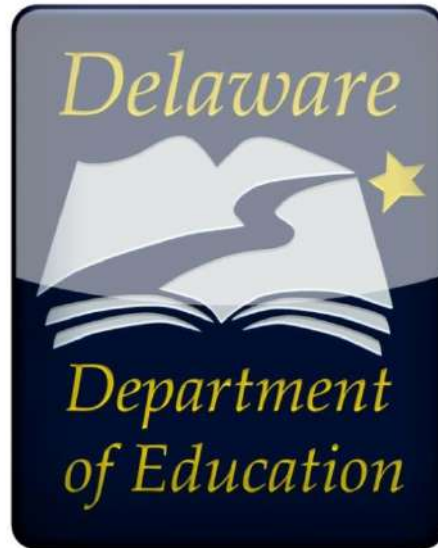


# CHARTER SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY COMMITTEE

DELAWARE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



## First State Montessori Academy

**MAJOR MODIFICATION APPLICATION  
INITIAL REPORT**

CSAC Initial Meeting: January 26, 2016  
CSAC Initial Report Published: January 29, 2016

On December 30, 2015, First State Montessori Academy submitted an application for a major modification of its charter.

The following were in attendance at the Initial Meeting of the CSAC on January 26, 2016:

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

- David Blowman, Chairperson of the Charter School Accountability Committee and Associate Secretary, Financial Management and Operations, DDOE
- Karen Field Rogers, Deputy Secretary, DDOE
- April McCrae, Education Associate, Science Assessment and STEM, DDOE
- Barbara Mazza, Education Associate, Exceptional Children Resources, DDOE
- Chuck Taylor, Head of School, Providence Creek Academy

**Non-voting Members of the Charter School Accountability Committee**

- Kendall Massett, Executive Director, Delaware Charter School Network

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

- Catherine Hickey, Deputy Attorney General, Counsel to the Committee
- Jennifer Nagourney, Executive Director, Charter School Office, DDOE
- John Carwell, Education Associate, Charter School Office, DDOE
- Michelle Whalen, Education Associate, Charter School Office, DDOE
- Barbara Clendaniel, Acting Executive Assistant, Charter School Office, DDOE
- Brook Hughes, Education Associate, Financial Reform and Resource Management, DDOE

**Representatives of Delaware Academy of Public Safety and Security**

- Yvonne Nass, Board Co-Chair
- Karen Thorpe, Innovative Schools
- Angela Angeny, Board Member, Parent, Head of PTO, Head of Expansion, and Charter School Network Captain
- Courtney Fox, Head of School
- Liz Madden, Education Director
- Kristen Chastain, Board Member and Teacher

## Discussion

The following was discussed:

- A summary of the request – Through its major modification application, the school seeks to increase its enrollment (beginning in the 2016-17 school year), change its grade configuration to add 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades (beginning in the 2017-18 school year), and add space to accommodate the increased enrollment. The school is confident that it is prepared for the changes, as it has a strong staffing model, policies and procedures, a rich Montessori-based curriculum, strong financial footing, a committed board, a supportive community, and supportive families.
- The school's plan with respect to the buildout in both the existing grade levels and the timeline with respect to 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade – The school responded that it wants to build from the lower grades up so that its students entering the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades have the skills they need to be ready. The intent is to bring in an additional three classrooms at the K-1 and 2-3 levels the first year. The following year, the school would still be K-6. The school would then add a 7<sup>th</sup> grade class the third year and an 8<sup>th</sup> grade class the 4<sup>th</sup> year. In terms of the space, the existing building would become the lower school serving K-3 and the new building would serve as the upper school, starting with six classrooms next year and increasing that number in later years.
- Why the school chose to make these changes now, as opposed to at a later date – The school responded that it engaged in reflection and data collection at the end of last year. One thing that the school noticed was that it was losing students between 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades, largely due to the fact that the school's model doesn't align with the grade configuration of surrounding schools. Most parents just wanted their children to start middle school with their peers. However, because the school has multi-age classrooms, having older students in those classrooms is very important to the model. The board then considered its options, including scaling back to grades K-5, but ultimately determined that going K-8 was the best option.
- The size of the typical multi-age classroom – The school responded that it was approximately 26 students. At the K-1 level, it's approximately half and half, with two teachers. At the 4-6 level, there are more 4<sup>th</sup> grade students because of the triangle model. The CSAC asked how this would look at 7-8. The school responded that it would still have content specialist teachers. Its students at the elementary level have an individualized work plan that they work through for all of their different content areas within the walls of their classroom. The school has broadened this, for example, to allow students to visit the math teacher's classroom for certain things. However, they would still be working within an individualized plan as they do now. Over the next year, the school plans on working on how that would work in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms. However, the Montessori and Common Core curriculum are there.
- Clarification regarding the break between the two schools – The school responded that its current location would become K-3 and the second location across the street would become 4-8, with 4-6 moving over next year. The school does not anticipate any

necessary renovations in the next two years, as the rooms are already large enough to fit the model.

- How administration will be divided between the two buildings – The school responded that it will ensure that there are secretaries, nurses, and members of the leadership team in both buildings. However, the buildings are very close to one another. The school does not anticipate an initial need to add administrative positions. The facilities manager also manages both buildings and will continue in that role.
- The school's proposed curriculum, particularly at the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade levels – The school responded that it already has a strong, state-approved 6<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum in place that serves as a foundation moving forward. The school noted that it is already implementing a middle school curriculum based on the Montessori model and Common Core. The school also hired a staff member who has already run a 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade Montessori program in the past. She is currently teaching 4-6, but the school anticipates that she will be able to bring the middle school training into the school next year. The school also utilizes a responsive classroom approach, which would flow into the middle school in terms of social curriculum and soft skills. The school noted that it continues to be a very standards-based program involving a personalized education plan and takes into account how students are taught at the elementary level. The intent is not to have every detail for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade hammered out at this point, but to take next year to conduct research and ensure that its programming is appropriate.
- The CSAC cautioned that, at the middle school level, there are things other than content courses such as the Career and Technical Education piece, that the school should be mindful of. The school responded that one aspect about its model that is helpful is that, aside from content area specialists, the school staffs the rest of the classrooms with part-time employees. As a result, there is flexibility regarding who the school can hire to fill those roles. The school noted that it has been working with Margie Lopez-Waite at Las Américas ASPIRA Academy to determine what aspects of that school's blended learning curriculum could fit the Montessori model and what lessons that school has learned. The CSAC cautioned that bridging up from the elementary level will come naturally, but vertically articulating the high school piece will not come as naturally.
- The CSAC encouraged the school to join the Transition CADRE led by Dale Matusevich of the Exceptional Children Resources Group during its planning year, as it will help with the planning piece of transition as it relates to the IEP and working with the higher education office.
- The CSAC also acknowledged that the school is in its second year of Common Ground and has made great progress.
- Current enrollment projections – The school indicated that it currently has approximately 430 applicants and anticipates 52 spaces if it grows. There will still be a lottery at every grade level. For example, the school has 78 kindergarten openings and approximately 180 applications right now. Based upon last year's experience, the school anticipates more applications between now and April. The school has made clear to people that it currently only has openings in Kindergarten, but anticipates more applications if the modification is approved and more space is made available.

- The financial impact of running two separate buildings – The school responded that, even setting aside summer pay, potential reserves, and potential contingencies, the school still anticipates ending this year with almost \$1 million to carry over into next year. The school’s financial position is now even better than what is represented in the application. The school has been extremely disciplined with spending during the first two years and is in a strong financial position to move forward. The school’s plan is conservative in the revenue numbers coming in (95%), but aggressive with respect to potential spending. Those numbers still allow the school to manage both buildings. The school is currently engaged in discussions regarding the lease numbers, which are pretty close to what is represented in the application. While the school does not have exact numbers, initial discussions seem to reflect that lease numbers are identical in year one. The school provided a letter of intent from the owner expressing an intent to allow the school to lease the building. The school is in a unique position to be able to more accurately predict costs associated with the operation of the building based on its recent occupancy by another school. Finally, the school reiterated that the building would require minimal work to become operational.
- The CSAC warned that, although the school does not have many Christina students, it should anticipate and plan for a reduction in local revenue due to Christina’s reduced expenditures this year. The noted that it has approximately 50 Christina students. However, the school has discussed how the upcoming Brandywine referendum may impact its budget the year after next, as 50% of its students are Brandywine students.
- Whether there is a contingency plan if, for whatever reason, the building is not available – The school responded that it is far enough along in the lease process that it is not concerned about that possibility. The school noted that the modification request only works at this point if the building is secured. The requests are contingent upon one another.
- The CSAC commended the school for its high anticipated carryover. The school responded that it wanted to be in a position to make the requested changes, but is also prepared to put the money back into the classroom. The school noted that it has been smart about its staffing, including part-time teachers, as its model has allowed them to have high staff numbers at a lower cost.
- The anticipated timeline with respect to the lease negotiations – The school responded that the lease cannot be finalized until the modification is approved.
- Ms. Massett stated that the charter community wished to note that First State Montessori Academy is a model of how to open a school successfully. The board has been meticulous and voluntarily completed the Delaware Alliance for Nonprofit Advancement board training. Additionally, the Delaware Charter Schools Network identifies Ms. Fox as an individual that the charter community can learn from.

## **Conclusion**

Mr. Blowman asked the CSAC whether there were outstanding areas of concern or whether additional information was needed to inform its decision-making. The following information was requested:

- A general outline of a proposed curriculum for the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade content areas.

## **Next Steps:**

- An Initial CSAC Report will be issued no later than January 29, 2016.
- The first of two public hearings will take place on February 1, 2016, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor Auditorium of the Carvel State Office Building, which is located at 820 N. French St., Wilmington, Delaware, beginning at 5:00 p.m.
- The school's response to the Initial CSAC Report, if the school chooses to submit a response, is due by the close of business on February 16, 2016.
- A Final CSAC Meeting will be held on February 22, 2016, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor Cabinet Room of the Townsend Building, which is located at 401 Federal St., Dover, Delaware.
- A Final CSAC Report will be issued no later than March 1, 2016.
- A second and final public hearing will take place on March 7, 2016, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor Auditorium of the Carvel State Office Building, which is located at 820 N. French St., Wilmington, Delaware, beginning at 5:00 p.m.
- The public comment period will close on March 11, 2016.
- The Secretary of Education will announce his decision at the regular meeting of the State Board of Education on March 17, 2016.