

**In The Matter Of:**  
*Department of Education*  
*Major Modification Application- Sussex Academy*

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*Hearing*  
*February 10, 2020*

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STATE OF DELAWARE  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
CHARTER SCHOOL OFFICE

IN RE: MAJOR MODIFICATION APPLICATION  
SUSSEX ACADEMY

Delaware Department of Education  
Charter School Office  
Townsend Building  
401 Federal Street  
Dover, Delaware

Monday, February 10, 2020  
5:30 p.m.

BEFORE: LEROY TRAVERS,  
Lead Education Associate,  
Charter School Office

ALSO PRESENT: CANDICE FIFER,  
Delaware State  
Board of Education

DARYL A. PARSON, ESQ.,  
Deputy Attorney General for  
the State Board of Education

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1 MR. TRAVERS: Good evening,  
2 everyone. I declare this public hearing  
3 for Sussex Academy Charter School to be  
4 open.

5 My name is Leroy Travers. I'm  
6 the lead education associate with the  
7 Charter School Office and I've been  
8 appointed by the Secretary of Education to  
9 conduct this public hearing.

10 Sussex Academy has filed an  
11 application to modify its charter to  
12 increase its approved enrollment from  
13 840 to 1,080 students, change its grade  
14 configurations from grade six to twelve to  
15 include grades K through five and establish  
16 a second campus.

17 As is required by law, the  
18 matter was referred to the Charter School  
19 Accountability Committee for investigation  
20 and report. This joint public hearing is  
21 being held by the Department of Education  
22 and the State Board of Education.

23 I will now ask those seated at  
24 the table with me to introduce themselves.



1 MS. FIFER: Candice Fifer with  
2 the State Board of Education.

3 MR. PARSON: Darryl Parson,  
4 Department of Justice.

5 MR. TRAVERS: In case you  
6 forgot.

7 I would like the record to  
8 reflect that the notice of the time, date  
9 and place of today's public hearing was  
10 published at the Charter School  
11 Accountability Committee's official place  
12 of business, on the Department of  
13 Education's official website, and on the  
14 State Public Meeting Calendar on the  
15 State's initial website.

16 A court reporter is present so  
17 that a record of this hearing can be made.  
18 It will be necessary for each speaker to  
19 clearly identify his- or herself before  
20 beginning to speak so that the court  
21 reporter will be able to note who you are.

22 The record of this hearing will  
23 be provided to the Secretary of Education  
24 and members of the State Board of



1 Education, together with any written or  
2 electronic comments received during the  
3 renewal decision process. To date,  
4 comments received on this renewal  
5 application are posted on the Charter  
6 School Office's website.

7 We will proceed in the  
8 following manner. First we will hear from  
9 representatives of the charter school who  
10 wish to comment on the renewal application.  
11 Unless otherwise waived by the presiding  
12 officer, charter school representatives  
13 shall be limited to 15 minutes in total.

14 Next we will take comments from  
15 the public. If you desire to speak and  
16 have not signed up, please indicate so now.

17 Okay. Those who have not  
18 signed up will not be permitted to speak  
19 and instead will be asked to submit written  
20 comment. All public speakers shall be  
21 limited to three minutes.

22 I reserve the right to impose  
23 reasonable time, place and manner  
24 restrictions if the speakers prevent this



1 hearing from accomplishing its goals in a  
2 reasonable manner. This hearing's purpose  
3 is strictly to collect public comment.  
4 Questions of the Department of Education or  
5 the State Board of Education are not  
6 permitted and will not be acknowledged.

7 At this point we will accept  
8 comments from any representatives from the  
9 school.

10 MR. ANDERSON: Good evening.

11 My name is Eric Anderson, and  
12 I'm the head of school at Sussex Academy.  
13 Joining me today, I have Duncan Smith, who  
14 is our chief operating officer, and  
15 Jennifer Scott, who represents our board of  
16 directors as our past president. I am  
17 before you today to speak on behalf of our  
18 recently submitted major modification  
19 application.

20 First, for those who are not  
21 familiar with our school, I would like to  
22 give some brief details from our 20-year  
23 history. Sussex Academy opened our doors  
24 in 2000 as a middle school serving grades



1 six through eight. Since our charter's  
2 inception, we have been recognized not only  
3 as one of the top performing schools in  
4 Sussex County but also in the State of  
5 Delaware. In 2012 Sussex Academy submitted  
6 and was granted a major modification to  
7 expand and offer grades nine through  
8 twelve. And this year we will hold our  
9 fourth high school commencement. In line  
10 with our middle school, our high school  
11 performs academically as one of the top  
12 high schools in the state. And, notably,  
13 our IB diploma program performs above the  
14 international average. For last school  
15 year, we have earned a hundred percent on  
16 our Charter Performance Framework and we  
17 have consistently maintained a clean and  
18 secure financial record. And in 2017 we  
19 were the first charter school to be granted  
20 a ten-year renewal by the Delaware  
21 Department of Education.

22                   Knowing you have all reviewed  
23 our application, I will only briefly speak  
24 on our rationale and desire to expand, and



1 then I will yield the time for those hear  
2 to give public comment.

3           Prior to coming to Sussex  
4 Academy, I held teaching and administrative  
5 positions at the Charter School of  
6 Wilmington, which is a charter school  
7 serving grades nine through twelve. The  
8 Charter School of Wilmington serves  
9 students that come from more than 30  
10 different middle schools and, as a result,  
11 that caused many inconsistencies in  
12 students' learning experiences when they  
13 arrive to the ninth grade.

14           At Sussex Academy, having a  
15 middle school that feeds into our high  
16 school program, I have noticed learning  
17 inconsistencies are far fewer as students  
18 enter the ninth grade. However, I have  
19 noticed similar learning inconsistencies  
20 that I encountered at CSW when Sussex  
21 Academy students enter the sixth grade, as  
22 they are coming from more than 20 different  
23 elementary schools.

24           First and foremost, expanding





1 to offer grades K through five will give us  
2 the opportunity to develop students from  
3 the beginning of their academic journey and  
4 further reduce learning acquisition  
5 inconsistencies at the middle school level,  
6 which ultimately will lead to increased  
7 academic achievement for our students.

8           Some specific academic outcomes  
9 we hope to achieve through expanding  
10 include offering Spanish, beginning in  
11 kindergarten, to help build the capacity  
12 for when students arrive to the high  
13 school. They can then actually attempt to  
14 obtain an IB dual language diploma, which  
15 is the program's most prestigious diploma.

16           Additionally, our K to 5  
17 program will be situated on the current  
18 Jefferson School campus, which is a unique  
19 facility that lends many opportunities for  
20 an outdoor environmental science classroom  
21 and help foster one of our school goals,  
22 which is to instill in our students a sense  
23 of environmental awareness.

24           I know that there are specific



1 questions around our desired timing to open  
2 our K through 5 program and questions on  
3 the perceived lack of diversity in our  
4 school. And we are currently in the  
5 process of preparing a response to submit  
6 next week.

7           One thing I can say, as a  
8 leader of color -- and the only leader in  
9 color in the state's history to lead a  
10 school -- a high performing charter  
11 school -- that diversity is on the  
12 forefront of my agenda. And there are  
13 efforts currently underway to diversify our  
14 school population.

15           I would also, however, like to  
16 make note on one significant change within  
17 our modification application, and that  
18 pertains to our enrollment preferences. If  
19 this modification were to be approved, we  
20 will be eliminating our special interest  
21 preference, in which we believe only clouds  
22 the public's perception to the transparency  
23 of our admissions process, which is always  
24 held with true integrity and in accordance



1 with the Delaware Charter School Code. It  
2 is our belief that the act of applying to  
3 our school in itself demonstrates that  
4 special interest. And we further believe,  
5 by eliminating the special interest  
6 preference, we further eliminate any biases  
7 for students that may come from family  
8 situations where they have less support to  
9 write and submit an essay to qualify them  
10 with equal access to said preference.

11 So, again, I understand the  
12 real purpose for tonight is to hear from  
13 the public, so I will now yield my  
14 remaining time to begin public comment.

15 And thank you for your time.

16 MR. TRAVERS: Thank you,  
17 Mr. Anderson.

18 Are there other representatives  
19 of the school that would like to speak at  
20 this time?

21 We will now accept comments  
22 from anyone else who has signed up to  
23 speak. Please remember to identify  
24 yourself before you begin your comments.



1 First we have Candice Shetzler.

2 MS. SHETZLER: Good evening.

3 I would first like to introduce  
4 myself. I'm actually a current member of  
5 the Jefferson School. So my child attends  
6 the Jefferson School, which would be -- I  
7 guess the terminology is up for debate --  
8 but be acquired, physically and  
9 structurally.

10 It's an interesting position  
11 for us to be in. I would just like to say  
12 that this is somewhat nerve-racking to talk  
13 to you. And I give workshops. And I'm a  
14 faculty member at Wesley College for a  
15 living. So what I do is speak to people  
16 all day long. But this is about children's  
17 futures and my child, in particular, and  
18 many others that are on the line.

19 We are -- I think, can speak  
20 for everyone's sadness that the Jefferson  
21 School is not financially stable and would  
22 be looking to close if this modification  
23 did not go through. And although there is  
24 no guarantee that our child would enter



1 Sussex Academy, it would at least secure  
2 options for children.

3           As a practicing occupational  
4 therapist who is working in pediatrics -- I  
5 work in school systems every day. I work  
6 with the Department of Health and Human  
7 Services in birth to three. And I work in  
8 public schools. I work in alternative  
9 schools. So schools are really important  
10 to me. And I believe in public education.  
11 But I also believe in options. I believe  
12 that there is no one-size-fits-all. I see  
13 it every day in our children who need  
14 special accommodations, have special needs,  
15 and, quite frankly, just need differences.  
16 They just need a different way to learn  
17 sometimes.

18           So I think, on behalf of all of  
19 that, we really appreciate that you are  
20 looking at the modification. Again, we're  
21 saddened that this is happening for us.  
22 And sometimes we feel sickened by the  
23 thought that we don't really know what  
24 could potentially happen to our own



1 children, you know. And we have looked at  
2 all of our options. But we still do -- I  
3 still do believe this is the best choice,  
4 because it provides options.

5           Secondly, I think it provides  
6 the State with an amazing environmental  
7 school. And I would never want to see that  
8 end, even if my child can't go to that  
9 school.

10           The Jefferson School, in the  
11 way it's situated, is amazing. It has  
12 amazing environmental options. It has  
13 ponds. My child has learned to skim the  
14 pond and take what he skimmed and put it  
15 under a microscope and look at it. There  
16 is just so many options of hands-on  
17 learning, taking care of animals -- things  
18 of that nature that I would never want to  
19 see taken off the table for anyone in  
20 Delaware.

21           So I really just wanted to  
22 express to you that we appreciate that  
23 you're looking at the modification and  
24 that, from a Jefferson School perspective,



1 I support it even if it means my child may  
2 ultimately not be a part of it or benefit  
3 from it. I still support it moving  
4 forward.

5 MR. TRAVERS: Thank you.

6 Becky Ghabour.

7 MS. GHABOUR: Good evening.

8 My name is Becky Ghabour, and I  
9 am also a parent of two children that  
10 attends the Jefferson School currently. My  
11 daughter Lily is in the third grade, and my  
12 Gavin is in the first grade. Both of my  
13 children have attended Jefferson for the  
14 last four years.

15 And my husband and I chose  
16 Jefferson for our children over the public  
17 school in our area because of our  
18 children's specific social and emotional  
19 needs. And we felt that the school could  
20 meet those needs. We also truly believed  
21 in the school's mission and their  
22 philosophy of education and as Candace  
23 spoke on their environmental science focus  
24 and on the hands-on learning that they



1 provide for our children. And we've been  
2 really happy with that choice.

3 And just like Candice, we're  
4 sad that this is the situation that it is,  
5 because our kids really love the school and  
6 they have come a long way developmentally.

7 The children who attend  
8 Jefferson School are just like Lily and  
9 Gavin. They're there for very specific  
10 reasons, reasons that made this school in  
11 Sussex County the best option for them. So  
12 when the Jefferson School closes next year,  
13 parents like this us are not going to have  
14 another option in Sussex County. If we --  
15 if you all approve the modification, we,  
16 along with many other families in the  
17 county, will have a choice and will feel  
18 that we have an option that would be the  
19 best fit for our children and for their  
20 education. So I just wanted to come  
21 tonight to offer my support for the  
22 modification of Sussex Academy's charter.

23 And I just want to also say  
24 that, as an educational psychologist and as





1 a professor of psychology at Wilmington  
2 University, I spent the last five years  
3 really focusing on the effects of trauma on  
4 children and having a trauma-informed  
5 approach. We've developed curriculum at  
6 the undergraduate and graduate level. So  
7 if I sit here tonight and I don't mention  
8 it, I would be remiss -- that I ask you  
9 all, I ask the Department of Education, and  
10 I ask the leadership of Sussex Academy to  
11 take that into consideration and to take a  
12 trauma-informed approach when we're  
13 thinking about the change, the change that  
14 will occur for our children that are  
15 currently at Jefferson and the change that  
16 will occur for new students coming to a  
17 school. And I just wanted to mention that  
18 as well.

19 Thank you very much.

20 MR. TRAVERS: Thank you.

21 Lisa Tulloch.

22 MS. TULLOCH: Well, I'm just  
23 a parent. But not education or anything.  
24 But I want to say my son, who is now



1 30 years old, was in the very first class  
2 at Sussex Academy. He started out in sixth  
3 grade, went through to the eighth grade  
4 there. And, unfortunately, at the time  
5 there was not a high school, which was very  
6 disappointing. But I'm glad since that now  
7 there is the high school, because it was  
8 much needed.

9 I can just tell you, as a  
10 parent, my son, after leaving Sussex  
11 Academy and going on to public high  
12 school -- he did go on to college. He  
13 attended the University of Delaware,  
14 obtained his Bachelor's degree. He has a  
15 job now where he is a leader in his  
16 position. And he did tell me that he  
17 thought that the Sussex Academy prepared  
18 him more for college than his high school  
19 did. So I just want to say that from just  
20 the way their structure and the curriculum.

21 And also something else that I  
22 saw when he was at Sussex Academy on the  
23 last day of eighth grade. The school did a  
24 play. And the children, knowing it was



1 their last day -- I saw tears from both  
2 boys and girls -- tears that these kids  
3 were going to have to -- that it was going  
4 to end, that it -- you know, for them. And  
5 that was very hard to see. The parents  
6 were crying. The kids were crying. So I  
7 think the values and the friendships that  
8 they got in the school were really deep and  
9 really important. The inclusion that these  
10 kids -- you know, they're still friends to  
11 this day, these kids.

12 But I do now -- I have a  
13 seven-year-old daughter. So I have --  
14 yeah. So I have a seven-year-old daughter.  
15 And, for me, I am very much interested in,  
16 of course, for her -- if this happens, for  
17 her to become a part of the elementary  
18 school and as soon as possible. And why I  
19 say that is what Mr. Anderson was saying  
20 about those inconsistencies with children  
21 coming from -- I want her to start now with  
22 those values and that structure and that  
23 curriculum. I want her to have that now as  
24 opposed to starting it in sixth grade. And



1 I don't know what bad habits she may pick  
2 up where she's at. And I want to start  
3 that as soon as possible for her.

4 So basically that's really all  
5 I have to say. But it's very important to  
6 me. It's important to enough that my  
7 sister and I came here tonight. My niece  
8 does attend Sussex Academy at my  
9 recommendation. And she did get in. And  
10 she loves it. And it's been good for her.  
11 And so I'm really hoping this is for the  
12 younger children.

13 That's it.

14 MR. TRAVERS: All right. We  
15 would like to thank everyone for your  
16 participation today. The Secretary will  
17 consider your comments in deciding, at the  
18 conclusion of the modification process,  
19 what decision to submit to the State Board  
20 for assent.

21 This hearing is now closed.

22 (The hearing adjourned at  
23 approximately 5:50 p.m. this same day.)

24 - - - - -



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C E R T I F I C A T E

STATE OF DELAWARE :  
:  
KENT COUNTY :

I, Robert Wayne Wilcox, Jr.,  
Registered Professional Reporter and Notary  
Public, do hereby certify that the  
foregoing record, Pages 1 to 20 inclusive,  
is a true and accurate transcript of my  
stenographic notes taken on February 10,  
2020, in the above-captioned matter.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto  
set my hand and seal this 10th day of  
February, 2020, at Wilmington, Delaware.

  
\_\_\_\_\_

Robert Wayne Wilcox, Jr., RPR

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<b>two (1)</b> 14:9	<b>website (3)</b>	<b>1,080 (1)</b> 2:13	
		<b>15 (1)</b>	