

CHARTER SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY COMMITTEE

DELAWARE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



First State Montessori Academy

Charter Renewal

Initial Report

November 1, 2022

On September 30, 2022, First State Montessori Academy (First State Montessori) submitted an application to renew its charter for a term of five years. The purpose of the initial meeting is for the Charter School Accountability Committee (CSAC) to review the renewal application in light of the relevant statutory criteria for renewal.

The following were in attendance at the initial meeting of CSAC on October 25, 2022:

Voting Committee Members

- Kim Klein, Associate Secretary of Operations Support
- Aimee Beam, Education Associate, School Support
- Gregory Fulkerson, Education Associate, Academic Support
- Tiffany Green, Education Associate, Workforce Support
- Brook Hughes, Education Associate, Operations Support
- Joyce Leatherbury, Education Associate, Academic Support
- April McCrae, Education Associate, Academic Support
- DeAnne Wimbish, Education Associate, Office of Equity and Innovation
- Ted Molin, Community Member
- Charles Taylor, Community Member

Ex-Officio Members (Non-voting)

- Kendall Massett, Executive Director, Delaware Charter School Network
- Deb Stevens, Delaware State Board of Education

Staff to the Committee (Non-voting)

- Leroy Travers, Director, Charter School Office
- Alicia Balcerak, Administrative Secretary, Charter School Office
- Faye Schilling, Education Specialist, Charter School Office

Representatives of First State Montessori

- Courtney Fox, Head of School
- Liz Madden, Education Director
- Meghan Newberry, Board Chair
- Anabelle O'Malley, Teacher Board Member
- Stephany Pachowka, Business Manager
- Karen Thorpe, Financial Consultant

First State Montessori was given time to provide an overview of the school. Ms. Newberry shared some of the positive feedback that she received from members of the First State Montessori community. Children are leaders that build relationships and help each other learn. The entire staff is passionate and engaged at all times. The school shared a video that depicted daily life at First State Montessori.

Finances, Budget, and Financial Framework

1. There are no financial concerns at this time. The school has done a phenomenal job managing the budget and building cash reserves over the years. First State Montessori continued to improve its financial standing during the last charter term.

Facilities

2. First State Montessori contracts with the Community Education Building to purchase vended meals. This relationship seems to work well and the school has compliant during all reviews.

Staffing

3. What is the average staff to student ratio?

A - The ratio breakdown is as follows:

- 11:1 student to staff ratio;
- 13:1 kindergarten to sixth grade student to teacher ratio;
- 15:1 seventh and eighth grade student to teacher ratio.

- a. How does this ratio provide for optimal student learning?

A - This allows the average class sizes to be 24 to 26 students. Montessori classes are intentionally larger to allow the school to have varied levels. Each classroom includes two teachers. One teacher is full-time and the other teacher is present during instructional time only.

4. How is First State Montessori maximizing the talents of the staff who are not needed full-time for instruction, support, etc.?

A - The school maximizes talents through three strategic methods: hiring and developing teachers, structured supports, and creating a great place to work. In hiring great educators, First State Montessori looks for strength, experience, and expertise. Structured supports include co-teaching and a collaborative spirit. Educators set high standards for each other. Teachers are paired carefully to maximize their passions and strengths. Teacher retention is also important. The school works to provide opportunities for staff to feel a sense of belonging, significance, and purpose. First State Montessori truly focuses on family and views itself as one big family.

First State Montessori feels that they have the flexibility to create things that work best for students. For example, specialists were given time in their schedule to support students through mentoring. As a team, they look at the needs of students and analyze the ways in which adults can be used to support those needs. Another example is the elective courses that have been implemented. These courses are teacher-developed and based on their personal passions. Classes include leadership, Spanish, French, agricultural science, creative writing, drama, theater, choir, and science. Needs are met by utilizing a proactive as well as a reactive approach.

5. How do you reward staff members who are considered high performers?
 A - There is no formal reward system in place, however, the school builds a sense of community and respect based on mutual goals. Through professional curiosity, a collaborative environment, and allowing staff to be heard, individuals feel valued, empowered, and energized. Through leadership committees and other platforms, staff have an opportunity to contribute and are looked upon as colleagues. First State Montessori highlights great things that are happening at the school and shares those items with the community. The staff members' time is valued by the leadership and teachers are given items as special recognition. First State Montessori's salary scale is competitive and comparable to area school districts.
6. How many staff members are licensed and certified within the area in which they teach?
 A - There are 60 full-time and part-time teachers. This includes lead and assistant teachers. Of those 60 teachers, all but seven are licensed and certified. Of the 60 teachers, 38 are full-time teachers. Thirty-seven of those teachers are licensed and certified and one is in the process of applying for credentials.
 - a. How many staff members are not certified?
 A – Seven staff members are uncertified.
 - c. How many staff members are on initial licenses?
 A – Ten staff members are on initial licenses.
 - d. How many staff members continuing licenses?
 A – Thirty-nine staff members are on a continuing license and one is on an advanced license.
 - e. How many staff members are participating in an Alternative Routes to Certification program?
 A - No staff members are participating in ARTC.
7. Does First State Montessori consider their mentoring support program to be effective? Why or why not?
 A - The school participates in the state mentoring program and works closely with Tiffany Green. Other educators participate in Responsive Classroom training and Montessori Training. Montessori training requires 1,000 clock hours and an internship year that includes additional coaching and training through observations and debriefs. In addition to coaching, teachers attend three intensive weekend seminars focused on the practice of observing children (how they learn and develop, academic/social emotional needs, etc.).
8. Does the school have an effective and sustainable instructional coaching staff?
9. Does First State Montessori partner with any Educator Preparation Programs?
 A – First State Montessori partners with University of Delaware through their Montessori Teacher Residency (UDMTR) program. The school also partners with Howard Vocational and Technical High School's Residency Program.
10. What is the staff retention rate?
 A - The retention rate has historically been 90% and was 88% last year. Nine teachers left the school. Two of those teachers planned to attend graduate school full-time; three teachers went into the private sector; two teachers left for other charter schools; one teacher entered the business world; and one chose to be a stay-at-home parent.
 - a. What are the school's goals related to the retention of current staff?

A – Goals for staff retention include utilizing systems such as social media, Indeed, and Join Delaware Schools. Their partnership with UDMTR has enabled First State Montessori to hire many excellent student teachers over the years. First State Montessori hosts many UDMTR events. In addition, the partnership Howard Vocational High School’s Teacher Residency Program exposes future educators to Montessori education. First State Montessori also looks to recruit within the local community. Three of the school’s new hires were parents of students at the school. Because of their tremendous work in the school and the fact their values align with our goals and mission, they were sent for Montessori training.

11. When did First State Montessori last update or revisit its staff recruitment plan?

A - This is revisited annually as part of their yearly processes.

12. How does First State Montessori provide staff with stretch or long-term opportunities while not causing burnout?

A - Teachers and all staff members wear many hats. However, the goal is to let people choose their passions and add responsibilities by choice. Leadership aims to take items off of teachers' plates. Positions such as content area liaisons, coaches, committee leaders, and mentors are compensated.

13. How does the school gather feedback from staff?

a. How often does this occur?

A - Feedback is gathered in many different ways. Yearly feedback surveys are administered and the administrative team carefully reviews that data. Staff check-ins are conducted regularly throughout the year, as well. Additionally, committee and liaison reports list teacher feedback, which the administrative team reviews.

Recruitment and Enrollment

14. When did First State Montessori last revisit its recruitment plan for students?

a. Have any new strategies been adopted?

A - The school has a strong waiting list; however, recruitment plans are reviewed yearly. The school utilizes customary practices such as social media, tours, open houses, school choice events, virtual events, and the sharing of First State Montessori graduates’ high school success stories.

15. How is the school utilizing its budgetary and time resources for enrollment?

A - Very little of the budget is used on recruitment. Recruitment is mostly done by staff, current families, and other community stakeholders.

16. Have new stakeholders been engaged to increase student enrollment?

A – Stakeholder engagement is a grassroots effort. Through education, First State Montessori reduces preconceived ideas about Montessori Education. First State Montessori builds connections within the city and has strong involvement from the Board and current families. The use of eighth grade ambassadors enables them to share the story of First State Montessori. Stakeholder partnerships include the Wilmington Public Library, Howard Vocational High School, and local pre-schools.

CSAC Follow-up - Staffing and Recruitment and Enrollment

Gregory Fulkerson- What additional supports are provided for educators to complete Montessori training?

A. The average cost of the training is \$10,000. The school assists in paying that tuition fee. The program is intense, therefore, while teachers are completing their training, First State Montessori looks for ways to take items off of their plate.

Joyce Leatherbury- How do you utilize your special education staff?

A - Five special education teachers “push-in” to classrooms or pull students out of classrooms to provide extra support. There are two teachers in every classroom for small groups and individualized support. Additional staff include speech pathologists; an occupational therapist; and two school psychologists.

Kendall Massett- The school is to be applauded for sticking to its mission. Is First State Montessori registered for DE ConnectED event on December 10th?

A - First State Montessori is registered and will attend.

Kim Klein- How many students are currently on the waiting list?

A - The school’s waitlist will max out around 500 students. However, to start the school year there were 200-300 students on the waiting list.

Academic Performance and Framework

17. Consider use of the word “monitors or monitoring” over “tracks or tracking” in your descriptions of data and review of student and teacher progress. The term “tracking” can be misleading in the context of school settings.

Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Development

18. How are the Florida Center for Reading Research activities and Reading Rockets resources being implemented as reading interventions?

A - Reading Rockets is rarely used. Interventions commonly used are Walpole, Reading Assist, and activities from the Florida Center for Reading Research. Through screeners and progress monitoring, students’ specific areas of weakness are identified in reading (i.e., fluency, decoding, etc.). The school wants to determine exactly what the student is struggling with and determine the best approach based on a teacher’s training and the child’s precise need.

19. How has Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) been implemented within your school’s systems?

A - MTSS has grown tremendously over the past several years. A student support team that consists of the Director of Special Education, Instructional Coach, Counselor, Director of Curriculum, Head of School, and Student Support Specialists (Occupational Therapist, Speech Pathologist, and School Psychologist) is utilized for this process. This team meets weekly for two hours to review data. In addition, the support team meets four

times per year (for one week) with teachers to review academic concerns and social and emotional development needs of students. First State Montessori takes a deep dive into student data and determines specific needs using information from the teacher, universal screeners, data from the student management system, listening and comprehension screeners, and speech and language screeners. From this, progress monitoring is measured and evaluated to determine growth or decline and, in turn, plans are developed to support students for the next six-to-eight-week cycle.

- a. What challenges have you faced? What steps will you take to address these challenges?

A - The major challenge is time. However, having two teachers in every classroom is helpful. Support is also provided to teachers in pacing and navigating progress monitoring tools.

20. In what ways have you been successful in implementing the MTSS framework?

A – First State Montessori has been successful in focusing on all areas, not just reading and math. All staff members are used in this process. The student support team has also been valuable in providing individualized support to students.

Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Development Follow-up Questions

Tiffany Green- What system does the school use for teacher evaluation?

A. First State Montessori uses the Delaware Performance Appraisal System (DPAS-II) and are moving to the Delaware Teacher Growth and Support System (DTGSS).

Additional Request for Information/Final Comments

Chuck Taylor- Complimented the school on its continued success.

Kendall Massett- Noted that multiple educators serving on the First State Montessori's student support team were nominated for annual charter awards. This is a credit to the work that the team is doing and the parents recognize this.

The follow items were requested as follow-ups to this meeting:

1. Provide a staffing chart that includes the following:
 - a. Each teacher's license and certification status, to include whether they are on an initial or continuing license;
 - b. Each teacher's instructional assignment.

Next Steps:

- An initial report will be issued on or before November 1st.
- An initial public hearing will take place on November 15th at 5:00 p.m.

- The applicant will have the opportunity to submit a written response to the CSAC initial report, which is due by close of business November 16th.
- A second and final meeting of CSAC will be held on November 30th.
- On or before December 6th CSAC will issue its final report which will include its recommendation on the formal review.