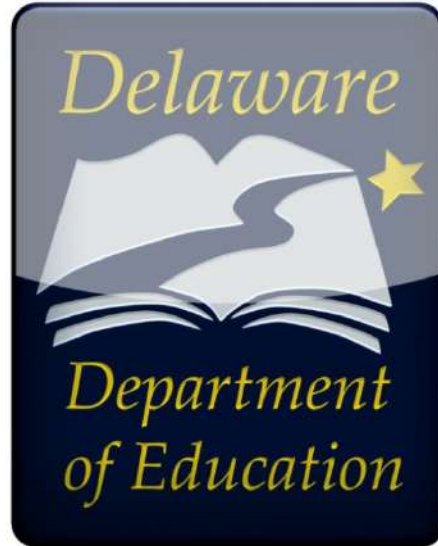


**CHARTER SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY COMMITTEE**

**DELAWARE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**



**Prestige Academy**

**FORMAL REVIEW  
INITIAL REPORT**

CSAC Initial Meeting: May 13, 2015  
CSAC Initial Report Published: May 18, 2015

The following were in attendance at the Initial Meeting of the CSAC on May 13, 2015:

**Voting Committee Members of the Charter School Accountability Committee**

- David Blowman, Chairperson of the Charter School Accountability Committee and Deputy Secretary of Education, DDOE
- Karen Field Rogers, Associate Secretary for Adult Education and School Supports, DDOE
- April McCrae, Education Associate, Science Assessment and STEM, DDOE
- Mary Ann Mieczkowski, Director, Exceptional Children Resources, DDOE
- Charles Taylor, Community Member and Retired Head of School
- Tasha Cannon, Deputy Officer Talent Recruitment, Selection and Strategy, Teacher and Leader Effectiveness Unit (TLEU), DDOE

**Staff to the Committee (Non-voting)**

- Ilona Kirshon, Deputy Attorney General, Counsel to the Committee
- Jennifer Nagourney, Executive Director, Charter School Office, DDOE
- Brook Hughes, Education Associate, Financial Reform and Resource Management, DDOE
- John Carwell, Education Associate, Charter School Office, DDOE
- Michelle Whalen, Education Associate, Charter School Office, DDOE

**Representatives of Delaware Prestige Academy**

- Dr. Jack Perry, Executive Director
- Dana Davisson, Academic Dean
- Michelle Lambert, Accountant
- Don Mell, Board Chair
- Dr. Rita Vasta, Board Vice Chair
- Rodney Merriweather, Board Treasurer

**Additional Attendees Noted**

- Elizabeth Lewis, Office of Management and Budget

## Discussion

Mr. Blowman stated that he was looking forward to an open dialog with the meeting. He stated that the purpose of the meeting was to have a free and open discussion, and not to issue a recommendation.

Mr. Blowman noted that the grounds for the formal review are outlined in a letter to the Prestige Academy (“Prestige”) Board, dated April 23, 2015, which include the following potential violations of the law and charter:

- Financial viability;
- Board capacity;
- Fidelity to the approved charter; and
- Academic performance.

Mr. Blowman noted that Prestige submitted a set of documents to the Department on May 5, 2015. These documents included a revised budget and organizational chart based on the updated student enrollment number and documentation of academic performance throughout the current school year.

### Financial Viability

Mr. Blowman noted that Prestige failed to meet the 80% enrollment requirement by April 1, 2015. Specifically, as of April 1, 2015, Prestige had enrolled 186 students, or 59% of the school’s approved enrollment of 315 students. By May 1, 2015, which is the date that sets initial financial allocations, Prestige had enrolled 213 students, or 68% of the school’s approved enrollment. And, as of May 13, 2015 (the date of the Initial CSAC meeting), Prestige had enrolled 217 students, still 11% shy of the 80% enrollment requirement. He reviewed the history of Prestige’s enrolled student data:

Date	# Enrolled Students	Approved Total	% of Approved Total
April 1	186	315	59%
May 1	213	315	68%
# Students in May 5 Budget Projections	213	315	68%
May 13	215	315	68%

Mr. Blowman emphasized the tie between the 80% enrollment threshold and financial viability, noting that enrollment drives resources necessary to provide services to students in accordance with the approved charter of the school.

Mr. Blowman asked the school about its recruitment plan to achieve 80% enrollment and whether the school has a contingency plan in place in the event that student attrition trends downward. Dr. Perry stated that the school has employed a Recruitment Director, who has been working with Prestige for approximately one year and has a group of nine Street Team members who “hit the ground” on a daily basis in an effort to recruit students. He identified several strategies that Prestige is utilizing, which include increasing media appearances, expanding its reach to Middletown and the Latino community, enlisting the support of civic associations and community leaders, and participating in upcoming community events. He stated that the Street Team has increased its canvassing efforts by door knocking, increasing table appearances at events, calling parents, and delivering applications to families. He stated that the school has also been working with the leaders at the Community Education Building (CEB) in Wilmington in an attempt to gain access to overflow lists from other charter schools. He stated that the school is focusing on re-branding and imaging, as there is a misconception in the community that Prestige is a reformatory school. He stated that the school has been trying to increase the attention to its extracurricular activities and the success of its athletic programs. He noted that it is sometimes difficult to motivate and inspire young men to want to attend a school full of boys. Finally, he noted that Prestige has revamped its website and its literature, and has increased its social media presence. Dr. Perry noted that these strategies have been in place for the last six to nine months, but that efforts have increased in the last three to four months. Dr. Perry emphasized that the school experienced a similar trend at this point last year, as Prestige’s student population tends to make the decision to attend closer to the start of school. As a result, he expects the school’s enrollment numbers to increase as August approaches.

Mr. Blowman asked whether any particular recruitment approaches are more effective than others and asked the school to identify its main barriers to enrollment. Dr. Perry responded that, last year, the school’s focus on billboards was not as effective as the school had hoped it would be. He stated that, this year, the “on the ground” approach of the Street Team has yielded the most benefits from a recruiting standpoint. He noted that, in the past, the Street Team was a volunteer effort, but paying the Street Team members has increased their motivation and efforts. Ms. Davisson added that the addition of alumni to the Street Team has benefited the school. Dr. Perry stated that the main barrier to recruitment is that, as an all boys’ school, Prestige serves just one segment of the population. He also noted that 5<sup>th</sup> grade is not a natural entry point for elementary school, resulting in a smaller 5<sup>th</sup> grade class at Prestige. Finally, he noted that, while he believes that there should be competition and choices for parents, saturation in the charter market has presented a barrier to Prestige’s student recruitment efforts.

Mr. Blowman asked whether, in light of the difficulties in recruiting incoming 5<sup>th</sup> grade students, the school has given consideration to starting its educational program in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Dr. Perry noted that the school has discussed the issue, but chose 5<sup>th</sup> grade in order to have more time with the students. He noted that, if he could do things differently, the school would have started with Kindergarten. He stated that the school recognizes that its 5<sup>th</sup> grade class is smaller and has adjusted its staffing to reflect that reality. He added that this is no surprise to the school and is the reason that the school submitted a modification request to lower its enrollment to 268. He

stated that, if the modification requested had gone through, the school would be at 80% today. Ms. Nagourney later clarified that, immediately after the modification request was submitted and in multiple discussions with the Charter School Office thereafter, Prestige's Board Chair requested that the Department withhold consideration of the application. With respect to the grade issue, Mr. Mell added that, when he first came to Prestige, he thought that the grade configuration was natural based upon his own schooling experience in Delaware. He stated that he anticipates the discussion regarding the school's grade configuration will continue internally and with the Department after the formal review process.

Mr. Blowman asked whether there is a significant achievement difference between those who enter Prestige in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade and those who enter Prestige in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Dr. Perry responded that the school would have to look at the data, but added that he does not know that the difference is significant. Mr. Mell added that this would play a major role in any decision regarding the school's grade configuration.

Mr. Taylor asked the school to elaborate on the messaging to parents in convincing them to send their child to Prestige. Dr. Perry responded that the message is that Prestige's all boys model presents an opportunity for young men that is free and does not exist elsewhere in the state. Prestige will inspire, motivate, and provide young men with guidance that is going to put them on track for college. There are extracurricular and athletic programs, including LEGO robotics, chess, math league, and other options that will push young men to do their best. Finally, Prestige has a longer school day and year, as well as partnerships with some of the state's best public and private high schools. Dr. Perry stated that the Street Team uses a script to deliver the same message to parents.

Mr. Taylor asked whether Prestige loses students during the school year. Dr. Perry responded that, like all schools, Prestige loses students. He stated that honoring the initial year enrollment agreement, and holding parents accountable, will help with losing students at the beginning of the year. He added that it seems that parents are being held more accountable over the last few months, which he expects will have a positive impact. With respect to losing students during the school year, he noted that some districts tend not to accept those students. He stated that the school tries to prevent this from happening by being upfront with parents about Prestige's expectations.

Ms. Field Rogers noted that, two years ago, the school had 287 students on September 30, but only 246 students this year. She asked how the decline in enrollment has affected the school program. Dr. Perry responded that Prestige has had to change its staffing and grade configuration. For example, the school has reduced the number of homeroom classes for each grade, has one Science teacher teaching two grade levels, and has one Social Studies teacher teaching two grade levels. He added that this is not uncommon for middle schools.

Ms. Field Rogers noted that there was variation among the May 1 enrollment count and the revenue sheets that the school submitted. For example, the May 1 enrollment count identified seven intensive students, whereas the revenue sheets identified two. Ms. Lambert responded

that the school was initially looking at 207 students when it did the budget. However, given the short period of time when the number increased to 213, Ms. Lambert did a percentage increase.

Ms. Field Rogers noted that a significant portion of Prestige's students come from the Christina School District and asked what happens if Christina School District's cost per pupil goes down in light of its current financial situation. Ms. Lambert responded that Prestige will look at the expense portion of its budget once it knows what those numbers will look like. She noted that the budget does have some wiggle room to make staffing changes to offset any differences.

Ms. Field Rogers noted that budget lists donations and contributions of \$24,000, but this year there were less than \$1,000 listed in the First State Financials Accounting System (FSF). Ms. Lambert replied that actual fundraising is done through the school's foundation, which sits outside of the FSF account. She added that, over the last three years, Prestige has raised no less than \$100,000 from private fundraising, such that \$24,000 is actually a modest number. Mr. Blowman asked whether the school intends to pull \$24,000 from that account and Ms. Lambert replied that it does. Mr. Mell stated that there are two groups: individual donations and grants.

Ms. Field Rogers asked whether the school has any loans or outside lines of credit. Ms. Lambert replied that the only outside financial matter is the mortgage, which is not in FSF.

Ms. Field Rogers asked the school to approximate its summer pay obligation. Ms. Lambert responded that it is approximately \$200,000.

Ms. Field Rogers asked the school to confirm that it anticipates ending this year at approximately \$350,000 and Ms. Lambert confirmed the amount.

Mr. Blowman noted that Prestige's enrollment and student achievement have been steadily declining. He then asked representatives of the school to discuss its leadership capacity both at the board and school level, including whether that capacity is in place to turn things around.

Mr. Mell noted that Dr. Perry is leaving the school beginning July 1, 2015. He stated that the board has been working with an outside consultant, who brought the issues to the board's attention in November. The same consultant helped the school engage in a national search for a new school leader. The two final candidates have been interviewed and the board anticipates a recommendation on May 14, which will be voted upon at the May 18 board meeting. Mr. Mell stated that he hopes to be able to announce a new school leader by May 22, 2015. He stated that he expects the new school leader to address some of the CSAC's questions, as the implementation of a strategic plan will be executed by that individual. He added that the candidates are aware of the issues that the school faces and have experience in school turnaround. He acknowledged that addressing the recruitment issue, including clearing up confusion in the community, will be the first order of business. He credited Dr. Perry for working hard to ensure a smooth transition. Finally, he stated that the board is very cohesive and very engaged.

Dr. Vasta added that that she chairs the academic achievement committee, which uses the framework. She stated that, although the committee is a governance committee, both Dr. Perry and Ms. Davisson are involved. She stated that the biggest issue is Common Core alignment, resources, and professional development for teachers. She stated that she saw the trend approximately three years ago and reported it to the board. She stated that the school would come back to the board with a corrective action plan and the board would serve as the audit team looking at follow through and results.

Mr. Mell added that Mr. Merriweather and Ms. Lambert have created a system of checks and balances that serves as an early warning system with finances. Mr. Merriweather added that the school has not had one exception from its independent audits for the last six or seven years.

Mr. Blowman commended the school for managing its budget downward as enrollment decreased, but noted that the descent goes hand-in-hand with a steady decrease in student achievement, which may or may not be related to one another. He stated that if the steps that the school has taken have had an effect, they've not had an effect on the school's overall student achievement.

Ms. Davisson stated that the school saw the most significant decline in academic performance at the same time that it experienced a significant increase in its percentage of students with disabilities. She stated that, within a year and a half, the number of students at Prestige with an IEP or a 504 plan doubled. She attributed this increase to the school's reputation for making significant gains with respect to students with disabilities. She stated that the school was unable to keep up with such a significant increase all at one time. In response, the school has added a Learning Support Case Manager to each grade and would need to do this moving forward. The school will need to continue to expand and modify its special education department, including its clinical health department, which includes the School Nurse and Guidance Counselor. She added that this is the first year that the state has provided Prestige funding for a school counselor. She emphasized the importance of clinical health services with regards to students with disabilities and the need to continue to develop this area at Prestige. She identified a Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) system as one area of need.

Ms. Mieczkowski asked how many special education staff members are at Prestige. Ms. Davisson responded that there is currently one Special Education Coordinator who oversees the department and manages the 7<sup>th</sup> grade caseload, as well as three special education teachers, a full-time counselor, a full-time school nurse, and contracted services for speech, Occupational Therapy, and behavioral interventions.

Ms. Mieczkowski asked what systems are in place to address specially-designed instruction to meet the students' needs. Ms. Davisson stated that she just recently uploaded new disaggregated data. She stated that the school is using Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) and Scholastic Math Inventory (SMI) to gauge student growth. She stated that the documentation that the CSAC has does not include the lexile and quantile growth, but that has been provided. She added that the school recently asked for and received approximately 15 hours of professional

development for inclusion teaching, co-teaching and team teaching. She stated that Ms. Mazza of the Exceptional Children Resource group has worked directly with the school. In addition, the school's contracted Behavioral Interventionist has increased her hours to meet the needs of Prestige's students. Finally, the school is utilizing a tracking system for behaviors and Response to Intervention (RtI).

Ms. Mieczkowski asked whether all teachers take part in professional development. Ms. Davisson stated that all teachers, including general educators, special educators, and paraprofessionals participate.

Mr. Taylor asked how confident the school is that it can meet the needs of the special education population and what steps the school has put into place each year to counter any declines. Ms. Davisson stated that the co-teaching and inclusion setting professional development only started last year. She noted that being in a true team teaching model is difficult. The school has also adopted some intervention programs, including Spatial-Temporal Reasoning (ST) Math, as students tend to come to Prestige with a larger deficit in math skills compared to reading skills. The school looks forward to receiving data in June. However, she stated that she is seeing some major jumps in the special education population for this year. For example, 5<sup>th</sup> grade special education lexile growth between the fall and the winter is 107 points compared to the one-year prescribed amount of 75-100 points. In addition, 8<sup>th</sup> grade special education reading is at 152 average lexile growth.

Mr. Taylor asked whether the school utilizes interim assessments for both special education and general education. Ms. Davisson stated that the school does interim assessments for the entire population. Dr. Perry added that from Year 2 onward, Prestige was working with an outside nationally-known vendor to create interim assessments. Because Prestige was the only school in the state working with the vendor, the assessments were not specifically aligned to Delaware standards. However, in partnership with the other charters in the Charter Collaborative (EastSide Charter School, Kuumba Academy, and Thomas Edison Charter School), Prestige is working with a new vendor and assessments tied to Delaware standards. He added that the school is also working with those schools on the Teaching Excellence Framework. Dr. Perry also took advantage of the Relay Principal Fellowship two summers ago. Finally, from a programmatic standpoint, the school has redesigned its RtI program and implements the Read180 Program in 5<sup>th</sup> grade.

Mr. Taylor asked whether the school has paraprofessionals in every classroom. Dr. Perry responded that the school does not. Ms. Davisson stated that the school has paraprofessionals only for its intensive needs scholars.

Mr. Taylor asked about the school's student to teacher ratio. Ms. Davisson stated that the 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade ratio is approximately 18:1 or 20:1, but the other grades are approximately 25:1.

Mr. Taylor asked how often the interim assessments take place and Ms. Davisson responded that they are given approximately every eight weeks.



Mr. Taylor asked the school to describe its RtI process. Ms. Davisson stated that one of the most significant factors to special education growth has been the Read180 Program. With respect to RtI, Prestige staff received training from the University of Delaware to help coach students in their RtI groups on how to do performance tasks. She noted that this has been successful in reducing test anxiety around the SBAC. Dr. Perry added that much of the programmatic changes are included in the school's Annual Report, but that the school has also taken advantage of instructional coaches. He stated that the school has also changed its class schedule to ensure that most of the content is delivered in the morning and early afternoon.

Mr. Taylor asked what has contributed most to the school's academic declines. Ms. Davisson responded that hiring and training qualified staff with a growth mindset is the highest leverage piece. As such, Prestige has completely remodeled its hiring process to find individuals with grit and demonstrated growth mindset, as well as data to back up their performance. She also described the school's evaluation system, which includes a minimum of eight unannounced observations.

Ms. Mieczkowski asked what safeguards the school has put in place to ensure that it's compliant with the IDEA. Ms. Davisson responded that Ms. Mazza has worked directly with the school's Learning Support Coordinator in cross-checking all of the school's documentation. Wednesdays are also reserved for the Learning Support team to meet to address any and all compliance paperwork, clinical health, and learning support issues.

Mr. Mell expressed concern that the proper resources are not being allocated to students with special needs. He stated that he does not think that the issue is unique to Prestige.

Ms. McCrae stated that it is important for the school to make strong choices as it moves forward and makes decisions. She noted that the school's 5<sup>th</sup> grade Science scores have dropped more than 16% over the past two years. She stated that Science and Social Studies can boost confidence in students and motivate them in math and reading. She urged the school to weigh its financial choices as it moves forward. Ms. Davisson stated that she is grateful to have been allotted a spot for a Next Generation Science Standards team lead teacher and has already signed up a teacher. She stated that she believes that Science and Social Studies are invaluable.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the school's December 23, 2014 modification application was discussed. Ms. Nagourney clarified that Mr. Mell had requested that the Department withhold consideration of the application and Mr. Mell confirmed. Dr. Perry asked for clarification regarding whether the application required board action and Mr. Mell stated that his understanding was that it did. Dr. Perry stated that the Board Chair signed the document and Ms. Nagourney noted that the Board Chair subsequently rescinded the application. Mr. Blowman added that, while it may have resulted in the school achieving 80% enrollment, nothing is different in terms of the fundamental dynamics and direction of the school.

## Conclusion

Mr. Blowman stated that it was clear that the school failed to comply with the requirement that the school achieve 80% enrollment by April 1, 2015. He also noted that fidelity to the approved charter, academic performance, and leadership capacity remain ongoing areas of concern.

Ms. Davisson asked for clarification regarding how the academic framework will be revisited, given that this is not an accountability year. Ms. Nagourney stated that the current projection is for the new academic framework to be completed and the reports to be run in January, but for the testing data to be available by the end of the summer. Ms. Davisson asked how the framework ratings are impacted, given that it is the first year of SBAC. Ms. Nagourney replied that they are waiting until they have data in order to set cut points and that they are meeting with charter schools on May 28, 2015 to discuss growth metrics and answer questions.

Mr. Blowman asked the CSAC members whether there is any additional documentation or information that they feel is necessary for their review; the members requested the following:

- Documentation demonstrating that Prestige has moved forward with making changes in its academic performance, including any current school year student data that points to academic growth;
- Revamped teacher selection model;
- Any early level data that demonstrates the selection of higher-quality teachers; and
- Trend information on the school's special education population and need/classification within that population.

## Next Steps:

- An initial public hearing will be held on May 18, 2015, in the 2nd Floor Auditorium of the Carvel Building in Wilmington, DE, beginning at 5:00 p.m.
- The applicant's written response to the CSAC Initial Report is due on or before June 1, 2015.
- The final meeting of the CSAC will be held on June 3, 2015, in the 2nd Floor Cabinet Room of the Townsend Building in Dover, DE, beginning at 1:00 p.m.
- If, after the final meeting, the CSAC recommends probation, revocation, or any other remedial measures, a second and final public hearing will be held on June 9, 2015, in the 2nd Floor Auditorium of the Carvel Building, Located at 820 N. French St., Wilmington, DE, beginning at 5:00 p.m.
- The public comment period ends on June 12, 2015.
- The Secretary will announce his decision at the June 18, 2015 State Board of Education meeting.