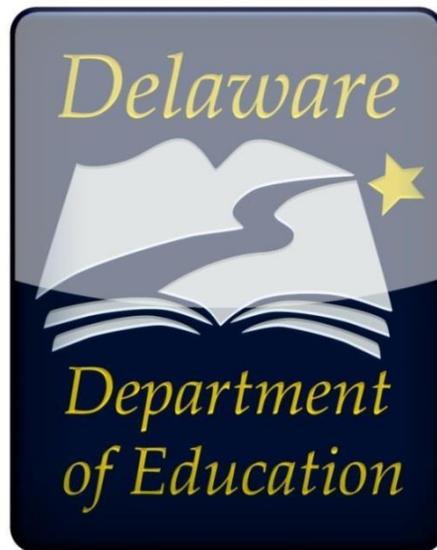


CHARTER SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY COMMITTEE

DELAWARE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



Thomas Edison Charter School

**RENEWAL APPLICATION
INITIAL REPORT**

CSAC Initial Meeting: October 23, 2017
CSAC Initial Report Published: October 30, 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 Initial Meeting of the CSAC on October 23, 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
- 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

- Ronald Pinkett, Board President
- Salome Thomas-El, Head of School/Principal
- Elizabeth Yates, Assistant Principal
- Patricia Winder, Chief Financial Officer
- Jerry Velasquez, Board Member
- Wayne Cooper, Board Member

Discussion

Section 1: Overview

Principal El stated that Thomas Edison Charter School (TECS) is located in the City of Wilmington and has been serving families since the year 2000. He recited the school's slogan which is "We are educating and elevating every student every day to attend the best high schools and colleges. No excuses." Principal El noted that he expects all of his staff, regardless of their position, to subscribe and align with providing a high-quality education to all TECS students.

Principal El introduced a brief video written, produced and edited by TECS students which provided a synopsis of the TECS experience. Principal El explained that the video was made for the school's Leadership Day. He stated that TECS is a *Leader in Me* school which is Franklin Covey's whole school transformation process. Principal El stated that the school hosted its first Leadership Day which included over 200 members of the local community and greater Delaware community. Principal El highlighted the following information from the school's fast fact sheet which was distributed to the CSAC:

- TECS is currently in its 18th year of serving Wilmington families.
- 732 students are currently enrolled at TECS.
- Enrollment has remained stable with a waitlist despite the opening of new charter schools and expansion of existing charter schools in Wilmington.
- 95% of TECS students qualify for free or reduced priced lunch.
- 90% of TECS families are at or below the poverty level.
- TECS provides 190 days of instruction and 197 teacher days, which provides staff with 7 days of professional development.
- TECS provides a plethora of after school, Saturday school and summer school enrichment programs for students as well as accelerated programs.
- TECS students have won two National Chess Championships. Over 200 TECS students play chess every day. The Delaware State Chess Champion was a female TECS student.
- TECS has boys and girls basketball teams. The girls' basketball team has been undefeated for three consecutive years.
- TECS has a 21st Century Community Learning Centers' grant which provides students with unique opportunities in the arts such as the drumline and jazz band.
- TECS is a member of the Delaware Early Learning Initiative which targets students in grades K-3 and includes students with disabilities and English Language Learners.

Principal El presented a PowerPoint that highlighted the following information about TECS academic performance:

- In English Language Arts (ELA), grades 3 and 4, TECS outperforms similar charter schools.
- In ELA grade 5, similar charter schools outperform TECS but by grades 7 and 8, TECS outperforms similar charter schools as well as the State average.
- In Math, similar charter schools outperform TECS in the early grades, but by grade 7, TECS students only missed the State average by 7 points and by grade 8, only missed the State average by 1 point.
- TECS outperformed similar district schools in math.
- TECS alumni have matriculated at some of the most prestigious private high schools in Delaware and nearly all have received partial or full scholarships. TECS alumni also attend high performing public schools.
- TECS also mentors and supports TECS alumni who attend major colleges and universities.

Principal El introduced a second video (titled: “I Won’t Give Up”) to conclude his overview presentation. He noted that Wilmington is a troubled community and he praised his staff for their dedication despite the challenges in the community. He noted that TECS students will be successful as long as the adults in their lives care enough not to give up on them. Principal El concluded his opening remarks by asking the CSAC to give TECS the opportunity to continue to make a difference in the lives of children.

Mr. Blowman noted that the school’s reenrollment rates are impressive based on the school’s demographics. He asked the school to explain the key drivers behind the reenrollment rates. Mr. Pinkett noted the school’s caring and loving environment as a key driver of the school’s reenrollment rates. He also stated that most student withdrawals are due to family relocations and guardianship changes. Mr. Pinkett credited the administration’s efforts for the school’s successful reenrollment. Principal El noted that his team often “goes the extra mile” by creating an environment where students do not want to be absent and parents want their students to enroll at TECS. Principal El added that TECS is intentional about building resilient students by not only teaching students how to be successful but teaching them how to respond when they are not successful which helps them to become more powerful community members in the long-term. Principal El also noted that TECS has a large number of families who are relatives so they “spread the word” about the culture and environment at TECS. Mr. Cooper stated that many parents who have withdrawn their children often try to return to the school.

Ms. Johnson noted that last year the reenrollment rates for some grades dipped below 80% and she asked the school to provide an explanation. Principal El stated that several new charter schools opened and parents decided to explore these new options. He also stated that TECS had a number of issues with its transportation contractor and ongoing late buses. Ms. Massett noted that late buses were a statewide issue last year.

Mr. Blowman asked the school to reflect on its current diversity and describe its efforts to increase diversity at the school. Principal El stated that TECS believes there is power in diversity. He noted that a number of diverse families who attended the Charter Expo expressed interest in TECS but ultimately attended other schools. Principal El stated that most schools reflect the demographics of the communities in which they are located. He added that Edison is located in one of the most dangerous communities in Wilmington which creates some challenges with recruitment but enrollment has remained stable. Principal El added that two White students recently enrolled.

He stated that the world is not like TECS so the school has worked to build cultural connections with other schools such as La Academia Antonia Alonso and First State Montessori Academy to expose TECS students to the broader diversity in the City of Wilmington and across the State. Principal El also acknowledged the challenge of preparing TECS alumni for high performing high schools where they might be the only minority in their classrooms. He added that school trips outside of Delaware are another strategy to counter the school's lack of diversity. Mr. Pinkett highlighted the national chess tournaments as a means for exposing students to more diversity. Principal El stated that the school's lack of student diversity and challenges in the community has not prevented TECS from recruiting a diverse staff. Mr. Cooper noted that many TECS staff have enrolled their children at TECS.

Section 2: Academic Framework

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

English Language Arts

Overall Evaluation: Meets Expectations

Commendations:

- The school has adopted the Expeditionary Learning curriculum resources. This resource is aligned to state standards.

Recommendations:

- Send a representative to Literacy Cadre and/or Coalition meetings.

Expectations: N/A

Math

Overall Evaluation: Meets Expectations

Commendations:

- The school has adopted the Engage NY curriculum resources. This resource is aligned to state standards.
- The Assistant Principal and Instructional Coach have joined the Learning Leader Network.

Recommendations:

- Ensure that teachers use the models included in Engage NY, and have students draw and explain, not just solve the problems with an algorithm.

Expectations: N/A

Social Studies

Overall Evaluation: Partially Meets Expectations

Expectations:

- 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.

Science

Overall Evaluation: Meets expectations

- Currently a member of the DE Science Coalition

Recommendations:

- Need to focus on learning sequence to support students making sense of phenomena and/or designing solutions to problems.
- Start aligning assessments so that they are three dimensional (practices, crosscutting concepts, and core ideas)

Expectations:

- Need to have a Next Generation Teacher Leader to help build capacity in implementing NGSS
- Science is taught at least three times a week for 45 minutes

Ms. Baker-Sheridan asked the school to describe the four common interim assessments mentioned in the charter renewal application. Ms. Yates stated that the school plans to align the interim assessments with Engage NY and Springboard.

Ms. Baker-Sheridan asked the school to describe what they currently use as screeners for their remediation plan. Ms. Yates stated that AIMSweb was implemented as part of its Delaware Early Literacy Initiative (DELI) program to conduct progress monitoring. Ms. Baker-Sheridan asked the school to describe how they are using the Wilson Language Program. Ms. Yates explained that the Foundations for Wilson Reading is used for grades K-2. Principal El noted

that in addition to reading, TECS also focuses on literacy in math.

Ms. Neugebauer noted that students with disabilities also demonstrated a similar pattern of growth in grades 7 and 8 but not as much in the earlier grades. She added that the school's participation in the Delaware Early Literacy Initiative should impact the earlier grades next year. She asked the school to describe its instructional strategies to improve the performance of students with disabilities at all grade levels. Principal El explained that specials were reduced to increase time for Response to Intervention (RtI). Ms. Yates added that this change freed up additional staff to assist students during RtI time which created smaller groups. Principal El also noted that the retention of special education staff was an issue so this year the school has added additional supports for that team. Additionally, the school has invested in instructional materials to support special education students such as Achieve 3000, Smarty Ants and TenMarks. Principal El also noted that the Teaching Excellence Framework's observation and feedback program facilitates open and candid conversations with teachers to improve instruction.

Ms. Neugebauer noted that last year there was an issue with planning time for the special education staff and asked if that had been resolved. Ms. Yates stated that the special education staff now have common planning time.

Ms. Johnson acknowledged the school's intense academic growth in grades 7 and 8 but noted some regression in grades 5 and 6. She asked the school to describe the interventions to address the regression. Principal El stated that there were staffing changes at grades 5 and 6 but not immediately. Initially, he added, these teachers were offered support, professional development and coaching. He also noted that teachers in grades 7 and 8 are mentoring the teachers in grades 5 and 6. Ms. Yates noted that students experience a learning curve from grades 5 to 6 because they shift from the Engage NY curriculum to Springboard so additional supports have been added to support this transition. Principal El also noted that grades 5 and 6 are a difficult time for students developmentally. Additionally, the school has partnered with external service providers and counselors to help the students navigate adolescence and address mental health issues.

Section 3: Organizational Framework

Mr. Blowman asked the school to describe their strategies to retain their best teachers. Mr. Pinkett stated that it has been very challenging given the budget limitations but the school has implemented a salary step system to give teachers a clear salary framework. He also acknowledged that despite implementing such a system, it is challenging for the school to compete with the salaries of surrounding school districts. However, he added, TECS salaries are competitive with other charter schools. Principal El added that teachers are provided leadership opportunities to build their capacity and are provided a stipend. He also noted that the administration works hard to create a family environment so that teachers feel supported, comfortable and valued. Principal El also stated that TECS teachers appreciate that the administration sees themselves as teachers and will "go to the mat" for them to support their

success. He commented that emotionally resilient teachers create emotionally resilient students. Ms. Yates stated that some teachers have left TECS and worked elsewhere but have returned because of the culture at TECS.

Ms. Johnson asked the school if they are currently using the teacher performance pay structure. Principal El explained that the teachers did not see the return on their investment since they had to give up time on weekends on top of TECS' extended day and school year.

Ms. Johnson asked the school to describe its recruitment strategies to bring in a diverse teaching staff so that teacher demographics more closely match the student demographics. Principal El stated that TECS has a significant proportion of male teachers. He added that TECS recruits teachers at historically black colleges and universities (e.g. Delaware State University, Cheney University). Mr. Pinkett stated that the leadership team provides significant support to the teaching staff. Principal El noted that the principal is the prime facilitator of culture in a school. His leadership team promotes the Four Cs philosophy that teachers must exhibit every day – 1. Be “Crazy” about kids; 2. Be “Curious” about the lives of our children outside of school; 3. Provide “Consistent” leadership and teachers; and 4. Provide a “Culture” of love, support and high expectations. He explained that this forms the basis for how the school recruits and retains students, parents and teachers.

Ms. Massett asked Principal El to describe his participation in the Black Male Educators Convening (BMEC). Principal explained that BMEC is a national organization and one of its primary goals is to quadruple the number of males of color in education. He also noted that BMEC recently hosted its first national convention in Philadelphia, PA with over 400 black male educators in attendance. Delaware also has a BMEC chapter.

Mr. Blowman stated that the overall rating for the Organizational Framework is “Approaching Standard” and he asked the school to speak to the indicators that did not meet standard. Ms. Yates stated that the school was close to meeting its mission specific goal which was based on STEP and Achieve 3000 data. She added that with the school's increased focus on RtI and more instructional time the mission specific goal will be met in school year 2017-18. Ms. Neugebauer noted that the “Approaching Standard” rating for students with disabilities was based on the school's compliance monitoring last year and the school is working to correct the areas of non-compliance by January. Mr. Pinkett noted that the Board has recently completed governance training and will continue to seek additional training opportunities.

Ms. Johnson asked the Board to describe policies and procedures it has established to comply with open meeting laws. Mr. Pinkett stated that the recent board governance training helped the Board understand areas of non-compliance. Mr. Taylor asked the Board to describe strategies to ensure ongoing compliance and operational effectiveness. Mr. Pinkett stated that a Board retreat is scheduled every 12-18 months. He noted that the training helped the Board understand that its meetings need to be conducted with more transparency. Mr. Velasquez stated that the Board has regularly attended the National Charter Schools Conference.

Mr. Blowman asked the Board to address the governance issues which impacted the school over the past three months and convince the CSAC that these issues will not recur going forward. Mr. Pinkett stated that the Board realized that the course of events could have been avoided through better communication. Mr. Velazquez noted the school's achievements over the years should not be diminished by 2-3 days of bad press. Mr. Blowman stated that the school's successful, long-term track record is not in question. He clarified that his question was about the 732 students who were impacted because the adults took their focus off of their best interests and nearly collapsed a 17 year old institution in a week's time. Mr. Blowman asked the school to describe the structures, systems and procedures to provide confidence to the CSAC that these issues have been resolved. Mr. Pinkett stated that the first priority is open communication. Mr. Taylor acknowledged the importance of open communication but that alone is insufficient without strong written policies and procedures which can mitigate human factors.

Ms. Johnson noted that the organizational performance indicators where the school did not meet standard were based on the Board's lack of strong written policies and procedures. She added that it is important for the Board to evaluate its performance annually. Mr. Blowman stated that it is easy for schools to take compliance for granted when they are successful but strong policies and procedures protect the school when issues arise. Mr. Taylor noted that there are boilerplate policies available online. He also suggested that the Board establish an oversight committee to review how policies are being implemented.

Section 4: Financial Framework

Mr. Blowman commended the school for its strong financial position and consistently high balances. He asked the school to speak to its current financial position. Ms. Winder stated that there are no large capital expenses expected in the near-term and enrollment is projected to remain stable. She added that TECS' FY17 audit had an unmodified opinion with no findings.

Mr. Blowman noted that the school's projected balances gradually trend down from \$2.6M over the next 4 years. Ms. Winder stated that the projections are conservative and noted that increased salaries partly drive the decrease in projected balances.

Ms. Johnson asked the school to speak to any concerns about the impact of transportation expenses going forward. Ms. Winder stated that last year transportation expenses increased by \$160,000. She anticipates that the State will provide additional revenue for transportation going forward. She also hopes that new contractors will enter the market and the State will develop new solutions to address the current market challenges.

Ms. Johnson recalled from the school's last charter renewal that there was a major capital expense (boiler replacement) and asked the school if there were any upcoming capital expenses. Ms. Winder stated that the school completed a major masonry project over 2016-17 for approximately \$300,000 which impacted the Debt Service Ratio on the Financial Performance Framework. Mr. Pinkett stated that at some point the roof will need to be

replaced since it was last replaced in 1999-2000 and generally has a useful life of 20 years. Mr. Velazquez stated that the school is maintaining a “rainy day fund” for anticipated capital expenses. He also noted that the school has replaced its fire alarm control system and temperature control system.

Section 5: Five-Year Planning

Mr. Blowman asked the school to provide an overview of its 5-year plan. Principal El stated that TECS will meet its academic performance targets and goals. He added that the Board and leadership team will be working together as a team to support families and advance the school. Principal El also stated that TECS will be financially stable and will explore possible expansion to another site to serve more Wilmington children in grades 6-12. He added that there are several potential sites in the surrounding community which are readily available.

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. Written Board policies, procedures
2. Bylaws
3. Curriculum: 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.

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 27; 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.