

In The Matter Of:

*Department of Education Charter School Office
In the Matter of: First State Montessori Academy*

*Hearing
October 17, 2017*

*Wilcox & Fetzer, Ltd.
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STATE OF DELAWARE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
CHARTER SCHOOL OFFICE

IN THE MATTER OF)
FIRST STATE MONTESSORI)
ACADEMY)

Carvel Building
2nd Floor Auditorium
820 North French Street
Wilmington, Delaware

Tuesday, October 10, 2017
5:42 p.m.

BEFORE: DENISE STOUFFER,
Lead Education Associate

APPEARANCES:

CATHERINE T. HICKEY, ESQ.
DEPUTY ATTORNEY GENERAL
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Dover, Delaware 19904
for the Department of Education

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1 MS. STOUFFER: Good evening. I
2 declare this public hearing to be open. My
3 name is Denise Stouffer. I am the Lead
4 Education Associate and I have been appointed
5 by the Secretary of Education to conduct a
6 public hearing. The First State Montessori
7 Academy Charter School has filed an application
8 to renew its charred for a term of five years.
9 This matter has been referred to the Charter
10 School Accountability Committee for
11 investigation and report. This public hearing
12 is being held to receive public comments.

13 I am here with Catherine Hickey,
14 Deputy Attorney General for the Department of
15 Education.

16 I would like the record to
17 reflect that the notice of the time, date and
18 place of today's public hearing was published
19 in The News Journal and the Delaware State News
20 on September 17th, 2017. In addition, notice
21 was posted at the Charter School Accountability
22 Committee's official place of business, on the
23 Department of Education's official website, and
24 on the State Public Meeting Calendar on the



1 State's official website. Further, the First
2 State Montessori Academy charter school was
3 personally notified of the time, date and place
4 of today's public hearing on September 9th,
5 2017.

6 A court reporter is present so
7 that the record of this hearing can be made.
8 It will be necessary for each speaker to
9 clearly identify his or herself before
10 beginning to speak so that the court reporter
11 will be able to note who you are. The record
12 of this hearing will be provided to the
13 Secretary of Education and members of the State
14 Board of Education, together with any written
15 or electronic comments received during the
16 course of this renewal decision process. To
17 date, no comments have been received.

18 We will proceed in the following
19 manner: First, we will hear from any
20 representatives of the charter school who wish
21 to comment on the renewal application. Then we
22 will take comments from anyone else who desires
23 to speak. There was a sign-up sheet in the
24 beginning of the room. I will now pause for a



1 moment for anyone who desires to sign up to
2 speak and has not already. First, I would like
3 a show of hands who would like to make any
4 comments so that I can determine whether it may
5 be necessary to impose a time limit.

6 (Discussion off the record.)

7 MS. STOUFFER: We can go back on
8 the record. I intend to try to be as liberal
9 as possible with time. However, I do reserve
10 the right to limit comment if it is purely
11 repetitive or cumulative. At this point, I
12 will accept comments from any representatives
13 from the school.

14 MS. NASS: Good evening. My name
15 is Yvonne Nass, and I am the board chair at
16 First State Montessori academy.

17 We are so excited about our
18 renewal, and delighted to have this hearing and
19 time to present what we have been doing and
20 where we are going.

21 We have been very busy since the
22 dream started I believe in 2009, came to
23 fruition four years ago. We have grown from a
24 baby to a toddler, and we are very busy. And



1 last December we put in an application to amend
2 and go up to 7th and 8th grade, that was
3 accepted, and so now we have a middle school in
4 progress.

5 So we are so excited. We are a
6 city school. We had a wonderful parade on
7 Monday, right on 10th and French. We had a DJ.
8 They closed, and we were dancing in the
9 streets, ladies and gentlemen, and excited that
10 that is what we can do for the city.

11 And we intend to continue and to
12 make sure that we do what Montessori says, and
13 that is to create these wonderful learners of
14 the future. We invite everybody to come visit
15 if you are not part of our school. So thank
16 you very much.

17 MS. CARTER: My name is Beth
18 Carter, C-A-R-T-E-R. I am on the school board,
19 but I'm here today to talk to you to share some
20 family experiences. My daughter is in 3rd
21 grade, she is in her third year at First State
22 Montessori Academy.

23 Prior to attending the school we
24 never really traveled into the City of



1 Wilmington. There was no need. Shops,
2 restaurants, boutiques, they were all in our
3 neighborhood. We stayed in our neighborhood.
4 That was fine for us adults. But I think for a
5 child she needed this experience.

6 So when she started the school
7 she also introduced our entire family to the
8 City of Wilmington. Now we dine, we shop, we
9 have boutiques, and we have a great experience
10 with the restaurants and the concerts and the
11 parks that we have experienced in the city.

12 So in addition to a great
13 education that she is receiving, she also
14 receives and we as a family receive the benefit
15 of the school being in the City of Wilmington,
16 and for that I am truly grateful.

17 I am also hopeful to see you in
18 five years and share more family experiences
19 with you at that time.

20 MS. SALOMON: Hi. My name is
21 Janine Salomon. I am a board member, but I am
22 also a parent, and I actually wasn't going to
23 speak today so my remarks will be very short,
24 but I felt compelled to do so because of all



1 the energy I was hearing from the other side of
2 the aisle, and so that everyone understands
3 that I and everybody at First State Montessori
4 is equally as energetic as the folks we just
5 heard.

6 So let me just say, I am speaking
7 as a parent, and I am going to sound like I'm
8 bragging, but it is an important part of the
9 story. My daughter was identified as a gifted
10 child very early, like before her first
11 birthday. Believe it or not, I had a doctor
12 call in several doctors to see what she was
13 doing. She knew her alphabet at like 13
14 months, like, so, and I didn't really know or
15 have other children, she is an only child, so
16 who to compare it or anything. I didn't know
17 that this was gifted.

18 So I have a lot of teacher
19 friends, and as she approached school age they
20 kept saying to me, oh, you really have to be
21 careful with her because she is going to be
22 bored in regular school, you got to find the
23 right place for her. So I started to look into
24 Montessori. Actually, she started when she was



1 two, mostly because I lost my nanny and there
2 was a Montessori school around the corner from
3 me.

4 And once I learned about
5 Montessori a little bit and this whole
6 curriculum of the child leading, I was like,
7 ah, eureka, this is really what is going to
8 work for my child. Because the beauty of it is
9 she goes at her own pace, and her pace might be
10 a little faster than the kid next to her, but
11 that's the beauty of the curriculum, the child
12 leads, and it works for kids on all ends of the
13 spectrum.

14 I am a results-oriented person,
15 and I think people haven't talked a lot about
16 individual results here, and I hope Courtney
17 will talk about some of our statistical
18 results. But I can tell you about the results
19 of my child. My child is starting 2nd grade.
20 She is reading at like a 6th grade level.
21 That's not from me. That's from the school.

22 All my other friends are, like,
23 what are you doing? I'm like, Montessori,
24 that's what I'm doing. And she loves to read,



1 loves school, to the point where over the
2 summer I had to say: Put down that book and
3 watch some TV, please. I mean, she is just in
4 love with school, every day, loves to read, is
5 self-motivated and driven. And I really
6 believe that the Montessori education is a big
7 part of that, the approach.

8 The last thing that I have to
9 mention is, because I have all these friends
10 that are teachers in other schools that know
11 Courtney very well, and when I said that I was
12 sending my child to First State Montessori,
13 they said, and I quote, oh, you have got
14 Courtney, she is unstoppable force. Everything
15 there will be great.

16 So I think we have one of the
17 best heads of schools in the state. I think
18 everyone who encounters her sees that, sees the
19 energy. You should have seen her in her
20 costume on Monday. She is great and the kids
21 love her.

22 So I thank you for the time and
23 appreciate the opportunity to comment.

24 MR. SIMS: Good evening. My name



1 is Dawayne, D-A-W-A-Y-N-E, Sims, S-I-M-S. And
2 good evening.

3 So I echo my colleague Janine. I
4 first should introduce myself as a parent to a
5 beautiful ten-year-old girl who is in 5th grade
6 with First State Montessori Academy. We are
7 proudly family there, started out in 2nd grade.
8 We were very fortunate, and I do mean
9 fortunate, to have been selected with the last
10 seat in 2nd grade at that time, and I'm very
11 proud of that.

12 So I want to start by touching on
13 two things. Before I forget, I also was vice
14 chair of the board of directors for First State
15 Montessori as well. I should formally announce
16 that for the record, of course.

17 So two areas I really want to
18 touch base on. One is about our school and the
19 other about our student families, as I like to
20 call them.

21 So first and foremost, Janine
22 touched on something and I think I'll piggyback
23 on that, we find ourselves at First State
24 Montessori Academy very, very fortunate to have



1 a head of school and a director of education in
2 Liz and Courtney, who really are uniquely and,
3 quite frankly, unequivocally committed to doing
4 what is best for children first. And I want to
5 emphasize that, first, in every decision that
6 they make at this school.

7 I've had an opportunity as a
8 member of the CBOC with the school from the
9 beginning to personally witness that in a
10 number of conversations, where they
11 continuously, whether it be financial,
12 academic, curriculum based, or really just
13 culturally at the school, put children first
14 and that is, and I say unique, unique
15 characteristic, and I applaud them for that and
16 I think we are very, very fortunate to have
17 them running our school.

18 Secondly, we have a diverse
19 board of directors, and I mean that in culture,
20 gender, personal experience, as well as
21 professional experience, and we bring all of
22 that to the table with respect to governing
23 First State Montessori Academy and working
24 collaboratively with our head of school and



1 director of education to implement the goals of
2 the school. So that's very, very important.
3 And so I find that as well a huge advantage at
4 First State Montessori.

5 Obviously, a dedicated and
6 trained body of faculty and staff, and then, as
7 I mentioned as well, a collaborative effort
8 with our CBOC around financial responsibility
9 and accountability within our school and
10 working well with our state representatives as
11 well. So that's very important.

12 So what I'm really trying to lay
13 out for you with respect to the school is a
14 culture of accountability, a culture of putting
15 children first, and a culture about doing what
16 is right for our families and our students'
17 families, as I like to call them, which is a
18 good segue I think into my second point.

19 Many folks at First State
20 Montessori who are sitting here now personally
21 know my story from my child, who suffered a
22 traumatic brain injury at one point early in
23 her life, at six years old, and so we were
24 looking for an alternate education option, if



1 you will. We were recommended by A.I. DuPont
2 faculty and medical staff there the Montessori
3 education model, and so I really want to
4 emphasize the importance of the impact that
5 First State Montessori and the Montessori
6 education model is having on our student
7 families.

8 And I say student families. Why?
9 Right, because it has impacted our students,
10 yes. Right. We are talking about children who
11 love to learn. And that is a part of our
12 mission, as our board chair so adequately
13 mentioned. Our goal is to send forth into the
14 world lifelong learners and to commit and to
15 have a positive impact on the community.
16 That's critical.

17 And we do that in our own way,
18 right. It is a Montessori model, right, and
19 so, but student families, so what am I talking
20 about, I'm talking about not just the students
21 who are lifelong learners, but their families
22 are impacted. I personally have been impacted.
23 And I speak to families and the first thing
24 they say to me: We are so happy. Right. We



1 are so happy that our child is in the school,
2 and our child is coming home excite about
3 education, our child is coming home excited to
4 learn.

5 But then they go into a secondary
6 story about how their family, their home, their
7 culture in their home has been impacted because
8 their child is excite about learning, because
9 their child is excited to come to school the
10 next day.

11 And so what we are talking about
12 here really is the impact that a school and the
13 people who are running it and governing it are
14 not only having for children as they move
15 forward into the world, but families that
16 currently are here.

17 And we are excited to be a city
18 school too. Right. We are very excited about
19 that, about being here in Wilmington, in the
20 city, where there are, sometimes may not be the
21 best stories coming out of the city or, for
22 that matter, in any other aspect. But we are
23 here.

24 We have a wonderful parade,



1 vocabulary parade, as we always like to talk
2 about, is a highlight. We go out and do
3 community service. Children are planting
4 tulips in Rodney Square and going to the
5 library and their artwork in the libraries.
6 That's a powerful thing for children, nine, ten
7 years old, to see their artwork in a public
8 library. Right.

9 So we are committed as an
10 institution to this type of development and
11 that type of civic engagement. So for all
12 these reasons, and many more, I stand before
13 you in support of First State Montessori
14 Academy's renewal of their charter and, of
15 course, willing to do so and support in any
16 other form as well. So I thank you for your
17 time.

18 MS. STOUFFER: At this point I
19 will accept comments from anyone else who would
20 like to speak.

21 MR. STEPPICH: Good evening. My
22 name is Alfred Steppich, S-T-E-P-P-I-C-H. When
23 I checked the little box on the sheet that said
24 would you like to make comments, I didn't



1 realize it was a full-on public speaking
2 affair. I think I would have dressed a little
3 bit more appropriately.

4 But my wife and I fully believe
5 in the Montessori principles, and we have been
6 following this school since long before it
7 opened, and we are super ecstatic to have our
8 daughter Ava enrolled in the school.

9 It is a very diverse school
10 within the city, which we think is amazing, and
11 it has created great partnerships within the
12 city, one of which is the First State Ballet
13 Theaters Danceworks Program, which my daughter
14 was fortunate to be in, and she was ecstatic,
15 and she dances around the house and pirouettes
16 and all that good stuff. She is a very high
17 energy individual.

18 The school has tremendous parent
19 and community involvement, with numerous
20 volunteers supporting the schools in various
21 ways. One of the other things that I think is
22 great about the school, and it has been
23 mentioned by everyone so far I think that has
24 stepped up here, but FSMA creates fun learning



1 events, like the vocabulary day parade, where
2 kids got to dress up as the vocabulary word of
3 their choice. And I, unfortunately, didn't get
4 to attend this year due to a work function, but
5 last year it was absolutely amazing, so much so
6 that I had to make sure that my parents came
7 down to witness it. And they, well, my mom
8 truly enjoyed it. So now everyone has to come
9 next year. So it will be even bigger.

10 But it really is fun to see the
11 creativity of the kids with the word they pick
12 and how they decide to dress themselves up.

13 Most importantly, though, the
14 education of our children is paramount. And I
15 believe that my daughter could not get a better
16 education at any other school in this area,
17 which is why we are ecstatic to be here.

18 And ultimately as parents we
19 don't want to lose the opportunity for choice,
20 which is why I'm here tonight to support FSMA.
21 Thank you.

22 MS. STOUFFER: Is there anyone
23 else who desires to speak?

24 Does the school wish to provide



1 any closing remarks? If not, I want to thank
2 you all for participating today. The Secretary
3 will consider your comments in deciding, at the
4 conclusion of the renewal process, what
5 decision to submit to the State Board for
6 assent, if needed. This hearing is now closed.

7 (Proceedings conclude at 6:02
8 p.m.)

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1 State of Delaware)
2 New Castle County)

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5 CERTIFICATE OF REPORTER

6
7 I, Eleanor J. Schwandt, Registered
8 Merit Reporter and Notary Public, do hereby
9 certify that the foregoing record, pages 1 to
10 18 inclusive, is a true and accurate transcript
11 of my stenographic notes taken on October 17,
12 2017, in the above-captioned matter.

13
14 IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto
15 set my hand and seal this 19th day of October,
16 2017, at Wilmington.

17
18
19
20 

21 Eleanor J. Schwandt



A	<p>aisle (1) 7:2</p> <p>Alfred (1) 15:22</p> <p>alphabet (1) 7:13</p> <p>already (1) 4:2</p> <p>also (5) 6:7,13,17,22 10:13</p> <p>alternate (1) 12:24</p> <p>always (1) 15:1</p> <p>amazing (2) 16:10 17:5</p> <p>amend (1) 5:1</p> <p>announce (1) 10:15</p> <p>anyone (4) 3:22 4:1 15:19</p> <p>anything (1) 7:16</p> <p>applaud (1) 11:15</p> <p>application (3) 2:7 3:21 5:1</p> <p>appointed (1) 2:4</p> <p>appreciate (1) 9:23</p> <p>approach (1) 9:7</p> <p>approached (1) 7:19</p> <p>appropriately (1) 16:3</p> <p>area (1)</p>	<p>17:16</p> <p>areas (1) 10:17</p> <p>around (3) 8:2 12:8 16:15</p> <p>artwork (2) 15:5,7</p> <p>aspect (1) 14:22</p> <p>assent (1) 18:6</p> <p>Associate (1) 2:4</p> <p>attend (1) 17:4</p> <p>attending (1) 5:23</p> <p>Attorney (1) 2:14</p> <p>Ava (1) 16:8</p>	<p>15:12 16:6</p> <p>beginning (3) 3:10,24 11:9</p> <p>being (3) 2:12 6:15 14:19</p> <p>believe (5) 4:22 7:11 9:6 16:4</p> <p>benefit (1) 6:14</p> <p>best (3) 9:17 11:4 14:21</p> <p>Beth (1) 5:17</p> <p>better (1) 17:15</p> <p>big (1) 9:6</p> <p>bigger (1) 17:9</p> <p>birthday (1) 7:11</p> <p>bit (2) 8:5 16:3</p> <p>Board (8) 3:14 4:15 5:18 6:21 10:14 11:19 13:12 18:5</p> <p>body (1) 12:6</p> <p>book (1) 9:2</p> <p>bored (1) 7:22</p> <p>boutiques (2) 6:2,9</p> <p>box (1) 15:23</p> <p>bragging (1) 7:8</p>
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