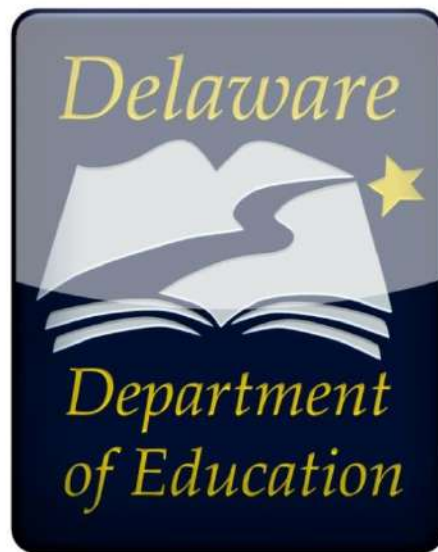


# CHARTER SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY COMMITTEE

DELAWARE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (DDOE)



## **Great Oaks Charter School MAJOR MODIFICATION APPLICATION INITIAL REPORT**

Initial Meeting: April 27, 2021  
Initial Report Published: May 5, 2021

On March 18, 2021, Great Oaks Charter School (Great Oaks) submitted an application for a major modification of its charter. The following individuals attended the initial meeting of the Charter School Accountability Committee (CSAC) on April 27<sup>th</sup>:

**Voting Members**

- Kim Klein, Chairperson of CSAC and Associate Secretary of Operations Support, DDOE
- Gregory Fulkerson, Ph.D., Education Associate, World Languages and International Education, DDOE
- Tiffany Green, Education Associate, Mentoring and Induction, DDOE
- Brook Hughes, Education Associate, Finance Office, DDOE
- Joyce Leatherbury, Education Associate, General Supervision IDEA, DDOE
- April McCrae, Ed.D., Education Associate, Science Assessment, DDOE
- Brian Moore, Education Associate, School Climate and Discipline, DDOE
- James Pennewell, Education Associate, Capital Project Management, DDOE
- Michael Saylor, Ed.D., Education Associate, School Leadership, DDOE
- Ted Molin, Community Member
- Charles Taylor, Community Member

**Ex-Officio Members (non-voting)**

- Kendall Massett, Executive Director, Delaware Charter Schools Network
- Audrey Noble, Delaware State Board of Education

**Staff (non-voting)**

- Leroy Travers, Lead Education Associate, Charter School Office, DDOE
- Alicia Balcerak, Administrative Secretary, Charter School Office, DDOE
- John H. Carwell Jr., Education Associate, Charter School Office, DDOE
- Darryl Parson, Deputy Attorney General,

**Representatives of Great Oaks**

- Jim Mazarakis, Board of Directors
- Leland Kent, Executive Director
- Damien Burke, Chief Operating Officer
- Samanta Lopez, Head of School
- Kaitleen Gillis, Dean of Student Support Services
- Kendra Giardiniere, Manager of Operations
- Karen Thorpe, Financial Consultant

*On March 12, 2020, Governor Carney issued a declaration of a state of emergency for the State of Delaware due to a public health threat. The state of emergency allows all public meetings of executive branch public bodies, including CSAC, to be conducted electronically, either by means of telephone or video-conference call. This meeting was open to the public electronically only, as was reflected on the State's Public Meeting Calendar.*

## Discussion

Ms. Klein shared that this was the initial meeting of CSAC relative to the major modification application submitted by Great Oaks. Great Oaks has applied to change their grade configuration by eliminating sixth, seventh and eighth grade. If granted, Great Oaks would be a ninth through twelfth grade school. This change is requested to begin in school year 2021/2022 with the elimination of sixth grade, the elimination of seventh grade in school year 2022/2023 and elimination of eighth grade in school year 2023/2024.

Ms. Klein stated that the purpose of the meeting was to review the application, ask questions, and discuss areas of concern. The meeting also served as the applicant's opportunity to provide comments regarding their application.

The school was given ten minutes to summarize its application.

Mr. Kent stated that the school wishes to be granted this modification to allow for consolidation of its resources which will enable them to provide a unique and viable option to students in Wilmington. The school is committed to reimagining professional learning and they have implemented a new organizational structure that will support and sustain Great Oaks' momentum in improving the school while capitalizing on the unique strengths and talents within their organization.

Mr. Kent stated that Great Oaks has worked with DDOE to increase their metrics in teacher certification and special education compliance. They have also submitted a letter of intent to apply for a Reimagining Professional Learning Grant. Mr. Kent informed the committee that they are strategically building a network of support in and around their community.

Ms. Lopez stated that her background has allowed her to obtain a great understanding of the needs of students in inner-city Wilmington. The school wishes to provide students with access and options to become successful. Ms. Lopez quoted a headline from USA Today that reads "Growing up under fire: Wilmington, Delaware leads U.S. in teen shootings." Great Oaks wishes to be part of a solution to this growing issue by operating a high school that provides a rigorous and high quality curriculum to go with tutoring and mentoring to empower and educate the city's youth.

Mr. Burke reiterated that Great Oaks wishes to consolidate resources and dedicate their efforts to high school students in the city of Wilmington. Mr. Burke stated that Great Oaks has thoughtfully partnered with proven, local, world-class organizations that are aligned with the Great Oaks mission. These partners help provide layered, coherent supports to their students. This includes their partnership with the Community Education Building (CEB) that allows them to access a large network of shared resources, shared thinking, and shared space. This partnership allows them to provide internships and exposure in multiple fields such as library science, facilities, operations, pediatrics, community health, and culinary arts. Great Oaks also partners with the CEB on the Student Advocacy Case Management Program. This program is a holistic approach that brings together multiple agencies that center around each child to remove instructional barriers.

Mr. Mazarakis stated that the decision to remove grades was difficult but necessary considering that less than half of the students in the city of Wilmington graduate high school. Great Oaks wishes to engage students in the high school to help improve that statistic.

Ms. Klein asked for questions or comments from CSAC regarding the application.

Ms. Leatherbury asked what steps Great Oaks has taken to increase the proficiency of their special education students.

Ms. Gillis answered that the special education team, in collaboration with other instructional leaders, has made a concerted effort to ensure that high percentages of special education students completed state testing to help provide more complete data. The team strategically assigned students to small group testing to ensure that the students were testing with teachers that they were familiar with and had a positive relationship with. The school has also increased the number of certified special education teachers each year and will continue to do so into next year.

Dr. Saylor asked the school to further explain their restructured agreement with the Great Oaks Foundation.

Mr. Kent responded that Great Oaks has gone through a process of being more autonomous in their governance. Their partnership with the foundation is currently a partnership to provide a tutor-based model, however, everything else is now being governed locally.

Dr. Saylor asked if there was a funding impact due to the restructured agreement with the foundation.

Mr. Mazarakis stated that the funding has actually improved as a result. He stated that the revenue generated by the school was previously going into the foundation, however, it is now staying in the Great Oaks school community.

Dr. Saylor asked if the school's strategic plan has been written since the new leadership has been in place. Mr. Kent responded that the struggles of transitioning leadership during a pandemic has not allowed them the time and opportunity to focus on their strategic plan. The school does have plans to host a retreat with the Board and leadership team to develop a plan. Ms. Massett stated that while strategic plans are helpful they are often created then just sit on a shelf. Ms. Massett stated that Great Oaks has a plan, even if it is not in writing.

Dr. Saylor stated that only 42% of the school's freshman are on track to graduate. He asked what the implications of having 42% graduate may be for the school and what Great Oaks' plan is to change that. Ms. Gillis responded that she has worked closely with the guidance counselor to track credits and make individual plans for students. Many of these students are working in credit recovery programs.

Dr. Saylor asked what was being done to proactively improve graduation data. Ms. Lopez stated that the school is studying the curriculum to ensure that it is effectively engaging students as Great Oaks has identified lack of engagement as an underlying issue. Great Oaks has identified

Career and Technical Education (CTE) pathway courses to offer students. Ms. Lopez stated that school is utilizing tutoring and mentoring to set students up for success.

Ms. Gillis added that Great Oaks has partnered with DDOE to offer training to all of their teachers in the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) instructional model. Throughout the school year teachers meet every two weeks for professional development sessions. This has helped Great Oaks improve its instruction to English Language Learners as well as all struggling readers. Great Oaks is also in the process of building out its Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) for all students.

Mr. Burke added that the school understands that having only 42% of their students on track for graduation is unacceptable, however, the school will benefit greatly from being able to focus all of their resources on their high school program. Ms. Gillis added that their behavior health development partner is already making a difference with some students that are not on track to graduate. The mental health of many students has suffered due to the ongoing epidemic and racial injustices throughout the country. The behavior health professional has been able to re-engage these students in academics.

Dr. Saylor reminded the school that, by beginning in high school, they will forfeit the opportunity to reach students earlier and the opportunity to create a transition for students in ninth grade. Mr. Kent stated that many of the schools in the area that Great Oaks serves are schools that have students in kindergarten through eighth grade. Great Oaks is looking to partner with those schools to become a destination for their students when they get to high school. Additionally, Great Oaks is partnering with the CEB to provide an advocacy program for its students to connect them with positive adults to help provide a variety of supports. Mr. Kent stated that parents have told him that having their children begin at Great Oaks in the middle school causes them hardships due to having children at multiple schools.

Ms. Leatherbury asked what percent of the students that are on track to graduate are students with disabilities and what supports are in place to improve the graduation rate of those students. She also asked the school what transition strategies are in place for special education students. Ms. Gillis was unsure of the exact percentage of the special education students that graduate. Great Oaks has assigned transition counselors to students this year, for the first time. The school plans to begin working with eighth grade students with disabilities this summer. The counselor is working with students on basic pre-employment skills. Another person is assigned to eleventh and twelfth grade students with disabilities on transition services. Great Oaks has hosted parent workshops on student transitions. These workshops are recorded and posted to their website. Additionally, Ms. Gillis attends transition cadre meetings.

Ms. Leatherbury asked how student and family engagement initiatives have worked out. Ms. Lopez stated that the school has contacted all families and provided home visits to make connections with families. The Great Oaks has child study sessions every week to identify students with different areas of concerns. Great Oaks utilizes learning pods to provide learning opportunities to students that are struggling academically or not engaged in the learning.

Dr. Noble stated that the school has written in their application that a majority of students in the city of Wilmington do not graduate from high school. Dr. Noble added that the data does not reflect this. Data provided by DDOE show that the State's graduation rates are at the highest they have been in over a decade and that, of the three Wilmington schools serving high school students, the school lowest graduation rate among African-American students was at 67%. Other schools serving the Wilmington community have graduation rates from 81%-100%. In 2020 the Redding Commission published data that stated that students in the city of Wilmington were graduating at a lower rate than other students in the State, however, 73% of Wilmington students were graduating. Dr. Noble shared concern that this is one of core reasons for Great Oaks transitioning into a high school. Dr. Noble asked for a deeper explanation about why the school wishes to transition to a high school only.

Mr. Kent stated that the new leadership and new Board of Directors took a look at the school's current situation and distribution of resources and found that, as Great Oaks transitioned into a high school and some of the leadership at the time left the school, systems were not put in place to set the school up for success. The school was being managed by the foundation out of New York. The new structure will allow for more autonomy and a better understanding of where to focus resources. Mr. Kent stated that there are many students falling into the cracks and dropping out early. Great Oaks wishes to serve all students and give them opportunities. Great Oaks will support students socially and academically through their numerous community partnerships.

Ms. Gillis added that she is one of the founding members of the school. She stated that several years ago, they began to attract students that did not attend their middle school and had an influx of students with learning disabilities. Trying to serve students with extremely high needs in middle school and high school is stretching their resources thin. They feel that it would be better to serve their highest need students, which is their high school students.

Dr. McCrae asked the school to discuss their projected enrollment and how that would fit into a strategic plan since Great Oaks seems to expect a five to ten percent attrition rate per year. Mr. Burke stated that Great Oaks is thinking conservatively with their enrollment forecast for the next five years. The school has built a budget around an enrollment of 350 students. They feel that budget is viable. Mr. Burke stated that their projections for next year are to have 334 students. They currently have 332 students and have a strong recruitment program kicking off next week that will run through the summer.

Dr. Noble shared statements that she made at the prior week's State Board of Education meeting. She stated that Great Oaks current modification application is the school's fourth modification request related to enrollment. An initial request was made to increase enrollment by 8%. Two subsequent requests asked for reductions of 12% and 14.9%. The school's original charter application projected that Great Oaks would serve 600 students by school year 2019/2020. Great Oaks current enrollment is roughly half of that. Delaware code requires that, on April 1<sup>st</sup> of each school year, charter schools shall have enrolled at least 80% of its authorized enrollment. Great Oaks current enrollment represents 57% of its authorized enrollment. Dr. Noble expressed concern that the school would not be financially stable and that many areas of the approved charter would not be able to be implemented with fidelity. This includes Great Oaks' instructional

programing, serving students with special needs, and plans for administrative and operational needs. This could constitute a failure of Great Oaks to comply with its charter. Dr. Noble asked that the DDOE consider placing Great Oaks under formal review to gain a better understanding of the problems that the school is facing and how they can be resolved. Dr. Noble stated that, despite efforts to increase enrollment, the enrollment continues to decline. Additionally, since 2015, four charter schools have been found to be in violation of their charter due to low enrollment. Three of those schools are now closed. The State Board feels that low enrollment leads to financial problems that could lead to school closing. Dr. Noble asked the school how they will remain financially viable.

Ms. Klein stated that the school could respond to that question when responding to the initial report.

Mr. Moore commended the school for taking in students that come from facilities that work with troubled youth. The school has welcomed those students with open arms and has done a great job of working with them.

Dr. Fulkerson provided an overview of Great Oaks' curriculum review (see below).

Mr. Taylor reminded the committee that Great Oaks is working with a population of students that traditionally struggles academically.

Ms. Massett stated that the Delaware Charter School Network has worked with the school since its inception. She stated that the school's vision of bringing the community together using their school is amazing. Ms. Massett stressed that the new leadership has worked tirelessly over the last year to help students that have often been left behind and encouraged the committee to continue to allow Great Oaks to improve.

## **Conclusion**

At the conclusion of the meeting, Ms. Klein asked the members of CSAC if there was any additional information they required in order to inform their decision-making. CSAC requested the following information:

- Information on how parents have responded to the school's modification request.
- Information on their recruitment process for high school students to include:
  - o How they will address the large increase from 42 freshmen to 100 freshmen in only two years.
  - o An explanation of add past target enrollments, actual enrollments and reasons for missing targets.
- Information on their lease with the CEB. Will there be an early termination fee?
- Submit a scope and sequence documents for grades nine and ten from the *CommonLit 360* curriculum. The submitted link only provides these documents for grades six through eight. While this curriculum will not be fully available until June 2021, these documents were available on the *CommonLit* website.
- Submit one unit document from the *CommonLit 360* curriculum for grade ten. The submitted link only provides this document for grade nine. While this curriculum will not be fully available until June 2021, these documents were available on the *CommonLit* website.

- Submit documented alignment between primary instructional resources, assessments, academic MTSS supports, and all partner instructional supports (Tier 3).
- Information on the thought process in selecting “Reveal Math” as their math instructional resource.
- Information on how Great Oaks is supporting students within their primary math instruction and how are they connecting supports from outside of their current primary math instruction.
- Information on how the school plans to ensure that their policies, practices and procedures for special education students are in compliance with Federal and State regulations and a plan for training staff in these areas.
- An overview of how many current teachers will remain on staff during the transition.
- A plan for mentoring for any teacher that requires mentoring and ensuring that evaluations are updated, on time, in Data Service Center.
- Provide data and evidence showing that attendance and engagement has increased since instituting learning pods.
- Provide data that shows that the CollegeSpring program has had a positive effect on student academic performance.
- A plan to complete teacher observations for the rest of this school year.
- A breakdown of costs budgeted under “Other Educational Program”, “Contracted Services”, and “Other”.
- Confirmation that the annual audit is included under the “Other” section in the “Administrative Operations” category.
- Provide additional information under the non-profit grants and donations, including confirmation of confirmed amounts versus anticipated amounts, any restrictions placed on the use each funding strand and any impact on the school’s finances should the funding not materialize.
- Information on teacher retention rate, over time.
- Information on student retention rate over the last five years.
- A plan for being financially viable even with low enrollment numbers including:
  - o In the short term, how will the school ensure their financial viability with limited state per pupil funding?
  - o Over time, how sustainable will that approach be? What needs to be done to ensure the school’s future financial stability?
- A plan to address student attrition due to transportation reasons.
- Information on the school’s plan to use any of its cash reserves to pay for costs associated with the modification. What are the school’s targeted financial reserve levels during the transition period and thereafter.

**Conclusion:**

The criteria for approving a modification to a charter are set forth in 14 Del. C. § 512. The criteria include that the charter school’s educational objectives are consistent with the legislative intent of and restrictions set forth in 14 Del. C. c. 5; the charter school’s educational program has the potential to improve student performance; the plan for the charter school is economically viable; the charter school’s financial and administrative operations meet or exceed the same standards, procedures, and requirements as a school district; and the charter



school's procedures to assure students', employees', and guests' health and safety are adequate.

**Next Steps**

- An initial public hearing will take place, virtually, on May 10<sup>th</sup>.
- The final CSAC meeting will take place on May 27<sup>th</sup>.
- A final public hearing will take place, virtually, on June 7<sup>th</sup>.
- The public comment period ends on June 9<sup>th</sup>.
- The Secretary of Education will announce her decision at the June 17<sup>th</sup> State Board of Education meeting and ask the State Board for assent.

The Education Associates in the Curriculum, Instruction and Professional Development Workgroup have reviewed the submitted curriculum documents in the following curriculum areas:

English / Language Arts

Math

Science

Social Studies

#### **Follow-Up Expectations for ELA:**

- The scope and sequence documents for grades nine and ten from the *CommonLit 360* curriculum is missing. The submitted link only provides these documents for grades six through eight. While this curriculum will not be fully available until June 2021, these documents were available on the *CommonLit* website.
- One unit document from the *CommonLit 360* curriculum for grade ten. The submitted link only provides this document for grade nine. While this curriculum will not be fully available until June 2021, these documents were available on the *CommonLit* website.
- Documented alignment evidence between primary instructional resources, assessments, academic MTSS supports, and all partner instructional supports (Tier 3).

#### **Content-Specific Comments, Commendations and Recommendations**

##### **ELA**

##### **Commendations:**

- Great Oaks previously used the 2014 edition of *Springboard* English/Language Arts. No explanation was provided for the reason for the change in instructional resources other than a new attention to texts written by diverse authors featuring diverse protagonists. Their new adopted resource for grades nine and ten, *CommonLit 360*, meets the criteria outlined by the Department of Education's requirements for alignment, but has not been assessed by an independent evaluator at this time.
- The new adopted resources for grades eleven and twelve, *Pathways to Career and College*, is a high quality instructional resource in terms of alignment and usability, having been rated green on EdReports.

##### **Recommendations:**

- Select instructional materials in a systematic and thoughtful manner. The *Springboard* materials have been updated twice since the last adoption and fully meet the requirements of high quality instructional materials in terms of alignment and usability. In addition, they have professional learning supports for teachers that provide guidance for implementing the materials skillfully. The reason to transition from an updated, highly rated resource to two free resources – one incomplete and unrated – is unclear.
- Plan for the transition and the necessary Tier 1 teacher supports strategically. Using two different resources in the lower and upper grades will result in two different launch

and implementation plans for the department. Use the linked [Curriculum Support Guide](#) and downloadable workbook as a resource to support and guide Great Oaks educators in establishing an English/Language Arts Instructional Vision that will support decision making to result in improved teacher practice using their assigned resource and student learning.

- Plan for the transition and the necessary additional student supports strategically. The data shows an average of 35% proficiency in literacy across grades six through ten, and less than 50% of students on track to graduate on time. While responsibility for students' literacy achievement and growth is shared between the English, Social Studies, and Science/Technical subjects in grades six through twelve, this transition to two different ELA resources will also place additional demands on support personnel who serve students in multiple grades.

#### **Expectations:**

- Submit a scope and sequence documents for grades nine and ten from the *CommonLit 360* curriculum. The submitted link only provides these documents for grades 6-8. While this curriculum will not be fully available until June 2021, these documents were available on the *CommonLit* website.
- Submit one unit document from the *CommonLit 360* curriculum for grade ten. The submitted link only provides this document for grade nine. While this curriculum will not be fully available until June 2021, these documents were available on the *CommonLit* website.
- Submit documented alignment between primary instructional resources, assessments, academic MTSS supports, and all partner instructional supports (Tier 3).

#### **Math:**

##### **Commendations:**

- Great Oaks has submitted documentation for the use of Reveal Math, which is an instructional resource rating green on EdReports.

##### **Recommendations:**

- The linked [Curriculum Support Guide](#) and downloadable workbook is recommended as a resource to support and guide Great Oaks Wilmington in establishing a mathematics instructional vision and selecting and implementing their instructional resources that support that vision and student learning and understanding of mathematics.

#### **Social Studies:**

Great Oaks is a current member of the Social Studies Coalition and therefore meeting expectations.

##### **Recommendations:**

- The Great Oaks administration is encouraged to attend the SSCD monthly meetings to learn about and provide input on upcoming shifts in social studies curriculum and assessment.

**Science:**

**Recommendations:**

- It is recommended that teachers register for NGSX, “How to become a NextGen Teacher” training. It will be offered virtually through DDOE this summer.
- It is recommended that Great Oaks used the EQuIP Rubric to evaluate all science curricular resources to see if the curricular resource is aligned to three dimensional learning. ([www.nextgenscience.org](http://www.nextgenscience.org))