

CHARTER SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY COMMITTEE

DELAWARE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



Sussex Montessori School

Charter Renewal

Initial Report

November 6, 2023

As is required, Sussex Montessori School (SMS) 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 30, 2023:

Voting Committee Members

- Kim Klein, Associate Secretary, Operations Support
- Aimee Beam, Education Associate, School Support
- Tierra Fair, Community Member
- 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
- Ted Molin, Community Member

Ex-Officio Members (Non-voting)

- Kendall Massett, Executive Director, Delaware Charter School Network
- Shawn Brittingham, Delaware State Board of Education

Staff to the Committee (Non-voting)

- Leroy Travers, Director, Charter School Office
- Alicia Balcerak, Administrative Secretary, Charter School Office
- John Carwell, Education Associate, Charter School Office
- Faye Schilling, Education Specialist, Charter School Office
- Carla Jarosz, Deputy Attorney General

Representatives of SMS

- Linda Zankowsky, Board Chair
- Lisa Coldiron, Head of School
- Precious Benson, Director of Finance and Operations
- Jessica Bradley, Board Member
- Mason Falligant, Teacher, Board Member
- Michelle Hastie, Financial Consultant
- Trish Hermance, Board Vice-Chair
- Nazaneen Khalilnaji-Otto, Testing Coordinator
- Jori Martinez-Woods, Director of Teaching and Learning
- Alyson Silva, Special Education Coordinator
- Sean Steward, Board Member

Sussex Montessori was given time to provide an overview of the school.

Dr. Zankowsky introduced the SMS team members. She acknowledged the time and work commitment required of educators working in a Montessori model. The SMS team prepared a video presentation that was sent to CSAC members. [The video can be viewed at this link.](#) Ms. Coldiron shared demographic data and other unique characteristics of SMS, such as the outdoor space serving as an extension of the classroom, student leadership, associate teachers in every classroom, specialized instruction for each learner, parent involvement through volunteering and participation in Parent Camp, strong social and emotional learning (SEL) supports, tutoring obtained through focused grant applications, and additional van transportation provided for families to ensure consistent attendance. Additional highlights included the upcoming graduation of SMS's first sixth grade class this spring and the ongoing renovation of the school's barn, which will serve as a community resource center. Dr. Zankowsky summarized the presentation by stating that SMS's goal is to become a beacon for what Montessori education can be.

Initial CSAC Questions and Feedback:

Finance

1. SMS's five-year enrollment chart becomes the authorized enrollment for the school and shows authorized enrollments of:
 - 2024-25 – 455
 - 2025-26 – 460
 - 2026-27 – 475
 - 2027-28 – 475
 - 2028-29 – 475

The enrollment trend file ([Enrollment Trends Combined Files.pdf \(doe.k12.de.us\)](#)) indicates that the school intends to have an authorized enrollment of 455 students through at least 2026-27. If the school seeks to maintain an authorized enrollment of 455 over the next charter term, submit a revised five-year projected enrollment chart to reflect that.

[A - The school's intention is to adhere to its charter and maintain enrollment of 455 students. A revised enrollment projection chart will be provided.](#)

Staff / Licensure and Certification / Evaluations

2. SMS's current professional growth plan completion rates are as follows (the recommended time for completion is October 15th):
 - professional growth goals – 0%
 - student improvement goals – 0%
 - a. Share the school's experience with completing professional growth and student improvement goals. Have there been any challenges in completing either?
[A - While professional growth goals and student improvement goals were completed by the October deadline, the failure to submit to the Department of Education \(DOE\) was due to human error. Since recognizing this all goals have been successfully submitted. Ms. Martinez-Woods shared that the main challenge](#)

originated from the school's goal to effectively train and educate 34 teachers in Delaware Teacher Growth and Support System (DTGSS) while also balancing the philosophical elements of Montessori evaluation and pedagogy. Additionally, there was a deliberate commitment to showcasing an authentic Montessori classroom experience for members from the Department of Education visiting the school.

- b. Describe SMS's plan for completing professional growth and student improvement goals.
A - This process is near completion and should be complete by Friday, November 3rd.
 - c. Have the three DTGSS observations been scheduled to ensure each observation is completed promptly? The recommendation is to complete round one before December 1st, round two before March 1st, and round three before May 15th. Explain the schedule or plan for scheduling and completion.
A - All teachers have received training and one-on-one support for DTGSS. Observations and feedback sessions have already commenced, and there is a scheduled plan in place through the end of the year to ensure that the evaluation process, aligned with all components of DTGSS, is completed by the end of this school year. Additionally, all Montessori teachers receive coaching from the University of Delaware Montessori Teacher Residency Program (UDMTR). Coaches from UDMTR provide support in Montessori pedagogy, along with techniques and resources aligned with the standards that can support learners. SMS partners with the Center for Montessori in the Public Sector, which visits the campus to observe and provide feedback and guidance on how SMS is evolving into a mature Montessori program.
3. According to information in the mentoring center there are three educators in year one of the comprehensive induction program (CIP), five educators in year two, two educators in year three, two educators in year four and two educators completing the New to State Program.
 - a. When will year one and two mentees be assigned a mentor for the 2023-2024 school year in the mentoring center?
A - All mentees have been assigned mentors, except for two teachers. One teacher is on medical leave, and another teacher was recently hired and her first day of employment was October 27.
 - b. Has mentoring begun for them? The recommendation is that all mentees are assigned within 30 days of employment and that they are all assigned in the mentoring center by October.
A - All required components of mentoring are in place. All mentees have been assigned mentors; mentoring information has been entered into the Mentoring Center, and all observations have been scheduled. The site coordinator is the lead mentor. She has three years of experience in this role and works closely with Ms. Green.

- c. Have the year three and new to state mentees started mentoring requirements with the lead mentor's guidance? If not, when will they begin?
A - Mentoring has started, with the exception of one teacher, who is a new hire and another who is converting an out of state teaching license to Delaware.
 - d. Is SMS's mentoring site coordinator attending required meetings to stay informed about the CIP and able to communicate with school leadership?
A – The mentoring site coordinator is attending all required meetings.
 - e. Does SMS have enough experienced educators to serve as mentors for the educators in years one and two of the program?
A - SMS has enough experienced educators to serve as mentors.
4. Does SMS have year-long teacher residencies?
 - a. If so, how many?
A – SMS does not have teacher residencies.
5. Does SMS have a para-educator to teacher program or pipeline?
 - a. If so, have any participants been hired?
A - SMS has partnerships with Relay, Wilmington University, and Delaware Technical and Community College for the Alternative Routes to Certification (ARTC) program. Four employees came to the school as associate teachers and enrolled in an ARTC program. They are now lead teachers. Currently, there are five associate teachers enrolled in an ARTC program.
6. What is the school's staff to student ratio?
A - The staff to student ratio is 13:1.
7. When was the staff recruitment plan last revisited?
A - The board has included in its strategic plan a focus on the recruitment of high-quality educators qualified as both Montessori and Delaware Certified teachers. The school uses platforms such as Join Delaware Schools, Handshake, Indeed, LinkedIn, Montessori Recruitment pages, along with outreach to colleges and universities to recruit educators.
8. How many current vacancies does the school have?
A - The school currently has no vacancies.
9. Does the school have a plan to recruit and retain dual-certified teachers?
A - SMS and the board have included this as a focus of the strategic plan. There are currently six dual-certified teachers.
10. Submit a full staff listing with each staff member's current assignment and current licensure and certification status (including initial or continuing license).
A - SMS submitted a full staffing list, which includes the credentials of all staff members (appendix A).

11. Submit SMS's salary schedule / table.

A - SMS provided a salary schedule included in their packet (appendix B).

Follow-up questions for Finance and Staff / Licensure and Certification / Evaluations

Gregory Fulkerson- What is SMS's average class size?

A - There are 26 students per class with one lead teacher and one associate teacher.

Tiffany Green- Are there teachers working on professional growth and student improvement goals? Have observations been scheduled and is the school on track to complete the first round by the December 1st deadline? There are several teachers in year one and two of mentoring. How are teachers supported for CIP?

A - All goals are complete with the exception of new teachers. There are 17 lead teachers, and goals have been entered for 13 teachers. There is also a technical glitch in which a course name must be entered for the teacher to submit goals. The school is not aware of the course name that should be entered and will reach out for support. This should be complete by Friday, November 3rd. All observations have been scheduled. This schedule is included in appendix B. All mentees have been assigned a mentor. SMS has five mentors. Alyson Silva mentors the two special education teachers. The lead mentor is responsible for mentoring the other teachers.

Joyce Leatherbury- Do the six dual certified teachers share in the caseload of special education students?

A - Currently, the caseloads are divided between the two special education teachers. Previously, the special education department took care of all aspects of the individualized education plans (IEPs), however, the school now divides the responsibilities and oversight. The special education coordinator and two special education teachers oversee the caseload and work to build teacher capacity and growth, so that in the future, teachers can handle their own caseloads.

Kendall Massett- Stated that charters are not required to have a salary schedule.

Academic Performance and Framework

12. In 2023 22% of students were proficient in English / language arts (ELA) and 15% were proficient in math. What factors contributed to these low proficiency rates?

a. What is the school doing to increase proficiency rates?

A - Since the pandemic, several students have joined the school significantly behind their expected grade levels, academically. Many students arrive at SMS without prior attendance in a pre-school or Head Start program. The school is closely monitoring the current status and future direction of these students. Unfortunately, test scores have been low. Initially, the school lacked a universal screening tool that would allow them to correlate the relationship between academic standards and how Montessori learners adapt to and demonstrate understanding of those standards. The school has recently implemented Star Reading and Star Math, along with Star Early Literacy, to ensure effective benchmarking and progress monitoring. These tools enable SMS to conduct in-depth analyses of the data and customize support tailored to the standards. The

school didn't allocate enough time for students to familiarize themselves with Chromebooks and develop technology skills, which may have contributed to the poor performance. To address this, the school has established workstations in each classroom where state testing is required. These workstations allow students to practice using the devices while working with programs that expose them to language and questions similar to those on state tests. SMS's commitment to improving scores has led it to create a schedule for multi-tiered systems of supports (MTSS) during which tier II and tier III students receive extra support.

13. What strategies do you plan to implement to increase student proficiency levels for students with disabilities?

A - Through the implementation of MTSS and "win time", tier II and tier III students get individualized support. Teachers can customize supports based on the data produced from various academic and behavioral sources. In addition, professional learning communities (PLCs) are dedicated to data review of student progress, allowing the team to make the necessary adjustments required to meet the students' needs. Other areas of focus include specially designed instruction, small group interventions, and identifying teacher content strengths to ensure that MTSS time is maximized and the achievement of students with disabilities is increased.

14. SMS has an on-track attendance rate (students missing less than 10% of school days) of 66.4%. This is considerably low compared to the four elementary schools in the surrounding district (Seaford) which each has on-track attendance rates of 85% or greater. To what do you attribute SMS's low on-track attendance rates?

a. What is the school doing to improve on-track attendance rates?

A – SMS has a significant attendance issue. For the first two years of the school's existence, COVID-19 led to extensive quarantine time for both teachers and students and impacted students' learning. Last year, this trend continued. The school reached out to colleagues at West Seaford Elementary and Dr. Henry May at the University of Delaware. Dr. May has conducted extensive research related to student attendance. Dr. May provided quick solutions to address attendance issues. The school rented vans for additional transportation as some absences were the result of parents' lack of transportation. Prior to this, if students missed a bus or could not get to a transportation hub they were absent from school. A parent's lack of transportation should not be a barrier to education. Dr. May also provided guidance on messaging and how to approach and address parents about attendance concerns by focusing on the positive, while also providing an infographic with simple and colorful messaging related to the importance of being at school each day. In addition, an attendance team has been assembled. The attendance team is responsible for outreach and formulating connections and relationships with families.

Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Development

15. Describe, in detail, the enhancements that have been made to the school's MTSS process.

A – The school conducted a complete overhaul of MTSS. PLC time is scheduled throughout the day. Enrichment classes were rescheduled to allow teachers time to meet weekly in PLCs. There is a specific focus each week throughout the month- curriculum, special education, MTSS and child study, and housekeeping, which includes general student concerns, such as attendance. An MTSS period was instituted in each grade level. This time allows administration the opportunity to monitor and ensure that support, interventions, and enrichment/acceleration are being executed with fidelity. Teachers also use this time to access curriculum leads for additional ideas, tools, and advice to assist learners.

- a. How do students move from tier 1 to tier 2 and from tier 2 to tier 3?

A - All students are getting tier I instruction with access to SEL lessons provided by school counselors, access to social groups, peer groups, and anger management. Movement of students from one tier to another involves studying Star data for major shifts and using PLC time to analyze the data and look at what is happening during the six-to-eight-week MTSS window (after the differentiated instruction and additional supports were provided). When considering a shift from tier II to tier III, if progress is not shown during the six-week MTSS period, the child study process is initiated, which is the precursor to considering an evaluation for a learning disability. Tier II students are tracked bi-weekly and tier III students are tracked weekly. If, after tier III, there is no growth, an evaluation is initiated. If growth is shown after two MTSS evaluation cycles a student may move back to tier II, but will be monitored closely. The expectation this year is that all decisions will be data driven.

16. What resources and interventions are used to support students in tier 2 and tier 3?

A - Reading Assist is used for reading interventions. Child study is used to create academic goals and Zones of Regulation is used for behavioral and social interventions. Orton-Gillingham is used to build reading skills.

17. What resources and professional learning opportunities will you provide to general education teachers to increase their knowledge of inclusive practices?

A – SMS contracts with speech and language pathologists. Speech and language items are presented at monthly special education PLCs. The SLP then goes into the classrooms to model techniques with students. Staff members are trained and the SLP goes into classrooms to ensure that the training is being executed with fidelity. Through work with the Adapting Curriculum and Classroom Environments For Student Success (ACCESS) project, SMS is focusing on special education and other best practices to ensure that student needs are being met. Beginning in January, there will be a monthly focus around a particular topic or disability. For example, January is autism awareness month, therefore work will center around professional development training and resources related to autism. SMS uses google drive to collect resources, so that teachers have access to all the materials needed to differentiate and accommodate specific student needs.

- a. How will SMS know if special education services and inclusive practices are being implemented?

A – SMS utilizes MTSS time and PLCs to ensure that services are being implemented. Teacher’s toolboxes are being built to ensure that teachers feel comfortable and have a variety of tools to implement when helping a student.

18. In response to question 27, you described enhancements and changes that have been made for at-risk students. What measures will be used to evaluate the impact of the services and strategies that have been implemented and how will you know if they are improving student outcomes?

A - In the Montessori environment, children are viewed as a holistic being- all their parts and their core sense of being must be intact so that they can be ready to receive the work. The developmental rating scale is utilized, which is a tool used to look at the three pillars of Montessori- the prepared learning environment, the prepared adult, and the learners and how they function within the environment. It is similar to the DTGSS rubric, in that specific items are expected of the learner. It gives teachers specific feedback to create a setting where students can thrive.

19. The school discusses several assessments and types used to monitor student progress. It is not clear what the school's goals are relative to these assessments. For instance, Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) is referenced often. DIBELS is typically utilized as a screening tool, not a proficiency or criterion referenced assessment. Using this tool as a measure of student proficiency is not particularly appropriate, as students at this age meet DIBELS measured goals at different ages and stages, but the tool does provide a semi-diagnostic approach to recognizing if students are not meeting milestones as anticipated. This is not a measure of content proficiency and should not be used as such. The school also discusses the use of norm referenced assessments as tools used to measure growth. While this is not "wrong" it is not particularly useful in supporting criterion referenced goals (meeting standards). If a school’s goal is to ensure that students will meet standard, measuring student growth within a population of students does not provide an accurate measure of whether the students measured are meeting standard, more it is a measure of how well they are performing relative to one another. How are the school's specific goals aligned with the specific claims and measures of the assessments being used to monitor progress?

A - In previous answers SMS has shared that they are using a hands-on and “all in” approach along with the expansion of infrastructure to include more resources, practices, and strategies. With the initial application, DIBELS was a tool familiar to stakeholders at the time. While DIBELS is utilized as a progress monitoring tool and can show growth, SMS has included Star and Aperture to indicate where students are academically.

20. The school did not meet standard for curriculum in ELA, mathematics, and science. Continue to work with the Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Development (CIPD) workgroup to address all expectations.

A - SMS is continuing to work with DOE to make improvements and meet all academic expectations set forth by the CIPD work group. In addition, the school is collaborating with First State Montessori School for guidance and support, along with the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector. SMS continues to work to put together

curriculum that meets the expectations of the state and imbed high quality instructional materials, while also honoring a commitment to Montessori education.

CSAC follow-up for Academic Performance and Framework and Curriculum, Instruction and Professional Development

April McCrae - SMS has two goals, dedicating itself to Montessori and meeting Delaware standards. DOE's goal is to ensure that the school is meeting the standards and expectations of Delaware. How SMS goes about meeting those expectations is up to the school which means the Montessori approach does not have to be abandoned. However, the school must work to align Montessori methods, resources, and goals to the required state measures of proficiency.

A - SMS is at a developmental stage. Ms. Martinez is a bridge builder to help teachers see that there are not necessarily two goals, but one goal for children to read and do math at grade level. Developmentally, staff members are at different stages. They are working to improve at telling the story and demonstrating through data that is aligned. Work will continue with DOE to ensure that this is being done. SMS will work to get more proficient at demonstrating a parallel commitment. The school must teach the standards, and Montessori is the way to do that. There is also support from the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector who is working to support other Montessori schools throughout the country in similar positions.

Kendall Massett - What does CSAC need to know about multi-grade classrooms?

A - The fundamental focus should be on teaching children instead of dishing out curriculum. The multi-age classroom creates an environment for children to grow socially, emotionally, and academically.

Kendall Massett - Did the considerable number of students that remained remote affect proficiency rates and on-track attendance?

A - It absolutely affected attendance. There is slow growth, and the hope is that it keeps improving.

Shawn Brittingham- Has there been improvement in attendance thus far this year?

A – The school is tracking attendance and beginning to see patterns. Interventions are being put into place to address attendance. The school is looking at root causes and determining how they can support. SMS is stressing to parents the impact absenteeism has on their student, the classroom, and the teacher. Families need to feel connected, engaged, and valued. Last year SMS started family visiting day which is student-led and enables parents to see how students learn and the dynamic within the classrooms. Parents were genuinely excited and felt connected after this experience. Therefore, this year another family visiting day will take place earlier to get parents engaged and build relationships sooner. The message to students and families is “we are not whole if you are not here.”

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

1. Provide an updated five year enrollment chart.
2. Provide a staff chart that includes individual teachers' areas of certification.
3. Continue to work with the CIPD workgroup to ensure that all curricular areas meet standard.

Next Steps:

- An initial public hearing will take place on November 9th at 5:00 p.m. (3rd Floor Conference Room, Townsend Building, 401 Federal Street, Dover, DE 19901).
- The applicant will have the opportunity to submit a written response to the CSAC initial report, which is due by close of business November 21st.
- A second and final meeting of CSAC will be held on November 30th.
- On or before December 7th CSAC will issue its final report including its recommendation on the renewal.