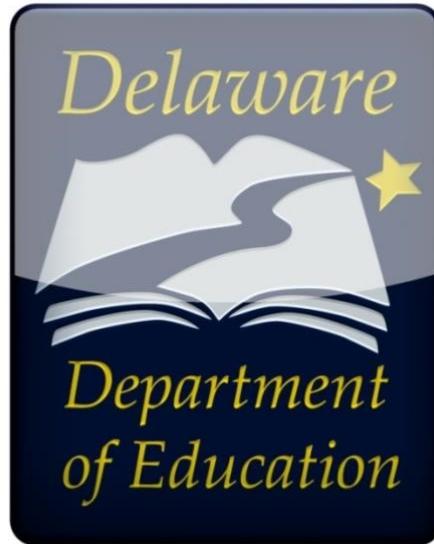


CHARTER SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY COMMITTEE

DELAWARE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



Academia Antonia Alonso Charter School

New Charter Application

FINAL REPORT

March 29, 2022

Under 29 Del. C. § 10006A(e) the Charter School Accountability Committee (CSAC) is permitted to hold a fully virtual meeting without an anchor location during a state of emergency. On July 13, 2021, the Governor of the State of Delaware issued a Declaration of a Public Health Emergency for the entire state. Governor Carney extended the Public Health Emergency on January 31, 2022.

Members of CSAC met with representatives from Academia Antonia Alonso Charter School (AAA) on March 22, 2022, for the final meeting to address the approval criteria set forth in 14 Del. C. § 512.

The following attended the Final Meeting:

Voting Committee Members

- Kim Klein, Chairperson of CSAC and Associate Secretary of Operations Support, DOE
- Gregory Fulkerson, Education Associate, Academic Support, DOE
- Tiffany Green, Education Associate, Educator Support, DOE
- Brook Hughes, Education Associate, Operations Support, DOE
- Joyce Leatherbury, Education Associate, Academic Support, DOE
- April McCrae, Education Associate, Academic Support, DOE
- Brian Moore, Education Associate, School Support, DOE
- Ted Molin, Community Member
- Charles Taylor, Community Member

Ex-Officio Members (Non-voting)

- Kendall Massett, Executive Director, Delaware Charter School Network
- Vincent Lofink, Delaware State Board of Education

Staff to the Committee (Non-voting)

- Leroy Travers, Lead Education Associate, Charter School Office, DDOE
- John H. Carwell Jr., Education Associate, Charter School Office, DDOE
- Faye Schilling, Education Specialist, Charter School Office, DDOE
- Alicia Balcerak, Administrative Secretary, Charter School Office, DDOE

Representatives of AAA Charter School

- Wilma Almonte, Dean of Curriculum and Instruction
- Dr. Maria Alonso, Board President
- Mercedes Alonso, Executive Director
- Mayara Costa, Director of Admissions
- Michelle Hastie, Business Manager
- Jennifer Jones, Dean of Operations
- Danielle Lanier, Dean of Culture and Climate
- Nora Lewis – Board Member
- Daniel Primiani, Fifth Grade Teacher

- Colleen Rajewski, Dean of Curriculum and Instruction
- Deb Rodenhouser, Project Manager

Discussion

Ms. Klein shared that this was the final meeting of CSAC relative to the major modification application submitted by Academia Antonia Alonso Charter School (AAA), which included a request to:

- Change locations;
- Add grades six through eight to its current kindergarten through fifth grade configuration, and;
- Increase authorized enrollment by a total of 312 students. This represents an increase of 52%.

The proposed modification would begin would begin June 15, 2022 with the relocation to the new school. Subsequently, Academia will expand one grade level each year, beginning with 6th grade in SY 2022-2023, until maximizing grade configuration to K-8 with a total enrollment of 912 students in the SY 2024-2025

Ms. Klein stated the initial CSAC report was issued March 1st and the school submitted a timely response to that report. The initial public hearing hearing was held on March 7th. Ms. Klein announced that the final report would be issued March 29th.

Ms. Klein stated that the purpose of this meeting was for CSAC to continue its review of the major modification application with the applicant, review any areas of continued concern through a discussion with the applicant, and issue its recommendations to the applicant.

Ms. Klein stated that, in the initial report, CSAC requested the following information:

Finance and Budget

1. Is the \$115,000 security deposit noted in the lease included in the budget projections?
A- Funds for the anticipated \$115,000 security deposit have been set aside in the current year's financial outlook, so the deposit can be paid during this fiscal year. If these funds are not paid before FSF closes in June, they will roll-over and be available next year.
2. The lease indicates that most repairs and maintenance will be the responsibility of the tenant. Did Academia have an independent inspection of the facilities?
A - Yes. Academia hired a 3rd party architectural firm under the direction of the school. Academia has completed numerous walk-through inspections of the facilities with specialized vendors, including kitchen services, interior designers, IT, New Castle County, the Fire Marshall, and DEMA (Delaware Emergency Management Agency). Additionally, the Design Team meets weekly with school administrators and the entire construction and design team to discuss progress and walk through the site.

- a. Are there any major issues/deficiencies that will need to be addressed by Academia?
A- There are no deficiencies. Monitoring progress and consistent updates have been shared with the school throughout the entire process. Hence, the school has been aware of everything that is happening.
 - b. If so, what are the anticipated costs of those repairs and are they included in the budget?
A -There are no additional costs. We do not anticipate any major issues or deficiencies as they are all being included and addressed through the renovation process. Thus, the school has not added additional funding, except for what has already been projected into the budget.
3. The rent amounts in the budget appear to be higher than the amounts noted in the lease. Provide additional information about the amounts used in the budget. What expenses will be covered with the excess funds budgeted in the rent line?
A - The reason the red amounts are higher is due to the school's responsibility for property taxes, which is considered additional rent. According to the school's research on the property, it was approximately \$270,000 for the year, as indicated on the red line in the budget worksheet. It will increase each year with a 2% inflation rate.
 4. Has the budget been updated to reflect insurance coverages for the new facility and grade levels served?
A – Since the school is renting and not purchasing the facility, the school has increased its premium by 20% to cover any additional costs. The school does not have a firm quote at this time because the insurance company has not yet been out to the facility and Academia has not received final approval for its charter modification.
 5. Has any of the proposed work on the new building begun?
A - Yes, the work has been started on the building and the school is on target to have everything completed for the COO.
 - a. Since it is now mid-March, can the landlord and/or contractors still complete the renovations and alterations needed prior to occupancy?
A - The school is on target to have everything completed for the COO.
 - b. Will any of the proposed timelines need to be shifted or altered?
A – There are weekly check-ins to confirm that everything remains on target. Therefore, there will be no need to adjust the timeline.
 - c. If work has already begun, what is Academia's financial obligation (if any) if the modification is not approved?
A – The financial obligation is significant and the fiscal impact for the school would be profoundly devastating if the major modification is not approved. If the application for modification is not approved, Academia will be homeless. Academia has spent months speaking with different board presidents, not only to lease building 26, but also desperately needing building 27. In the end, that was

not something that Odyssey and its board was willing to take on. During COVID, Academia went out searching for a home. The school had two existing schools, but those deals did not go through. Finally, Academia found Wakefield. The relocation to Wakefield cannot be financially sustained without the approved expansion into the middle school grades. Over the last three years, families have been demanding an expansion to 8th grade. Enrollment depends upon being able to go up to the 8th grade to sustain current families. Thousands of valuable resources and dollars have already gone into the renovations of this new building, funded with existing dollars. If Academia were to default on the lease, the school would have liability; however, if there is no school, (i.e. because Academia is homeless), there is no entity left subject to that liability.

6. Does the school anticipate any negative impacts on carryover funds/reserves or on any of the metrics in the Financial Performance Framework?

A – This year Academia is using \$ 1.3 million of its reserves, which will result in an impact to the financial performance framework. The impact will be in days cash, cash flow metrics, and the total margin metrics. As Academia grows to full student population, days cash will be between 50 and 75 days. Ms. Hastie projects this year it will be about 62 days since the school is pulling out so much money from their cash reserves.

Therefore, the margin is going to go down this year also, because of this one-time cost. Academia’s goal is to have their total margins and cash flow positive each year as they gain more accurate knowledge regarding their operational staffing needs and facility costs.

7. Submit a budget that reflects 80% enrollment.

A – Ms. Hastie indicated that this budget will be sent by the close of business today (3/22/22) with all the supporting documentation.

Facilities

8. Provide an updated copy of insurance coverages for the new facility with all coverages defined in the lease.

A – Academia’s insurance adjusters are in the process of getting that together, as per the request from the State Board. The insurance adjusters were holding off because it was not effective until after the current coverage expires. The school has requested an adjustment to that timeline in order to provide that information. Mr. Travers indicated that the documentation from the insurance adjusters can be sent directly to him and that he will forward it to the members of the State Board and CSAC.

9. The Counseling Suite is open and in the library. This goes against best practice, which is to provide a separate confidential and secure area to support students in privacy. What is the plan to address this concern?

A - The counseling rooms are sound proof. The rooms have no windows. Hence, the space maintains privacy and confidentiality. According to Dr. Alonso, privacy and confidentiality refers to communication between the patient and counselor, aligned to the ethical, professional, and legal standards, which all counselors must follow. As a mental health provider, Dr. Alonso stressed the importance of de-stigmatizing mental health.

Further, Dr. Alonso indicated that mental health should be dealt with honestly and without shame through conversations happening in rooms that offer the privacy. Dr. Alonso referenced an article published by a school counselor, who was also designing a counselor center. As per the article, the author suggested utilizing an area like a library where it is quiet, and a school can have rooms that are private.

Recruitment and Enrollment

10. The Initial Report states that information regarding demand for middle grades will be submitted in response to this report. Share where this demand data can be found.

A – Academia has had conversations with families about the potential expansion to middle school since 2019. The most recent indication of this demand happened on March 7th in which the school received an outpouring of support from teachers, families, board members, and the community. This work began during the strategic planning effort in 2019, which included parent interviews and parent participation on the strategic planning committee. Building a culture of survey participation continues to be a journey and barrier for Academia. Parents either do not have an email or working email address; therefore, the rate of return on anything written is about a 25%. In order to obtain feedback and disseminate information the school relies on Booster club meetings and PTO meetings. In addition, Academia has hosted “Coffees with the Executive Director,” utilized cold-calling, and have hosted information sessions both in person and online. An additional data piece contained within exit interviews indicates that an overwhelming number of families cite the reason for departure from the school is because Academia does not have a middle school, or that they are leaving simply because they are the sibling of a middle school student and families wish to keep all their children together in one school. Academia also has a very transient population.

It is important to note that 65 out of 72 students have indicated that they will return to Academia if middle school is offered. Additional students and families from outside of Academia have also inquired and requested to apply for middle school if it is offered.

CIPD

11. Describe the supports and scaffolds that will be used for students needing Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) in tiers II and III.

A – In terms of academics- there are two research and evidence-based resources that will be utilized- Read 180 and System 44. Both resources combine three major components- whole group instruction led by the teacher; small group, skill focused instruction led by the teacher; and Independent Technology, which is an adaptive program for the students. Tier II supports and scaffolds with the Read 180 resource include: Data driven small group instruction that meets students’ unique learning needs by using adaptive instructional software and leveled books; skill focused small group instruction; explicit vocabulary instruction; the teaching of direct and explicit comprehension strategies; instructional routines that would include closed procedures (think-pair-share and peer feedback); and the use of Audio and E-books, anchor videos, and teacher facilitated lessons. Supports using System 44 include: explicit vocabulary instruction, which gives students a bank of recognizable words; multicultural content that makes reading relevant to students from diverse backgrounds; instruction and small groups led by a teacher; software videos that provide background information and help students form mental

pictures before they begin to read the text; and audio books and interactive lessons delivered through various modes. Tier III supports and scaffolds also include greater frequency, longer duration, smaller group sizes, and more frequent progress monitoring. The non-academic supports and scaffolds that are in place for Tier II and Tier III begin with explicit instructional support and SEL (Social Emotional Learning) small groups. These small groups consist of 4 to 6 students, and they are led by either school counselors or therapeutic support staff- including masters and doctoral level interns. Small group work is based on data that is gathered through progress monitoring, which is completed by the group facilitator and done in collaboration with the student's classroom teachers. Within Tier II, FBAs (Functional Behavior Analysis) are conducted resulting in a BIP (Behavior Intervention Plan). This is a process of gathering information through observation to determine the cause of the behavior issue. The mental health team works hand in hand supporting faculty and staff in the implementation of the BIP within applicable settings. In Tier III, the students will follow a more individualized path, which really allows them to work specifically within their zone of proximal development. The setting and the frequency of support are determined by the student's initial screening data and the progress monitoring data.

12. What is your process for moving students from MTSS tier I to tier II or tier II to tier III?

A – The process is grounded in Delaware’s vision and framework, as it provides for the whole child. The process begins by identifying the need through universal screening. The MTSS core team, which includes the teachers, review, analyze, and discuss all student data. Based on that data, the team then creates a plan of intervention and supports. This plan includes how often and the duration, as well as the facilitator for those supports. During this process there is frequent progress monitoring of the student interventions as well as collection of other data, like attendance. The leadership team ensures that the intervention plans are implemented through classroom observations as well as data dives that are done within Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). At the end of every cycle, the core team then meets to discuss and reflect on the data and the outcomes of the intervention; and with that, decide if the interventions need adjustment. If the goals were reached, next steps will be determined, which may include moving a student from one tier to another. Academia adheres to regulation 508 (MTSS), which guides the movements of students from tier to tier and is both academic and non-academic

13. Make sure that the next safety plan submitted addresses the set-up of a secondary science classroom. Consult the facilities section in the Safety-First Manual. Tonyea Meade, the Education Associate for Science, is available to assist you in your planning and to provide any chemical safety training for your teachers that you may deem necessary.

A - Yes, the school will review and update the safety plan over the summer for the fall submission date. Academia has been in contact with Tonyea Mead at DOE (Delaware Department of Education) over the last several months regarding the expansion and will continue to reach out moving forward.

14. What are the school’s academic performance goals for grades six through eight?

A – Academia remains committed to align and meet the State’s proficiency standards, according to the Delaware School Success Performance Framework. The criteria for student performance are not only to perform well on standardized tests, but to develop behaviors and attitudes that are aligned with Academia’s vision and values. Assessments and tests are tools that provide feedback in order to diagnosis students’ areas of strength and need and will support the school’s growth to meet the state standards. Academia has been in conversation with April McCrae in order to effectively align goals and tools. Due to COVID, this will be a baseline for 3rd to 5th grade students because they have not experienced SBAC (Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium). Therefore, in order to establish realistic goals for our students, there is a need to establish a baseline to know exactly where students are- particularly ELL (English Language Learners) students. 60-79% of Academia students will demonstrate growth sufficient to reach proficiency. Further, 60-79% of the lowest quartile students will meet growth targets. Also, the school’s average proficiency rate in Reading and Math will meet or exceed the state-wide average of schools serving the same grade levels and subgroups.

Follow-up Questions and Discussion

Greg Fulkerson

For your current K-5 students, what do you do for the Spanish part of the day for intervention- especially in Spanish Language Arts when students need additional Tier II and Tier III supports?

A- The school creates a baseline at the beginning of the year with a Spanish proficiency report card. For students who are at risk or below the expectations, the school proceeds to administer the decoding inventory in Spanish and students are placed in language support groups to target skills. The school then administers a reading passage at the middle of the school year and then at the end of the school year to show the growth in our students. The school also administers the Spanish proficiency report card at the end of the year, so that the student, the parents, and the teachers are aware of the level of proficiency. This data enables informed instruction in the classroom and supports and scaffolds our plan.

Tiffany Green

No further questions right now. However, Jennifer, I did reach out to you through email. I just had a couple of questions about your mentoring supports and how your mentees are paired, so if you could follow up with me, that would be great.

A – Yes, I was out on medical leave for a few weeks. I am just catching up now. I have updated our mentoring seminar.

Brook Hughes

Are there any options for the tenant to do an early termination of the lease or any funding-out clause? Since it is a length lease term, what happens if you need to get out of your lease early? Is there an option to terminate the lease early by the tenant? What are, if any, the financial penalties?

A- Academia will go back to their attorney and clarify. Academia remains committed to be at the location for the years that are stated and will be fiscally responsible to pay the lease if there is a need to leave earlier.

Joyce Leatherbury

Have you discussed what you will use for Math interventions for Tier II and Tier III students?

A – Academia will use Reveal Math, which is a high-quality curriculum that will provide interventions for students at various levels. Academia also uses Aleks, which is a blended technology program that assesses the students. It is equivalent to the Imagine Learning Suite Academia is currently using, but for middle school.

How are your interventions scheduled throughout the day? Are the students pulled out or do they remain in their regular setting or in their Tier I instruction?

A – It will be both pushing in and pull out. There will be combination of both; however, preferably pushing into classrooms, which is always Academia’s model of preference.

April McCrae

No Questions. I do want to commend the school. They did reach out to me and they do have plans to work with the Assessment Office in the future to have professional learning throughout next year associated with the assessment for learning

Brian Moore

I understand the model of the school is to reduce the stigma around the approach to counseling. I think the concern that we always have is based on what we have seen through state and national surveys regarding the students’ comfort levels with being able to approach that environment- particularly a students’ ability or inability to enter or exit a counseling suite. I applaud the goal to reduce the stigma around it and to make it as you would a nurse’s office. However, I would also point out that you do not go through the library space to get to the nurse’s office.

Chuck Taylor

Is there anything in these closed, confined rooms that would protect the counselor, psychologist, or student from a “he said/she said” situation? Would you consider the use of cameras to monitor behaviors?

A - Academia is working on implicit bias, which is a term often associated with Race and Equity. However, there are attitudes and stereotypes around mental health that affect understanding, actions, decisions in an unconscious manner. If schools are doing that (using cameras) and it is best practice, it is something Academia can certainly look at and consider.

Vince Lofink

A member of the Academia team mentioned a property tax of \$220,000 per year reimbursement that had to be made. Could you elaborate on that?

A – At Academia, since the property will still be owned by a non-governmental entity, not a school, we will not own the property. Hence, the property taxes will be passed on to Academia and therefore in the lease as additional rent.

What happens if you are not approved for the grade expansion?

A – If not approved, Academia can only go up to 630 (based on the current charter of 600) students. Academia would need to reconfigure the whole school to hold 630 students. The school, therefore, would not be adding additional staff and the entire model would change.

If the expansion is not approved, would that eliminate the possibility of moving? What would occur then with regard the actual physical move?

A – Currently, once a student reaches the 5th grade, and if that student has siblings, Academia loses not only the rising middle school student, but also their siblings because families want to keep their children together. In this situation, Academia is losing students at the top and the bottom. However, if Academia can expand, we can bring in middle school students, and potentially their younger siblings. This is a push-pull situation. If we do not expand, Academia will continue to lose students. The relocation depends on the expansion. The current location does not accommodate what we are even doing now.

Do you need to be at 95% enrollment in order to be economically viable?

A – We were asked by the State Board to present an 80% budget. Academia has sufficient cash reserves at 100% and at 90% enrollment to make the financial framework and stay in the black. At 80% right now, our maximum configuration, if expansion is approved, is 730 students. We will still be in the black, but there are some metrics that we will be missing.

Leroy Travers

As of March 17th, it looked like your kindergarten enrollment was zero (0), can you explain the reasoning for that? If the reason is lack of applications, what is your plan to reach full enrollment in kindergarten?

A - Parents had until March 18th to answer their invitations for school choice. Therefore, Thursday and Friday of last week, Academia had pre-registration days. We had our kindergarten parents coming to school to fill out the registration packets. Due to the online enrollment system not working properly, we had to collect documentation from parents in person. Hence, during that time we had around 50 parents pre-register for next year. Most of those applications have been entered into the system already, therefore you will see different data if you check today. Thus far, Academia has 109 kindergarteners that accepted the invitation for next year.

Kim Klein

I want to first acknowledge what an outstanding job the school has done in presenting the application and then responding to questions. I do need to state on record that I am concerned about the lease as it is written without an opt-out clause. I understand the lease was signed in October, which is well before this process plays out. We have heard from several stakeholders that there is a belief that CSAC is a rubber stamp process. That is not what this process should ever be viewed as. If we could go back and rewrite history, we would have given you the advice to tentatively sign a lease that gave you an option if your expansion and relocation request were not approved. Logistically speaking, it is always best practice to have a funding-out, or some type of termination clause in any contractual arrangement. I would encourage the school to work with legal counsel to see if you could amend your lease to include an opt-out clause.

Additional Comments from the CSAC

Chuck Taylor

CSAC is not a rubber-stamp. Schools are held accountable. We have turned down modifications and closed charter schools.

Additional Comments from Academia

Mercedes Alonso

[Thank you for your thoughtful questions. We did not see this as a rubber stamp. We are in the fight of our life for our viability. This is our last stich effort to save our school. We have fought so hard for children and are committed to doing that moving forward. In no way do we not feel respect for CSAC and the State Board. What we did for this group is what we do every day. How you do one thing is how you do everything! We have not taken any part of this process for granted.](#)

Ms. Klein asked if there is a motion to recommend approval of Academia's major modification application. The motion was made and seconded to recommend approval without condition. The motion was carried unanimously. Ms. Klein reminded the school that CSAC's recommendation was just that, a recommendation to the Secretary of Education on the application to modify the charter

Conclusion

The criteria for approving a modification to a charter are set forth in 14 Del. C. § 512. The criteria include that the charter school's educational objectives are consistent with the legislative intent of and restrictions set forth in 14Del. C. c.5; the charter school's educational program has the potential to improve student performance; the plan for the charter school is economically viable; the charter school's financial and administrative operations meet or exceed the same

standards, procedures, and requirements as a school district; and the charter school's procedures to assure students', employees', and guests' health and safety are adequate.

Next Steps:

- The public comment period ends on April 11, 2022.
- The Secretary of Education will announce his decision at the May 2nd State Board of Education Meeting and ask the State Board for assent.