

Friday, September 11, 2015

Dear Public Education Commissioners:

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the final analysis made of our Desert Willow School charter. Our comments seek to shed more light on various aspects of the charter as well as to provide some additional information about the local school district.

First, we wish to address several portions of the final analysis made by the Charter School Division.

- On page 6 the analysis cites a description of Enki Education made by an individual opposing our charter that refers to it as a homeschool curriculum. While Enki Education does have a homeschool division, it has trained classroom teachers since its inception in 1989. Indeed, we first learned of Enki from Mountain Mahogany Community School in Albuquerque, which is an Enki-inspired elementary and middle school. At this point in time Beth Sutton, the founder of Enki, is actually phasing out its homeschool wing to focus on implementing the Enki curriculum in the classroom.
- On page 7 the analysis cites the lack of a specific plan to align the Enki curriculum with Common Core State Standards. At our March 27 training we were given to understand that we had two options in the curriculum section. We could provide the curriculum in full or a description of it. Our description contains the beginning of our work to align Enki and the CCSS as evidenced on pages 35-37. We understood the prompt to require a description, with the complete alignment to be a planning year task that would come with conditional approval. We are fully committed to this mandatory alignment and have begun work on it.
- On page 7 the reviewers find the explanation of how we would differentiate instruction to be lacking. We thought we had provided adequate details of this through a description of the 3-Fold learning process on pages 64 and 65 of the charter.
- We are puzzled by the comment made on page 7 of the analysis that states that the charter did not adequately address the needs of special population students. We believe that we covered this quite thoroughly on pages 66 through 74. Original feedback from the Charter School Division on pages 74 and 75 states that, "The applicant provides a clear explanation of the practices and strategies the proposed school will employ to provide a continuum of services, and ensure students' access to the general education curriculum."
- On page 11 is a paragraph in which it is assumed that the Enki Web is our proposed Organizational Structure. We wish to clarify that this assumption was made because the chart showing the Desert Willow Organizational Structure was inadvertently not attached in Appendix B as it should have been. We take full responsibility for that error. The Enki Web is part of the observation and feedback guidelines for teachers. We understand that we are not to include new information at this time, but if you would like to see the Organizational Structure scheme, we do have it.

- Regarding evidence of partner and contractor relationships on page 14 we wish to clarify that the Memorandum of Understanding with The Learning Center for Dyslexia and Academic Success states that they (TLC) is committed to providing partial funding for teachers to receive training in Orton-Gillingham methodology and Enki teacher training.
- We wish to respond to some points made in the final paragraph of page 17 regarding the uniqueness and innovation in education that Desert Willow could bring to the Silver City community. The analysis states that the charter lacks adequate evidence of Enki's uniqueness, innovation and significant contributions. Enki Education is unique in many ways and provides many valuable contributions. As described in part D of the Curriculum section, the curriculum we propose is fully arts and movement integrated, whereas the local district lacks such thorough integration and has even cut music from the elementary school budget. Enki uses the arts and movement, which come naturally to children and are significant learning modalities for the elementary age, as a vehicle through which they progress from an initial introduction to a concept all the way to mastery. As far as we know, no other public school in southwestern New Mexico is making use of the arts and movement in its classrooms to the extent that Desert Willow School would.

Second, no other public school that we know of provides the extensive support that students with dyslexia and other brain-based reading issues need to close the achievement gap, and which we would implement. The analysis states that "the local schools are required to and do provide services to these students also." As we stated at our community input hearing, the impetus to create Desert Willow comes from our experience of the lack of effectiveness of the local district's efforts in this regard. Based on our research, this population will see great improvements in academic performance if provided with the holistic curriculum, smaller student-teacher ratio and reading specialists for which we have budgeted. Furthermore, the review states that the Enki curriculum contains some elements of Montessori education, and that there is already one Montessori school in the community. Although Enki shares a holistic philosophy with Waldorf and Montessori, it is different. For one, it pairs a holistic philosophy with Western education's drive to skill mastery. Regarding the local Montessori school, please know that it is a very small private school with less than 30 students, is struggling to survive, and its board fully supports the founding of Desert Willow because they would prefer this proposed public alternative. As the president of the Guadalupe Montessori School Board said at the community input hearing, she believes that Enki is the best available curriculum. Please see pages 223 to 229 for a detailed list of more of the innovations of our proposed charter.

- Page 18 of the final analysis says that we have not established a compelling need for Desert Willow School in part because of the letter grades that the state has given the local schools. We established a need for this school on pages 5 and 6 of our notice of intent, and again compared every innovation we propose with what is happening in the local schools on pages 223-229. Although the letter grades given by the state education department to the schools in Silver City are reasonably good, the outpouring of community support that you witnessed at the community input hearing tells another story. The seventy supporters that were able to make a 1:00 PM weekday meeting are the tip of an iceberg. Parents of school children in this

community have been through several years with a local school district superintendent and two principals under investigation by the state attorney general's staff.

The outpouring of community support that you saw and heard from is direct witness to the innovations of Desert Willow School. There is a need for a school which will provide an arts- and movement-integrated curriculum with a strong emphasis in multisensory reading instruction.

We understand the concerns of the charter school division in response to our application. As first time charter writers we now see the areas where you were looking for more details. We view the comments made by the Charter School Division as a road map of what needs to be done next. We know we are able to do the work the CSD has requested to the specifications stated. We also believe that if you were to approve the charter with one of the conditions being provision of further details, we have the capacity to

Approval of the Desert Willow School charter would give us the leverage needed to obtain the board commitments, training, facility, and the fund-raising required. In essence we know the task ahead of us is great, but with approval and a start date, we can begin to apply for grants, secure funding and a facility. If your concerns are that there is too much for us to accomplish in a year, we ask you to approve us with conditions for a start date of August, 2017.

Sincerely,

Emily Aversa, Fiona Bailey, Alicia Edwards, William Knuttinen, and George Lundy