

CHARTER SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY COMMITTEE

DELAWARE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



Great Oaks Charter School - Wilmington

Charter Renewal

Final Report

December 5, 2023

As is required, Great Oaks Charter School submitted an application to renew its charter for a term of five years. The purpose of the final meeting is for the Charter School Accountability Committee (CSAC) to review the renewal application considering the relevant statutory criteria for renewal.

This report serves as a summary of the strengths and areas of follow-up and/or concerns identified by members of CSAC during their review of the charter applicant's renewal application, performance review reports, annual reports, and performance agreements and during CSAC meetings.

The following were in attendance at the final meeting of CSAC on November 28, 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, Educator Excellence
- 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
- 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
- John Carwell Jr., Education Associate, Charter School Office
- Faye Schilling, Education Specialist, Charter School Office
- Carla Jarosz, Deputy Attorney General

Representatives of Great Oaks Charter School

- Angela Perry, Board Chair
- Laretha Odumosu, Head of School
- Edward Emmett, Board Member
- Michelle Lambert, Financial Consultant
- Angela Parana, Special Education Coordinator
- Tamara Price, Principal

Discussion

Final Charter School Accountability Questions

Finance

1. The current year budget projects an end of year balance of \$335,690, which is an improvement over last year's carry over balance. However, this is still a relatively small cushion for the school to rely on in case of a large, unexpected expense that was not included in the budget. How would the school handle a large, unexpected expense (a lawsuit or due process claim, for example)?
A - Any legal claims would be covered by the school's insurance policy which has a \$500 deductible.
2. In terms of the current spending controls, who has final approval for expenditures and who is ultimately responsible for adhering to the budget?
A - Ms. Price and Dr. Odumosu are responsible.
3. If a school staff member identifies a need for resources that are not in the budget, how are those requests handled?
A - These requests will be handled by Ms. Price and Dr. Odumosu.

Follow-up Questions

Brook Hughes – Does the school's insurance policy provide coverage for due process claims?

A – Due process claims are covered by insurance.

Brook Hughes – Does the budget include facilities expenses?

A - The school's lease covers facilities expenses.

Ted Molin – What is the school's comfort level with the current fund balance?

A - The goal is to grow the school's fund balance to 60 days cash on hand. The school expects to be close to meeting this goal by the end of the fiscal year.

Kim Klein – What is the current insurance coverage limit?

A - The school did not have this information on hand and would have to contact their insurance agent. The coverage limits align with other charter schools.

Enrollment

4. Now that the school choice window has opened for next year, what recruitment efforts are underway during November and what is planned for December?
A- The school continues to contract with Voice for Impact, a software marketing company which will launch a direct advertising campaign. Last year's campaign began in February, but this year's campaign will be launched now. Additionally, the school is conducting weekly outreach to applicants throughout the school choice period.
 - a. How are board members engaging in the current recruitment efforts?
A- Monthly updates are provided to the board and requests are made for additional supports, as needed.

5. At what point in the current school year will Great Oaks begin talking to or surveying existing students about their intent to return to Great Oaks next year?
A- At the close of the school choice period. Additionally, Great Oaks continues to cultivate student investment in the school community through student activities (e.g., homecoming) and engagement in the charter renewal process. Most recently, student turnout at the public hearing was the largest attendance for the current cohort of renewing charter schools.
6. The school notes that the minimum enrollment range needed to remain financially viable is 100-105 students. Would the board voluntarily surrender the school's charter if enrollment were to drop below this enrollment range?
A- The board actively reviews the school's financial viability throughout the school year. If school leadership and the board determine that the school is not able to operate, then they will engage in difficult conversations with school community about next steps.

Special Education

7. Describe the systematic policies and procedures that have been implemented to ensure that initial evaluations and re-evaluations for special education and related services meet regulatory requirements.
A- The current special education team joined Great Oaks in August 2022. The team developed a guidebook that designates roles and responsibilities for all special education staff and procedures to ensure regulatory compliance. The guidebook is updated and shared with staff annually to ensure that all staff are aware of their individual responsibilities and provides clear timelines. Regarding compliance with the Evaluation Summary Report (ESR) document, several additional process steps are implemented. When preparing to send a permission to evaluate for signature the special education coordinator and school psychologist complete a file review and discuss required areas to be assessed.
8. Describe the systematic policies and procedures that have been put into effect to ensure that individualized improvement plans (IEPs) meet regulatory requirements and are implemented with fidelity.
A- The guidebook serves as a resource for special education staff to ensure that IEPs meet regulatory requirements and are implemented with fidelity. Additionally, staff received DOE training on standards-based IEPs. The school provided additional training at the beginning of the school year regarding expectations for IEP writing and goal setting. Additionally, the teachers have a shared drive with various resources and tools to reference when they write IEPs. Special education professional learning communities (PLCs) are convened regularly to discuss the needs of individual students.

9. During evaluations for special education students with high absenteeism rates, how does Great Oaks rule out lack of instruction as a potential source of underperformance?

A- As a result of COVID-19 the statewide attendance rate has decreased, and Great Oaks has been impacted as well. The school has been in discussions with DOE's Exceptional Children Resources workgroup to explore absenteeism that might be tied to underperformance. As a result, the school gathers as much valid data as possible, especially historical data for students being evaluated for initial eligibility or reevaluated for eligibility. If there is insufficient data to qualify for initial eligibility, the IEP team will continue to support students through the multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) process to gather additional data.

Follow-up Questions or Comments

Gregory Fulkerson - Asked the school to elaborate on its response to questions 4a regarding board members engaging in the current recruitment efforts.

A - The primary role of the board is long-term strategic planning. Board members are also expected to support ground level activities such as outreach, event planning, etc.

Brook Hughes – How many enrollment applications have been submitted to date?

A- As of November 27, twelve applications have been submitted.

Brook Hughes - To maintain the current enrollment, the school would need to enroll 58 new students. Is Great Oaks on track to meet this goal?

A- Historically, the first two months of the choice period have not served as reliable indicators of fall enrollment. Last year, July and August were the highest recruitment periods for the community Great Oaks serves.

Joyce Leatherbury – Thanked Dr. Parana for collaborating with DOE's Exceptional Children Resources workgroup and asked what types of professional learning opportunities have been attended by the school psychologist?

A- This year, the school psychologist has attended two DOE trainings. Additionally, he is currently pursuing an advanced degree.

Joyce Leatherbury - Asked the school to elaborate on how the special education coordinator and school psychologist collaborate on reviewing draft ESRs and whether they meet regularly.

A- The special education coordinator and school psychologist share the same office and meet frequently. They have established a process to collaborate before sending a permission to evaluate and serve as resources for each other. Additionally, there are several board members with special education expertise who serve as resources for the school.

Joyce Leatherbury - Asked the school to elaborate on the usefulness of the guidebook.

A- The guidebook serves as a helpful point of reference when staff might have questions about procedures and timelines.

Kendall Massett – Expressed appreciation for the school's response to Dr. Fulkerson's question about the board's role in recruitment. The board's role is to govern, not micromanage. Regarding student enrollment and recruitment, she applauded the school for receiving twelve applications

only three weeks into the school choice period when compared to other schools that have a more established following.

Deb Stevens – The school began the school year with 145 students enrolled. Has there been any change to enrolment since then?

A- Current enrollment is 145 students.

Staffing

10. Are mentoring supports being provided by the school for the two teachers that are not certified and therefore not eligible for the Comprehensive Induction Program?

A- Both teachers have been matched with a certified teacher. They will plan together and reflect upon their professional practice.

11. Are the long-term substitutes being provided with mentoring supports?

A- Long-term substitutes do not qualify for the formal state program but have been assigned internal mentors to help them be successful in the Great Oaks community. Mentors assist long-term substitutes with lesson planning, classroom management, and Great Oaks policies and procedures.

12. Three of the 13 staff members (not including long-term subs) are on a continuing license. Is Great Oaks finding it difficult to navigate the required mentoring program due to ten staff members being on initial licenses?

A – To clarify, there are currently six (6) staff members on initial licenses. It has not been difficult to navigate the required mentoring program.

13. The long-term substitutes listed do not hold active licenses. Are there plans to hire any of them?

A- The school is seeking certified and licensed staff for all open positions. Currently, there is not a plan to hire the long-term substitutes. However, if they express interest in any of the positions, the school will provide the steps necessary to become licensed and certified and provide support, as needed.

a. If so, is there a plan in place to ensure they are actively licensed and certified?

A - See the response to question 13.

b. If granted initial licenses, they would be required to have a mentor on a continuing license. Will that be possible with the current staff and the additional educators who would also need a mentor?

A- Each year, the leadership team determines the number of mentors needed and develops a plan for mentoring supports. If additional supports are needed, the school will reach out to Ms. Green, as needed.

14. Provide a detailed account of the status of the two uncertified teachers.

a. Has teacher A taken the Praxis exam?

A- Teacher A has registered to take the Praxis exam in December 2023.

b. If so, did they pass?

A- Not applicable

15. A Pennsylvania certification is required for reciprocity in Delaware. Is teacher B certified in Pennsylvania?

A- Teacher B recently learned that their current Pennsylvania certification did not qualify for reciprocity in Delaware. As a result, the teacher has registered to take the Praxis exam in December 2023. Regarding Teacher C, the school has been in contact with DOE's licensure and certification office. Official transcripts and passing Praxis scores have been submitted to DOE as of November 27.

a. Where are they in the process of becoming certified in Delaware?

A- See response to question 15.

Curriculum

16. Share the processes the school engaged in to respond to the expectations outlined in the original curriculum review report for each content area.

A- The school has actively worked with content experts in DOE's Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Development workgroup to review and update its curriculum.

Follow-up Questions or Comments

Gregory Fulkerson – To what extent did teachers participate in the curriculum process.

A- Teacher leads participated in the curriculum update process.

Tiffany Green – Who is providing additional mentoring supports for the long-term substitutes?

A- Mentoring is being provided by certified teachers.

Tiffany Green - Based on DOE's records there are three teachers on continuing licenses. Mentors must be on a continuing license.

A- The school's mentoring structure for long-term substitutes does not replicate the state program structure since they would enroll in the state model if hired fulltime. It is more of a support model where teachers receive support in areas such as lesson planning and classroom management.

Tiffany Green - Currently, most of the teachers are on an initial license and three are on a continuing license with one assigned as a mentor for three teachers. As the number of teachers increases how will the school navigate the growth.

A- The leadership team annually reviews the school's mentoring needs and develops a plan. If support is needed with the plan, the leadership team will reach out to DOE, as appropriate.

April McCrae – Asked the school to describe its organizational approach to providing professional learning to address student trauma.

A- Based on trauma informed research, Great Oaks provides a heavy emphasis on teacher-student relationships, creating a safe environment, and creating structure. These factors are built

into the fabric of the school. Consequently, professional development is provided on effective teacher-student relationships. It is important for students to know the structure, so it is built into the school schedule and reflected in student and parent meetings. Knowing the students is critical. Ms. Price does an amazing job of informing staff about students and their needs. Additionally, the small student-to-staff ratio provides the opportunity for effective teacher-student relationships. The relationships were mentioned numerous times by many of the students who attended the public hearing.

April McCrae - How is the school fostering trauma-informed care through professional learning?

A- Annual training is provided on various topics such as trauma-informed care, brain science, and de-escalation. Additionally, the leadership team has an “open door policy” when staff encounter difficulties with students. The Community Education Building (CEB) youth advocates and its community partner, Born for Brothers, also serve as resources for staff and students. Additionally, non-IEP-based, informal support plans are created for students to ensure that staff have the tools and resources they need to support students.

Kendall Massett – asked the school to provide an overview of the CEB youth advocates.

A- The youth advocates follow the students year after year until graduation. Additionally, they build relationships with parents.

Deb Stevens – Regarding teacher A and teacher B, what is the school’s plan if they do not pass the Praxis exam?

A- The teachers will have an opportunity to retake the Praxis exam in the spring. Additionally, the school provides tutoring and will look into the multiple measures option that was passed by the Professional Standards Board.

Kim Klein – Will the current leadership structure with an executive director that manages the principal continue for the foreseeable future?

A- The current organizational structure will continue for the current 2023-24 school year. Any possible changes after this school year will be determined by the board.

Final Questions & Comments

Gregory Fulkerson – Commended the school for completing a tremendous amount of work to update its curriculum documents. After reviewing the submissions, the school’s English/language arts, science, and visual and performing arts curricula have met expectations for Delaware content standards. Social studies, world languages, health, and physical education require some additional work.

Joyce Leatherbury – Commended Dr. Parana for working closely with DOE’s Exceptional Children Resources workgroup and other offices which have led to improvements to the school’s special education program.

Tierra Fair – Asked the school if there was any information not asked by the accountability committee that the school would like to share.

A- Dr. Odumosu commended Ms. Price and Dr. Parana for their leadership and commitment. Specifically, she commended Ms. Price for her work with the curriculum and Dr. Parana for her work with the special education program.

Ted Molin – thanked the school for all their hard work to serve the Great Oaks community.

Kendall Massett – Thanked and commended the school for serving and advocating for Great Oaks students.

Deb Stevens – Asked if the school planned to hire permanent staff to replace the four positions currently filled by long-term substitutes?

A- The four long-term substitutes were hired for the current 2023-24 school year. Hiring for school year 2024-25 will be based on the candidate pool and if the long-term substitutes are interested in permanent positions. The leadership team engages all staff (including long-term substitutes) mid-year to determine their intent to return the following school year. Anecdotally, one of the current long-term substitutes worked at Charter School of New Castle last year and has found a home at Great Oaks. The national teacher shortage continues to be a factor relative to teacher recruitment.

Final Comments from Great Oaks

Ms. Klein asked if the school had any final comments.

Ms. Perry stated that the charter renewal process has been heart wrenching. Compliance is not the ultimate goal for the school. The Great Oaks team has chosen this difficult and rewarding work and has sought to offer voice for those most impacted by CSAC’s recommendation. At the public hearing, Great Oaks students were unscripted and begged for their school to stay open. “Care,” “love” and “hope” were mentioned numerous times regarding Great Oaks staff, terms that should be emblematic of our education system. There is a national crisis of chronic absenteeism, but Great Oaks has reversed this trend. If students feel cared for and supported, it fuels student success.

Conclusion

Ms. Klein proposed a motion to recommend that Great Oaks Charter School has met the standard for charter operations under the charter school law and, therefore, its charter should be renewed for a five-year term beginning on July 1, 2024, with conditions. Additionally, the motion includes approval of the school’s modification application to reduce its approved enrollment to 148 students.

The motion was made, seconded, and passed unanimously to recommend approval with the following conditions:

1. For the remainder of Fiscal Year (FY) 2024, Great Oaks leadership (head of school, building principal, and a representative of the board) will engage in bi-weekly, on-site

meetings with members of the Department of Education (DOE) on the first and third Tuesday of each month at 1:00p. These meetings will be utilized for the following:

- Review progress made towards meeting each condition.
 - Offer support in any area identified by the school or DOE.
 - Review the following:
 - Teacher certification,
 - Recruitment and enrollment and
 - Budget.
2. For the remainder of the FY24, on or before the last Tuesday of each month, Great Oaks will submit a financial report to the Charter School Office containing the following:
 - Projected cash balance at June 30, 2024.
 - Anticipated summer payroll projections (updated monthly to reflect staffing changes).
 - Account code level expenditure report that compares year-to-date actuals to the budget.
 - Written explanation for any budget variances and/or adjustments to the budget.
 3. For the remainder of FY24, the school must maintain an available cash balance in First State Financials to cover summer salary obligations.
 4. On the 2023-2024 Financial Performance Framework improve to a rating of “approaching standard” on the Days Cash and Cash Flow measures.
 5. On April 1, 2024, Great Oaks will have an enrollment of 119 students (80% of authorized enrollment).
 6. On September 30, 2024, Great Oaks will have an enrollment of 148 students.
 7. Great Oaks will meet all deadlines required/requested by DOE.
 8. By February 1, 2024, Great Oaks will develop and implement a succession plan. The plan must include the following:
 - An organizational chart that identifies key positions and outlines responsibilities of each position.
 - A professional development plan that builds capacity within the current on-site leadership team.
 - A plan for ongoing support of the on-site leadership team.
 - Emergency succession protocols for unexpected vacancies or emergencies.
 9. Great Oaks will submit detailed policies and procedures for multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) no later than February 1, 2024. This document must include:
 - A plan for tiered interventions.
 - The current number of students in each tier.
 - A description of team-based decision-making procedures.
 - A description of data collection processes and procedures.
 10. By February 1, 2024, Great Oaks will submit a detailed plan for parent engagement and communication for children with disabilities. This will include a plan for parent councils and a plan for chronically absent students.
 11. By February 1, 2024, Great Oaks will submit a special education professional development plan that includes a scope and sequence.
 12. By February 1, 2024, Great Oaks will submit a detailed plan of the internal processes for monitoring compliance of special education timelines, individualized education plans (IEPs), and evaluation summary reports (ESRs). This plan will include:

- Roles and responsibilities
 - Frequency of internal monitoring
 - Processes for verifying compliance
 - Specific action steps to be taken in the event of non-compliance.
13. Great Oaks will schedule and attend monthly meetings with the Exceptional Children Resources liaison. These meetings will include the special education director and school psychologist. The compliance monitoring plan will be reviewed at these meetings.
 14. By December 15, 2023, the foster care liaison will review the online training module and submit confirmation.
 15. By February 1, 2024, Great Oaks will meet standard in ALL curricular areas as determined by the Curriculum, Instruction and Professional Development workgroup.
 16. Great Oaks will report monthly to DOE on the progress for each unlicensed and/or uncertified staff member to obtain certification and corresponding status update.

Next Steps:

- On or before December 5th CSAC will issue a final report, which will include its recommendation on the renewal application.
- The public comment period will close on December 7th.
- The Secretary of Education will announce his decision at the December 14th State Board of Education meeting.