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Sent: Friday, December 12, 2014 9:47 PM
To: infocso
Subject: Charter Renewal for Reach Academy

The Hon. Mark T. Murphy
Secretary of Education
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Dear Secretary Murphy,

Once again I write to urge you to recommend to the State Board of Education that the Charter for Reach Academy for Girls be renewed. To be candid, we at Reach are somewhat at a loss to understand the Charter School Accountability Committee's recommendation to not renew. I make this comment in the light of the academic and other achievements made by Reach since we went through this process in 2013. Immediately following the District Court decision in January of this year enabling Reach to operate for an additional academic year (2014-2015), the Board of Directors began taking and continues to take major steps to turn our school around. These steps were detailed in our Charter Renewal Application and, of course, discussed at the CSAC meetings. Suffice it to say that by the time we submitted our Charter Renewal Application in September, and as a direct result of very thorough and rigid evaluations, recommendations, board orientation, teacher training and staff coaching by our external consultants (Claremont Consulting and School Turnaround), Reach Academy already had demonstrably improved in every aspect of school functions. This includes governance and leadership, professional development, student academic achievement and operations. Most important for the purpose of this communication is the upward movement in academic achievement based on Spring 2014 test scores and other assessments, including having met AYP for the first time in our brief history as a school. At this writing, by various assessments it is clear to us that this upward trajectory continues. Believe me, sir, we are under no illusion that Reach is anywhere near where any of us wants Reach to be, academically speaking; but there is absolutely no question in our minds that given the time, this school will not only meet, but in the next charter period, will exceed State standards. Incidentally, we went into this process having met, as consistently in the past, Organization and Financial Framework expectations.

What I have outlined above is what was reported in our submission and discussed at the Initial CSAC meeting. Moreover, in response to CSAC members at that meeting, we responded in a timely manner to every single question, suggestion and request for additional documentation or information requested by them.

We came into the Final CSAC meeting not unrealistic about the hard work still remaining for Reach to move into and remain in the range of Meets Academic standards. Again, we also have no doubt, that given the opportunity and the time, that will be the result. Frankly, throughout the Final CSAC Meeting we thought we were going to get that opportunity. This was based on most of the comments, questions, tone and demeanor of the majority, if not all of the CSAC participants. They expressed satisfaction with the additional information and documentation they had requested. The Chair, in particular, commented several times on the strides made by Reach since the previous renewal process. Other members not only made favorable comments but in conversation with Ms. Allen suggested resources that would be helpful to Reach going forward.

Even when the Committee cast its vote of Does Not Meet the Academic Framework, we were not surprised. We understood that. As I said above, we certainly were under no illusion about the work in front of us, despite the recent and modest academic improvement, Actually, each one of us had predicted that charter renewal would be

recommended, albeit with perhaps some stringent conditions to be met by times certain or be faced with Formal Review.

Therefore, the greatest surprise came during the final minutes of the meeting when the CSAC voted to recommend non-renewal, and the Chair explained that in spite of the "tremendous" improvements Reach has made since January, none of that matters. The decision cannot be based upon future promises, he said, but only on past performance to date.

What actually has transpired is that we have been judged on performance, for the most part, during the exact same years that led to the non-renewal recommendation a year ago. According to the Chair, what has happened since then, to date, may not be considered. That being the case, we ask, "What was the purpose of the renewal process we just went through?" " Why were CSAC requests made following the Initial Meeting for information that would 'aid them in making their decisions' if, in fact, such information was not going to matter? "

The effect of this action is simply to take us right back to where we were the last time we faced the Charter School Accountability Committee. The evidence which the Chair stated could not be taken into consideration, it seems to us, should be the primary evidence on which CSAC should base a recommendation regarding charter renewal for Reach Academy. I hasten to say, on the other hand, that we certainly acknowledge performance in past years could be the basis for the committee to recommend specific benchmarks and conditions to be met by times certain or face Formal Review proceedings. This is a process already statutorily available to CSAC. Having reviewed CSAC Final Reports for other charters up for renewal at this time, we note that indeed this is the course that CSAC has followed in at least one instance, and where the charter school has had a history of Does Not Meet in all three Performance Framework areas.

Our passion is to enable our girls, many of whom have faced more challenges and trauma than other youngsters much older than themselves, to realize their fullest potential, academically, emotionally, socially and in all ways. Mr. Secretary, I am not offering any "excuses" here, nor are we looking for a free pass. However, as I stated in my last year's letter to you, given where most of the students are academically when they come to Reach, getting all of them to a standard of "Meets" can only happen over time. Now they are gaining confidence, and that is shown in these first steps toward meeting academic achievement levels. Their parents are joyfully noticing this growth as well and are telling us so. We at Reach are convinced, given the improvements we are continuing to make, that before the end of the next charter period, the highest percentage of our students will be consistently meeting and even exceeding expectations. We ask for this opportunity--with conditions as deemed necessary.

What is Reach's failure that such an option is not available to us? Why is it so important once again to deny parents choice in determining where their daughters will attend school, or to deprive them of a single gender education? Why is it necessary to create a climate for emotional and physical disruption and trauma to the girls and parents alike? Moreover, why should these girls be consigned to schools no better performing (or less so, or only a little more so) as an alternative to Reach? To leave them at Reach will produce at least a neutral result, and it has the chance, based on the evidence that we have seen and the CSAC Chair obviously has acknowledged, to become a venue where they are safe and will thrive academically and in all other ways.

We are poised for success. Our parents love Reach for what is happening to their girls. Our teachers and students are thriving in their new, vastly improved school environment. It would be a tragedy, after such a brief time for Reach, to dash the aspirations and potential of the current girls and their parents and of those hoping yet to come.

As the only all-girls Charter School in the State, Delaware needs Reach. Reach has the valuable potential to help young girls, even of the humblest origins, to grow into well educated, self confident, independent women, able to successfully compete as leaders wherever their journey takes them in this diverse, global society. Please grant us this opportunity.

Peace,

The Rev. Canon Lloyd S. Casson
President, Board of Directors, Reach Academy for Girls

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Sent from my iPad