

May 28, 2014

Mississippi Charter School Authorizer Board

Charter School Application Recommendation Report

New Charter School Application for
Phoenix Early College Charter School

Submitted by
Phoenix Community Development Foundation, Inc.

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

Phoenix Community Development Foundation, Inc.

Proposed School Name

Phoenix Early College Charter School

Mission

The mission of Phoenix Early College Charter School is to provide area students who are underrepresented in higher education a supportive and integrated opportunity to complete a high school education while accruing post-secondary credits simultaneously.

Proposed Location

Natchez-Adams District 130

Enrollment Projections

Academic Year	Planned # Students	Grades Served
2015-2016	75	9
2016-2017	150	9-10
2017-2018	225	9-11
2018-2019	300	9-12
2019-2020	300	9-12

Executive Summary

Phoenix Early College Charter School

Recommendation

Deny

Summary Analysis

The evaluation team recommends denial of this application for Phoenix Early College Charter School. There are three primary areas of weakness: 1) the real capacity of the applicant is unknown because the legal entity that will govern the school does not yet exist and is different from the one that will hold the charter; 2) the school's educational and staffing plan lack sufficient detail and have many inconsistencies; and 3) there is no firm commitment from either Alcorn State University or Copiah-Lincoln Community College to participate in this project and these partnerships are absolutely essential to implement the school's early college model design.

Another concern is that it appears that the consulting group Charter Pros, which wrote the application, will be primarily responsible for designing the school program. Although the consultants have extensive experience in successful charter school operations, none has ever operated an early high school model school. Also, the startup plan omits a number of important tasks and the budget contains some erroneous calculations.

It is evident that the board members of the Phoenix Community Development Foundation have carefully chosen the early high school model based on the needs of students in the Natchez community and they have been very successful in raising community awareness and support for their project. The evaluation team hopes that the founding group will use the evaluation findings 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 ▾

Partially Meets the Standard

III. School Structure and Operations ▾

Does Not Meet

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

Rating ▾

Partially Meets the Standard

Phoenix Early College Charter School

Plan Summary

Phoenix Early College Charter School (PECCS) will serve high school students in Natchez, MS, who are underrepresented in higher education. The school will offer the opportunity to complete a high school education while accruing post-secondary credits simultaneously at Copiah-Lincoln (Co-Lin) Community College.

PECCS will be located at Alcorn State University-Natchez, located on the same campus as the community college. The school culture will promote a safe, secure learning environment with strong relationships and a sense of belonging. A restorative justice discipline system will be used. Ninth and tenth graders will be required to wear a uniform and attend a closed campus, while 11th and 12th grade students attend classes at the community college.

The college will seek to engage the community through local churches, and through partnerships with the two colleges, mentoring and tutoring for students. Parents will be engaged through special events and educational resources offered at the school.

Analysis

This section partially meets the standard. It provides a compelling description of the target population and need for an early college high school program in the Natchez community and evidence that the design team conducted extensive research on this model. However, it fails to address other key factors defining the school culture, including evidence of a commitment of support from the proposed college partners, and clear descriptions of the discipline policy and parent engagement strategies.

The founding group does not provide evidence of the necessary community support; namely, solid commitments from the two partner colleges, Copiah-Lincoln Community College and Alcorn State University, to offer dual enrollment and provide the facility for the school. In the interview, the applicants indicated that initial discussions have begun with both institutions but they have not yet secured a memorandum of understanding or any type of agreement, which is needed at this point to substantiate the viability of the program.

The vision of the school culture is described well, but lacks details on how this culture will be created and fostered. The discipline policy is briefly described, mentioning that it will use the restorative justice system, but again, without meaningful details including policies for special education students. Finally, the application mentions that a parent engagement program will be based on the successful program developed by Robertson Charter School, but without offering any specific information.

II. Leadership

Phoenix Early College Charter School

Rating ▾

Partially Meets the Standard

Plan Summary

The school's leadership team will consist of a principal, college liaison/guidance counselor, and lead teacher. The principal, who has not yet been identified, will have a master's degree in educational administration and knowledge of the early college model. The principal will report to the board of directors. The college liaison/guidance counselor will be appointed by the partner community college in the third year. The college liaison/guidance counselor will have a master's degree in counseling and provide advising and assessment services to students attending college courses as well as serving as a liaison with the college. The lead teacher will lead the instructional staff and also provide administrative support.

The consultant, Charter Pros, will evaluate the leadership team twice a year and consult with the board regarding findings. The principal will evaluate teachers and non-teaching staff.

Analysis

This section partially meets the standard because although it provides comprehensive job descriptions for the principal and guidance counselor and includes information on how the principal will be evaluated, other necessary information is missing or unclear about the leadership team. Specifically, the application lacks information on the role of the lead teacher, how the principal will be recruited and hired, how teachers will be coached, and why the guidance counselor will be appointed by the college.

The application notes that the college liaison/guidance counselor "will be appointed from the partnering college staff by the college," yet according to the staffing chart and budget, that individual's salary will be paid by the charter school. It is not clear how this arrangement will work. A lead teacher is mentioned as the third member of the leadership team, but insufficient information is provided to explain what that person's role and responsibilities will be.

The application does not describe the process for recruiting, hiring, and selecting the principal. When the application was prepared a possible principal had been identified, but during the interview, the applicants said that this was no longer true. The application mentions that Charter Pros will evaluate the "leadership personnel" twice a year. It is not clear if this refers only to the principal. The criteria and/or instrument to be used to evaluate the principal is not discussed. The information provided under "Leadership Team Coaching and Evaluation" is out of place as it refers to teachers' professional development.

III. School Structure and Operations

Rating ▾

Does Not Meet

Phoenix Early College Charter School

Plan Summary

The school staff will consist of the principal, college liaison/guidance counselor, teachers, student assistant personnel ("SAP"), and one secretary. In year one, four teachers and one SAP will be hired for an enrollment of 75 students, increasing to eight teachers and three SAPs in year five for an enrollment of 300 students.

Student recruitment activities include radio, television, and print advertising, as well as informal presentations at local churches, civic groups, middle schools, and youth clubs. Enrollment will be through open lottery. The school will provide bus passes to students for public transportation and food services including breakfast and lunch. The school facility is planned to be located on the Alcorn State University Natchez Campus with shared use of laboratories, classrooms, and other common areas. The startup plan begins with fundraising, student recruitment, and the hiring of the principal in the fall of 2014.

Analysis

This section does not meet the standard. Although it addresses all of the criteria in some way, there are large gaps of information that are needed to create a feasible school structure.

The narrative personnel roster in Attachment H includes clear information on the number of staff and when they will be hired. It does not include information on salary ranges and benefits as requested in the RFP. The applicants are relying on hiring a teacher licensed in both social sciences and special education to meet special education needs. It may not be possible to find such a candidate and it is unclear how special education services will be provided in other subject areas. Also, there is no plan to hire or contract with personnel who can provide social emotional counseling, an important element of any school serving this population. The job description for the guidance counselor lists only academic counseling responsibilities; there is no reference to any type of social emotional counseling.

Transportation for students who live outside public transit routes is mentioned but there is no specific plan described. The narrative states that PECCS will provide food services to students but does not identify where services will take place; the facilities plan in Attachment I does not require any food preparation or eating area. An "underutilized existing building" at Alcorn State University is mentioned as a possible facility site but without any meaningful details, such as how large the space is, what types of rooms are available, whether the school will have to share certain areas with the college and if so, how those arrangements work.

The Startup Plan is difficult to follow in narrative form, omits tasks in several areas, and does not identify who is responsible for each task. For example, there is no time line for curriculum development; establishment and training of the new board of directors; set up of school office functions; or development of the assessment and financial systems, to name a few.

IV. Education Program

Phoenix Early College Charter School

Rating ▼

Does Not Meet the Standard

Plan Summary

PECCS will follow the established early college high school model. Ninth and tenth graders will take high school classes taught by PECCS teachers at the charter school. Juniors and seniors will take dual credit courses at Co-Lin Community College. PECCS students will also be able to participate in the college's career and technical education courses.

The high school curriculum will provide 24 required credit hours and include project-based learning, extensive writing practice, high-level thinking skills, and character and leadership development. Instruction will be provided for 7.75 hours per day, a minimum of 180 days per year, using a four-block hybrid school day schedule.

Assessment tools will include the ACT Explorer and Plan Test, SATP2, A+ Learning Link, iSTEEP benchmark testing, and the ACT. The school will utilize the three tier Response to Intervention (RTI) process. Graduation requirements will include 24 credits plus 60 service learning hours.

Analysis

This section does not meet the standard. Although a number of areas of the educational program are addressed, there are also several critical weaknesses in the plan that will make it difficult for the school to address the academic needs of the target population.

The proposed curriculum and intervention strategies do not address the needs of entering ninth graders who are performing far below grade level in order to prepare them to take college-level courses within two years. This is presumably a large segment of the target population. The statement that struggling students will have up to 50 additional days of instruction is not supported by any specific plan, staffing, or the school calendar. The proposed "minimesters" provide just a few days of remediation at a time, and it was learned in the interview that a mandated 30-day summer session is dependent upon unidentified private funding. The evaluation team determined that the description of the RTI plan was copied verbatim from the Illinois State Board of Education website, which raises the question of the team's understanding of the process. Furthermore, it is not clear what the specific strategies will be for each level and who will provide them. The description of SPED services is very brief; who will develop students' IEPs and who will provide SPED services are not discussed. It is also not clear if the budget assumptions for SPED services are adequate. The "special education consultant" listed in the budget is not discussed in the application and the amount allocated for those services remains flat for five years, even though student enrollment triples in size.

The number of teachers does not appear to be sufficient to ensure that students fulfill all course requirements. Only two teachers will be hired to teach all classes for 11th and 12th graders who cannot qualify for dual enrollment. A Spanish teacher is not on the roster to teach the required Spanish course. Teachers of health, music, art, and PE are not identified. A morning gathering mentioned on p. 65, in which the character development and leadership curriculum will be taught, is not in the daily schedule.

The performance framework in Attachment S includes ambitious, measurable academic goals, while the governance "goals" are simply policies and procedures. The application does not address at all the corrective actions the school will take if it falls short of its expectations or goals.

V. Instructional Staff

Phoenix Early College Charter School

Rating ▾

Partially Meets the Standard

Plan Summary

Teachers will be recruited in the community and through various charter school support networks through advertisements in a variety of media. In the first year, four teachers credentialed in mathematics, English language arts, and science, as well as a dually-certified teacher in special education and social sciences will be hired. In the second year and beyond, eight teachers will be required. "Fully immersed" eleventh- and twelfth-grade students will be taught by instructors at the community college. Student assistant personnel (SAP) will assist teachers in monitoring biweekly progress of each PECCS student, including those with special education needs.

Teachers will be regularly observed and evaluated weekly by the principal and by two formal evaluations each year, using a rubric included in the application. Teachers will participate in a four-day summer institute on early college school programs led by the Middle College National Consortium. Two more sessions will occur at the school during the year, along with weekly staff meetings to share ideas.

Analysis

This section partially meets the standard. A detailed plan for recruiting and hiring teachers is provided, but a number of questions remain concerning the staffing structure, teacher evaluation, and professional development.

To reiterate concerns about inadequate staffing mentioned in Section IV: there are not enough teachers shown in the roster to teach all of the required courses; finding a dually-certified teacher to provide all SPED services is unrealistic; and the use of a few low-paid Student Assistant Personnel (SAP) to monitor and support all students, including SPED students and those in college courses, is not explained in enough detail to justify the staffing plan.

The application does not describe how the school will approach professional development as an important element of the school design. There do not appear to be enough days in the plan for teachers to be properly trained. Project-based learning is described as a "pillar" of the curriculum plan but teachers will not be trained in it until the second year.

The evaluation rubric for teachers included in the narrative is not sufficiently detailed; a useful measurement of performance may be difficult without more focus areas and more specific indicators. The success of PECCS also depends heavily on the instructors in the community college, yet there is no discussion on how or whether their performance will be monitored or evaluated. Regarding teacher recruitment, is it not explained how and where auditions will be held before school opens. Also, the audition rubric provided uses several vague terms that may be difficult to score ("Back on track," "Hands on").

The plan to send teachers to a summer institute on the early college high school program given by the Middle College National Consortium and to have MCNC members provide additional training sessions during the year will help teachers in implementing the model. However, none of these sessions appear on the school calendar or professional development scope and sequence.

VI. Governance

Phoenix Early College Charter School

Rating ▾

Does Not Meet the Standard

Plan Summary

The charter will be held by Phoenix Community Development Foundation, Inc., an established nonprofit corporation governed by a board of five members. The school will be governed by a separate board of directors representing the school, yet to be established. Two of the foundation's board members, Volley Davis and Walter Huston, will also serve on the school's board.

The estimated budget expenditures are \$88,878 in the startup year, \$609,184 in year one, \$1M in year two, \$1.4M in year three, \$1.8M in year four, and nearly \$1.9M in year five. Sixty-five percent of the budget is allocated for staff and staff support. Charter Pros, a consulting firm, will be contracted to provide back office financial services, staff and board development, and marketing services for a fee of ten percent of base and categorical student funding. The fundraising goal is to raise \$100,000 a year for the first three years.

Analysis

This section does not meet the standard based on new information gleaned during the capacity interview; namely, that the governing board identified in the application will not be the governing board of the school. The new board has not yet been established nor does it have any legal status. This leaves the identity of the entity that will be responsible for governing the school unknown. Missing are bylaws, a conflict of interest policy, a grievance policy, and a plan for recruiting board members. The evaluation team had assumed that Phoenix Community Development Foundation, Inc. would be both the holder of the charter and the governing entity of the school. This was implied in the application and it was members of the foundation's board who submitted the board questionnaires.

In the interview, it was learned that the founding team does not have direct experience operating an early college high school as implied in the application. The application was written by consultants from Charter Pros with input from the Phoenix Community Development Foundation, Inc. board. Although two of the consultants, the CEO/president and principal from Robertson Charter School in Illinois, are experienced and successful charter school operators, neither has operated an early college high school program, although one participated in a research project on the model. This is a concern since it appears that Charter Pros will have primary responsibility for designing the school structure and for training staff.

Although it is evident that the board members of the Phoenix Foundation have carefully chosen the early high school model for their Natchez school, and have raised community awareness and support for their project, it is the capacity of the actual charter school board that must be considered. Without an existing board, there is no capacity.

Finally, the budget contains some errors and questionable items: the three percent authorizing fee is omitted from expenses; the facility lease rate of \$.25/sq. ft. seems unrealistically low and is unsupported; the budget includes three teachers in the first year while the roster includes four; and the applicants did not provide strong evidence that they will be able to raise the budgeted \$100,000 a year for three years.

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 served as program director for the Gold Seal of Excellence Charter School Program in Florida and 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 Limmie 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.