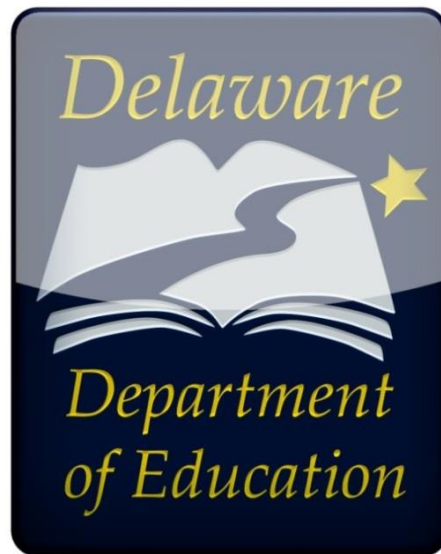


CHARTER SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY COMMITTEE

DELAWARE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



Design Thinking Academy

**RENEWAL APPLICATION
FINAL REPORT**

CSAC Final Meeting: November 27, 2018
CSAC Final Report Published: December 5, 2018

By September 30, 2018, Delaware Thinking Academy Charter School applied to renew its charter. Consideration of this application is in accordance with the applicable provisions of 14 **Del. C.** Ch. 5, including § 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 discussions during the CSAC meetings.

The following were in attendance at the Final Meeting of the CSAC on November 27, 2018:

Voting Committee Members of the Charter School Accountability Committee

- Chuck Longfellow, Chairperson of the Charter School Accountability Committee and Associate Secretary, Operations Support, DDOE
- Christine Alois, Deputy Secretary/Performance Support, DDOE
- Deborah Hansen, Education Associate, Curriculum, Instruction and Professional Development, DDOE
- Tracy Neugebauer, Education Associate, Exceptional Children, DDOE
- Chandra Pitts, CEO, One Village Alliance, Community Member
- Brian Moore, Program Manager, School Climate and Discipline, DDOE
- Robert Grey, Education Associate, Educator Effectiveness, DDOE
- Chuck Taylor, Retired Head of School, Community Member

Ex Officio Members (Non-Voting)

- Audrey Noble, Vice President, State Board Education
- Kendall Massett, Executive Director, Delaware Charter School Network

Staff to the Committee (Non-voting)

- Catherine Hickey, Deputy Attorney General, Delaware Department of Justice, Counsel to the Committee
- Leroy Travers, Lead Education Associate, Charter School Office, DDOE
- John Carwell, Education Associate, Charter School Office, DDOE
- Brook Hughes, Education Associate, Financial Reform and Resource Management, DDOE
- Sheila Lawrence, Administrative Secretary, Charter School Office, DDOE

Representatives of Charter School

- Paul Miller, Board President
- Stephanie Silverman, School Principal
- Durrell Harris, Assistant Principal/Athletic Director
- Ashley Bystricky, Director of Exceptional Children
- Christina Hembree, Director of Internal Operations
- Michelle Lambert, Financial Consultant (via teleconference)

Discussion

Mr. Longfellow stated that an initial public hearing was held on October 15, 2018 and the CSAC Initial Meeting was held on October 23, 2018. He added that the CSAC Initial Report was issued on November 1, 2018. The school submitted a timely response to the CSAC Initial Report by November 16, 2018.

Mr. Longfellow stated that the purpose of the CSAC Final Meeting was for the CSAC to continue its review of the Renewal Application, probe any areas of concern through a discussion with the applicant, and to issue a recommendation on the renewal application to the Secretary of Education. A final report would be issued by CSAC no later than December 5, 2018.

Mr. Longfellow stated that the CSAC identified the following areas of concern at the CSAC Initial Meeting and requested a response from the school:

Organizational Performance:

1. Educational Program: A summary of the school's process and findings from the audit which Ms. Silverman conducted when she arrived at the school.
2. Educational Program: Based on Appendix 1 of CSAC's initial report containing review notes from DOE's Curriculum, Instruction and Professional Development workgroup.
3. School Climate and Discipline: Provide a plan for compliance with the Non-Academic Mandatory Training requirements for staff (e.g. suicide prevention, bullying prevention, gang awareness, etc.)
4. Enrollment: A plan to increase enrollment.

Financial Performance

5. Documentation of the internal controls of the school's procedures for expenditure and purchasing.
6. Re submit the revised 100% Budget with any changes or additions.
7. Revised 80% budget projections: DTA submitted an 80% budget, but only Year 0 reflected 80% enrollment. Resubmit with 80% reflected in Years 0-4. (For both the 100% and 80% Budget: inflationary factors, enrollment projections, increasing cost for rent/lease, and substitute funding when the XQ grant runs out should be reflected in the budget.)

Mr. Longfellow asked the CSAC if they had any questions or concerns regarding the school's response relative to organizational performance that required further discussion. Mr. Grey noted a concern regarding the school's turnover and retention of staff and administration. He commended the school for its recent actions to address the turnover and its long-term plans. However, he added, the school has acknowledged that it has a history of poor staff retention. He also stated that the school's renewal application described its staffing history as a "complicated trajectory." Mr. Grey commented that staff retention is a strong indicator of the health and success of a school. He encouraged the school to continue its recent efforts to improved staff retention and offered the support and help of DDOE's Educator Effectiveness

team. Ms. Massett commented that staff turnover should not always be interpreted negatively. She added that staff turnover is sometimes necessary and schools should analyze the root causes. Ms. Massett also noted that staff turnover actually led to improvements for Design Thinking Academy. She also commended the school for reaching out for resources. Mr. Grey clarified that his concerns were based on the school's staff turnover over several years as opposed to one year and commended the school for its improvements in this area.

Dr. Noble noted that the school's response to the CSAC Initial Report clearly outlined a plan to address student retention but the response did not address how the school plans to increase enrollment. Ms. Silverman stated that the school's recruiter and outreach coordinator, Ms. Loretta Harper-Brown, leads this work and she has developed strategies that include building personal relationships and networks with feeder schools that go up to 8th grade to identify "mission appropriate" students. She added that a comprehensive recruitment calendar has been developed with open houses and "shadow nights" that provide prospective students and their families opportunities to visit the campus and learn about the school. She noted that on December 1, 2018, an open house was scheduled for prospective 7th and 8th grade students and their families to meet with faculty and staff and explore classrooms. At this event, she added, DTA students and staff will lead a hands-on, "make and take" design thinking activity in the school's new rapid prototyping and maker space room. Ms. Silverman stated that the purpose of these activities is to build internal and external coherence around the school's educational model. Dr. Noble asked Ms. Silverman to explain what she meant by "mission appropriate" students. Ms. Silverman stated that "mission appropriate" students are students who self-identify as creative and are looking for pathways that will lead to career opportunities in architecture, engineering, media and art and design, audio engineering and other fields. The goal, she added, is to clearly articulate what the school has to offer and differentiate the school in the public education landscape.

Ms. Pitts stated that she did not see a messaging plan in the school's response to the CSAC Initial Report and recommended that the school's recruitment plan include a messaging plan. More specifically, she added, the school's name change and change of administration require messaging to address how these changes might be perceived by the community. Ms. Silverman agreed and provided a copy of the school's new marketing materials which is one messaging strategy to highlight what is unique and special about the school such as the school's college and career readiness program, community partnerships, student college acceptances, faculty information, as well as curricula and career pathway information. The school, she added, has also launched a more robust and user friendly website. The marketing materials, she added, are a useful tool for seeking major gifts. Ms. Silverman also stated that the school recently purchased billboard space on Interstate 95.

Ms. Pitts commended the school for its marketing materials and asked how the average student and parent would receive the materials. Ms. Silverman referred to the work of Ms. Loretta Harper-Brown, who attends community events and meets with principals at feeder schools to create a personal connection. She added that the school's marketing plan includes running radio ads which helps articulate the school's vision. Mr. Miller stated that Ms. Silverman sends out a

weekly message to parents which helps articulate the school's story on a weekly basis and equips parents to be more effective ambassadors. The weekly messages, Ms. Silverman added, include student highlights. Ms. Silverman also noted that the weekly messages are deliberately sent electronically to encourage the sharing of the document with other parents. The weekly message features a different component or department of the school. Ms. Silverman also explained how Design Thinking Academy had a staff member who managed their digital platforms in-house. This strategy, she added, has allowed the school to leverage social media to recruit more students. Ms. Silverman also noted that the school's assistant principal, Mr. Harris, is heavily involved with the school's recruitment efforts. Mr. Harris stated that recruitment activities are held weekly for prospective students and parents to tour the school.

Ms. Hansen thanked the school for its curricula submission and noted the school's responsiveness to the various content areas. She also noted that the school's response to the CSAC Initial Report also included a process for the ongoing review and revision of its curricula. She encouraged the school to contact DDOE's Curriculum, Instruction and Professional Development workgroup for support. Ms. Hansen also commended the school for its partnerships with Cooper Hewitt, the Design Museum of the Smithsonian, and XQ. She also commended the school for hiring a curriculum specialist.

Mr. Moore stated that the school has complied with the CSAC's request for a comprehensive plan to complete DDOE's Non-Academic Mandatory Training requirements. He also commended the school for its fluid response to a recent emergency event and noted that the school's response exceeded state requirements. Mr. Taylor commended the school for the growth and improvements he has seen since he visited the school several years ago.

Mr. Longfellow asked the CSAC if they had any questions or concerns regarding the school's response relative to financial performance that required further discussion. He stated that the school's internal controls policy was not satisfactory and noted the following concerns:

- The policy references the school's old name;
- The policy references the name of a closed school (Prestige Academy);
- The policy references the State Budget and Accounting Manual but there are many inconsistencies throughout the document.
- The policy did not provide sufficient evidence of segregation of duties, conflicts of interest, and management oversight of purchases and expenditures. Management should authorize expenditures prior to placing orders.
- The policy does not include procedures regarding P-Card purchases, the Payroll and Human Resources Statewide Technology (PHRST) system.

Mr. Longfellow offered the support of DDOE staff as the school revises its internal controls policy and procedures manual. He commented that it's not only important for schools to have a strong internal controls policy but stressed the importance of implementation. Ms. Lambert commented that the actual procedures currently implemented at the school are strong and noted that she will review the school's internal controls policy and procedures manual to ensure

that it reflects what the school is doing. Mr. Longfellow recommended that the school reference chapter 2 of the State Budget and Accounting Manual which provides a framework for internal controls.

Conclusion

Mr. Longfellow asked if there were a motion to recommend renewal of the charter of Design Thinking Academy for a 5-year term beginning on July 1, 2019 with the following condition:

By February 28, 2019, submit to the Charter School Office a revised internal controls policy and procedures manual that addresses the following:

- The policy references the school's old name;
- The policy references the name of a closed school (Prestige Academy);
- The policy references the State Budget and Accounting Manual but there are many inconsistencies throughout the document.
- The policy did not provide sufficient evidence of segregation of duties, conflicts of interest, and management oversight of purchases and expenditures. Management should authorize expenditures prior to placing orders.
- The policy does not include procedures regarding P-Card purchases, the Payroll and Human Resources Statewide Technology (PHRST) system.

The motion was made and seconded to recommend approval with this condition and was carried unanimously.

Mr. Longfellow reminded the applicant that the CSAC's recommendation was just that: a recommendation to the Secretary of Education on the renewal application.

Next Steps:

- On or before December 5, 2018, the CSAC will issue a Final Report which will include its recommendation on the Renewal Application.
- A second public hearing will be held on December 10, 2018, at 2nd Floor Cabinet Room, Townsend Building, Dover.
- The public comment period ends on December 14, 2018.
- The Secretary of Education will announce her decision at the December 20, 2018 State Board of Education meeting and seek the assent of the State Board as necessary.