*****Massachusetts Department of***

***Elementary and Secondary Education***

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| Jeff Wulfson  *Acting Commissioner* |  |
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# Review Process for Charter School Applications and Criteria for Review

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Department) conducts a thorough review of charter school applications within statutory and regulatory timelines. The charter school statute requires that the award of new charters for Commonwealth and Horace Mann I and III[[1]](#footnote-1) charter schools occur in February of each year.

## **Objective of the Process**

The objective of the review process for charter school applications is to award charters to applicants who demonstrate the greatest probability of creating public schools of the highest quality. The Department conducts a process with multiple phases that includes participation by internal and external reviewers, opportunities for public comment, and interviews with each applicant group. The prospectuses and final applications are reviewed against extensive criteria outlined in the charter school regulations, 603 CMR 1.04, and specified in the charter school application.

**Prospectus and Final Application Review**

During the current application process, an average of nine individuals reviewed every prospectus and final application. The Department utilizes multiple reviewers for prospectuses and final applications including school leaders and teachers, education consultants, representatives from non-profits, higher education administrators, and Department staff. Teams of reviewers read the prospectuses and final charter applications thoroughly, with reference to the criteria in the charter application.

At the prospectus stage, the Department incorporates the written review of the external reviewers into the discussion and evaluation of each prospectus. Upon completion of its evaluation, the Department provides applicants with a written description of substantial questions and concerns based on the application criteria. The Department requests final applications from applicant groups that adequately address the majority of the application criteria and that demonstrate the potentialto create a public school of the highest quality.

At the final application stage, review panels discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the application based upon the charter application criteria and identify areas where clarification from the applicant is needed. This process helps to generate questions for the next step, an interview with each applicant group.

**Public Comment**

In order to solicit comments on charter applications from the public during the application cycle, the Department holds public hearings in areas where applicants propose to locate and requests written comments from the public, superintendents, and school committee members. At least one member of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board) presides over each hearing and will provide a report to the full Board in February if the proposed charter school is recommended by the Commissioner. The Department reviews all oral and written comments and any substantial issues raised about a specific application are pursued during applicant interviews.

## **Interviews**

The Department interviews all final applicant groups. Interviews last approximately two-and-a-half hours. The interviews allow applicants to respond to questions about their proposed school and issues of capacity identified in the review of their charter applications. Interviewers note the degree to which the applicant group successfully addresses the identified weaknesses of its application and evaluate, in person, the capacity of the applicant group including the proposed board of trustees, proposed employees, and any proposed partner organizations. In the case of existing operators of charter schools, the Department interviews the board of trustees and current school or network employees.

**Commissioner Recommendation**

The Department summarizes the evidence gathered during the charter application process. Department staff present all of the information to the Commissioner and, based upon the information presented, the Commissioner determines which recommendations, if any, to make for the February meeting of the Board.

**Final Application Criteria**

The attached document contains the charter application criteria for final applications. The Department has one set of criteria for new operators and one for current boards of trustees proposing to establish or to expand a network of charter schools. Both are attached.

Enclosure: Criteria for Review of Charter Applications (New Operator and Current Board of Trustees versions)

1. Horace Mann and Commonwealth charter schools differ in that a Horace Mann charter school must have its charter approved by the local school committee and, in some cases, the local teachers union in addition to the Board. Requirements for the involvement of the collective bargaining unit vary by type of Horace Mann charter school. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)