelists. Both applicants submitted additional information, which was shared with the review panel (Attachments D–E).

The panel reconvened on Friday, May 14, 2010, to discuss the reviews and reached a consensus on the recommendations regarding the applications. After considering all of the information supplied by the applicants, the panel recommended that the Board of Education approve neither of the applications.

Global Garden Proposal

The application for the Global Garden Public Charter School (GGPCS) describes an inquiry-based IB Primary Years Programme (PYP). The applicants propose to create a joyful educational environment where the work is “real and meaningful to everyone in the school community.” The mission statement reads: “Global Garden Public Charter School will offer children and their families a joyful educational experience rooted in responsive relationships. Our staff will cultivate each child’s natural curiosity through a vigorous International Baccalaureate curriculum that emphasizes inquiry, discovery, and authenticity. Our students will grow into active, creative participants in the life of the school and in the local and global communities.” The proposal details the aspiration to create a school that “cultivates wisdom enough to understand the worth of our shared address: Earth.” The applicants also propose to teach Spanish through an immersion approach in Grades K–5 and Arabic starting in Grade 6. The applicants state that the offering of Arabic is intertwined with their view of creating “global citizens.” They propose both an extended school day and a year-round calendar.

The governing board is comprised of 11 members. The president, Ms. Janet E. Sluzenski, is currently a school counselor at Lucy V. Barnsley Elementary School. The vice president, Ms. Heidi Mordhorst, is currently a reading initiative teacher at Garrett Park Elementary School. The applicants lay out how the board of directors will govern and supervise the principal who would be responsible for the daily operations of the school. If the application is approved, some of the founding board of directors would resign from the founding board and seek employment with GGPCS.

The GGPCS applicants have identified two possible facilities. One facility is located at 4928 Wyaconda Road in Rockville, and the second is at 10800 Lockwood Drive in Silver Spring. The financial plan is predicated upon the 98 percent per pupil allocation from MCPS. Global Garden has been awarded a Public Charter School Program Grant from the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) in the amount of \$550,000 pending approval of their charter application. The application also describes the applicant's intent to engage in fundraising to supplement the per pupil allotment.

The enrollment process for GGPCS aligns their admissions to the MCPS timeline for the language immersion programs and will utilize a lottery if there are more requests for admission than available slots. The applicant anticipates that the student body would reflect the diversity of Montgomery County.

Issues Raised

Panelists raised a number of concerns about the GGPCS applicant. In particular, there were significant concerns raised regarding the academic design proposed by the GGPCS applicants, including several foundational philosophical concerns. First, the philosophical pretext of the GGPCS *flow*, which is emphasized as an overriding goal of the program, may be difficult to execute well. Flow is described as "a state of great absorption, engagement, competence and fulfillment." The concept of flow is difficult for individuals to achieve or maintain on a regular basis, according to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the author of the best-selling book, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Applying *flow* to education may be even more difficult to achieve. The concept of school as "fun" pervades the application. However, learning theorists and practitioners repeatedly discount the concept of learning as fun, stating that learning happens when individuals are mildly frustrated by an intriguing problem they are solving or by a complex set of skills they are trying to master. Pleasure, to be sure, may be found in hard work; sometimes this is joyful or fun, sometimes the pleasure derives from having mastered something difficult, from accomplishment. MCPS is committed to engagement as a strategy for increasing student achievement; however, engagement can look like "fun," or it can look like effort, concentration, and puzzlement. Panelists raised concerns that the application implies that MCPS does not "cultivate each child's natural curiosity through a vigorous curriculum that emphasizes inquiry, discovery, and authenticity," and they questioned that assumption.

The academic design of GGPCS presents additional deficiencies. A listing of standards does not provide adequate detail about grade level or course expectations in each discipline. The Maryland State Curriculum standards listed in the application are *content standards*, which are broad statements that do not change across grade levels. *Performance standards* or indicators and objectives provide specificity that is missing in the GGPCS academic design. It is impossible to determine in the GGPCS design the progression of concepts and processes that will be taught and learned from one grade to the next. Additionally, no mention is made of the upcoming implementation of Common Core State Standards in Maryland and their implications for the State Curriculum and subsequently for the school's academic design.

The plan for world language instruction evidences a significant misunderstanding of how individuals learn a nonnative language and reveals, at best, unfamiliarity with the language acquisition needs of English language learners. Multiple models for foreign language instruction are confused in the GGPCS document with models to support English language learners, to the degree that non-synonymous terms are used interchangeably—full or partial immersion, dual language, and bilingual instruction—with little indication that the design team understands the terms used or their implications for students, scheduling, staffing, and resources.

Foreign language immersion, for instance, is a highly complex strategy that is best used with students who are not native speakers of the target language. Foreign language immersion typically involves teaching other disciplines in the target language and students usually are immersed in the target language for all or most of their instructional day. The model requires translated instructional materials in science, social studies, fine arts, and reading, and requires teachers who are fluent in the target language and certified and trained to teach many contents.

Additionally, pairing elementary school instruction in Spanish, a language using the same alphabet as English, with middle school instruction in Arabic, a complex language using a different alphabet, further complicates the plan for foreign language instruction. While students are better served by studying a language for seven or more years to reach proficient levels, if they change languages before reaching proficiency, it is better to stay within a language group of similar sound, symbol, and syntactic structures. The GGPCS plan for world languages also runs counter to the philosophy of the IB Programme, which emphasizes an extended period of language study to achieve full proficiency in one language.

The integrated approach to instruction, with two 90-minute inquiry workshops in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) or humanities, may strengthen or weaken teaching and learning in all contents. This is a high risk strategy. If the integration is successful, all disciplines will be strengthened, with the curriculum reinforcing concepts and helping students make connections across subjects. Conversely, if the integration is flawed, the consequences include a significant dilution of core curriculum, with a lack of depth and inconsistent building of foundational skills. In order to ensure the former, the academic design of a school must include information about how specific curricular outcomes will be accomplished in science and social studies, with direct instruction in content and skills. Similarly, the fine arts section of the GGPCS document outlines a plan for integrating the arts—visual and performing (a grouping of music, dance, and theatre) and for integrating the arts with other disciplines. Mention is made of the arts reinforcing other contents. A clear plan is needed for direct instruction and clear competencies in art and music primarily, as well as dance and theatre. The arts should not be used simply to reinforce other content areas.

Several other aspects of the academic design also caused concern. Both the reading and mathematics sections of the GGPCS document refer to drilling toward mastery, a strategy proven by research to be ineffective. Drilling, or rote memorization of low-level and discrete facts, also counters the concept of *flow*. Additionally, the academic design leaves many questions unanswered about specific aspects of writing goals and instruction. While writing workshops

can be an effective strategy when used with other instructional approaches, a cohesive plan is missing that would provide necessary detail about which writing concepts, skills, processes, purposes, and elements will be addressed when and in what manner. The academic design also does not provide a writing assessment plan or writing performance criteria. The GGPCS design does not address the Maryland School Assessment (MSA) in science as an accountability measure and the plan does not acknowledge the assessment limits in the Maryland science state curriculum. The plan to use MCPS science kits in a rearranged sequence puts students at risk of missing critical content and process skills assessed on the MSA and does not consider material availability, space limitations, and staffing constraints related to building kits out of order. Additional costs to GGPCS may be incurred in a contract with MCPS for science kits built out of order.

GGPCS intends to become an authorized IB PYP school, using its framework to design a program of inquiry, and sharing the mission of the IB Organization, which emphasizes academic excellence. A specific objective of GGPCS is that in its first year of operation, the school will make substantial progress toward authorization as an IB World School. The performance indicator is that by July 12, 2012, the summer after the school's first year of operation, teachers will have completed required training and the Program of Inquiry will have been written and implemented under the guidance of the IB PYP. Typically, the task of developing a program of inquiry is one a whole school staff takes responsibility for and it necessitates a sustained collaborative process. IB documentation describes this process as lengthy, requiring many hours of collaboration and discussion, and recommends using existing curriculum documents to assist in the development. The IB organization timeline indicates that the process of applying for authorization, developing appropriate curriculum, and identifying high-quality resources (both expensive and time-consuming) is a three-and-a-half-year process. Most often, schools that engage in the PYP authorization process transition from their current curricular scope and sequence to the PYP program of inquiry. GGPCS would have no existing curriculum and would be relying on Maryland State standards as the framework for developing the PYP skeleton program and units of inquiry. Additionally, with no currently developed curriculum, it is not clear what teachers will be using in their first year as curriculum. Further, it is not apparent how and when teachers will conduct the lengthy collaborative process required for curriculum development, while maintaining their teaching responsibilities and acclimating to an extended day and restructured academic calendar. GGPCS directs little of its ongoing operating budget to training, so it is unclear if there would be the skills in place for educators to carry out this ambitious agenda.

In addition to these concerns, there were generalized concerns about GGPCS' plans for providing differentiated instruction to a diverse set of learners. It was not clear how they would schedule, group, and differentiate for students at any of the grade levels. This deficiency is magnified at the middle school level, where it is proposed that there be one class section at the 7th grade level (continuing to the 8th grade level the following year) and that all students be introduced to Arabic. Necessary flexibility in scheduling is not apparent in the design and there is no specific plan for differentiated instruction to meet students' varied needs and levels.

Beyond the significant concerns with the academic design, panelists raised a number of concerns with other aspects of the application. These concerns spanned a range of areas and included issues related to governance, facilities, and operations. For example, there was significant apprehension about the explicit intention for founding directors to participate in hiring the principal and then resign and seek employment with that same principal. Panelists also were concerned about the lack of special education teachers, paraeducators, and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teachers in the staffing plan. Yet another example of the concerns raised were the quantity and quality of professional development opportunities and trainings that will be available to staff members, and the proposal that GGPCS contract out transportation services if unable to contract with MCPS.

Concerns also were raised about the proposed facilities. Of the two possible sites identified to house its program, neither is large enough to be able to house the number of students envisioned in the program. Program standards for an MCPS program with a comparable number of students would require approximately 25 percent more gross square feet than the applicant has identified in its application. In addition, it is unclear how the applicant would configure the space to assure that Grades pre-K–1 could be provided grade-level access to meet life safety code requirements. Providing suitable playground and multipurpose room kitchen space will be especially challenging. While the applicant has indicated that it would be in a better position to secure a lease with an approved charter, its idea of a suitable facility will need to be adjusted to provide adequate space.

Crossway Community Montessori's Proposal

Crossway Inc. is a nonprofit organization that has been operating in Montgomery County for 20 years. It is located on 14 acres in Kensington. The organization currently operates the following: The Family Leadership School, a residential life skills program for women and their children who have experienced trauma, family violence, and financial insecurity; The Lifelong Learning Center, a facility that houses work on academics, youth development, family support, health and social services, and community development; and The Crossway Montessori Children's Program, an early intervention center for children ages three months to six years. Before and after school care, summer programs, garden literacy, and evening child care twice a week are among the services offered.

In addition to the Montessori aspect, Crossway touts a wraparound approach that promotes the concept of whole family care. This results in staff members having responsibility in more than one program; for example, the school principal also has responsibilities in the residential program. The goal is to break down silos of funding and adopt a holistic family approach that integrates resources and services to meet the needs of individual families.

The Crossway Montessori Charter School (CMCS) proposes to open a program serving Grades pre-K–3 in the first year and expanding to Grades 4–6 in year four. The effort is led by Ms. Kathleen Guinan, chief executive officer, and Ms. Ann Byrne, deputy director. Ms. Byrne currently heads the Montessori school on campus. The CMCS would be located in a

former elementary school located on Crossway's property at 3015 Upton Drive, Kensington, Maryland.

The proposal is predicated upon the Montessori concept: "This approach has as its centerpiece an intense focus on the academic and social growth of individual children." This approach promotes collaboration and the sharing of ideas between students, and allows them to be active participants in the direction of their efforts within a set criterion. The applicants have expressed the belief that the Montessori approach has significant benefits for economically disadvantaged students. They note that the Montessori approach was first "applied to address the unique needs of students living in poverty who also have a variety of educational challenges." The applicants state that "[w]e are especially interested in providing a Montessori educational option for economically disadvantaged students and families."

The proposed Board of Directors for CCMS would be the founding group of Crossway Community Inc. There currently is a structure in place providing governance for Crossway Community Inc.; this role would be expanded and refined to encompass CCMS. The applicants propose an Advisory Council to assist the Board of Directors. CCMS has been awarded a Public Charter School Program Grant from MSDE in the amount of \$550,000, pending approval of their charter application. The application also describes the applicants intent to engage in fundraising to supplement the per pupil allotment.

CCMS' application purposes the use of a stratified lottery if there is greater demand for admission than there are seats. Under the stratified lottery, priority would be given to low income families for up to 50 percent of the spaces in each grade. CCMS also would like to give priority to neighborhood students who live within one mile of the school. CCMS also proposes a mandatory "Ready, Set, Go" six-week preparation class over the summer for all entering students.

Issues Raised

The review panel raised myriad concerns about the CCMS application. These concerns arose in all areas but were particularly acute in the areas of operations and finance. One of the most compelling areas of concern raised by the review panelists regarding the Crossway Community Montessori surrounded questions of comingling of public and private funds. The integrated nature of Crossway that allocates resources, including staff members, throughout the organization, blurs the boundaries. It is unclear how, given such an integrated model, the organization would be able to ensure that funds allocated for the Community Montessori School would be sufficiently segregated from the rest of the organization. It would be difficult, if not impossible, for an MCPS audit to confirm that all funds would be properly segregated. The panelists expressed concern that there would be a public charter school essentially housed within a private school. This dilemma is particularly acute in regard to the proposed pre-K program. Under current state guidelines students must be income eligible to participate in free pre-K services. The proposal does not indicate, nor were the applicants able to clearly articulate, how the state guidelines requiring income eligibility would align with the school's admission process

for kindergarten. It was unclear that the applicant had well designed internal controls to prevent the expenditure of public funds for their private (nonprofit) enterprise.

In addition to concerns about the organization's ability to segregate funds, there also was concern about the proposal's explanation of the recruitment, evaluation, and training of teachers. Although Crossway's current staff is Montessori trained, they lack state certification. The application promises teachers will take courses toward certification; however, there is no timeline or penalty articulated. Other operational concerns focused on the lack of detail in the food service and transportation plans. In particular, there are no specifics about geographic areas eligible for transportation. In addition, the transportation plan appears to require additional funds that are not reflected in the proposed budget. Also there was concern about the applicant's ability to meet the needs of the upper elementary school aged students because of their lack of experience with that age group. It was unclear if the applicant had a firm understanding of the curricular rigor required for students to be able to seamlessly transition to an MCPS school upon completing the CCMS program.

Additionally, the applicant currently operates programs in a closed school facility. The size of the facility appears to be adequate to provide its current residential, child care, and kindergarten programs; however, it does not appear that there would be enough space to continue the current programs and add the full complement of students identified in the application. Program standards for an MCPS program with a comparable number of students would require more gross square foot capacity than the applicant has identified in its application. While the applicant has demonstrated expertise in managing its facility, it is not clear how an expansion of the current facility could be accomplished given the facility's constraints. Providing all of the spaces identified in the application will be a challenge.

Recommendations

On Friday, May 14, 2010, the review panel convened to consider information supplied through the review process, the applications, the information provided through the question and answer session, and the supplemental materials supplied by applicants in response to the question and answer session. In a dynamic session, panelists discussed in great detail the strengths and areas of concern with the applications. The panel was able to reach consensus on the application for Global Garden, each member citing numerous concerns with among other things, the academic design and applicant's ability to deliver on the panoply of promises contained in the application. The lack of planning for professional development particularly given the nature of professional training required in a PYP school, the problems identified with the facility sites, and the lack of a detailed and specific plan for food and nutrition services, all were cited as significant obstacles. The panel discussed their concerns about the viability of the proposal and delineated numerous areas such as the lack of planning to meet special education and ESOL students' needs, as the basis for their decision. For the reasons described above, and the overall concerns about the applicant's grasp of the critical elements of operating a school, the panel recommended the Board of Education not approve a public charter for Global Garden.

The panel was able to reach consensus on the application for the Crossway Community Montessori after an extensive discussion of the strengths and areas of concern with the application. The alignment of the work of Crossway with MCPS' commitment to families and education as a critical lever for ending generational poverty was cited as an important strength, as was the focus on wraparound services, and the organization's track record in the community. However, the panelists believed the concerns with funding, operational issues, and staffing required them to recommend that the Board of Education not approve the Crossway Community Montessori School charter request. For all of the reasons set forth above, including concerns about the lack of a detailed plan for transportation and food and nutrition services, staff evaluation, and curricular rigor required for a smooth transition between MCPS and CCMS, the panel could not recommend approval.

Issues in both applications regarding academic design are cause for concern. The panel was not convinced that either applicant had the necessary full understanding of implementing a rigorous curriculum that will provide students with a solid foundation and ensure a successful transition to middle and high school. Academic rigor is critical to success in high school and post high school goals. Neither applicant was able to meet this standard. Additionally, facility issues require significantly more detail than provided to ensure that the applicants' identified facilities have the capacity to support the programs described in the applications.

Resolutions for your approval regarding the two charter schools applications follow.

Present at the table for today's discussion are Ms. Lori-Christina Webb, executive director, Office of Deputy Superintendent of Schools; Mrs. Chrisandra A. Richardson, associate superintendent, Office of Special Education and Student Services; Ms. Betsy Brown, director, Department of Curriculum and Instruction; and Dr. Marshall Spatz, director, Department of Management, Budget, and Planning.

Present in the audience are the Charter School Review panelists.

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Attachments