

CHARTER SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY COMMITTEE

DELAWARE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



Las Americas ASPIRA Academy - Georgetown Application to Open a Charter School INITIAL REPORT

CSAC Initial Meeting: November 21, 2024
CSAC Initial Report Published: November 25, 2024

Members of the Charter School Accountability Committee (CSAC) met with representatives from Las Americas ASPIRA Academy - Georgetown (ASPIRA - Georgetown) on November 21, 2024, for the CSAC Initial Meeting to address the approval criteria set forth in 14 Del. Code § 512.

The following were in attendance at the Initial Meeting on November 21, 2024:

Voting Committee Members

- Kim Klein, Associate Secretary, Operations Support
- Aimee Beam, Education Associate, School Support
- Tierra Fair, Community Member
- Tiffany Green, Education Associate, Workforce Support
- Brook Hughes, Education Associate, Operations Support
- Joyce Leatherbury, Education Associate, Academic Support
- Ted Molin, Community Member
- Preston Shockley, Education Associate, Academic Support

Ex-Officio Members (Non-voting)

- Kendall Massett, Executive Director, Delaware Charter School Network

Staff to the Committee (Non-voting)

- Alicia Balcerak, Administrative Assistant III-I, Charter School Office
- John Carwell Jr., Education Associate, Charter School Office
- Faye Schilling, Education Specialist, Charter School Office
- Leroy Travers, Director, Charter School Office

Representatives of ASPIRA – Georgetown

- Jose Aviles–Rivera, Head of School (K-8)
- Kellie Cruz, Director of Finance
- Guillermina Gonzalez, Board Chair
- Margie Lopez-Waite, Chief Executive Officer
- Greg Panchisin, Chief Operating Officer
- Deb Panchisin, Chief Academic Officer
- Kim Whyte, Director of Educational Enrichment

Ms. Klein stated that the purpose of the meeting was to discuss the new charter application with the applicant, ask questions, and explore areas of concern based on CSAC’s initial review of the written application. She also noted that each section of the application was aligned to the minimum requirements for consideration, as identified in 14 Del. Code § 511 and 512.

Application Overview

Ms. Klein asked the representatives of ASPIRA - Georgetown to summarize the application for a new charter school. Ms. Lopez-Waite shared a PowerPoint overview of the proposed school (Attachment A) [along with a video overview](#).

Discussion

CSAC reviewed the school's application and sent initial questions and concerns to the school prior to this meeting. Ms. Klein asked the school to address the initial questions and concerns that CSAC provided. The school's verbal responses are notated as follows in blue.

Staff / Licensure and Certification / Evaluations

1. Will the proposed school leader for the Georgetown school work at the existing Las Americas ASPIRA Academy (ASPIRA) location?
A – Ms. Lopez-Waite will be the school leader for the first two years of the school's existence to ensure consistency and uniformity. The next head of school will be identified and developed during those two years.
2. Opening a new location on the opposite end of the state will require a significant amount of time and work. Given that most of the individuals involved in this effort are also supporting the existing ASPIRA locations, what steps will be taken to ensure that the existing schools do not suffer negative impacts due to the diversion of resources/personnel required for the opening of ASPIRA - Georgetown?
A – The school approached this opportunity very seriously and would not have applied if they were not confident that they had the capacity to open a new school and successfully operate their existing campuses. A small core team will be created on a voluntary basis to serve as a start-up team. Bandwidth at the ASPIRA-Georgetown will expand through "grow your own" programs such as tuition reimbursement and ASPIRA's teacher academy.

Enrollment

3. The application states that 375 parents (representing 410 students) expressed intent to enroll their children. Will these 410 students be eligible for enrollment in the 2026-27 school year (meaning, they will be in kindergarten, first, or second grade when the school opens)?
A - When the petition process began in the summer, the initial plan was to open a kindergarten through fifth grade school with 400 students in the first year. However, after reviewing the financials and construction plans, the decision was made to open a kindergarten through second grade school with only 200 students in the first year.

The team in Georgetown, initially collected signatures under the assumption of a kindergarten through fifth grade opening but adjusted their approach once the change was decided upon. The petition question was revised to capture information on families with children ready to enter kindergarten, first, or second grade in the fall of 2026. Based on the data collected, 273 (64%) fall within the kindergarten through second grade span.

Enrollment Follow-up Questions

Kim Klein asked how Ms. Lopez-Waite would monitor the existing campuses while serving as the school leader at ASPIRA – Georgetown?

A – Ms. Lopez-Waite’s decision to run for political office prompted a shift in organizational structure. Last summer, a new leadership model was created, referred to as the "Chief Counsel." This team includes the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Chief Operating Officer, Chief Academic Officer, Chief Mission Officer, and the CEO in training, Jose Aviles, who is being developed as the future successor.

This restructuring ensures that operations will continue smoothly without disruption. While the primary focus for Ms. Waite will be on ASPIRA - Georgetown for the first two years, Mr. Aviles and the rest of the Chief Counsel will manage the Newark campuses and oversee operations in the CEO's absence. Though the CEO will be working remotely, the team has already tested this model since the summer, and it has proven effective.

Plans include a possible residence in Sussex County to stay connected to the community, aligning with the commitment to being an active member of the local area.

Finance

4. In response to question 129, the applicant indicates that they will use Christina School District’s prior year local scale for the first year of operation but will switch to whatever local district scale most of their students come from beginning in year two. How will significant discrepancies between the two local scales be handled? For example, if the year two scale results in lower salaries for some employees, how will that be handled?
A - ASPIRA follows the state's current pay scale. Most students are anticipated to come from the Indian River School District (IRSD), where the local pay scale is comparable to Christina School District. IRSD offers higher pay at the lower end of the scale, while Christina offers higher pay at the upper steps. To align with the local pay structure, ASPIRA - Georgetown will adhere to the state’s current school year scale, with the previous year’s local scale becoming the new local scale in year two. The local pay for first-year staff members will not increase until alignment is achieved. This approach ensures each staff member receives an annual increase based on the state scale, approximately seven percent of their pay. The impact on the budget is minimal, as there are only 21 staff members.

- Note that charter schools do not receive minor capital improvement (MCI) funding in their first year of operation since allocations are based on prior year Division I units. The fiscal year 2027 budget includes an allocation of \$37,000 for MCI, which should be removed. This change does not materially affect the budget, so no action is required. The ending balance would still cover summer pay and meet contingency reserve requirements.

A – ASPIRA-Georgetown has removed MCI funding from the budget with no material effect.

Board of Directors

- How will board of director meetings be handled? Will they be held in the Georgetown location to allow for parent/community participation?

A - The Board of Directors will maintain a physical presence at both locations, ensuring that staffing and technology are fully operational in each. The goal is to always be present and engaged in both locations.

- Will the board include one parent and one teacher representative from each location (Newark and Georgetown)?

A - There will be separate parent and teacher representation from each school on each respective board.

Curriculum, Instruction and Professional Development

- Will ASPIRA – Georgetown utilize the same curriculum and professional development plan as the Newark campus for each subject area?

A – The curriculum, curriculum maps and professional development plan for ASPIRA-Georgetown will be the same that is currently used at the Newark campus.

Finance and Curriculum, Instruction and Professional Development Follow-up Questions

Tiffany Green asked the school to provide a breakdown of the 21 staff members for the first year of ASPIRA-Georgetown.

A – There will be 14 combined teachers and paraprofessionals, an administrative assistant, a nurse, a counselor, a custodian, a nutrition manager and a nutrition team member.

Tiffany Green asked if the school anticipated a more experienced or novice staff.

A – School organizers have had the opportunity to meet qualified and experienced educators. These educators, while skilled in their home countries, have not yet gone through the process of recertification in the United States but are eager to return to the classroom. The school is excited to have a core group from the ASPIRA Newark schools, who will serve as veterans to guide and mentor these educators. There is optimism that the staff will be a strong mix of novice and experienced teachers from the local area.

Tiffany Green asked if ASPIRA teachers are bilingual.

A – ASPIRA’s staffing model includes both English immersion and Spanish immersion teachers, so it is not necessary for all staff members to be bilingual. This clarification will be emphasized in all job postings, as it is a frequently asked question.

Brook Hughes asked if there will be physical locations for board meetings in both counties and a virtual option for both.

A – There will be physical locations for both schools as well as a virtual option.

Leroy Travers stated that the Department of Education (DOE) will investigate whether there will need to be two distinct and separate board meetings for each school.

Kendall Massett explained the benefits of having a teacher and parent representative from each location on the board to weigh in on items specific to their location.

Kim Klein commended Mr. Panchisin for being a strong financial leader in the charter school community and submitting a complete application.

Other

9. Why did the school choose to pursue a new charter instead of a major modification to expand?

A - While some shared services will be utilized between the leadership teams, the proximity of the schools and the differences in bus transportation funding were factors in the decision. Sussex County offers higher transportation funding compared to New Castle County, which was a significant consideration for the school. If a modification had been pursued, the school would have received the lower New Castle County transportation funding. Additionally, from a financial perspective, it is more advantageous to establish a new charter rather than modify an existing one, as it allows for additional staff units.

10. As a multiple charter holder, each school would have separate educational plans, separate financial plans and separate frameworks. Is that the intention?

A - This approach of maintaining separate educational plans, financial plans, and frameworks was intentionally designed to ensure that the New Castle County schools are not impacted by the expansion. While there is confidence in the success of the new schools based on a strong track record, this decision was made as a precaution to ensure the continued stability and success of all schools involved.

11. What is the school's transportation plan given transportation and driver shortages in Sussex County?

A - The transportation model for the new school will mirror the one used at the two New Castle County schools. A potential bus transportation provider, Dutton Bus Company, has already been contacted, and the owner has given a verbal commitment to support transportation needs. Bus routes will primarily consist of hub stops, with an anticipated 70% of the projected enrollment using bus transportation. Two bus routes will be needed for the first year, serving a maximum of 72 students per bus for an enrollment of 200 students. As enrollment grows to 400 students by year four, the number of bus routes will increase to four, following the current model used in the New Castle County schools.

To address the nationwide bus driver shortage, part-time roles at the school will be offered to assist with nutrition and custodial needs, which will also help recruit drivers. Transportation funding will be passed through directly to Dutton Bus Company. This model has proven successful in New Castle County, where many drivers now work full-time in the school and benefit from a pension plan. It has helped address staffing challenges while providing additional support for school operations. The approach has been effective, with many part-time drivers transitioning into full-time roles, even progressing to other positions within the organization, such as systems manager. This model fosters strong connections between bus drivers and students, as drivers become familiar faces within the school community.

Ms. Lopez-Waite made the following statement:

"In closing, I would like to address recent social media posts regarding ASPIRA. We live in a world where social media is often relied upon for information, but as we teach our students, it is not a reliable source. There are no guardrails preventing individuals from sharing opinions on anything and everything, and unfortunately, there is no fact-checking. This leaves readers to separate truth from fiction on their own. Some individuals thrive on the reactions they provoke, as social media isn't about being right but about generating responses, such as visits, likes, and shares.

At ASPIRA, we follow Michelle Obama's advice: "When they go low, we go high." We choose not to engage with those spreading falsehoods online. Instead, we focus on what matters most—our students, families, and team members. We hope everyone in our school community shares our mission, vision, and core values. However, there are times when an individual's values may not align with ours, and we must part ways.

We do not believe in employment contracts, as we feel individuals should be free to leave if they choose. We want our team members to stay for the right reasons—for the students. However, we do believe that educators make a commitment to their students for the entire school year when they accept a position. This commitment is not written or legally binding, but it is a commitment made from the heart. When educators choose to break that commitment, all we can do is wish them well and take the necessary steps to fill the vacant position.

I am pleased to report that we have successfully filled all open positions at the high school. Our incredible students, families, and team members have come together during this time of adversity and have rallied around their school leader."

Follow-up Questions

Brook Hughes asked if the building would be at maximum occupancy with 400 hundred students.

A – The building could accommodate an additional twenty students.

Brook Hughes commended the school for providing a comprehensive financial overview in the application.

Joyce Leatherbury encouraged the school to engage with DOE around multitiered systems of support should the application be approved.

Kendall Massett stated that ASPIRA has been an incredible partner within the entire charter community.

Kim Klein stated that the current ASPIRA campuses have a community feel among staff and students.

Kim Klein stated that applications such as ASPIRA – Georgetown’s make the work of CSAC and the discussion much easier. A great deal of that is attributed to Ms. Lopez-Waite’s leadership and the strength of the team.

Next Steps:

- On or before November 25, CSAC will provide the school with an initial report addressing the information reviewed and discussed today.
- A public hearing will be held on December 2, beginning at 5:00 p.m. That meeting will take place at Delaware Technical and Community College in Georgetown, DE.
- The school will have an opportunity to comment on CSAC’s initial report. The school’s comments are due on or before December 6.
- A second and final meeting of CSAC will be held on December 19.
- On or before, December 23, CSAC will issue a final report, which will include its recommendation on the new charter application.
- A second and final public hearing will be held on January 7.
- The Secretary of Education will announce his decision at the January 16 State Board of Education meeting and ask the State Board for assent.