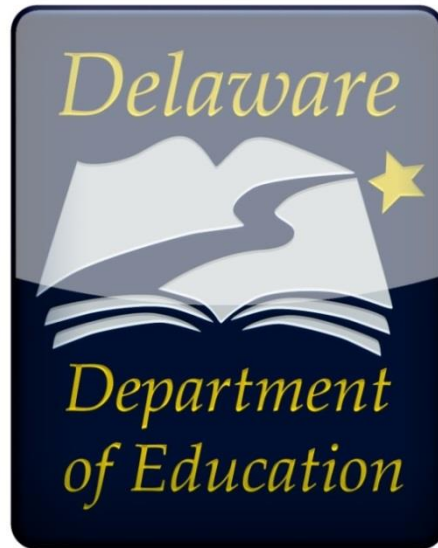


# CHARTER SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY COMMITTEE

DELAWARE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



## Providence Creek Academy

**RENEWAL APPLICATION  
INITIAL REPORT**

CSAC Initial Meeting: October 13, 2015  
CSAC Initial Report Published: October 16, 2015

By September 30, 2014, Providence Creek Academy submitted an application to renew its charter. Consideration of this application is in accordance with the applicable provisions of 14 *Del. C.* § 514A and 14 DE Admin. Code § 275. Written renewal application guidance is provided by the Delaware Department of Education (DDOE) on its website. The renewal application template developed by DDOE is aligned to measures and targets within the Performance Framework, which outlines the academic, organizational and fiscal standards by which all Delaware charter schools are evaluated. The evaluation of the school's performance as measured by the Framework is a major component of the decision on the renewal application. The decision on the renewal application is based on a comprehensive review, guided, in part, by the following three questions:

1. Is the academic program a success?
2. Is the school financially viable?
3. Is the school organizationally sound?

This report serves as a summary of the strengths, areas of follow-up, and/or concerns identified by members of the Charter School Accountability Committee (CSAC) during their individual reviews of the charter applicant's renewal application, Performance Review Reports, Annual Reports and Performance Agreements and during the CSAC meetings.

The following were in attendance at the Initial Meeting of the CSAC on October 13, 2015:

**Voting Committee Members of the Charter School Accountability Committee**

- David Blowman, Chairperson of the Charter School Accountability Committee and Deputy Secretary, DDOE
- Karen Field Rogers, Associate Secretary for Adult Education and School Supports, DDOE
- Barbara Mazza, Education Associate, Exceptional Children Resources, DDOE
- April McCrae, Education Associate, Science Assessment and STEM, DDOE

**Staff to the Committee (Non-voting)**

- Catherine Hickey, Deputy Attorney General, Counsel to the Committee
- Jennifer Nagourney, Executive Director, Charter School Office, DDOE
- John Carwell, Education Associate, Charter School Office, DDOE
- Michelle Whalen, Education Associate, Charter School Office, DDOE
- Brook Hughes, Education Associate, Financial Reform and Resource Management, DDOE

**Ex-Officio Members (Non-voting)**

- Kendall Massett, Executive Director, Delaware Charter School Network
- Donna Johnson, Executive Director, Delaware State Board of Education

**Representatives of Charter School**

- Amy Santos, Board President
- Christian Craig, Board Vice President
- Lisa Moore, Board Treasurer
- Melissa Rhoads, Board Member
- Chuck Taylor, Head of School
- Audrey Erschen, Principal
- Danielle Moore, Director of Curriculum

## Discussion

### Section 1: Overview

Ms. Santos stated that the school has identified areas of needed improvement and has taken steps to improve in those areas. She stated that the Board has been very involved and has attended trainings and retreats to ensure that the Board is on top of its responsibilities to the school. She stated that the school's leaders have also been working to make improvements where needed.

Ms. Santos stated that the school has identified academic areas that need improvement and has taken steps. For example, the school formed an Academic Excellence Committee and, through that, has added instructional minutes in areas such as math.

Ms. Santos noted that the Board recognized room for improvement in the school's structure and made changes.

Ms. Santos stated that the Board is now very strong, involved, and knowledgeable. She stated that the Board members are all passionate and committed to the children of Providence Creek Academy. Ms. Field Rogers asked for clarification regarding when the changes with the Board occurred, and inquired as to how many founding members remain on the Board. Ms. Santos replied that she and Gary Stulir have been Board members since 2004, two years after the school opened. Mr. Craig has been a Board member for several years, and Ms. Rhoads and Ms. Moore (Lisa) have been Board members for over one year. Ms. Santos indicated that some of the renewed energy is attributable to her movement into a position of leadership on the Board, but other Board members have also taken a very active role.

Ms. Mazza requested information regarding who serves on the Academic Excellence Committee. Ms. Santos replied that the committee is an internal committee comprised of she, Ms. Danielle Moore, a reading specialist, a math specialist, Ms. Erschen, two teachers, and a parent member. Ms. Santos stated that the committee is a parallel to the Citizens Budget Oversight Committee, but involves academics. Ms. Mazza asked whether there is representation from special education and Ms. Santos replied that Ms. Erschen has special education experience.

### Section 2: Academic Framework

Ms. McCrae requested more information on the 2011-12 initiatives referenced on page 5 of the renewal application as having contributed to the school's success. Ms. Moore (Danielle) responded that, during the 2011-12 school year, primarily in the upper school, Providence Creek Academy utilized a quasi-block schedule, which provided for 90 minutes each for ELA and math. Ms. Moore (Danielle) stated that the result was a noticeable increase in growth in math. However, the scheduling format did reduce the amount of instructional time in science and social studies, which resulted in a slide in scores for science and social studies. Consequently,

the school went back to its previous scheduling format, resulting in a decrease in math scores. The school then determined that additional time was needed in math and provided for an additional 45 minutes of math instruction partway through the 2014-15 school year, as well as additional science instruction. Because social studies instruction is still less, ELA teachers are working with social studies teacher to ensure that their instruction is cross-curricular. This year, the school's 6<sup>th</sup> grade ELA teacher is also the social studies teacher. Also, the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade social studies teacher is a former ELA teacher.

Ms. McCrae noted that, for 2014-15, the school's 5<sup>th</sup> grade science proficiency rate was 61%, but the school failed to achieve its participation rate goal of 95%, as only 91% of students participated. However, 36% of the school's 8<sup>th</sup> grade students were proficient in science. Ms. McCrae asked whether this was due to the scheduling changes. Ms. Moore (Danielle) replied that several 5<sup>th</sup> grade students refused to participate, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade science has traditionally been the school's lowest proficiency rate. She stated that last year, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders received 45 minutes of instruction each day, whereas now they each receive a full 90-minute block every other day. Ms. McCrae asked whether the school is participating in the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) training. Ms. Moore (Danielle) replied that the science coordinator has been participating and sharing the information with the school's science teachers. Ms. McCrae noted that NGSS incorporates math and ELA, along with science. Ms. Moore (Danielle) noted that, in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, the school is working to integrate math and science units.

Ms. McCrae noted that the school has made changes to its math curriculum, including purchasing Interactive Mathematics Program (IMP) and adopting Ready Common Core, and asked about professional development offered to teachers during this period of transition. Ms. Moore (Danielle) replied that the idea for IMP stemmed from a visit to MOT Charter School, which has traditionally been a high-performing school in terms of math. The teachers have attended all-day IMP training. The school has not participated in training offered by the company for Ready Common Core, but the program offers guided online support and Ms. Moore (Danielle) has offered professional development to her staff. Ms. McCrae noted that it was not just a shift in content, but in a way of teaching. She noted that the school should be cognizant of that as it moves forward with implementation. Ms. Moore (Danielle) replied that the school has utilized Professional Learning Community (PLC) time to focus on implementation strategy.

Ms. Moore (Danielle) spoke about the school's Spring Academy for students "on the bubble" in terms of Response to Intervention (RtI). The program occurred over the 2015 spring break and included hands-on learning experiences. Students were grouped not by grade level, but by skill needs. Approximately 70 students participated in the program and received instruction in both reading and math. Ms. Moore (Danielle) credited the program's success to the hands-on learning and stated that the school is now trying to integrate the hands-on learning into its classrooms.

Ms. Johnson requested more information regarding the school's decision to adopt IMP math for Algebra, rather than a traditional Algebra curriculum. Ms. Moore (Danielle) replied that the

decision to adopt an interactive and hands-on program was consistent with the school's philosophy in favor of offering students different learning experiences. The school also wanted students to understand "the why" behind what they're learning and to learn to problem solve. Ms. Johnson clarified that her question was more about the integrated nature of the program as more than just Algebra. She asked whether the type of curricula utilized by the high schools factored into the school's decision and Ms. Moore (Danielle) replied that it did not. She noted that the school is still also using the traditional Algebra curriculum and is working this year to ensure that the standards are aligned. Ms. Johnson noted that it would be helpful for the school to know where their students will be attending high school, as high schools differ on whether they offer an integrated, traditional, or hybrid math track.

Ms. Johnson indicated that she would like to see a deeper dive into the school's Smarter Balanced scores, including data analyses and comparisons between schools with similar demographics and within similar demographic areas. She requested feedback on specific issues that the school will be addressing moving forward. Ms. Moore (Danielle) replied that she is already working on this and will be presenting to the school's Board at its next meeting on October 27<sup>th</sup>.

Ms. Mazza noted that the school's percentage of special education students is fairly low and asked whether the school feels that it is under-identifying students. Mr. Taylor responded that the school's process is that everyone gets in and there is no differentiation. Ms. Erschen replied that the school follows the RtI process and that parents oftentimes request an evaluation if their child struggles. However, the school closes some of the gaps due to differentiation in the classroom, particularly at the K-3 level. Students tend to be identified in 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade. The school has a School Psychologist and an Instructional Support Team process that it follows. If the students meet the criteria, then they are identified and an Individualized Education Program (IEP) is developed.

Ms. Mazza asked whether the services provided in Tiers II and III are above and beyond the services provided to special education students. Ms. Erschen responded that the Tier II and III services are in addition to the students' special education services.

Ms. Mazza noted that the school received its special education annual determination letter in spring 2015 and received a rating of "Needs Assistance." Ms. Mazza asked whether the school has completed its Corrective Action Plan. Ms. Erschen replied that the Corrective Action Plan is ready for submission on Thursday. Ms. Mazza noted that there was a focus on reading and math and asked the school to discuss the root causes that it had identified, as well as some of the strategies that the school has put into place. Ms. Erschen replied that the school is meeting with students to develop individual goals and then quarterly to follow up with those students. She stated that the goal is for students to become their own advocates in order to communicate things that they need in order to be successful with their teachers and parents.

### **Section 3: Organizational Framework**

Ms. Santos stated that the school has experienced some organizational change. She stated that the school has learned from its mistakes, fixed them, and moved on. She noted that the school was previously very light at the top, as it had one Head of School/Principal and one Director of Human Resources and Maintenance. She stated that the school determined that this was not a good arrangement and has since changed its structure such that there is a Head of School, a Principal, a Director of Finance, and a Director of Curriculum. She stated that the school has found this structure to be a much more viable way of organizing the school leadership and ensuring that the responsibilities are appropriately divided. She stated that the new structure has provided for checks and balances, particularly financial.

Ms. Field Rogers noted that Mr. Taylor is an Interim Head of School and asked about the plan for hiring a permanent Head of School. Ms. Santos replied that the school is currently searching for a new Head of School. Ms. Field Rogers asked for more information regarding how the school knows that the policies and procedures that the school has put into place are truly ingrained and are not just the product of a strong Head of School. Ms. Santos replied that the Board now better understands the importance of following policies and will seek a Head of School candidate who also understands that. Mr. Taylor added that one big policy that was introduced was the Oversight Committee, which meets quarterly. The committee, which is comprised of three members, randomly selects a policy and asks the school to produce evidence that demonstrates compliance with the policy. Ms. Santos noted that the Board is ultimately responsible for holding the school leader accountable and making sure things are being done properly. Mr. Taylor provided an example of purchase order authorizations, which require three signatures. He stated that the Oversight Committee can pull any purchase order and will look for three signatures. He admitted that, at first, the school wasn't as good as it had hoped, but noted that the school has made improvements. Mr. Taylor noted that the topic is selected at random, but is well-informed, as the Board receives weekly updates, as well as monthly updates from him, Ms. Erschen, Ms. Moore (Danielle), and Ms. Moore (Lisa). In addition, there are Citizens Budget Oversight Committee (CBOC) minutes and agendas, as well as Board committees. Finally, the Board has received Delaware Alliance for Nonprofit Advancement (DANA) training. Ms. Santos indicated that the Board training was valuable and is something that all new Board members should attend moving forward. She noted that the Board recently had a retreat, which was facilitated by Ms. Massett and focused on the Board's mission and vision for the school over the next five years.

Ms. McCrae asked about the school's contingency plan if someone critical to the Board or school's operation leaves. Ms. Santos replied that all Board members have a copy of the Board Policy Manual, which is updated periodically, in both hard copy and on a USB drive. She stated that everyone now understands the importance of the policies and could step in to lead the Board if necessary. She noted that this universal understanding is one way in which the Board differs from two years ago. Ms. Rhoads added that the Oversight Committee has been valuable in this regard, as reading a written policy is not the same as actually seeing it being implemented.

Ms. Field Rogers asked where the Board stands in its search for a new Head of School. Mr. Taylor replied that the school has a meeting scheduled with a recruiter on Friday, October 16<sup>th</sup>. He noted that the school's current situation with him serving as the Interim Head of School is the result of unfortunate circumstances, as the previously-selected Head of School became seriously ill. However, the school has to move forward and anticipates that someone will be selected by January or February to start by June.

Ms. Johnson noted that there was a larger drop in students in one grade level (7<sup>th</sup> grade) and asked the school to speak about why this may have occurred and what the school is doing to address the issue moving forward. Ms. Erschen acknowledged that last year was a difficult year for the school, resulting in the school losing several families from one grade specifically. The school conducted its lottery last year and ended up with a waiting list for each grade. This year, the only grade level that the school did not fill was 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Historically, the school has struggled with 8<sup>th</sup> graders who come in for one year. As such, the school has tried not to bring in as many new 8<sup>th</sup> graders.

Ms. Johnson referenced Appendix 3.5a2, which speaks to staff evaluations. She noted that the policy states that the criteria for evaluations will be determined by the administrative team and asked for clarification regarding whether this is beyond certified staff. Mr. Taylor responded that the policy states that all certified staff will be evaluated in accordance with Department of Education policy and all non-certified staff will be evaluated using their job description and other mechanisms.

Ms. Johnson asked the school to speak about its Head of School evaluation. Ms. Santos replied that the school has a Head of School job description and a rubric (Appendix 3.5a1), which the Board plans to use for its Head of School evaluation. However, the Board has not had the chance to conduct the evaluation.

#### **Section 4: Financial Framework**

Ms. Field Rogers noted that the school experienced a number of issues a couple of years ago and asked whether there are any other things that the school is doing to ensure that its finances and financial practices are sound moving forward, aside from the Oversight Committee. Mr. Taylor referenced the three signature requirement, the requisition, and the requirement for two approvals prior to the issuance of a purchase order. He noted that an outside source, Bill Bentz, comes in once or twice per month to review the school's books. He added that the CBOC serves as a system of checks and balances. He also noted that the school had an Asset Management Policy which the audit showed was not being followed, but is being followed now. Finally, Mr. Taylor noted that the school changed audit companies, as he said he believes a school should do approximately every five years. A new auditing firm (Barbacane Thornton & Company LLP) conducted this year's audit and the school has requested a bid from the firm for the next two years. Ms. Field Rogers asked whether the new auditing firm provided a more thorough review and a different kind of guidance and comments. Mr. Taylor responded that the new auditing firm was much more thorough than the school had previously



experienced. He added that the school also had a couple of internal audits during the same time frame.

Ms. Field Rogers asked whether there was a PCard. Mr. Taylor responded that there was no PCard and one was not necessary.

Ms. Field Rogers asked if there were any outside accounts. Mr. Taylor responded that the school has a small Lowes account and regular vendor accounts. The school has two bank accounts: one for petty cash, which must be reconciled monthly and presented to the CBOC; and a second United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) account.

### **Section 5: Five-Year Planning**

Ms. Santos stated that, during its Board retreat, the Board discussed the school's mission of providing an education in the arts, athletics, and academics. She stated that the Board discussed tightening up the academic piece and ensuring that its students are receiving a top-notch education. However, the Board also wants the school to do a better job in athletics and the arts. She stated that the school has a number of wonderful after school programs, but would like to find a way to infuse arts and athletics into what students are doing. She stated that the school also has scheduled a tour of Sussex Academy, which has an International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum, to explore whether a similar program would be a good match for the school. Mr. Blowman noted that the middle years program is for grades 7-10. Mr. Taylor noted that this is an ongoing exploration process. He noted that there are charter schools in Pennsylvania and a charter school in Maryland that is K-8, as well as Brandywine School District's K-6 IB school. He emphasized that an IB program is a program yet to be fully explored by the school.

Ms. Johnson asked the school to discuss its plan to expand its Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Program. Ms. Erschen replied that STEM is currently a 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade specials class. The school uses Lego Mindstorms Robotics for that coursework. Two years ago, the teacher that taught that course approached school leadership about instituting an after school robotics course. As a result, the school has robotics competition teams: Jr. First Lego League and First Lego League. The school started with two teams and has expanded to three teams. Ms. Erschen stated that the school would like to incorporate that into the science and math coursework during school hours. The school has discussed the potential of a discover lab in the future. Mr. Taylor added that the elite program used to be for everybody, but has since narrowed down to 5<sup>th</sup> grade and below. This year, it has been reopened to all students 2<sup>nd</sup> grade and above. The school will provide two after school buses for two days per week. Ms. Erschen stated that the school wishes to build beyond that with Career and Technical Education (CTE) and Perkins type programs. Ms. Johnson clarified that the school's idea of STEM would be infused into the math and science classrooms. Ms. Erschen replied that it's currently an after school idea, but would hopefully be integrated into the math and science classrooms during the day. Ms. McCrae reminded the school to be cognizant of the fact that STEM is more than just robotics. Ms. Moore (Danielle) added that the school holds a two-week

Discovery Camp during the summer, which is more than just robotics and is something that the school hopes to integrate into the school day. Mr. Taylor noted that the school has a pond, stream, and fields, which it is trying to expand into its curriculum.

## **Conclusion**

Mr. Blowman asked voting members of CSAC whether there was any additional information that it required to inform its decision-making.

The following information was requested:

- An academic plan based on the school's Smarter Balanced results, including data analyses, comparisons between schools with similar demographics and within similar demographic areas, feedback on how the school will address identified weaknesses moving forward, and academic goals tied directly to the metrics.
- A professional development plan specifically for mathematics, including the October 12<sup>th</sup> professional development.
- A copy of the school's special education Corrective Action Plan once approved by the Department of Education.

Mr. Blowman asked CSAC whether there were any sections that they feel currently warrant a "Does Not Meet Standard" rating based upon information currently provided. The result was a unanimous "no."

## **Next Steps:**

- The CSAC will provide the school with an Initial Report no later than October 20, 2015.
- The applicant will have the opportunity to submit a written response to the CSAC Initial Report, which is due by close of business on November 4, 2015.
- The final meeting of the CSAC will be held on November 10, 2015, at 1:00 p.m., in the 2nd floor Cabinet Room of the Townsend Building at 401 Federal Street, Dover DE.
- The CSAC will issue its Final Report no later than November 17, 2015.
- A second public hearing will be held on December 8, 2015, in the 2nd floor auditorium of the Carvel State Office Building, located at 820 North French Street, Wilmington DE, and will begin at 5:00 p.m.
- The public comment period ends on December 11, 2015.
- The State Board of Education will hold a meeting on December 17, 2015, in the 2nd floor Cabinet Room of the Townsend Building at 401 Federal Street, Dover DE, at which time the Secretary will announce his decision on the renewal application and, if required, the State Board will act on that decision.