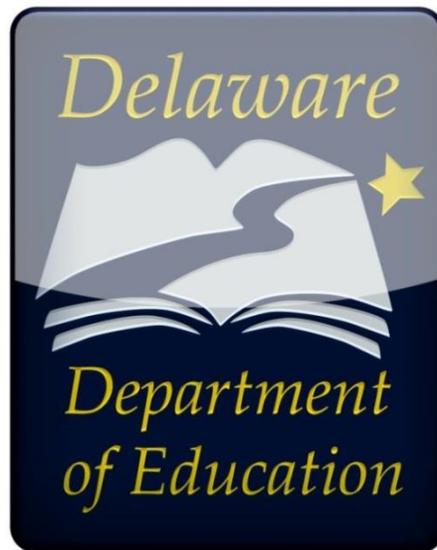


CHARTER SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY COMMITTEE

DELAWARE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



First State Montessori Academy

**RENEWAL APPLICATION
INITIAL REPORT**

CSAC Initial Meeting: October 24, 2017
CSAC Initial Report Published: October 30, 2017

By September 30, 2017, First State Montessori Academy (FSMA) submitted an application 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 during the CSAC meetings.

The following were in attendance at the Initial Meeting of the CSAC on October 24, 2017:

Voting Committee Members of the Charter School Accountability Committee

- David Blowman, Chairperson of the Charter School Accountability Committee and Associate Secretary, Financial Management and Operations, DDOE
- Karen Field Rogers, Deputy Secretary, DDOE
- Amy Baker-Sheridan, Education Associate, Academic Supports
- Tracey Neugebauer, Education Associate, Exceptional Children Resources, DDOE
- Seher Ahmad, Data Fellow, Performance Supports

Staff to the Committee (Non-voting)

- Catherine Hickey, Deputy Attorney General, Delaware Department of Justice, Counsel to the Committee
- Denise Stouffer, 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

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

- Yvonne Nass, Board Chair
- Courtney Fox, Head of School
- Liz Madden, Education Director
- Angela Angeny, PTO President, Board Member
- Karen Thorpe, Financial Consultant

Discussion

Section 1: Overview

Ms. Fox stated that eight years ago the founding group came together to develop a school where students are happy and learning is fun; a place where high levels of engagement are the norm in every classroom; and where joyful communities exist everywhere in the school. She added that the founding group was determined to utilize the power of the Montessori curriculum to create classrooms where the personalized needs of every student could be met. Ms. Fox introduced a brief video created with the help of First State Montessori Academy (FSMA) students. Following the video, Ms. Fox stated that she hoped the video portrayed FSMA's high level of student engagement, a blend of individual work, small group work, whole group work and happy kids. She explained that for FSMA, "happy kids" means that students are being challenged at the right levels; students are not bored because the work is too easy; and students are not frustrated because the work is too hard. Ms. Fox highlighted the following key accomplishments:

- FSMA has shown huge academic gains over time. Students made 12-24% gains over time in different subject levels and grade levels.
- FSMA has had a strong waitlist every year and the current waitlist is over 500 students.
- Strong staff development has helped FSMA teachers grow by leaps and bounds. A strong culture has been built around teacher growth.
- There has been significant community outreach. FSMA has become a true neighbor to the surrounding community.

Ms. Fox distributed a fact sheet to the CSAC and highlighted the following:

- FSMA currently has 510 students in grades K-7. The school was approved for a charter modification to add grades 7 and 8.
- FSMA has a lower school and an upper school located in a multi-building campus in downtown Wilmington.
- FSMA has mixed grade classrooms. Students are grouped in grades K-1, 2-3, 4-5-6. Grades 7-8 will be together when grade 8 is added next year.
- FSMA has two teachers in every classroom. Each classroom has one full-time teacher and one part-time teacher. Each classroom has 24-26 students.
- FSMA is a fairly diverse school and Montessori utilizes diversity, drawing students from five different districts in New Castle County.
- Students participate in a variety of different service learning projects.

Mr. Blowman noted that FSMA's English Language Learner (ELL) and special education populations were small but growing and trending closer to the State averages. He also noted that the low income population is growing as well. Ms. Fox stated that FSMA's low income population might be higher based on FSMA's local verification process. Mr.

Blowman asked the school to describe how they are managing the growth of the ELL and special education populations from a staffing and instructional perspective. Ms. Madden stated that FSMA had a 5.3% special education population in its first year which has grown to 12.2% currently. She added that staffing is reviewed annually and throughout the year based on the students' needs. Ms. Madden also stated that FSMA has brought many of its related services providers in-house instead of using contractors. Additionally, the school has hired an educational diagnostician. Ms. Madden explained that a team meets periodically to assess how well students and families are being served. She noted that FSMA currently contracts for ELL services but that function is gradually being brought in-house. Ms. Fox stated that FSMA looks for staff with strong school experience in Delaware schools. She also stated that FSMA has enjoyed a strong relationship with the Department's Exceptional Children Resource (ECR) team and FSMA's compliance has been consistently high. Ms. Fox explained that students not only have the benefit of two teachers in the classroom but one of the teachers is dual-certified in special education. She added that each student has access to a variety of resources. Ms. Madden stated that FSMA's RtI program has also grown and developed over the years in regards to identification, timely intervention and teacher expertise.

Mr. Blowman asked the school to describe its recruitment and outreach strategies to the high needs communities that surround the school. Ms. Fox stated that prior to the school's opening, FSMA conducted information sessions and purchased billboard space in a variety of downtown Wilmington locations. She added that FSMA reached out to approximately 100 day care centers in the school's first year. Ms. Fox also noted that FSMA currently targets the community directly behind the school where students can walk to the school. Additionally, FSMA staff have literally walked the surrounding community handing out information materials. Ms. Fox highlighted FSMA's partnership with Ministry of Caring which is located two blocks away from the school. She noted that Ministry of Caring brings their four year old students to FSMA every Friday. She explained that this program increases the likelihood that children served by Ministry of Caring will enroll at FSMA by simply entering the building. Ms. Fox also noted that FSMA utilizes Wilmington resources and remains active in downtown Wilmington events. For example, FSMA displays student artwork at Wilmington Library and FSMA's older students visit the library regularly to access its resources. Ms. Fox added that FSMA currently only targets its marketing to the surrounding community. She noted that over the past two years applications from City of Wilmington zip codes have increased from 100 to 150. She stated that from last year to this year the proportion of incoming students from Wilmington zip codes has increased from 22% to 26%.

Mr. Blowman asked the school to describe the feedback they have received from prospective parents regarding any perceived enrollment barriers. Ms. Fox stated that there is a perception that FSMA is a private school. Mr. Blowman asked the school if this perception is due to the building and/or the Montessori name. Ms. Fox stated that it is likely a combination of both factors but FSMA is constantly working to counter these misperceptions. Ms. Angeny stated that FSMA hosted a community event last May that brought together numerous community organizations in order to raise awareness about

the school and the Montessori approach.

Ms. Massett asked the school to explain how its interest and geographic (5-mile radius) preferences are beneficial to families. Ms. Fox stated that the 5-mile radius preference is beneficial because the City of Wilmington is divided into multiple districts so a district preference would exclude groups of children. However, she added, the 5-mile radius preference ensures that children who live closest to the school are eligible for this admissions preference. Ms. Fox also noted that FSMA has demonstrated interest preference. She explained that the intent behind this preference is to ensure that prospective families understand the uniqueness of the Montessori educational model and matches what they are looking for. Ms. Fox explained that families can demonstrate interest in numerous, minimal ways that demonstrate that they understand how Montessori is different than traditional education. For example, she added, parents can attend an information session, submit a brief interest letter, speak with a Board member or school leader to demonstrate interest.

Ms. Johnson asked Ms. Fox to provide clarification regarding how the various preferences are applied during the admissions process. Ms. Fox stated that the preferences are applied based on founders, staff, siblings, demonstrated interest, and 5-mile preference. Ms. Johnson asked the school if there are a large number of students who do not meet the demonstrated interest preference. Ms. Fox stated she did not have this information available. Ms. Johnson asked if there were any families that lived within the 5-mile radius but did not have a demonstrated interest preference. Ms. Fox stated that these families are tracked and contacted to make sure they get the demonstrated interest preference. She added that the primary intent of the demonstrated interest preference is to ensure that Montessori is the right fit for students.

Ms. Ahmad stated that charter schools often have a higher proportion of inexperienced teachers and asked the school to describe its professional development. Ms. Fox stated that FSMA actually has a small percentage of inexperienced teachers. She added that a lot of FSMA teachers participate in the mentoring program not because they are inexperienced but because they taught in private schools and/or out of state schools. Ms. Ahmad asked the school to discuss its uncertified teachers. Ms. Fox explained that FSMA's full-time teachers (one in every classroom) have to be both Delaware certified and Montessori certified and part-time teachers have to be certified in one or the other. She added that last year, FMSA only had two new teachers who had previously completed their student teaching assignments at FSMA. Ms. Madden stated that FSMA spends significant time and resources on professional development because of its positive impact on students. She added that when FSMA first opened every teacher received professional development in Responsive Classroom which pairs social-emotional learning with academic success. Ms. Madden also noted that this professional development helped all teachers begin on the same page with setting up learning environments for students to be happy, engaged and successful and it promoted strong classroom management. Additionally, all new teachers receive this training. Ms. Madden stated that FSMA also committed significant time aligning Common Core with Montessori and sent a team to participate in the Department's

Common Ground for the Common Core program. She added that last year, FSMA hired reading coaches to support all of the staff in grades K-1 and this year these supports are being rolled out to staff in grades 2-3. Additionally, teachers in grades 4-5 are receiving supports to implement FSMA's new math curriculum. Ms. Madden also stated that FSMA's next focus will be on implementing the Next Generation Science Standards. Ms. Fox stated that FSMA has established a competitive salary scale to attract and retain talented and experienced teachers. She added that FSMA's co-teaching model appeals to a lot of teachers. Ms. Nass added that the Board is very supportive of the teachers.

Section 2: Academic Framework

Mr. Blowman acknowledged the school's academic improvement in school year 2016-17 and highlighted the following:

- The school improved from 3 Stars (Approaching Standard) to 4 Stars (Meets Standard) in Academic Achievement.
- The school improved from 2 Stars (Needs Improvement) to 5 Stars (Exceeds Standard) in Academic Growth.
- The school maintained 5 Stars (Exceeds Standard) in On Track to Graduation.
- The school improved from 2 Stars (Needs Improvement) to 4 Stars (Meets Standard) in College and Career Preparation.
- The school made significant gains in English Language Arts and Science proficiency rates.

Ms. Fox stated that FSMA's 2016-17 academic success speaks to the incredible talent of FSMA's teachers and the power of authentic implementation of the Montessori program. She noted that the students who were enrolled in the first two years had limited exposure to the Montessori model. Ms. Fox added that it took students time to transition from a traditional educational model. She noted that students who have been enrolled for three years were 15% more likely to meet the ELA benchmark and students were 20% more likely to meet the math benchmark versus student who had only been at FSMA for 1-2 years. Overall, she added, the longer students are enrolled at FSMA, the more likely they are to meet the Smarter Balanced benchmarks. Ms. Fox stated that FSMA's data tells the story of students who were not high achieving students when they enrolled but became high achieving students over time. She added that FSMA has not made any major programmatic changes but teachers are more comfortable with the integration of Montessori and Common Core and they know the students better. Ms. Fox also noted that FSMA has created ongoing professional development to address identified gaps.

Ms. Field-Rogers asked the school describe its goals for continuous improvement. Ms. Fox stated that FSMA's primary goals are to keep students moving on an upward trajectory and, more specifically, move students to higher SBAC performance levels. Additionally, for students with disabilities, she added that she and her team work to ensure that students' IEP and 504 plan goals are rigorous and being met.

Ms. Baker-Sheridan asked the school to describe its RtI plan for literacy and math as described in Appendix 16 of the renewal application. Ms. Madden stated that the RtI plan for literacy was established three years and has been continuously refined. She added that the RtI plan for math was not as robust as the reading plan but last year, it began to align with the quality of the reading RtI plan. Ms. Baker-Sheridan asked the school to speak to its assessment plan and STAR Math, in particular. Ms. Madden stated that STAR math was implemented beginning this year. Ms. Baker-Sheridan asked the school discuss the use of AIMSweb. Ms. Madden stated that AIMSweb has been discontinued. Ms. Baker-Sheridan referenced the school's data and professional development plan outlined in Appendix 14 and asked the school to describe its plan to address areas for growth in math for grades 6 and 7. Ms. Madden stated that Connected Mathematics was adopted this year for grade 7 and early results are promising. Ms. Madden also noted that for grades 4-6, math teachers are utilizing their Professional Learning Community (PLC) to identify gaps and explore resources to increase math performance. Ms. Fox stated that one of the benefits of FSMA's two teacher model is the flexibility it provides for teachers to receive professional development without disruptions to instructional time. She added that professional development is teacher-driven and based on what they see in the classroom.

Ms. Neugebauer acknowledged the school's growth in ELA proficiency levels for students with disabilities but noted some areas for growth in math. Ms. Fox stated that student performance increases the longer the students are at the school. Ms. Neugebauer underscored the importance of reviewing accommodations for students with disabilities. Ms. Madden stated that this year more FSMA staff are participating in the Department's training on SBAC accommodations. Ms. Angeny noted that the FSMA's leadership team provides significant support to the teaching staff.

Ms. Johnson commended the school for the academic data packet provided in Appendix 14 and asked the school to describe its curricula and any related professional development to address the dips in math for grades 5 and 6. Ms. Fox stated that Montessori math is used in grades K-6 and teachers supplement the curricula with other resources. She added that the data packet was prepared for the Board of Directors, parents and staff and the professional development plan was prepared subsequently. Ms. Johnson noted that a challenge for teachers is moving from elementary school math content to middle school math content and asked the school if they currently utilize the Math Cadre or other resources. Ms. Fox stated that her current math team is actively engaged in exploring relevant resources. She added that Montessori math is very different than traditional math programs but it lends itself more to the transition from elementary to middle school math content. Ms. Johnson commented that Connected Math has been successful because it uses a foundational approach. Ms. Fox stated that the math teachers are exploring a variety of resources including collaboration with other schools. Ms. Johnson suggested that the school contact the Department and the University of Delaware for additional resources. Ms. Baker-Sheridan noted that the TERC curriculum is not completely aligned to the Common Core Standards.

Ms. Baker-Sheridan provided the feedback on the school's curriculum submission. This feedback

included:

Social Studies

Overall Evaluation: Partially meets expectations

The school should provide the updated MOU for the coalition(s) as well as the school's method for tracking and reporting the school's participation in the coalition meetings.

Section 3: Organizational Framework

Mr. Blowman commended the school for its successful organizational performance and asked the school to briefly describe its approach to managing its organizational responsibilities both as a Board and leadership team. Ms. Nass stated that the Board sought governance training as it transitioned from a founding Board to a sustaining Board. She added that the Board adopted a committee model which includes governance, finance, executive, governance, development and academic excellence committees. Ms. Fox stated that the Board is incredibly knowledgeable and supportive and tracks compliance. She added that the school's administrative team has established a team approach to compliance and excellence that starts at the Board level and filters down to the various project leads at the school. Ms. Nass underscored the importance of goal-setting at both the Board and school levels and noted that the Board created a strategic plan. Ms. Angeny cited the cohesiveness of FSMA's community (Board, administration, teachers, students, and parents) as a key reason for the school's successful organizational performance. Ms. Fox noted that the administrative team takes the lead for any new program or initiative before they are delegated to better understand the roles and responsibilities. Ms. Johnson commended the Board for recognizing the importance of strong leadership.

Ms. Stouffer asked the school to discuss its Board succession plan for Board members whose terms will end in June 2018. Ms. Angeny noted that in the past year, as part of their strategic plan, the Board reviewed its transition from a founding Board to a sustaining Board. She added that this process included a review of the Board bylaws and the current Board composition to determine current talent gaps or future talent gaps as founding Board member terms are due to expire. Ms. Angeny also noted that Board membership is staggered to maintain a balance of new and experienced members. Ms. Fox stated that Board members with ending terms are likely to remain engaged. She noted that two of the four members whose terms will end in June plan to remain on the Board and a plan is in place to replace the two members who are leaving. Ms. Nass stated that the Board is very intentional about creating processes so that new members have a pattern to follow.

Section 4: Financial Framework

Mr. Blowman asked the school to discuss how they have been able to prioritize teachers in its salary and staffing structure and maintain a strong financial position. Ms. Fox stated that the

school uses a conservative and creative budgeting approach to maximize investments into classrooms. As an example, she added that the food service program is run entirely by parent volunteers. Additionally, the school receives a portion of its supplies through donations. Ms. Fox also noted that FSMA's strong community supports allow the school to budget in unique and creative ways. Additionally, she noted that FSMA does not have a large administrative team and FSMA's two teachers per classroom structure eliminates the need for support staff. Ms. Fox stated that the school conservatively budgets under anticipated revenues. She added that summer pay is fully funded and set aside. Ms. Thorpe stated that the school's finance team meets monthly to review the school's cash flow.

Section 5: Five-Year Planning

Ms. Fox stated that FSMA will continue to build on its foundation of whole child development by not only addressing the academic needs of students but by utilizing Montessori to prepare them to think critically, work collaboratively and act boldly. She added that FSMA will continue to set individual goals for students as well as schoolwide goals. Ms. Fox also noted plans to grow FSMA's special education team. Additionally, she added, FSMA will continue to strengthen teachers through professional development. Ms. Fox stated that FSMA will continue to build on its culture through strong engagement with the PTO, Board, staff, consultants, etc. She added that staff retention is also a high priority over the next five years. Ms. Fox stated that FSMA is ready for the next five years based on the following:

- Established policies and procedures are place at both the Board and school levels;
- Strong curriculum that is getting results;
- Strong staff;
- Disciplined spending;
- A Board that is committed and knowledgeable; and
- Strong support from families and the community.

Ms. Field-Rogers asked the school to discuss where students typically go after they leave FSMA. Ms. Fox stated the 6th grade students who advanced before FSMA added its middle school enrolled at both public and private middle schools and some students went back into homeschooling. She also noted that there currently is not a clear pattern to where graduates enroll but they will be tracked to determine if any trends emerge.

Ms. Massett asked if the school had any plans to replicate FSMA's success at other schools. Ms. Fox stated that FSMA is always looking for opportunities to collaborate. She added that other schools have sent teachers to visit FSMA. Additionally, Wilmington University and University of Delaware have sent classes to visit.

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:

1. Curriculum: The school should provide the updated MOU for the Social Studies Coalition as well as the school's method for tracking and reporting the school's participation in the coalition meetings.

Next Steps:

- The CSAC will provide the school with an Initial Report no later than October 30, 2017.
- 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 14, 2017.
- The final meeting of the CSAC will be held on November 28; 2nd Floor Cabinet Room, Townsend Building, Dover.
- A second public hearing will be held on December 5; J.W. Collette Building, Conference Rooms A&B, 35 Commerce Way, Dover.
- The public comment period ends on December 8, 2017.
- The Secretary of Education will announce her decision at the December 21, 2017 State Board of Education meeting.