

May 28, 2014

Mississippi Charter School Authorizer Board

Charter School Application Recommendation Report

New Charter School Application for
Inspire Charter School STEM & Arts Scholars Academy

Submitted by
Inspire Charter School

Evaluation Team

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National Association of Charter School Authorizers

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Introduction

Following the passage of the Mississippi Charter Schools Act of 2013 (HB 369) in April 2013, Governor Bryant created the Mississippi Charter School Authorizer Board (MCSAB), a statewide charter school authorizer with exclusive charter jurisdiction in the state of Mississippi. The mission of the seven-member MCSAB is to authorize high-quality charter schools, particularly schools designed to expand opportunities for underserved students. To that end, the MCSAB annually issues a Request for Proposals to operate charter schools.

Focus on Quality

The 2013–2014 RFP and proposal evaluation process are rigorous and demanding. The process is meant to ensure that approved charter school operators possess the capacity to implement a school model that is likely to dramatically increase student outcomes. Successful applicants will demonstrate high levels of expertise and capacity in the areas of curriculum and instruction, school finance, educational and operational leadership, and non-profit governance, as well as high expectations for excellence in student achievement and professional standards. An application that merits a recommendation for approval will present a clear, realistic picture of how the school expects to operate; detail how the school will raise student achievement; and inspire confidence in the applicant's capacity to successfully implement the proposed academic and operational plans.

Evaluation Process

For its inaugural RFP cycle, MCSAB partnered with the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) to manage the application process and to provide independent, merit-based recommendations regarding whether to approve or deny each proposal. NACSA assembled independent evaluation teams that included both national and local expertise related to charter school start-up and operation. This report from the evaluation team is a culmination of three stages of review:

Proposal Evaluation

The evaluation team conducted individual and group assessment of the merits of the proposal based on the complete written submission. In the case of experienced school operators, the MCSAB and NACSA supplemented this written evaluation with due diligence to verify claims made in the proposal related to past performance.

Capacity Interview

After reviewing the application and discussing the findings of their individual reviews, the evaluation team conducted an in-person interview to assess the applicant's overall capacity to implement the plans in the proposal.

Consensus Judgment

Following the capacity interview, 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 against MCSAB-approved evaluation criteria. The authority and responsibility to decide whether to approve or deny each application rests with the members of MCSAB.

Report Contents

This evaluation report includes the following:

Proposal Overview

Basic information about the proposed school as presented.

Recommendation

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

Evaluation

Analysis of the proposal within each of the six required RFP sections (Culture, Leadership, School Structure and Operations, Educational Program, Instructional Staff, Governance), within any of four supplementary sections as applicable (Waivers, Conversion Charter Schools, Education Service Provider Relationship, Information for Applicants Currently Operating One or More Schools), and the capacity of the applicant team to execute the plan as presented.

Rating Characteristics

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

Meets or Exceeds the Standard

The response reflects a thorough understanding of key issues. It clearly aligns with the goals of the school. The response includes specific and accurate information that shows thorough preparation.

Partially Meets the Standard

The response meets criteria in some aspects, but lacks sufficient detail and/or requires additional information in one or more areas.

Does Not Meet the Standard

The response is significantly incomplete; demonstrates lack of preparation; is unsuited to the mission and vision of MCSAB or otherwise raises significant concerns about the viability of the plan or the applicant's ability to carry it out.

Proposal Overview

Nonprofit Applicant Name

Inspire Charter School

Proposed School Name

Inspire Charter School STEM & Arts Scholars Academy

Mission

Our mission is to provide a high quality education that puts students first and prepares them to become COLLEGE READY SCHOLARS and life-long learners.

Proposed Location

Columbus Municipal School District

Enrollment Projections

Academic Year	Planned # Students	Grades Served
2014-2015	120	K-3; 9
2015-2016	200	K-4; 9-10
2016-2017	280	K-5; 9-11
2017-2018	360	K-6; 9-12
2018-2019	380	K-6; 9-12
2019-2020	400	K-6; 9-12

Executive Summary

Inspire Charter School STEM & Arts Scholars Academy

Recommendation

Deny

Summary Analysis

The evaluation team recommends denial for Inspire Charter School STEM & Arts Scholars Academy. The educational program is not adequately developed and supported by the budget. Of particular concern is the fact that major changes were made to the leadership structure and the first year enrollment plan between the time the application was submitted and the capacity interview. No evidence is provided to show that the newly-selected school leader has the capacity to design, launch, and oversee a new school. The applicants fail to include many required details of the school's curriculum plan, including scope and sequence, class size and structure, resources, and instructional materials. There is no attempt to differentiate the educational program and culture of the high school grades and the elementary grades. It is not adequately demonstrated how a STEM and the arts focus of the school will be integrated into the curriculum.

Other concerns: the applicant's lack of awareness of the logistical challenges of opening both elementary and high school grades simultaneously in a small school with limited staff and resources; an inconsistent presentation of staffing structures; and an unacknowledged potential conflict of interest in the plan to lease the school facility from the church where the school leader is pastor.

The evaluation team would like to recognize the enthusiasm and teamwork of the members of the founding group and their dedication to serving the needs of their community. We hope that the comments made in this recommendation will be used to further their goals.

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.*

I. Culture ▾

Partially Meets the Standard

II. Leadership ▾

Does Not Meet the Standard

III. School Structure and Operations ▾

Does Not Meet the Standard

IV. Education Program ▾

Does Not Meet the Standard

V. Instructional Staff ▾

Partially Meets the Standard

VI. Governance ▾

Does Not Meet the Standard

VII. Waivers ▾

Not Applicable

VIII. Conversion Charter School ▾

Not Applicable

IX. Education Service Provider Relationship ▾

Not Applicable

X. Applicants Currently Operating One or More Schools in Any State or Nation ▾

Not Applicable

I. Culture

Inspire Charter School STEM & Arts Scholars
Academy

Rating ▾

Partially Meets the Standard

Plan Summary

Inspire Charter School will offer an "Early College Readiness Intervention Academy" for grades K-6 and 9-12 focusing on high achievement through a STEM-based inquiry learning structure infused with the arts in Columbus, MS. The school's projected population will be 73.61 percent free and reduced lunch, 2.59 percent special education only, and 10 percent free/reduced lunch and special education, representing 86.2 percent under-served students.

The school will promote a college-going culture through a system of support called the "Inspire Way." It will address the learning of each student using MDE's "Teacher Support Team Response to Intervention Model" in conjunction with individual learning plans. A local organization affiliated with the school, the Columbus Coalition for Education Options (CCEO), has conducted community meetings to solicit input and support from potential parents.

Parents will be involved through a school to family partnership called iPACT, which includes parent/student/teacher contracts and gives parents several means of involvement.

Analysis

This section partially meets the standard for approval because although it presents a strong vision and convincing evidence of the need within the Columbus community for a STEM and "college-going" educational program, it does not give a convincing and detailed explanation of how the school will create that "college-going" culture. The applicant does not explain the "Inspire Way" in enough detail or present a discipline plan that clearly supports this culture.

The applicant group did not explain how it will establish "The Inspire Way" or the "college-going culture" among students, teachers, and families. "The Inspire Way," the basis for the school culture, is introduced with clever and memorable themes. However, the application fails to detail the systems, structures, practices, and traditions that will be developed to foster this culture. Also, there is no discussion of how the culture will be developed differently in the elementary and high school grades, which is a concern.

The brief discipline policy does not address details regarding the dress code, behavior on the bus, use of technology, social media, and special education students. Although the application noted that the school's discipline policy will include research-based positive behavior supports, the attached policy included no such positive behavior reinforcements. It does not include any differentiation in disciplinary procedures for elementary and high school students.

When asked in the interview about the logistical challenges of opening with both elementary and high school grades simultaneously in a small school with limited staff and resources, the applicants did not seem to be aware of any. Rather, the group noted that they selected those grade levels simply to meet community needs.

Notable strengths of this section: the "iPact Strategies" to support ongoing family engagement; a Saturday "Parent University;" and the strong community support garnered through CCEO through multiple community meetings where families provided feedback on the school plan. The evaluation team is impressed by the enthusiasm and teamwork of the members of the founding group and their dedication to meeting the needs of under-served students in the community.

II. Leadership

Inspire Charter School STEM & Arts Scholars
Academy

Rating ▾

Does Not Meet the Standard

Plan Summary

The leadership team will consist of an executive director - who was identified in the interview as Pastor Darren Leach - a principal, teachers, and support staff. Reverend Leach is a member of CCEO and the founding group.

The board of trustees will oversee the executive director, who will oversee the principal. The executive director will be trained in effective charter school leadership in high poverty, high needs environments by the Mississippi Black Alliance for Educational Options.

The principal will be monitored and evaluated by professional consultants using Mississippi's Principal Evaluation System. The school leaders will be responsible for meeting expectations for academic performance, academic program fidelity, parent/teacher/student satisfaction, and fundraising/community relations.

Analysis

This section does not meet the standard because the applicant group presented a different leadership structure during the capacity interview than in the application, and announced that one of the founding members will serve as the school leader without providing enough information to assess his capacity to design, launch, and manage a high-performing school. The change in the leadership structure will have a significant impact on other aspects of the proposed school plan, requiring modifications to the startup plan, instructional staff plan, and budget.

In the application, the leadership team is identified as a school leader/CEO and assistant school leader, to be hired in the third year. In the interview, the applicants announced that the team will consist of an executive director and a principal, both to be hired in the first year. A member of the founding group, Reverend Darren Leach, was identified in the interview as the person who will serve as the executive director. Rev. Leach may have experience that is relevant to the qualifications required of the school leader, but full information on his background and qualifications was not provided, so it is difficult to determine his capacity in a meaningful way. The team did not explain when and how the principal will be hired and whether the principal's job description will differ from that provided in the application for the assistant school leader. With the leadership team structure still in development, it is not possible to determine its overall capacity.

Other members of the leadership team are not identified or discussed in the narrative although job descriptions are included in Attachment F. A time line, criteria, and process for recruitment are not included. In addition, there is no plan for coaching the school leader. The plan to use the MS Superintendents Evaluation Instrument to evaluate the school leader does not seem appropriate for a charter school administrator.

III. School Structure and Operations

Rating ▾

Does Not Meet the Standard

Inspire Charter School STEM & Arts Scholars
Academy

Plan Summary

The school staffing structure includes an executive director, principal, certified teachers, assistant teachers, a curriculum coordinator/blended learning specialist, a guidance counselor, a school resource officer, a school nurse, a librarian, and a custodian. Services will be contracted for food services, building maintenance, bus transportation, professional services, as well as for after school and summer school. Salaries will be based on the state's base teacher salary ranges, plus additional salary supplements for extended learning time and performance-based incentives.

Estimated enrollment in 2015-16 is 240 in K-3 and grade 9. Recruitment strategies include television, radio, newspapers, billboards, social media, word-of-mouth, mail, phone calls, texting, and presentations at public venues. The goal for attendance is 95-100 percent; the target for re-enrollment is 95 percent. The school will be located in a 41,500 square foot former school building owned by Genesis Church. The building is located on 5.6 acres with classrooms, a cafeteria, library/media center, locker room, and showers.

Analysis

This section does not meet the standard because in both the application and capacity interview, the applicant group did not present a consistent or well-organized line of authority, staffing structure, enrollment plan, or startup plan.

The organizational chart omits the board and shows confusing lines of authority among staff and contracted services. Two very different staff rosters are provided in Attachment H and in the budget document. The applicant states that salary ranges will be based on the Mississippi teachers' pay scale and "supplemented for additional service time;" it is not demonstrated that this will be adequate to attract qualified teachers.

The applicant noted that in the first year of operation, four part-time teachers will be hired for the small entering class of ninth graders. The ability of the school to meet high school academic requirements for these and future students is questionable with such a small staff.

The group also reported in the interview that they had restructured the startup plan so that the school would open in 2015-16 with 240 students rather than the original plan of opening in 2014-15 with 120 students. This change will require substantial modifications to the personnel roster, organizational chart, and budget so that all are aligned. The startup plan also leaves many tasks to be done in the summer before school opens, which may be unmanageable. The school leader is scheduled to be hired in June, only two months before the opening of school, which doesn't align with the plan to make the school leader responsible for tasks earlier in the year.

The group has already identified a suitable facility for the school: a 41,500 sq. ft. former school building owned by Genesis Church described by the applicant as needing only minor renovations and technology upgrades. However, the designated executive director, Rev. Leach, is the pastor of this church, raising conflict of interest questions. When asked about this, the applicants did not demonstrate an understanding of how this conflict of interest should be properly handled by the board.

IV. Education Program

Rating ▼

Does Not Meet the Standard

Inspire Charter School STEM & Arts Scholars
Academy

Plan Summary

The school's educational program will be based on the Mississippi Curriculum Standards and the Common Core State Standards. The curriculum will be augmented with a focus on STEM, the arts, and blended learning, with 1:1 computing ("every child will have a technology device in their hands every period, every class, every day"). The school will use resources from the Mississippi University for Women for its art curriculum. Each student will have a personalized learning plan.

The school will offer an extended school day (7:30 a.m.–4:30 p.m.) and a Saturday Academy for parents and students. Extracurricular and sports programming will be offered. If funding is available, a summer program will be operated.

Students' academic progress will be measured by the MAP assessment, EZ Test Tracker, and EZ assessment. The school plans to use the Mississippi Student Information System (MSIS) to manage student performance data. A special education teacher and contracted provider will identify special education students, who will be served through an inclusion model.

Analysis

The section does not meet the standard because the instructional program lacks detail and consistency and fails to demonstrate that applicants will be able to prepare students to become "college ready" and enter STEM careers.

The applicant left out many details of the curriculum plan, making it impossible to determine if the academic plan is rigorous and meets the needs of the targeted population. There is no information on the curricular model and focus; the learning environment; the class size and structure; whether the curriculum is research-based; resources and instructional materials; and an overview of course scope and sequence. Also missing are details on how the school will address literacy needs and integrate STEM and arts into the curriculum, although in the interview the applicants mentioned plans to use two curriculum products (Science and Technology for Children and Pitsco Education). There is no attempt to differentiate the elementary and high school academic programs. Blended learning is the only strategy offered to address the needs of students at risk of dropping out, which is not sufficient. There are many references to MDE staff and programs without explaining how these are connected to the proposed school's own program.

The school's approach to assessment is not clear. Except for the MAP, different assessments are listed in the narrative and the performance framework. The framework also omits required goals for governance, attendance, expulsion, suspensions, and post-secondary readiness. A "Managing Director for Student Assessment for the Inspire Foundation" is referred to but is not on the staff roster. Academic goals are clearly defined, although the goal of a 10 percent increase in proficiency in all subjects over five years is not rigorous enough to prepare all students to be "college-ready." Corrective actions are not identified if goals are not met.

The school calendar provided is inadequate as it omits holidays and school-year professional development days. The applicant intends to provide an extended year, but this is dependent upon securing funding for a 20-day summer program. Finally, there are extensive lists of electives and supplemental programming to be offered but without any plan for staffing them.

V. Instructional Staff

Inspire Charter School STEM & Arts Scholars
Academy

Rating ▾

Partially Meets the Standard

Plan Summary

The school leader will be responsible for teacher recruitment, interviews, and selection. Job openings will be posted on the school's website and in local newspapers. The school will ensure that 75 percent of all teachers hired are highly qualified. A cultural competency assessment will be part of the interview process. Background screening will be conducted by the police department. Teachers will be monitored, coached, and evaluated by the school leader using the MSTAR system developed by MDE with assistance from consultants.

Teachers will be inducted into the school through a program developed by a consultant. Professional development begins in June with training for the leadership team, followed by training in July for instructional staff. Monthly trainings for school staff and/or parents will be held during the school year.

Analysis

This section partially meets the standard as the applicant addresses some but not all of the required criteria. The MSTAR is identified as the teacher evaluation tool and coaching tool and the professional development plan includes a detailed list of topics aligned with the school program. Missing from the application are clearly-defined qualifications of teaching candidates, goals for teacher coaching and teacher retention, and identification of who will deliver the professional development plan. The application notes that the "School Leader/CEO" will be responsible for recruiting and coaching teachers; since the selected Executive Director does not have a background in education or educational leadership, he may not have the appropriate skills to identify and coach the instructional staff to support successful implementation of the educational program.

The application does not describe the desired professional backgrounds, depth of experience, and personal qualities of the teachers and other school staff - only that 75 percent will be highly qualified. It does not provide goals for teacher coaching or criteria that will be used to establish coaching feedback. The application only refers to plans to use the MSTAR as the system for coaching, without a discussion of any special coaching needs of the charter school's teaching staff. There are also no specific goals for teacher retention mentioned in the application.

The professional development plan in Attachment T is well-developed and includes parental training and involvement. It includes a long and detailed list of topics to be delivered monthly over the course of the year. However, information on who will provide each training is missing, as well as the estimated number of hours and days that will be required for each topic and how the professional development program will be evaluated. Without this information, it is difficult to determine if the plan is realistic.

VI. Governance

Inspire Charter School STEM & Arts Scholars
Academy

Rating ▾

Does Not Meet the Standard

Plan Summary

The seven members of the school's governing board have backgrounds in the construction industry, counseling, corporate leadership and marketing, youth programming, health sciences, and teaching. All reside in Columbus/Lowndes County, MS. The board will be responsible for the financial and academic oversight of the school. Members will participate in annual training from the Mississippi School Boards Association, as well as in Saturday workshops using online resources. The board will meet once a month.

The organization's articles of incorporation have been approved by the MS Secretary of State and its application for 501(c)(3) status is pending.

The school budget submitted with the application is \$1.2M in the first year, increasing to \$3.1M in the sixth year. A fundraising goal of \$1.3M is set to allow the school to open in 2014-15. The school will hold contracts with outside entities for transportation, food services, legal services, professional development, technical assistance, maintenance, and security.

Analysis

This section does not meet the standard because the budget does not align with the new startup plan and staffing structure described in the capacity interview, does not appear to support the educational program described in the narrative, and does not include a viable contingency plan if fundraising goals are not met.

The new leadership team structure and startup plan presented in the capacity interview warrant a complete overhaul of the budget. Hiring the executive director and principal in the first year will have a significant impact on the bottom line. (Originally, the assistant school leader was going to be hired in the third year.) Since the current budget is not aligned with the proposed program, it is no longer viable.

There are also concerns that allocations for student instructional materials and technology (\$350 per student) will not be sufficient for 1:1 computing and to implement a strong STEM and arts curriculum and a blended learning program for all grades. Another concern: estimates for printing and copying, postage and shipping, other instructional equipment, and property insurance remain flat or decrease over the five years while the school is growing. The \$5,000 budgeted for the annual audit, \$400 per employee for health care and \$2,500 in building supplies appear to be underestimated. The \$92,000 salary for the Executive is much higher than the mean wage for school administrators in the region. The \$75,000 to \$120,788 budgeted for educational consulting services is not explained.

The proposed contingency plan should the applicants be unable to raise \$200,000 a year in private donations is unrealistic as it depends solely on a line of credit from an unidentified source and additional fundraising activities.

Although the members of the board represent a diversity of skills, no one on the board has any experience with school startup or operations. This could limit their ability to oversee the school leader, who also does not have experience operating a school. At the same time, the review team would like to recognize the dedication and collaborative spirit exhibited by members of the governing board during the capacity interview.

Evaluator Biographies

Evaluator's Name

[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, Los Angeles and an M.F.A. in Art History from Princeton University.

Evaluator's Name

[Dr. Limmie Flowers](#)

Dr. Limmie Flowers is a 40-year veteran educator. She has held many roles in the education field, ranging from school administrator to instructional leader to elementary school teacher. She has also served as principal of high performing schools in both Jackson Public School District and Clinton Public School District. She currently works as a leadership and coaching specialist at the National Institute for School Leadership in University, Mississippi. Prior to this she served as director of Federal Programs for Clinton Public School District. She holds a B.A. from Tougaloo College, and an M.S. and Ph.D. in education from Jackson State University.

Evaluator's Name

[Dr. Tommye Henderson](#)

Tommye Henderson is currently an assistant professor in the School of Education at Mississippi College. With over 30 years in the education field, Tommye has served in many capacities including as superintendent of Clinton Public School District and as director of personnel for Columbus Municipal School District. She has also served as a principal and teacher and is active in many community organizations in Clinton. She graduated with a B.S. in elementary education from the University of Southern Mississippi, an M.Ed. from Mississippi State University, and a Ph.D. in educational leadership from Mississippi State University.

Evaluator's Name

[Simeon Stolzberg](#)

Simeon Stolzberg is currently an education consultant who works primarily with charter school authorizers, operators, and founding groups. Prior to this he was the director of school evaluation at the SUNY Charter Schools Institute, which oversees charter schools across New York State. He has been a school teacher and principal and is the founder of the Berkshire Arts and Technology Charter School in Massachusetts. Simeon holds an M.A. in public policy and served at the U.S. Department of Education in the Clinton administration.