

FINAL APPLICATION REVIEW 2014-2015

Proposed School Name (Commonwealth):	Academy for the Whole Child Charter School
Grades Served At Full Capacity:	K-4
Number of Students At Full Capacity:	360
Proposed School Location:	Fitchburg
Proposed Charter Region:	Fitchburg ¹ , Athol-Royalston, Clinton, Gardner, Leominster, Orange, and Winchendon
Proposed Opening Year:	2015-2016

Mission Statement:

Academy for the Whole Child Charter School sets the foundation for the long-term development of elementary age children in partnership with students, families and communities. By embracing the “whole child” approach, we ensure that each child reaches high levels of academic success, creativity, personal growth and well-being. Through a robust academic and social-emotional curriculum, children learn within a safe, child-centered, and inclusive environment.

Proposed Growth Plan for First Five Years of Operation:

School Year	Grade Levels	Total Student Enrollment
First Year	K-2	120
Second Year	K-3	204
Third Year	K-4	291
Fourth Year	K-4	342
Fifth Year	K-4	360

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Department) has compiled a summary of the evidence identified through the review of the charter application, the responses provided by the applicant group during the subsequent interview, and the testimony and comment provided at the public hearing and during the public comment period. The summary describes the evidence identified that addresses the application criteria and identifies the areas of the application criteria where limited evidence was provided during the application process.

¹ Due to the availability of seats under the 9 percent net school spending (NSS) cap in Fitchburg, the proposed school must enroll students from other areas of the charter region in order to reach the proposed maximum enrollment of 360, and avoid exceeding Fitchburg’s NSS cap.

Public Comment:

The application received testimony and written comment in support; materials were primarily from parents, residents of the proposed charter region, and potential external partners. The group received written comment in support from Fitchburg City Councilor Dean Tran. The applicant group submitted a significant number of signed petitions and supporting evidence of interest in a charter school for the proposed charter region.

This application received testimony and written comment in opposition during the public hearing and public comment process, including but not limited to Senator Jennifer Flanagan, State Representatives Stephen DiNatale, Dennis Rosa, and Jonathan Zlotnik, Mayor Lisa Wong, members of the Fitchburg and Leominster School Committees, Superintendents of Fitchburg and Ashburnham-Westminster Regional School districts, members of the Fitchburg City Council, parents, students, teachers, administrators, and representatives of the local collective bargaining units from the proposed charter region.

Mission and Key Design Elements (I.A. and I.B.)

Identified Evidence

- The mission defines the purpose and specialized focus of the school, is consistent with high academic standards and student success, and is reflected throughout the application. The applicant group proposes to provide a “safe, child-centered, and inclusive environment” and through the “while child approach” achieve student outcomes involving the “academic success, creativity, personal growth, and well-being” of all students. The mission also highlights that the success of the school requires development of a “partnership” relationship with students, families, and their communities. (I.A.)
- The application presents a clear understanding of the group’s educational philosophy and their core values and beliefs regarding the requirements for an effective and meaningful elementary school education. The application describes the core values using the acronym “CARING.” CARING refers to Community, Academic Achievement and Accountability, Rigor and Relevance, Inclusive for all, No exceptions, and Growth. (I.B.)
- The key design elements reflect the educational philosophy of the applicant group. The key design elements include eleven components of the proposed educational program, including extended day with additional supports outside of the traditional school day; arts integrated general education curriculum; arts and Spanish language instruction daily; social-emotional learning curriculum, instruction, and assessment; parent engagement, and community partnerships. (I.B.)
- The application contains academic and non-academic goals that provide a general understanding of the various metrics the school would propose to use to monitor and assess the progress of student development. Metrics include performance against grade level benchmarks on selected commercial assessments and the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System tests (MCAS); performance against the school’s proposed promotion standards; and performance against the school’s proposed assessment of social-emotional learning. (I.B.)

Limited Evidence

- The application describes eleven key design elements that are aligned with the mission but not consistently reflected throughout the application. The application provides limited information regarding the integration of the “Whole Child Initiative” from the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), and the Reggio Emilia curriculum and instruction approach into the proposed educational program, including the professional development necessary for effective implementation. The application also indicates the intent to model the school’s learning and professional environment after the “high-performing, high-poverty readiness model” described in *The Turnaround Challenge* by Mass Insight. The model involves its own elements of design that appear to align with the other models proposed for integration within the school. The application does not clearly describe how these approaches are integrated into a cohesive and comprehensive educational program. (I.B.)
- The applicant group has provided core values, CARING; goals for the school, which are enhanced and inclusive structure, meaningful and relevant curriculum, and working together through partnerships; and the eleven key design elements. The variety of descriptions provide a clear understanding of the proposed design components of the school but do not clarify how the board and school leadership will prioritize implementation, incorporate the design elements into an appropriate and meaningful accountability plan, and ultimately review progress towards effective implementation. (I.B.)

Description of the Community to Be Served and Enrollment and Recruitment (I.C. and I.D.)

Identified Evidence

- The applicant group indicated that the shift from a single district proposal focused on Fitchburg during the 2013-2014 application cycle to the current regional proposal is guided by the limited quality options for families in the region. The proposed charter region includes districts currently performing in the lowest 10 percent of districts on the state's MCAS tests, including Athol-Royalston, Gardner, Orange, and Winchendon. Clinton is just outside of the lowest 10 percent ranking this year. (I.C.)
- The applicant group demonstrated a passionate understanding of and connection to the proposed mission and goals for the school, as well as a strong commitment to serve the communities of the proposed charter region. The applicant group highlighted that while the region is currently served by the Sizer School, a regional charter school serving grades 7-12 located in Fitchburg, there is no similar option for families at the elementary school grades. (I.C. and I.D.)
- Within the application and during the interview, the applicant group described a variety of strategies to increase community awareness of the proposed school, including the use of social media to build both support and interest in the proposed school. (I.D.)
- The application described a variety of recruitment strategies to attract a student population reflective of the proposed charter region, including supplying information about the school in English and Spanish, and targeted outreach to day care and Headstart providers. The applicant group reported during the interview and via public comment approximately 140 children have indicated the intent to enroll in the proposed school if chartered. (I.D.)
- The applicant group proposes to open with grades K-2, and add a grade and additional section across the grade span, until reaching maximum enrollment in its fifth year of operation. The implementation of the proposed grade span will provide four years of MCAS data during its first charter term. (I.D. and I.C.)

Limited Evidence

- While the applicant group provided additional explanation during the interview, the growth plan proposed for the school remains confusing in its implementation during the first charter term. The proposed school intends to annually add sections to grades K-2 during the first years of implementation. In particular, the second grade cohort will have a new section added four out of the five years of the charter term. During the interview, the members of the proposed leadership team indicated that the original intent was to support effective implementation by focusing on a staggered grade roll out while enrolling a sufficient number of students to financially support the school. During the interview, the applicant group indicated the potential need to modify the growth plan and to increase enrollment to access additional finances for implementation of the proposed educational program. (I.D.)

Overview of Program Delivery and Curriculum and Instruction (II.A. and II.B.)

Identified Evidence

- The proposed school will implement a school year of 180 days and an extended day of 8:00 a.m. - 3:30 p.m. The school day includes an instructional focus on literacy and mathematics with arts integration in the general education classroom, and daily arts and Spanish language instruction. The application emphasized that the small class size and proposed staffing model are essential elements to effectively serve the targeted high needs student population. (II.A.)
- The school intends to provide an afterschool program every day from 3:30-5:00 p.m. to be supported by potential partners, and fundraising. The afterschool program would provide recreational, academic, and enrichment opportunities to students. The school also proposes to implement a four week summer program but very little information was provided regarding its implementation. (II.A.)
- The application provides a thorough discussion regarding the value of foreign language education at the elementary school grades, and the goals of implementing daily Spanish instruction for all students. (II.B.)
- The proposed school will implement curriculum consisting of both commercially available, and internally-developed curricula. The applicant group emphasized that teachers will be relied on for curriculum and assessment development, and provided autonomy in the classroom to implement curriculum and instruction, with guidance from the proposed Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment (DCIA). (II.B.)
- The application provides a clear description of the variety of instructional methods that will be used to deliver curriculum, including direct instruction, small collaborative groups, and independent practice. (II.B.)
- During the interview, the applicant group provided additional information regarding the use of the daily arts class period for the purpose of common planning time within each grade level team, and regular opportunities to collaborate with the Creative Arts Director (CAD), as well as special education and English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers. (II.B.)
- During the interview, the applicant group clarified the monthly opportunities for professional development as well as one week during the summer. Prior to the first year of operation, teachers will participate in an additional week to support curriculum development. (II.B.)

Limited Evidence

- During the interview, the applicant group noted that the proposed afterschool program may be implemented for fewer than five days due to financial constraints during the first charter term. It also remains unclear how the school will finance the proposed four weeks of summer programming. (II.A.)
- The application does not provide a clear understanding of the implementation of the Reggio Emilia approach within the proposed educational program, and provides inconsistent references to its use at Kindergarten, and also grades K-2. (II.A.)
- During the interview, the applicant group clarified classroom sizes which include approximately 14 students in K-1; and 18 students in grades 2-4. It remains unclear how the proposed educational design of student enrollment and staffing levels will be financial sustainable over time without significant fundraising. (II.A.)
- The application does not provide a clear description of the purpose, goals, and student outcomes related to implementation of the proposed S.T.E.A.M program once a week. (II.B.)
- While the application provides a clear description of the use of “Artful Thinking” to support implementation of Arts Integration within content-area curriculum, instruction, and assessments, there is limited information provided about the arts programming provided daily. (II.B.)
- While the application describes the use of a data inquiry cycle to ensure effective teaching and learning, the application contains a limited and generalized description of the processes used, both initially and on an ongoing basis, to develop, improve, and refine curriculum in alignment with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. (II.B.)
- The proposed budget does not adequately reflect the costs of professional development to support effective implementation of the ASCD “Whole Child Initiative” approach, the Reggio Emilia instructional approach, and Arts Integration practices. (II.B.)
- While the application contains a draft evaluation tool, the application does not provide a clear understanding of the teacher evaluation system or its use to support and coach teachers effectively. (II.B.)

Student Performance, Assessment, and Program Evaluation (II.C.)

Identified Evidence

- The application describes a clear assessment system that will provide multiple measures of student growth, and student performance that can be used to facilitate adjustments to the educational program, and inform a staff development plan that will support the goal of improved student learning. (II.C.)
- The applicant group provides detailed descriptions of the external assessments, such as Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), GRADE and G-MADE (Group Reading/Mathematics Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation), and Sustainability Tracking, Assessment, and Rating system (STAR) that will be implemented to support the monitoring of student learning. (II.C.)
- The application contains a number of components within the performance and assessment system which align with the school's mission and key design elements, including the use of a four-point scale to evaluate and report student performance, rubrics for the measurement of social-emotional learning and development, and a clear homework policy developed to demonstrate the variation in expectations of students in grades K-4, and highlight the responsibilities of stakeholders. (II.C.)

Limited Evidence

- Reviewers were concerned by the appearance of low standards for parent engagement communicated in the goals of the draft accountability plan. While the applicant group provided additional context to the overall expectation for parent engagement during the interview, the benchmark measure of “50 percent parent participation in their child’s educational experience” at renewal would appear to be a low standard for success taken in conjunction with the strong parent partnership proposed within the mission. (II.C.)

Supports for Diverse Learners (II.D.)

Identified Evidence

- The application provides a clear description of the process and procedures to identify, assess, and serve students who are English Language Learners (ELLs). The information was sufficient to indicate knowledge of the obligations of the proposed school to serve ELLs within the proposed educational program. (Section II.D.)
- The application provides a clear description of the process and procedures to identify, assess, and serve students with disabilities. The information was sufficient to indicate knowledge of the obligations of the proposed school to serve students with disabilities within the proposed educational program. (Section II.D.)

Limited Evidence

- During the interview, the applicant group noted the potential challenges to the proposed staffing levels for special education and ESL teachers if the degree of student need is greater than anticipated. It is unclear if the school would have the financial resources necessary to add additional staffing in these areas if the proposed school attracted a significant population of students with special needs. (II.D.)
- Reviewers noted that the inclusion of the Response to Intervention (RtI) process in reference only to the identification of students with special needs limits understanding of the specific strategies to be implemented in the general education classroom to support all learners, and appears to diverge from the educational philosophy and educational model previously described for the proposed school. (II.D.)
- The budget may not adequately plan for the provision of related service providers, such as a speech pathologist, physical therapist, or occupational therapist, based on the allocation of \$40,000 annually. The budget indicates that expenditure also includes yoga and karate instruction for all students. (II.D. and III.E.)

Culture and Family Engagement (II.E.)

Identified Evidence

- The application describes the use of externally developed social-emotional curriculum, MindUP, and internally developed character education curriculum, “Have a H.E.A.R.T.,” to support the non-academic growth of students consistent with the school’s mission and educational philosophy. The application indicates that the “Have a H.E.A.R.T.” program will be used to support the setting and monitoring of student behavior against school-wide expectations. (II.E.)

Limited Evidence

- The application does not provide a clear plan with specific strategies for establishing a school culture and norms consistent with the school’s mission, educational philosophy, and educational program from the first day of the school’s operation. The response to criteria reiterates the educational philosophy of the applicant group without providing specific actionable practices. The application does reference the institution of uniforms, and a brief reference to opportunities for group and whole-school assemblies. (II.E.)
- During the interview, members of the leadership team were unable to articulate clear plans for the student discipline system and behavior management. While the application indicated the implementation of character education curriculum, and the development of rubrics for social-emotional learning and behaviors, the applicant group described potential variation in the implementation of behavior management based on the teacher and the students’ needs. The systems and structures proposed to support effective and consistent behavior management are unclear based on the limited responses provided within the application and during the interview. (II.E.)
- While in the application and during the interview, members of the applicant group articulated the desire and need for parents to actively volunteer within the school day, the application more frequently describes parents engagement as receiving supports from the school rather than engaging in a clear partnership. It remains unclear how the “Parents as Partners” program will function and what activities or programming will result from its implementation, in addition to the proposed monthly informational meetings. While the application communicates a commitment to cultural competency within the school community, the strategies to develop and establish cultural competency are limited and generalized. (I.E.)
- The budget does not appear to reflect the employment of a qualified school nurse. (III.E.)

Capacity and Governance (III.A. and III.B.)

Identified Evidence

- The applicant group retained the majority of proposed board members from its previous submission during the 2013-2014 application cycle. The group has grown to include members with expertise in K-12 district and charter public schools, special education, and ESL programming, and expertise in finance and management. The proposed board members have a range of additional experiences and qualifications in higher education, law, real estate and facilities management, communications media and arts, and governance of non-profit organizations and local governmental bodies. Members of the proposed board have tangible ties to the communities the school will serve. Members include the former mayor of Fitchburg, an early education professional development provider, a K-12 teacher with dual certification in special education and ESL, the current K-5 curriculum coordinator of a charter school in Worcester, current president of the Fitchburg Cultural Alliance and former Fitchburg administrator, and a finance administrator at an education collaborative. (III.A.)
- The application provides sufficient information to establish understanding regarding the role of the board in oversight of the proposed school, including the responsibilities of board officers, the role of committees of the proposed board, and the processes for decision-making and policy development. (III.B.)
- The applicant has also retained all of the proposed employees from its previous submission. The proposed employees have significant skills and experience in K-12 education, creative arts, and after-school programming, as well as tangible ties to the community that the school will serve. Members include a former superintendent, and veteran general education and specialist teachers with experience in Fitchburg Public Schools. (III.A.)
- The applicant group has developed an advisory council for additional guidance on the challenges of opening and operating a charter school with the proposed educational program. During the interview, the applicant group reported that the advisory council will continue to mentor the leadership team, and provide resources. Some members of the advisory council may do so as paid consultants. (III.A. and III.C.)

Limited Evidence

- All but two members of the thirteen proposed board of trustees were able to attend the Department interview; absent were the finance administrator for a special education collaborative, and a faculty member at a local university. Beverly Tefft, the finance administrator, played a role in the budget review performed by the proposed board. (III.A. and III.B.)

Management (III.C.)

Identified Evidence

- Proposed members of the leadership team have already been identified to assist in the applicant group's ability to quickly move past the planning and preparation stage to the implementation and operation stage required to open successfully in the fall 2015, if chartered. The combination of individuals identified for employment have a variety of qualifications and skills that support the potential for success in their proposed role. (III.C.)
- The proposed Executive Director/Principal (ED/P) is a former superintendent; the proposed DCIA, and CAD/teacher are veteran educators with almost 20 years of experience; the three individuals are members of the design team, and primary authors of the charter application. Ms. Verge, the ED/P, will provide mentoring to Ms. L'Ecuyer during the initial years of implementation to support her growth into the proposed role of principal as the school reaches maximum enrollment. Josephine Rivers, the proposed CAD, will provide support to arts specialists at the proposed school, and support implementation of the arts integration within the general education classroom through collaborative planning with classroom teachers. (III.C.)
- The application describes the school's plan for recruiting high quality teachers, including providing a level of compensation necessary to recruit teachers with classroom experience, which is consistent with the proposed school's mission, vision, and educational philosophy. (III.C.)

Limited Evidence

- The application contained an organizational chart representative of the school's administration team during its first and fifth year of operation. During the interview, the applicant group indicated the omission of the proposed CAD from the organizational charts, and indicated that it remains undecided how the school's finances would impact the size of the administrative team as the school reaches its maximum enrollment. (III.C.)
- The application did not contain a staffing chart or narrative to explain the hiring plan for the proposed school's first charter term. The absence of the staffing chart limited the ability to determine if staffing projections are viable and adequate for the effective implementation of the proposed educational program. During the interview the applicant group provided additional information to clarify the 14 full time employees proposed for the first year of operation. (III.C.)
- Due to the educational and financial model proposed, members of the leadership team will perform multiple roles during the school's initial growth in the first charter term. In the case of the CAD/teacher, it is unclear how the individual will be able to provide the support and guidance to faculty on curriculum, instruction, and assessment for the arts classes and arts integration within content areas, while also managing the demands of her own classroom. Ms. L'Ecuyer will be supported by the ED/P in order to perform two different administrator roles, DCIA and Director of Operations. (III.C.)
- Members of the original design and development team who are the primary authors of the charter application will continue to meet informally to discuss the school's performance and progress outside of the school day and board or committee meetings. The team includes proposed administrators, classroom teacher(s), and a proposed board member. While the group clarified that this is considered another sounding board for school leadership, it remains unclear how the group of original founders will function differently under the structures of a charter school board of trustees and school leadership team. (III.C.)

Facilities, Student Transportation and Finances (III.D. and III.E.)

Identified Evidence

- The applicant group stated that they have identified two potential facility options in Fitchburg for the proposed school that have previously operated as school buildings. The applicant group reported a draft lease is ready to be signed, if chartered, for the preferred location, and the proposed lease is a deferred lease, amortized over the five years of the first proposed charter term. (III.D.)
- The Fitchburg Public Schools would provide transportation to students of the proposed charter school who are also residents of Fitchburg based on the proposed daily school schedule in adherence with district policies. The application indicated that the school would assist families within the charter region who do not reside in Fitchburg in coordinating carpooling to the proposed site. During the interview, the applicant group indicated interest in a number of different options to facilitate regional transportation, including coordinating transportation with the Sizer School, pursuing a fee-based transportation option, or accessing the resources of community organizations to assist with transportation. (III.D.)
- During the interview, the applicant group described a clear rationale to support their assertion that the proposed revenue, including tuition, was conservative in nature and that revenue would be expected to be higher than estimated within the proposed budget once the proposed school was in operation. (III.E.)

Limited Evidence

- The budget and cash flow projection submitted by the applicant group reflect expenditures related to a modified implementation of the proposed educational program. For example, while the application appears to indicate an instructional model of one teacher and assistant teacher in each classroom, the budget reflects one assistant teacher per grade, which was also clarified during the interview. Additionally, the budget reflects limited expenditures on instructional technology; instructional supplies and materials; testing and assessment; and professional development. During the interview, the applicant group reported that the budget is stripped down to reflect the essential financial needs of the first charter term, and in a number of areas, such as technology, the group is anticipating receiving donations from other organizations for school use. (III.E.)
- The school proposes to operate at a deficit for the pre-operational and first year of operation that does not appear to be repaid in the second or third year of operation. Depending on the financial resources and fundraising ability of the proposed school, it may run at a deficit during the first charter term. During the interview, the applicant group stated the intent to make adjustments to the growth plan in order to address the deficit. The group articulated that fundraising efforts would be focused on providing additional resources to the school, such as afterschool programming, and enrichment, not to address deficits from the operating budget. (III.E.)
- The proposed ED/P has committed to receiving a lower than market-rate salary due to her commitment to the success of the proposed school and her current status as a retired administrator. As a retired Massachusetts school administrator, Ms. Verge would be required to adhere to limitations on the amount of time she may work and the salary she may earn. The school's budget, as currently projected, would not support a replacement for Ms. Verge at a competitive rate. (III.E.)
- Due to the financial constraints of implementing the proposed model, the applicant group's ability to provide regional transportation for the proposed charter region appears unlikely. Without a reliable system of transportation in place for all students, it remains unclear how the school would serve the high need student populations from areas of the proposed charter region outside Fitchburg. (III.E.)