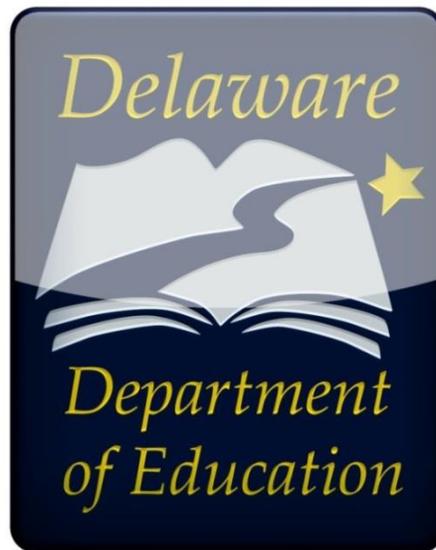


**CHARTER SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY COMMITTEE**

**DELAWARE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**



**Thomas Edison Charter School**

**RENEWAL APPLICATION  
FINAL REPORT**

CSAC Final Meeting: November 27, 2017  
CSAC Final Report Published: December 1, 2017

By September 30, 2017, Thomas Edison Charter School (TECS) 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 Final Meeting of the CSAC on November 27, 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
- Charles Taylor, Head of School, Providence Creek Academy
- 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
- Sheila Lawrence, Administrative Secretary, Charter School Office, DDOE

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

- Donna Johnson, Executive Director, Delaware State Board of Education

**Representatives of Charter School**

- Mikkell Christie, Board President
- Salome Thomas-El, Head of School/Principal
- Elizabeth Yates, Assistant Principal
- Jerry Velasquez, Board Member
- Wayne Cooper, Board Member
- Hal Blocksom, Board Member

## Discussion

Mr. Blowman stated that an initial public hearing was held on October 17, 2017 and the CSAC Initial Meeting was held on October 23, 2017. He added that the CSAC Initial Report was issued on October 30, 2016. The school submitted a response to the CSAC Initial Report on November 14, 2017.

Mr. Blowman 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.

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

1. Written Board policies, and procedures;
2. Bylaws; and
3. Curriculum: for which the school was asked to provide a current Social Studies Coalition MOU as well as the school's method for tracking and reporting the school's participation in the Coalition meetings.

Mr. Blowman asked the CSAC if there were any questions or concerns regarding the school's response to the CSAC Initial Report.

Ms. Field Rogers noted that the school's response stated that, "The Board of Directors will continue to pursue training and implement best practices regarding governance." She asked the school to describe its plans. Mr. Christie stated that he was recently elected to succeed Ron Pinkett as Board Chair. He stated that the Board bylaws are outdated and one of his first priorities as Chair will be to seek an opinion regarding the existing bylaws and begin to address any outdated provisions. He added that the Board intends to work more closely with the school administration. Mr. Christie stated that the Board plans to address these items at its December Board meeting.

Ms. Field Rogers asked the school to identify the specific training they are seeking. Mr. Christie stated that the Board's first priority was to complete the Board governance training which was completed in late September. Since then, he added, the Board has begun to address some of the areas that were identified through the training. Mr. Christie noted that the Board changed the format of its public meetings which used to begin with an executive session. Additionally, he stated that any Board committee meetings will be properly noticed and open to the public.

Mr. Taylor referenced the school's organizational chart which denotes a dotted line from the Board of Directors to the Chief Financial Officer and he asked the Board to explain the rationale for this reporting structure. Ms. Christie stated that this reporting structure was recommended last year by the school's audit firm, Haggerty & Haggerty, P.A., and the purpose is to create a

direct line from the CFO to the Board to report any financial improprieties. Mr. Taylor asked the school if the Board had considered duplicating this reporting structure in other areas. Mr. Christie stated that there could be an opportunity to duplicate this reporting structure in other areas but the audit firm's recommendation was specific to finance. Mr. Taylor asked the Board how it would avoid any potential micromanagement of the CFO as a result of the reporting structure. Mr. Christie stated that it is not the Board's intent to be involved in the day-to-day activities of the CFO. He added that the reporting structure is not intended to supersede the CFO's relationship to the Head of School.

Mr. Taylor asked the school to discuss other changes the Board has implemented as a result of the governance training. Mr. Christie stated that the Board has corrected its format for executive sessions which should be as needed, not as a standing agenda item. He also noted that the Board is exploring opportunities to improve its communications with the Head of School, update its bylaws, and increase transparency.

Mr. Taylor asked the school to clarify the Board member term lengths outlined bylaws. Mr. Velazquez stated that the bylaws include provisions for three different classes of Board members, each having 3-year terms. Mr. Christie noted that the bylaws do not specifically address term limits. Mr. Taylor asked the school to describe how Board committees function relative to school oversight, administrative oversight, parents, etc. Mr. Christie stated that to date Board committees have sought feedback from the school administration and their recommendations are provided to the Board.

Mr. Taylor asked Mr. Christie to describe his role as the new Board Chair in helping the Board increase its effectiveness. Mr. Christie commended Mr. Pinkett's service as the outgoing Board Chair and stated that the difference he brings to the Board are his soft skills. He added that the Board needs to heal its relationship with parents, become more aligned with the school administration and improve both formal and informal connections with the school. Mr. Christie also underscored the importance of making all stakeholders feel part of the process versus onlookers. He explained that the Board plans to encourage parent participation, teacher input and one-on-ones with the Head of School to facilitate a more unified approach.

Ms. Johnson stated that the school's response to the CSAC Initial Report included a page for the list of board members but the page was blank. She also noted that she reviewed the minutes of a recent Board meeting which listed new Board members and asked the school to provide a list of the current Board and their terms. Mr. Christie stated that a new parent representative was appointed to the Board at the last meeting. He also noted that several Board members resigned in recent months and the Board has yet to fill three of those seats. Ms. Johnson stated that compliance with the open meetings law is not optional. She recommended that the Board establish a deadline to update the bylaws as well as some mechanism to monitor itself to ensure ongoing legal compliance. Mr. Christie agreed that the Board should establish a deadline. Ms. Neugebauer stated that Board should have a training plan. She asked the Board if the entire Board participated in the September 2017 board governance training. Mr. Christie stated that there were some Board members who did not participate in the training but additional training

will be provided. Ms. Neugebauer reiterated the importance of establishing a one-year board governance training plan. Ms. Johnson stated that a board governance training plan would be helpful for both internal and external accountability and monitoring. Mr. Taylor stated that it would be helpful to submit the board governance training plan prior to the State Board of Education meeting on December 14, 2017.

Mr. Blowman asked the school to describe its recruitment plan to fill the three existing Board vacancies and engage the TECS community and stakeholders in the process. Mr. Christie stated that the Board aims to attract a talented and diverse set of prospective candidates through recommendations from existing Board members as well as the Head of School. Principal El added that the school is actively engaging several candidates with experience in fundraising, board governance and other areas. He added that another major goal in board recruitment is to increase diversity. Mr. Christie stated that the Board felt it was important for the school to participate in the recruitment process to create buy-in.

Ms. Stouffer noted that based on the Charter School Office's records, there are two Board members who have not received board governance training and asked the school to provide any updates, as appropriate. She asked the school if any additional board resignations were anticipated. Mr. Christie stated that all current Board members have indicated that they expect to serve their full terms.

Mr. Blowman asked the CSAC if there were any questions regarding the school's Social Studies Coalition membership. Mr. Taylor noted that the memorandum of understanding (MOU) was signed on October 30, 2017 and asked the school to provide the date when it is normally signed. Ms. Yates stated that the MOU should have been signed in August 2017 but the late submission was an oversight.

Ms. Johnson stated that at the CSAC Initial Meeting, the TECS Board indicated that the administrator evaluation process was being reviewed and asked the Board if the process was finalized. Mr. Christie stated that the process was not yet finalized but noted that he recently picked up the process from Mr. Pinkett. He added that a framework for the evaluation is currently in place and he plans to review it with Principal El in the next two weeks. Ms. Johnson asked if Mr. Pinkett is currently the Chair of the Board's personnel committee. Mr. Christie stated that Rev. Aaron Moore recently resigned as the Committee Chair and Mr. Pinkett was appointed to replace him at the Board's November meeting.

Mr. Taylor asked if public comment is permitted at TECS Board meetings. Mr. Christie stated that Board meetings typically open with teacher comment, parent comment and public comment. Mr. Blowman asked Mr. Christie if public comments are listed on the agenda. Mr. Christie agreed and stated that the Board could do more to encourage comments.

Mr. Blowman commended the school for meeting the needs of a very challenging student population. He also stated that the school is on sound financial footing and suggested that the school explore ways to utilize its resources to do more to attract and retain high quality staff.

Mr. Blowman stated that the CSAC has not been fully convinced that the board governance issues which led to the disruption of the education program that occurred in the fall of 2017 have been fully understood and resolved. He also stated that if any challenges arise in the future, it is critical to have systems and processes in place that would prevent a disruption as significant as the one which occurred this year. Mr. Blowman noted that the school's response to the CSAC Initial Report indicated that there was still more work to do to address these issues. He acknowledged that while Mr. Christie's presentation was very different in tone and substance from what has been presented in the past, there is a need for better processes and procedures going forward and mechanisms to ensure that they are being followed.

## Conclusion

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

Mr. Blowman recommended renewal of the charter for a five year term beginning July 1, 2018 with the following conditions:

1. Thomas Edison Charter School will have their current bylaws reviewed by an attorney to ensure that they are in compliance with Delaware Laws. The TECS Board shall submit their by-laws including any changes that result from this review to the Charter School Office no later than March 30, 2018. The Charter School Office will review and provide feedback as necessary no later than April 30, 2018. The school shall have until June 29, 2018 to address the feedback of the Charter School Office and adopt any necessary revisions to their bylaws.
2. The Thomas Edison Charter School bylaws shall include a description of the process by which school stakeholders and community members can apply to become directors and serve on committees. The Board shall communicate with parents in September 2018 the process by which they are able to join the Board and serve on committees.
3. All Thomas Edison board members shall receive training by the Public Integrity Commission no later than March 30, 2018. The Board shall submit evidence of training this training to the Charter School Office by April 13, 2018.
4. The Thomas Edison Board will complete a comprehensive review of all Board and school policies and procedures and submit revisions, additions, and changes, as necessary to the Charter School Office.

5. All Thomas Edison board members shall have completed Delaware Alliance for Nonprofit Advancement<sup>1</sup> (DANA) training between September 1, 2017 and March 30, 2018. The Board shall submit evidence of training to the Charter School Office by April 13, 2018.
6. New members of the Board shall receive Public Integrity Commission (PIC) and Delaware Alliance for Nonprofit Advancement (DANA) training within three months of joining the Board.
7. The TECS Board shall meet the governance measure and overall standard on the Organizational Performance Framework for the 2018-2019 school year.
8. The Thomas Edison Charter School Board President/Chair and one other members to be designated by the board shall meet monthly with a representative of the Charter School Office for progress reports on conditions and other governance issues that may arise until the Charter School Office deems that these meetings are no longer necessary.
9. The Thomas Edison Charter Board shall complete the Head of School evaluation by March 30, 2018.

The motion was made and seconded to approve the recommendation for the renewal of Thomas Edison Charter School with the conditions noted above and this motion was carried unanimously. Mr. Blowman reminded the school 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, 2017, 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 5, 2017, at the 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 14, 2017 State Board of Education meeting.

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<sup>1</sup> The TECS Board noted that they elected to contract the Delaware Alliance for Nonprofit Advancement (DANA) for Board governance training and for continuity to ensure that additional Board members are trained in the model.