

September 13, 2013

Orleans Parish School Board

Charter School Application Recommendation Report

Type 1 Charter Application for
Smothers Academy Preparatory School for Arts and Sciences

Submitted by
Smothers Academy, Incorporated

Evaluation Team

Team Lead: Mark Weinberg

Evaluators: Michael Buerger

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National Association of Charter School Authorizers

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Introduction

Across New Orleans, more than 80 percent of public school students currently attend charter schools. These schools have led to a dramatic increase in the number of students meeting academic proficiency standards and the performance gap between students in Orleans Parish and the state of Louisiana has been cut in half over the past seven years.

Despite these dramatic gains, additional progress is needed. The Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB or the District) believes that every student in New Orleans deserves equal access to high-quality schools where their interests will come first, where they and their families will have choice, and where educators will have the tools and support they need to be successful.

This year's new school application process sought proposals from highly qualified applicants to open new Type 1 charter schools and to transform existing schools into Type 3 charter schools.

Focus on Quality

The 2013 Request for Applications and the resulting evaluation process are rigorous and demanding. The process is meant to ensure that charter school operators possess the capacity to implement sound strategies, practices, and methodologies. Successful applicants will clearly demonstrate high levels of expertise in the areas of education, school finance, administration, and management as well as high expectations for excellence in professional standards and student achievement.

Autonomy and Accountability

Charter schools have broad autonomy but not without strong accountability. Charter schools are accountable to OPSB for meeting academic, financial, and organizational performance standards. OPSB has implemented rigorous standards and expectations for its charter schools through OPSB Policies A127 and A128 and the Charter School Demonstrations Program Law.

The three areas of performance covered by the evaluation policy correspond directly with the three components of a strong charter school application and the three key areas of responsibility outlined in charter contracts.

Accountability

Evaluation of charter school performance is guided by three fundamental questions.

- Is the educational program a success?
- Is the school financially viable?
- Is the organization effective and well-run?

The answers to each of these three questions are essential to a comprehensive evaluation of charter school performance.

Charter schools are evaluated annually against standards in the following categories:

Academic Performance – Charter schools are required to make demonstrable improvements in student performance over the term of the charter. Schools are required to administer all state standardized tests and to adhere to academic standards. Schools are required to serve students with exceptionalities.

Financial Performance – Schools must demonstrate the proper use of public funds, as evidenced by annual balanced budgets, sound audit reports, and conforming to generally accepted accounting practices.

Organizational Performance – A nonprofit corporation holds the charter school contract and is responsible for complying with both the terms in the contract and all applicable laws. This charter school board of directors is a public body and is required to adhere to public meeting and public records laws.

Approved charter schools are granted a five-year charter, contingent upon results of the reporting requirements at the end of the third year. Schools unable to demonstrate academic progress or unable to comply with legal/contractual or financial requirements may face sanctions or charter revocation.

Autonomy

In exchange for rigorous accountability, charter school operators experience substantially greater authority to make decisions related to the following:

- Personnel decisions
- School management and operations
- Finances
- Curriculum
- School day and calendar
- Education Service Provider (ESP) agreements

Type 1 and Type 3 Charter Schools

Type 1 charters are authorized by a local school board, such as OPSB, for new-start charter schools.

Type 3 charters are authorized by a local school board, such as OPSB, for conversions of existing schools to charter schools.

Evaluation Process

OPSB engaged the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) to manage the application evaluation process and to provide independent, merit-based recommendations regarding whether to approve or deny each proposal. NACSA assembled independent evaluation teams that include national and local experience and expertise on the operation of successful charter schools. This report from the evaluation team is the culmination of four stages of review:

Proposal Evaluation

The evaluation team conducted individual and group assessments of the merits of the proposal based on the complete submission. In the case of experienced operators, the District and NACSA supplemented the evaluation team's work with due diligence to assess the applicant team's record of performance.

Request for Clarification

Based on the initial review, the evaluation team identified any areas requiring clarification or revision. Applicants had an opportunity to address these issues in writing.

Capacity Interview

After reviewing the clarification packet, the evaluation team conducted an in-person assessment of the applicant team's capacity.

Consensus Judgment

The evaluation team came to consensus regarding whether to recommend the proposal for approval or denial.

The duty of the evaluation team is to recommend approval or denial of each application based on its merits. The authority and responsibility to decide whether to approve or deny each application rests with the members of OPSB.

Report Contents

This evaluation report includes the following:

Proposal Overview

Basic information about the proposed school as presented in the application.

Recommendation

An overall judgment regarding whether the proposal meets the criteria for approval.

Evaluation

Analysis of the proposal based on four primary areas of plan development and the capacity of the applicant team to execute the plan as presented.

- **Education Plan:** mission and vision, parent and community involvement, education program overview and theory of change, curriculum and instructional design, pupil performance standards, high school graduation requirements, school structure, special populations and at-risk students, school leadership
- **Organizational Plan:** organizational charts, governing board, advisory bodies, grievance process, staffing plans, performance management, recruitment and enrollment, facility
- **Financial Plan:** budgets, cash flow projections, related assumptions, and financial protocols
- **Evidence of Capacity:** skills and experience of the proposed governing board and leadership team as well as the track record of driving transformational student academic gains

Rating Characteristics

Evaluation teams assess each application against the published evaluation criteria. In general, the following definitions guide evaluator ratings:

Meets the Standard: The response reflects a thorough understanding of key issues. It addresses the topic with specific and accurate information that shows thorough preparation; presents a clear, realistic picture of how the school expects to operate; and inspires confidence in the applicant's capacity to carry out the plan effectively.

Partially Meets the Standard: The response meets the criteria in many respects but lacks detail and/or requires additional information in one or more areas.

Does Not Meet the Standard: The response meets the criteria in some respects but has substantial gaps in a number of areas.

Falls Far Below the Standard: The response is wholly undeveloped or significantly incomplete, demonstrates lack of preparation, or otherwise raises substantial concerns about the viability of the plan or the applicant's ability to carry it out.

Proposal Overview

Operator Name

Smothers Academy, Incorporated

Proposed School Name

Smothers Academy Preparatory School for Arts and Sciences

Mission

Smothers Academy Preparatory School for Arts and Sciences is a gender-specific charter school designed to develop students into competent, self-motivated, lifelong learners. Our goal is to provide a multi-cultural, student-centered environment in which all students are held to high academic and behavioral standards. Our foundational principles of "obedience and discipline" reflect our commitment to the fundamental pillars of learning. Smothers Academy founders understand the critical need to employ innovative educational alternatives that promote young men's evolution into well-rounded, insightful men and positive, productive citizens. Smothers Academy's mission centers on a singular motto: "Saving a generation, one child at a time."

Proposed Location

New Orleans

Enrollment Projections

Academic Year	Planned # Students	Maximum # Students	Grades Served
2014-15	300	300	K-5
2015-16	390	390	PK-6
2016-17	440	440	PK-7
2017-18	490	490	PK-8
2018-19	490	490	PK-8
Capacity 2017-18	490	490	PK-8

Executive Summary

Recommendation

Deny

Smothers Academy Preparatory School for Arts and Sciences

Summary Analysis

The Smothers Academy educational plan, although well-intentioned, lacks coherence and does not present a clear picture of how the target population of male students will be served in a single-gender environment. The proverbial kitchen sink of best practices, from service learning and Direct Instruction to project-based learning and differentiated instruction, are offered in the plan. There is no clear prioritization among the strategies and methods, and the applicants have not indicated how they will address the specific needs of male students. The act of separating the genders is not sufficient, in and of itself, when a body of research and practice exists on the different learning needs of boys and girls.

The financial plan does not stand up to scrutiny. There is significant over-reliance on unsecured philanthropic aid and competitive grants. Further, there is a lack of understanding of costs involved in finding, furnishing, and leasing a facility that would meet the needs of the proposed program. In addition, major flawed assumptions are made in both revenues, such as Pre-K funding and special-education funding, and expenditures such as facility costs, transportation, and the structure of benefits. These assumptions demonstrate a significant lack of preparation by the proposed board and administrators to oversee and manage the finances of a public school.

The applicant team lacks the skills and expertise needed to open and manage a high quality school. However, with more time, research, and the addition of expertise and experience, especially in the area of charter school start up, the applicants could potentially build a team with the breadth and depth of skills required.

Summary of Section Ratings

Opening and maintaining a successful, high-performing charter school depends on having a complete, coherent plan and identifying highly capable individuals to execute that plan. It is not an endeavor for which strengths in some areas can compensate for material weaknesses in others.

Therefore, in order to receive a recommendation for approval, the application must Meet the Standard in all areas.

Education Plan ▼

Does Not Meet the Standard

Financial Plan ▼

Falls Far Below the Standard

Organizational Plan ▼

Does Not Meet the Standard

Evidence of Capacity ▼

Does Not Meet the Standard

Evaluator Biographies

Mark Weinberg

Mark Weinberg joined the National Charter Schools Institute in 2012. He focuses on efforts to develop tools and support partner organizations in attaining breakthrough performance for the students they serve. Previously, Mark served as director of academic performance and accountability at Central Michigan University's Center for Charter Schools. Prior to this, Weinberg served as founding director of the International Academy of Flint. He has also served as a high school principal in Germany and has taught in Switzerland and Canada. He holds bachelor's degrees from the University of Western Ontario and Brock University, and a master's degree from Central Michigan University. He is also a nationally certified curriculum auditor.

Michael Buerger

Michael Buerger has more than 25 years of experience in finance, operations, accounting, and taxation in the non-profit, private, and public sectors. In 2005, Michael co-founded Abacus Education Partners, LLC, a charter school finance and operations services organization. Over the last eight years, Abacus has delivered a diverse portfolio of charter school financial and operational consulting engagements to more than 100 charter schools including 20 Charter Management Organizations across 14 states. Prior to co-founding Abacus, Michael worked at educationally focused organizations including EdTec, a for-profit educational consulting firm, as COO, and for the KIPP Foundation, an educational non-profit, where he served as CFO for three years.

Ann Clayton Chamberlain

Ann Clayton Chamberlain has spent the last five years managing her own consulting firm that includes general business and financial advice to a variety of industries. Ann spent a significant amount of time with Langston Hughes Academy Charter School in a turnaround while on the board and has spent the last three years in the active assistance for a start-up community health center as a board member and Treasurer. Ann has three years of public accounting experience, eight years of commercial banking experience, and six years of experience with a boutique investment banking firm.

Roslyn Johnson Smith

Roslyn Johnson Smith holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Elementary Education and Special Education, a Master of Education degree in Learning Disabilities, and a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Educational Administration. During her 32-year career in New Orleans' public education system, Dr. Smith taught elementary grades and special education. For 22 years, she was a principal. She was named the Louisiana Elementary Principal of the Year and a National Distinguished Principal. Dr. Smith's last position was Area Superintendent. Currently, she is the CEO and President of A+ Professional Educators, Inc. She is also the former President of the Treme Charter School Association.

Amy McClellan

Amy McClellan is an independent grant writer and non-profit consultant. She has worked extensively with the Florida charter school movement since 1999 and with the state charter school association, the Florida Consortium of Public Charter Schools. She serves as Program Director for the Gold Seal of Excellence Charter School Program in Florida and was Program Director for the Walton Family Foundation's Florida Grant Partners Program from 2003–2009. Amy has also served as a reviewer and editor for charter school applications in Louisiana, New Jersey, and Tennessee through the National Association of Charter School Authorizers. Amy received a B.A. from Occidental College and an M.F.A. in Art History from Princeton University.