

Veritas Preparatory Charter School

Questions as derived from Panel Review

Description of the Community (ies) to be Served

1. How have your experiences working in Springfield led you to want to start a school in Springfield? What do you think are some of the challenges you may face?

- A lot of us here grew up in Springfield. My education experience started in a community school. I was growing up during the busing period. There was much greater ethnic diversity then than today. Now, the ethnic population is largely Hispanic and African American. Average income has declined significantly. The traditional family unit of mother and father is no longer the norm. The school system has been on a declining trajectory for 20 years. Education attainment for kids is in crisis level. Crime is a concern of citizens and business leaders.
- But our biggest problem isn't crime but education, and the fact that school has moved away from the neighborhood school. There has to be an accountability standard for youth and parents in our community. Veritas is the opportunity to address these issues.
- I worked in Springfield as a teacher 10 years ago and was appalled at what school was like then. I was inspired by the students: when the bar was raised high for them, they met the expectations. Schools can be reformed in Springfield. What's there now isn't working. Looking outside of Springfield, it was clear things are working in charter schools.
- I worked in schools and with students. Saw talented students doing well and on the college track. But about 60% were not there yet. I saw students who could do well, but who were negatively influenced by peers and eventually fall through the cracks. They needed a solid academic structure to push them academically and socially. As a parent, I didn't have a problem sending our child to elementary school, but we had grave concerns about middle school. Kids were getting arrested in middle school. Veritas would fill an important need in Springfield

2. Describe how your fellowship with Building Excellent Schools has prepared you to be a charter school founder and leader. What support will BES provide if the proposed charter school is granted a charter?

- I was a teacher, a teacher leader, and a principal of a charter school. The fellowship gave me deep exposure to high performing charter schools. It gave me structure and guidance to study charter schools very deeply. I got to see how school opens, how school operates, how to hire staff, how to orient parents.
- Having the experience of being in a cohort with 3 other school founders, of learning from them, and of being able to debrief and analyze experiences with them is very helpful. I learned what's working, what's not, and what might be applicable to Veritas.
- I've had experience with instructional leadership, but the fellowship taught me the business and operation components of a school. Helped shape my thinking around those things to enable the success of the academic program.

- BES would support the board if the school is chartered. We'll make sure there is a strategic plan in place. Will make sure formal protocols are in place. Will work with board on as-needed basis throughout the year. Will help with hiring process, looking at marketing materials and pitch to people. Will support management as they make key decisions. Will visit the school upon opening and support the growth of school's culture.

Educational Philosophy, Curriculum and Instruction

1. How do you to plan address the needs of all children?

- Fundamentally, the school is established on the belief that all kids can learn and will learn at Veritas. Due to our extended school day and school year, we will have an emphasis on literacy, math, private attention, data review. We can use all those factors, methods, policies and procedures conducive to educating all kids.
- For English Language Learner and special education kids, we are committed to reaching all the kids in the community. Within the ELL population, we want to reach all those students and families. One big decision for us is to locate in the south end of Springfield, where there the population is 50% Hispanic.
- At minimum, we want to duplicate English Language Learner and special education percentages in the district. We believe we can be higher than that. Our marketing materials will go out in English and Spanish. We've done significant networking with agencies, like Springfield Housing Authority, Partners for Community Health, and Square One, to reach out to families.

a. Students with diverse learning styles...

- The director of social services will be part of the special education plan. Every student that has special needs will be identified from beginning. We will have staff to provide services for IEPs and individual students. At the end of the day, there is structured time, where teachers can work with specific students.

b. What are the student action plans – how and when are they generated and tracked?

- Teachers would meet with the director of student services to create action plans for students who don't have an IEP but who are struggling. Would implement plans for 2 to 3 weeks and reconvene to evaluate plans. If plans are working, we can continue with the implementation. If not, we might do testing and referrals and bring in the parents.
- Scheduling autonomy would allow us to embed tutoring in the day. Math teachers would have one period a day to work with students. In second year, we would hire a tutoring coordinator.
- Focus is additional time in the day for students to have targeted time for literacy needs. Might be a reading group, poetry slam etc. for students. Would be all hands on deck doing something literacy related.

2. **Since one of your core principles is about data driven instruction, please explain your approach to curriculum modification, improvement, and refinement of curriculum and instruction.**
 - We intend to begin the school year to focus on data. Get teachers on board with expectations. Create comprehensive assessments per course to get data at the end of the year. Do interim assessments using state standards. It's to be determined if we create internal assessments or if we contract out.
 - a. **How will data days operate?**
 - Will be on abbreviated Fridays, every 6 to 8 weeks when we get results from the interim assessments. Would review the data and create action plans for every child.
 - The board will get a monthly dashboard, so we will know how things are going. If figures are off each month, we will discuss it with school leaders and address it quicker, before any issue becomes critical.
3. **Will you use data to determine professional development? How will professional development be specifically determined? Since you mention individual goal setting, how do you support individualized professional development?**
 - We'll use student achievement data and observation data. The culture is such that ongoing feedback will be prominent. Will look for teachers who are aligned with this mission. As a whole school, we can also notice trends from the data and address any overall issue together.
 - a. **How will collaborative planning time for teachers be organized – grade level? Content?**
 - It's organized by grade level and department level. Abbreviated Fridays will be when this takes place, and also during the school day. Two math teachers will teach the same students; one will focus on problem solving. On abbreviated Fridays, grade level teams will come together to plan together. As school grows, perhaps we can budget in vertical alignment time.

Assessment, Promotion, and Graduation Standards

1. **What do you mean by standards-based assessments and how will they be developed and used?**
 - I think about standardized assessments. Performance assessment is harder to get right in terms of rigor and difficulty. Some resources are available to help do that.
 - Being able to connect with other 'Building Excellent Schools' (BES) schools is an advantage; we can spot check our own assessments to make sure we're not too way off.
 - Teachers would come together to give feedback. Would make use of the state's longitudinal data already available to inform us from the very beginning.
 - There's value in teachers creating their own assessments; real results have come from that. They will define the level of rigor and standards. This is about setting

the bar for our internal assessments with teachers creating them and tuning them together. Would kick this off in August.

2. How do you define rigor?

- No excuses model. Poverty is not an excuse. Having a diverse student body is not an excuse. Having high expectations along with character development.
- Having good pacing and momentum in classroom instructions. Having objectives on the board. Having kids work hard the minute they sit down, so that every minute matters.
- We're going to be focused on outcomes. Rigor is going to get defined over time as we get our outcomes.
- Rigor not going to be defined by just the board and the teachers. Students would have high expectations of each other too. It's going to permeate every level of the school.

3. Why are non-academic goals (DRIVE) not used for promotion or graduation requirements?

- **Determination, responsibility, integrity, vision and enthusiasm**
 - We have a vision that we want students to achieve. These elements are very difficult to measure, much like rigor. In building our culture, you can get some of these elements, but there's no objective way to measure this.
 - Academics have to come first. Only 32% of kids graduate in Springfield. Our school culture will support the academic piece. Students will be prepared for high school and college.

4. Who develops the weekly reports on student academic progress, behavior and homework completion to be provided to parents?

- Dean of community and culture would likely take on behavior tracking. In our first year, we would have the office manager input data into a tracking form; this would inform the weekly report. In the planning year, we would like to create all the necessary spreadsheets.
- Academics tracking would be based on weekly quizzes. Homework completion rate would be track in the homework center in the morning. All these things would go into the weekly report that goes out on Fridays.

5. What is the rationale for requiring parents to pick up their child's report card?

- This is an important way to develop face time for parents and teachers to talk in person. We would have multiple times during the day for parents to do this. We recognize that some parents might not have a car; in extreme circumstances, we would absolutely go to the home.
- Parent engagement in Springfield is not great. We want to hold not just the student but the entire family accountable for student success. Sometimes education is not high on the list of priorities for the family among other concerns they face. We have to find ways to engage parents. It's about setting up multiple occasions for either parent to come to the school.

- The south end of Springfield doesn't have a school. Residents there want a high performing school. So I think a lot of people from that community will want to be part of the school.

School Characteristics

1. Describe how your core academic classes are structured into flexible ability groups.

- Informed by interim assessments.
- In the student and family orientation at beginning, we would give diagnostic tests in reading and math. These tests will help us to place students in cohorts. Then we'll have weekly quizzes to separate students into high, middle, low level groups. At the end of a trimester, based on the interim assessments and quizzes, we would move students into their level group. The goal is around 5th and 6th grades, the gap will close.

2. What strategies will you use to establish your school culture?

- School culture stems from what the board and BES have imbued in the school – no excuses and high expectations. Will find teachers who believe in this mission and will put in extra hours to make this happen. Culture will be infused into the student population. Having uniforms will help with the sense of community and of newness of a different culture. Over time, as kids achieve success, they will develop pride in themselves and their school.
- We want our school to be the pride of the neighborhood, and we want the culture to stem from that.
- We have an unusual group of people who bring together a common philosophy towards Veritas. We share it very deeply – the philosophy of high expectations, rigorous academics, structured support and character development.

Special Student Populations and Services

1. What would a responsive classroom at Veritas look like?

- Would model after the Excel Academy classroom that the board had a chance to visit. The teacher would be engaged with all students. All students would be listening and paying attention. There would be “Do now’s” on the board.
- We want a classroom where students are reflective and engaged. Even during lunch time, students have the opportunity to work on academics. They have this opportunity again at the end of the day.
- We understand this doesn't happen on day one, but we will work hard to make it happen.
- Also, we don't want to have pockets of excellence in teaching, but excellence throughout the school.

2. How are you going to respond to different students' needs?

- The workshop model provides an opportunity for differentiation. Implement “Do Nows” in class to check in with students. Use mini lessons, guided practice, and independent practice. This structure allows for differentiation. During

independent practice is a time to work with specific students. Planning and tutoring times are also built-in structures to support teachers implementing differentiation. Need to be responsive to social and emotional issues. We know we will need to differentiate.

- Our teacher ratio will be 11:1. A teacher should be able to adjust his/her teaching style for each student with this ratio. That kind of intimacy will allow teachers to really know the learning needs of each student.

3. Please describe how services for ELL will be delivered within the school schedule and the proposed staffing to implement this programming.

- Our approach is to work within sheltered English immersion during the school day. Students will receive instructions from category-trained teachers. That is the number one way. We anticipate getting 14% of Limited English Proficient (LEP) students in Springfield.
- Our plan is to bring on a half-time ESL teacher. The director of student support will be the special education teacher 75% potentially with a case load of 16 special needs students. This person would also administer the ESL program. This is based on projected numbers but it may be different. There will be a part-time ESL teacher that comes on in the first year and grows as the school grows. They will build out the program.
- We proposed 7 full-time positions, but can be flexible if need be.

4. Please describe how services for students with special needs will be delivered within the school schedule and the proposed staffing to implement this programming.

- Definitely during the “focus” time. In the schedule, there’s close to 3 hours of literacy instruction every day – 55 minutes for each period. Those needing sheltered English instruction, even 2 ½ hours will receive it during these periods.

5. Who will manage the relationships between families and support services?

- The Executive Director will do this work. In the second year, we will bring on the dean of community and culture and tutoring coordinator. They will then take on this piece.

Capacity

1. What are the proposed board members’ expectations about the work required during the pre-operational year and beyond?

- We have an expectation of monthly board meeting plus monthly committee meeting. That’s the minimum; but from this application process, we know the work happens in the trenches and not at those meetings.
- Facilities are also a big challenge, along with providing oversight of the hiring process for the 7 teachers. We’ve laid the groundwork very well, so we expect to continue doing the work we have been doing.
- We have diverse board experiences and appreciation for what it takes to launch a successful venture. Everybody understands it’s a lot of work. But we’re asking the kids to do a lot of work, so we’re prepared to do what it takes.

Governance and Management

1. What do board members perceive their role in ensuring that ‘the school’s academic program is successful?’

a. Please provide examples of board versus administrative decision making.

- The board will be an overseer in terms of primary functions: ensuring academic success of the school, adhering to the mission and vision stated in the charter, providing financial oversight, and planning for the long term viability of the school. The board would work in conjunction with the Executive Director (ED) who would run day-to-day operations.
- We have a lot of faith in our proposed ED. We’re here for oversight and support. The strength of this board is our deep connection to the community. Another role for us is in bringing all our resources and connections to bear to support the school.
- Administrators would hire/fire staff; the board would not be involved in that, except perhaps as a consultative body.
- Behavioral culture of the school would be under the jurisdiction of the ED.
- The board would take care of the audit, legal counsel, and compliance as it relates to running the school. Would also have oversight of reporting requirements to the state. Would evaluate the ED.
- Fiscal management would be both an administrative and board responsibility. We have to be able to meet our financial obligations.
- We’re being entrusted with lots of public funds, and we will have check and balances to make sure we use the funds according to policies and procedures.

2. Please clarify the reporting structure of the school.

a. Is ESL teacher under Director of Academic Achievement or Director of Student Services?

- The DAA.

3. What is the rationale for year one administrative staffing?

- The director of business and operations and director of academic achievement are priorities for building the school in year one. Having 3 administrators for the first year is already top heavy. We want to have a well oiled machine from day one. We may not have enough ELL and special education teachers, but we will work to develop that quickly.
- We have to make an investment in some administration to build a good foundation for future years. It’s about making sure the ED will not be over stretched and to build capacity. It’s critical to start strong.
- In second year, we’ll bring on the dean of culture and community, who is essential to establish that strong culture for the school.
- In fourth year, we will have an alumni advisor to help students and families move through high school journey and on to college.

4. Clarify the staff evaluation process.

- If DAA is going to coach and nurture teachers, it would be beneficial to have the ED serve in the evaluation role. In practice, the ED and DAA would probably be working hand in hand.
- Considering our mission to be a college preparatory, it is important that the ED is the instructional leader of the school.

Budget

1. How did you estimate the federal grant revenues in line item three?

a. Federal grant is not conservative: Where does the \$450,000 come from in year 3?

- There's \$250,000 in federal grants for charter school start up, although this is not guaranteed and the school will have to apply for it. Remaining monies would come from Title I grants – we based our estimates on the Springfield district's entitlement grants.

2. How did you determine the salaries for your teaching and operations staff, including special education, ESL teachers and part-time nurse?

- We considered that Springfield public schools' starting salary is \$36,000. Other districts' salaries are around \$45,000. Administrative salaries are based off other charter schools, because the district doesn't have similar positions.

3. Explain line item 63: renovations and construction.

- We have a lot of real estate experience on our board. If we rent, some of these expenses might be paid by landlord. First year, there are a lot of fit-up expenses to make sure classrooms are adequate. This includes both hard and soft costs. At the end of the day, this is just an estimate.

Action Plan

1. Does the proposed board have any concerns about putting the bulk of responsibility on a single administrator?

- We've gotten to see Rachel first hand leading all-day retreats and going through many iterations of this proposal for the past 6-8 months. We don't have any doubt that we got the right person. We also have a very strong board to provide support and oversight.
- We interviewed Linda Brown from BES and heard about how she wants to impact school results by choosing the school leader. Having this BES endorsement is great support for Rachel.
- It's not just about one person, but it's about the vision of the school. The board will be there to supplement and fill in the gaps.