

MINUTES OF THE  
MISSISSIPPI CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORIZER BOARD  
Monthly Meeting  
Monday, June 2, 2014

The monthly meeting of the Mississippi Charter School Authorizer Board was held at 10:00 a.m. on Monday, June 2, 2014, at the office of the Board of Trustees of the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning, located at 3825 Ridgewood Road, Jackson, Mississippi. In attendance were:

Tommie Cardin, Chairman  
Chris Wilson, Co-Chairman  
Dr. Carey Wright  
Krystal Cormack  
Johnny Franklin  
Dr. Karen Elam  
Dr. Bonita Coleman-Potter

Also participating in person were NACSA representatives Beth Seling and, via teleconference, William Haft and Christine Vandewalker

Board Chairman Tommie Cardin called the meeting to order at 10:05 a.m.

ITEM I. ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA

A. Adoption of Agenda

The Agenda was previously circulated to all Board members.

**Chairman Cardin requested a motion to adopt the agenda as presented.**

**MOTION: Mr. Franklin**

**SECOND: Dr. Elam**

**There being no discussion and following a vote in favor by all members, the motion carried.**

ITEM II. APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES

A. Approval of Minutes

The Minutes of the May 8, 2014 meeting were previously distributed to the Board members for review.

**Chairman Cardin requested a motion for approval of the Minutes of the May 8, 2014 meeting.**

**MOTION: Dr. Wright**

**SECOND: Mr. Franklin**

**There being no further discussion and following a vote in favor by all members, the motion carried.**

### ITEM III. CHAIR REPORT

#### A. Administrative Matters

Kathryn Stewart reported that Denise DeRosette with Cornerstone Counseling, retained by the Board during the May meeting, has made advances in establishing the personnel and accounting needs of the Board. She is working to set up a fund within which to receive the monies appropriated by the legislature, and she has created an FY 2014 budget for the Board. She has been in touch with the State Personnel Board, ITS, MS Department of Revenue, the state unemployment office and PERS to establish the Board's relationships with those agencies.

### ITEM IV. COMMITTEE REPORTS

#### A. RFP and Application Committee

Mrs. Cormack reported that the committee continues to meet weekly with the NACSA consulting team. She stated that the Intern discussed during the May meeting is on the job and she thanked Mississippi First for providing a workspace for her in their office. The intern is available to the entire board should anyone need support or assistance.

Mrs. Cormack reported further than the RFP and Application for the next cycle have been published for public comment, and she encouraged everyone to review those documents and offer whatever comments they have as the comments received during the development of the initial RFP and Application were very beneficial. Chairman Cardin reiterated that encouragement for public comments.

Chairman Cardin discussed the public hearings held for each of the three remaining applications and stated that each hearing was well attended and that there was a strong showing of support for each applicant in their respective communities. He commended all who participated and thanked them for their interest.

#### B. Executive Director Search Committee

Chairman Cardin stated that a timeline and protocol needs to be established for the selection of an executive director and suggested that the search committee meet to discuss same and then return to the Board, possibly by teleconference, with a recommended timeline and protocol to follow. He stated that the job description and advertisement have been posted on the online and print publications identified during the May meeting with an application submission deadline of June 16, 2014. He reported that 12 applications have been received to date.

### ITEM V. NEW BUSINESS

#### A. NACSA Contract Extension

Chairman Cardin stated that he and Dr. Elam have discussed with William Haft a suggested scope of work and invited NACSA to submit a proposal based on those discussions. William

Haft gave a brief overview of the proposal and reminded the board that there are grant funds available to possibly be reallocated from another grant to put toward this work.

Following this overview, Dr. Coleman-Potter asked what benefits the Board should see as a member of NACSA for services performed outside the scope and cost of this proposal. William stated that document templates, informal support and advice are a part of those membership benefits, and he added that the prices for services quoted in this proposal are “high end” estimates allowing for the maximum amount of support needed but understanding the Board would likely not need as much assistance as is provided for in the proposal. Dr. Coleman-Potter expressed her concern for the Board committing more funds to the contract than will realistically be needed.

Chairman Cardin stated that he feels that for budgeting purposes, the language of the contract can address the fact that these are maximum caps and not commit the Board to paying the full amounts but provide the Board the opportunity to “pay as you go” up to these amounts.

Chairman Cardin asked that the first section “Leadership Recruitment, Selection and Training” be removed from the proposal at this time because the Board has no way of knowing at this point what it will need in terms of assistance and what the Board can do on its own.

**Dr. Elam made a motion to extend the contract with NACSA into the second application cycle with regard to the proposed scope of work set forth in the development of the charter contract and the application process excluding the Leadership Recruitment, Selection and Training section.**

**MOTION: Dr. Elam**

**SECOND: Mr. Wilson**

**There being no further discussion and following a vote in favor by all members, the motion carried.**

Chairman Cardin stated that a contract extension will be drafted and circulated to the Board members for review prior to the July meeting.

#### B. Final Decisions with Regard to Charter Applications

Chairman Cardin called on Beth Seling and William Haft to give an overview of the application selection process to date. A handout was provide and is attached hereto as **Exhibit A**. William reminded the Board of its statutory obligation to approve quality applications that meet the criteria and deny weaker ones in order to offer better educational opportunities to children who are not currently being served well with the existing public school systems. Beth Seling reviewed the process to date that is outlined in Exhibit A.

I. Application of Columbus Coalition for Educational Options  
(Inspire STEM & Arts Scholars Academy)

Krystal Cormack presented the recommendation to the Board. She stated as follows:

I had the opportunity to shepherd the Inspire STEM & Arts Scholars Academy through the RFP and application process. Their mission is to provide a high quality education that puts students first and prepares them to become college-ready scholars and life-long learners. They proposed opening a school in Columbus Municipal School District in Columbus, Mississippi. Their enrollment projections begin in August 2014, and for the 2014-15 academic year they plan to have 120 students in grades K through 3 and grade 9 and then max out in 2019-20 school year with 400 students in grades K through 6 and 9 through 12. The evaluation team, which is the evaluation team that we contracted with through NACSA, recommends denial of the Inspire Charter School STEM & Arts Scholars Academy. They felt that the educational program was not adequately developed and supported by the budget. Of particular concern, they noted some major changes that had been made to the leadership structure in the first year of the enrollment plan between the time that the application was submitted and to the capacity interview. They felt that there was not adequate evidence provided to show that the newly selected school leader was able to design, launch and oversee a new school because that person had not yet been identified by the time of the capacity interview. They also felt that it was not fully demonstrated how a STEM focus, which is Science, Technology, Engineering and Math, as well as the Arts focus of the school would be integrated into the curriculum. They cited a number of challenges and concerns, which the Board has in front of them in the Summary Analysis and Recommendation Report. I would like to recognize the enthusiasm of this team. They have been to many, many meetings. They packed a house during their public forum, and have shown not only a multi-generational coalition of the citizens from the Columbus community but they had a real interracial coalition as well, and so I do commend them on their hard work and their dedication, their emphasis on children and their focus on providing a very strong vision for the future. But at this time, it is my recommendation that we support the recommendation of denial.

**Krystal Cormack made a motion to deny Inspire Charter School STEM & Arts Scholars Academy's charter application because the charter application does not meet the criteria for approval for the reasons articulated in the Recommendation Report presented to the Board.**

**MOTION: Mrs. Cormack**

**SECOND: Mr. Franklin**

**There being no further discussion and following a vote in favor by all members, the motion carried.**

Chairman Cardin stated that the motion will be put into the form of a Resolution as required by the statute.

Chairman Cardin reiterated what Mrs. Cormack shared and stated that he was very impressed with the dedication, commitment and support in the Columbus community for what this group is doing and stated that he was also impressed with the professionalism and commitment demonstrated by this group through the entire process. He added that this is something they have worked on for a very long time, and he believes their hearts are in the right place and their intentions are good. He encouraged the group to continue moving forward and to use this as a learning process to figure out what changes need to be made in order to one day bring the vision of the charter school to that area.

II. Application of RePublic Charter School Board of Directors  
(ReImagine Prep)

Dr. Elam presented the recommendation to the Board. She stated as follows:

I would like to take the opportunity to introduce the application submitted by RePublic Schools, Inc. They are proposing to open a school named ReImagine Prep in Jackson. RePublic Schools Inc. is a new charter management organization incorporated in Mississippi in March 2014. Its network consists of Nashville Prep and Liberty Collegiate Academy, both serving grades 5 through 8. In the Fall of 2014, they will add a third school, Nashville Academy of Computer Science, and in the 2015-16 school year, they plan to open RePublic High School in Nashville.

The mission of ReImagine Prep is to educate students in grades 5 through 8 and build the academic and character foundation necessary for success in the most demanding colleges and prepare their students for a life of active citizenship. It is proposed to open in Jackson, and more specifically south Jackson, encompassing Whitten, Peoples, Siwell and Cardozo Middle Schools. Three of those four schools are failing schools and the fourth received a grade of D. In the academic year 2015-16, they will enroll 100 students for Grade 5. Thereafter they will add a grade level with an additional 110 students each for the three years so that at capacity in the academic year 2018 - 2019 they will have 440 students.

The independent evaluation team recommends that the Mississippi Charter School Authorizer Board approve the application for ReImagine submitted by RePublic Schools, Inc., a newly formed CMO. The independent evaluation team's executive summary statement states that ReImagine Prep will replicate the effective college preparatory school model created at two middle charter schools operated by the CMO in Nashville, Tennessee, those being Nashville Prep and Liberty Collegiate Academy. These schools have achieved exceptional success in improving academic achievement among a predominantly minority and

economically disadvantaged student population. The school's college preparatory program is ambitious and thoughtfully designed for the targeted population. Comprehensive details are provided about the curriculum, assessment plan and services for special education students, English language learners, and students in need of academic intervention. Ample professional development will be provided to enable teachers to deliver the education program and rigorous disciplinary plan. An extremely detailed 10 year budget and overall financial plan is provided. Although this will be RePublic School's first attempt to replicate its model outside of Nashville, the founding group demonstrates the capacity to accomplish this successfully.

The leadership team consists of a managing partner, Robert Gupta, founder of RePublic Schools and one of the Nashville schools; Principle Christina McDonald, currently an assistant principle and social studies teacher who has a strong track record of academy performance in her classrooms; and Kate Cooper, Regional Director of Operations who will direct start up and facilities preparation. The governing board of 8 has diverse professional expertise. The remarks made by the 7 board members attending the interview gave the evaluation team confidence that they have the capacity to govern the school successfully. In the capacity interview, the applicants clarified a number of issues surrounding the leadership team and organizational structure and future growth of the ReImagine School.

I would like to point out that opening and maintain 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 in 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 standards in all levels, and I am pleased to say that the independent evaluation team found that ReImagine School meets the standard in all the levels assessed.

In addition to reading to you the formal recommendation of the independent evaluation team, I would like to share with you some of the strengths I identified as I read the application and personally attended the capacity interview and public hearing for ReImagine. The elements that really create a desired school culture are clearly detailed in this plan telling how teachers will model and enforce expected behaviors. How the school will "sweat the small stuff" by holding students accountable for even the smallest disciplinary rules and how students will be recognized daily for positive behavior such as showing empathy or helping their teammates. For those of you who had the opportunity to visit STEM Prep last Fall, we could really see the replication of that school in reading this application. We were so impressed with that school, I know we would be proud to have a school like that in our state and that is certainly highly doable with ReImagine.

I will also point out that ReImagine will also have the disciplinary philosophy of consistency. I think for disadvantaged and underprivileged students, it would really be satisfying and helping in their lives to see consistent behavior. And speaking of that, ReImagine makes a particular point to say that the parental involvement will be strong and that showed that that will include annual family orientation meetings, a family contract at the beginning of the school year, an annual family survey, a monthly newsletter, and what I was most taken by was that they will have daily prep reports sent to the parents on the merits and demerits earned by each student that day. As I said before, Christina McDonald will be the principle of ReImagine and having seen her in both the public hearing and in the capacity interview, I can tell you she is truly dynamite. In my exchange with her I have never seen such enthusiasm and such a demonstration of love of teaching underserved children. It is also worth noting that Christina was awarded by Nashville Scene, the Nashvillian of the Year award to celebrate her tremendous teaching. The other instructional staff that they will be hiring will be given 30 days of training each and every year. They will have 20 days during the summer and ten more days scattered throughout the academic year.

It is worth noting that Nashville Prep and Liberty Collegiate both opened in the Fall of 2011, and by 2013 these two schools were ranked as the two highest performing charter schools in the state of Tennessee. Through them, Nashville 5<sup>th</sup> graders had the highest growth rate in reading, science and social studies of all public schools in Tennessee.

Community outreach for the school is well underway. RePublic Schools has added four people to the Board of Directors all of whom are from the Jackson community, and the fundraising is well under way having raised \$400,000 in the community to date. Mr. Gupta, who will be the executive director and managing partner, has been coming to Jackson frequently the last six months and his goal each time he is here has been to meet more and more members of the community that his school will serve. He has held forums in coffee shops and participated in neighborhood gatherings. This summer, ReImagine staff will use college interns to canvas the neighborhoods to help inform the served community of the educational opportunity that will be available for 5<sup>th</sup> graders in 2015. There will be a vigorous learning structure consisting of 187 school days with a 9 ½ hour extended day 4 days per week. Homework will be checked every morning and students who have not completed their homework will be retained for homework club. Importantly, if a student falls below the score of 70% on any subject matter, that student will be tutored until he demonstrates the necessary mastery of the skills. For students not needing extra help, there is a very nice program called Focus Block in which students choose their area of academic pursuit on top of their regular studies.

During the capacity interview, we learned that ReImagine board's vision is to have a cluster of charter schools in Jackson. There is no timeline for that, but I believe it demonstrates a very strong interest in improving the school system in the disadvantaged parts of Jackson. I would also like to point out that Mr. Gupta demonstrated during the capacity interview having a strong network of charter school operators across the US, and that is very important if he runs into an issue he hasn't had before, he has the contacts available to him so that he can pick up the phone and find out who else has dealt with that particular issue and how it has been handled in other charter school organizations.

ReImagine Prep, just like Nashville Prep, will be a very data-driven school meaning that changing lessons day by day will be based upon students' testing results. Plans are also being made to compare how ReImagine Prep is stacking up against Nashville Prep starting after quarter one and continuing forward.

In closing, I would say that by approving ReImagine to open in Mississippi in the Fall of 2015, we, the authorizer board, will be setting a great standard for what charter schools should look like in Mississippi. In short, really top notch.

**Dr. Karen Elam made a motion to approve ReImagine Prep's charter school application for the 2015-2016 school year, provided that execution of the charter contract and final approval of the school to open shall be conditioned on timely satisfaction of a set of reasonable preopening requirements. These preopening requirements will be designed to ensure that the school is prepared to meet its obligations as a public charter school, including but not limited to all building, health, safety, insurance and other legal requirements that must be fulfilled prior to opening.**

**MOTION: Dr. Elam**

**SECOND: Mr. Franklin**

Chairman Cardin stated that he had been very impressed with this group and specifically by their commitment demonstrated to community involvement, input and buy-in to the new school. What they demonstrated at the capacity interview was very impressive in terms of an understanding in the importance of engaging the community and having them involved and invested in the new school. He further stated that he was impressed as well with their agility and flexibility that was grounded in the substantive knowledge about the operation of charter schools demonstrated by the prospective board members during the capacity interview process.

Mr. Wilson expressed that he was also very impressed with this applicant. He asked two questions: 1. Has the building in which the school will be housed been secured? Dr. Elam stated that that acquisition was in the process with renovations planned prior to the school opening. 2. He questioned any opportunity for the co-mingling of funds considering the Mississippi school and the Tennessee schools will have the same operating manager. Dr. Elam explained that there had been some discussion and concern by the evaluation team initially, but Mr. Gupta and his group had adequately addressed the question and demonstrated that they have legal counsel as



well as an accounting firm hired to handle the funds appropriated to them to ensure that there would be no co-mingling of funds between the two states' entities.

Mrs. Cormack asked Dr. Elam to speak to some of the challenges seen by charter schools nationally, particular regarding discipline management, suspensions, and expulsions, etc., that are being reported in the news and asked if she had been satisfied with this organization's response as to how they will manage challenging students. Dr. Elam stated that though she had not asked specifically about the expulsion rate in Nashville, she had been very impressed on her visit to STEM Prep by the order and discipline exhibited and was satisfied with the plan offered for ReImagine Prep.

**There being no further discussion and following a vote in favor by all members, the motion carried.**

III. Application of Phoenix Community Development Foundation, Inc.  
(Phoenix Early College Charter School)

Dr. Coleman – Potter presented the recommendation to the Board. She stated as follows:

As before stated, the non-profit applicant is Phoenix Community Development Foundation. Their proposed charter was for Phoenix Early College Charter School. The mission of this proposed school was to be able to provide area students and specifically students within the Natchez/Adams school district the opportunity to receive excellent educational services that specifically targets students who have been underrepresented in higher education with a supportive and integrated opportunity to complete a high school education while also providing post-secondary credits. In terms of their enrollment projections for 2015-16, this school projected to serve grade 9 with 75 students, and by the year 2020 they would have served 300 students in grades 9 – 12 building those grades sequentially.

The Executive Summary for this Recommendation Report lists the recommendation as a denial. The evaluation team recommends denial based on three primary weaknesses. First being 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 actually hold the charter, according to the application. Secondly, the school's educational staffing plan lacked sufficient detail and also held many inconsistencies. Thirdly, there was no firm commitment from either Alcorn State or Co-Lin Community College, the two post-secondary providers, to participate in this project, and these partnerships will be absolutely essential to implement an early college model design.

Another concern is that there appears that the consulting group, Charter Pros, a group from Indiana, which wrote the application, will be primarily responsible for

designing the school program. Although the consultants have extensive experience in successful charter school operations in another state, none has ever operated an early college high school model program. Also, the startup plan omitted a number of important tasks and the budget contained some erroneous calculations as well.

We would certainly like to thank the Phoenix Community Development Foundation for their strong support of this proposal. We certainly saw that evidenced in the public hearing, as well, in terms of the community support from the Natchez/Adams community. The evaluation team hopes that the founding group will use these findings to further their goal, but at this time we do recommend denial.

**Dr. Coleman Potter made a motion to deny the Phoenix Early Charter School's charter application because the charter application does not meet the criteria for approval for the reasons articulated in the Recommendation Report presented to the board.**

**MOTION: Dr. Coleman-Potter**

**SECOND: Mrs. Cormack**

Chairman Cardin spoke to his impression of the need for another educational option in the Natchez area and commended this group for recognizing that need and in making a diligent effort in trying to address it. He stated his belief that this group is very committed to that pursuit and that they have good intentions. The public hearings demonstrated a strong level of community support, as well as the willingness of this group to work with the community in a very open and transparent manner. He encouraged both this group as well as the others to continue their efforts, take the suggestions that have been made and that will be made going forward and hopefully posture themselves to be successful in their pursuit of providing quality educational options to the communities in need in the future.

**There being no further discussion and following a vote in favor by all members, the motion carried.**

Chairman Cardin invited the members of the two groups not approved today to sit down with the Board or committee members in an informal setting to go over the detailed reports and answer any questions they may have and talk about what needs to be done going forward to arrive at the point of success.

Within the next ten days the Board will issue a formal notice of each decision made today in the form of a Resolution that will include the Recommendation Report of the evaluation team. The Reports will also be posted on the website.

#### ITEM VII. PUBLIC COMMENT

Mike Sayer with Southern Echo asked what the timeline would be for the public comment period of the second round RFP. Christine Vandewalker stated that the deadline for comments is June 18, 2014, and added that that timeline is published within the RFP. He asked if the RFP is posted on the Board's website. Kathryn Stewart stated that it is and pointed out the link. Further, Mr. Sayer complimented the board on how well it has done its work with the degree of transparency and diligence that it has and further stated that he felt that the board's willingness to involve the community was very important and he hopes that that will continue in the future. Finally, he stated his concern with regard to the questions Mrs. Cormack raised regarding discipline and discipline data about expulsions, suspensions, etc. He feels that the disciplinary plans need to be highlighted in each application and a monitoring system established to see if problems arise from any disproportionate suspension or expulsion of students.

Mr. Franklin spoke to the community commitment exhibited in the public hearings. His hope is that this process will serve to demonstrate to the policy makers, public educators and others in authority who are sincerely interested in the state's children and the future of those children that there is a sincere interest within the communities to provide educational opportunities for these children. The public hearings clearly demonstrated that there are people out there looking for better opportunities for their children. He suggested and asked if it would be possible to have the summer intern to contact each of those organizations that submitted Letters of Intent and provide them with information about the second application process and encourage them to continue to be a part of these opportunities.

#### ITEM VIII. NEXT MEETING

The July monthly meeting will be held on July 10, 2014 at 10:00 a.m.

**Krystal Cormack made a motion to postpone the formal consideration and vote on the charter contract until the meeting on July 10, 2014.**

**MOTION: Mrs. Cormack**

**SECOND: Dr. Elam**

Chairman Cardin stated that the contract negotiations between the application committee, NACSA and Mr. Gupta would take place in the interim and a proposed contract would be drafted and circulated to the board members for their review prior to the July 10<sup>th</sup> meeting.

**There being no further discussion and following a vote in favor by all members, the motion carried.**

ITEM IX. ADJOURN

**Chairman Cardin requested a motion to adjourn.**

**MOTION: Mr. Franklin**

**SECOND: Dr. Elam**

**There being no discussion and following a vote in favor by all members, the motion carried.**

**The meeting adjourned at 11:37 a.m.**

ADOPTED, this the 10<sup>th</sup> day of July, 2014.

  
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TOMMIE S. CARDIN, Chairman

July 10<sup>th</sup>  
adopted