

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

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Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D.
Commissioner

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education
From: Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D., Commissioner
Date: February 15, 2013
Subject: Charter Schools – Report on Conditions for Lowell Community Charter Public School and Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School

This memorandum provides a report on conditions for Lowell Community Charter Public School and Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School. I recommend that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board) remove Lowell Community Charter Public School from probation and the remaining condition from its charter. I also recommend that the Board remove the conditions from the charter of Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School.

Lowell Community Charter Public School

In February 2010, the Board renewed the charter of Lowell Community Charter Public School (LCCPS), placed the school on probation, and imposed conditions on the school's charter. The conditions imposed required the school to meet academic targets, to implement a school-wide corrective action plan, and to reduce the school's maximum enrollment from 900 to 610 and its grade span from K-8 to K-4. The renewal with probationary conditions in February 2010, which the Board approved on my recommendation, followed my initial recommendation to not renew the school's charter. In March 2011, LCCPS submitted a request to amend the probationary conditions to allow the school an additional year to reach the planned enrollment level of 610 and to allow the school to remain at grades K-6. In April 2011, the Board granted the school's requests.

This year, LCCPS has requested to return to its original K-8 grade configuration and to increase its maximum enrollment by 140, from 610 to 750 students, over the next two years. The school cited financial hardship caused by the condition to reduce enrollment and its fixed operational costs. Additionally, while LCCPS is configured as a K-6 school, Lowell Public School District has elementary (K-4) and middle (5-8) schools. The school states that it has been difficult to maintain the support services required by a high needs population due to the reduction in school funds.

Mission statement

“The purpose of the Lowell Community Charter Public School is to prepare a cross section of Lowell children for success as students, citizens, and workers by providing them with a comprehensive curriculum in a supportive, challenging, multicultural learning environment. The school’s highest priority is the promotion of academic achievement for all students in each of the areas addressed by the Massachusetts curriculum frameworks, including: English, reading and language arts, writing, mathematics, science, health and fitness, world languages, art, and music, as well as character and ethics. The Lowell Community Charter Public School will place special emphasis on the contributions that immigrants have made to American life and to Lowell’s development over the years, and on the culture, language, and history of the Southeast Asian and Latino peoples who comprise a substantial portion of Lowell’s present day population. The school will actively promote the joy of discovery and creativity in the learning process, and will integrate the use of technology into aspects of instruction. The opportunity for learning will be enhanced through a longer school day and an extended year. Student achievement will be demonstrated in measurable terms to parents, students, and the community at large.”

Type of Charter	Commonwealth	Location	Lowell
Regional/Non-Regional	Non-Regional	Districts in Region	NA
Year Opened	2000	Year(s) Renewed	2005, 2010
Maximum Enrollment	610	Current Enrollment	640
Students on Waitlist	250	Chartered Grade Span	K-6

Report on Conditions

Condition 1: No later than September 2012, the school shall reduce its maximum enrollment to 610 students.

Status: Not Met

According to data submitted to the Student Information Management System (SIMS) on or about October 1, 2012, LCCPS currently enrolls 640 students from Lowell in kindergarten through grade six. While the 2012 enrollment is 30 students over the 610 limit that the Board set, the school is making progress on meeting this condition. Furthermore, SIMS data from the past three years shows that enrollment at the school typically declines between October and June through attrition.

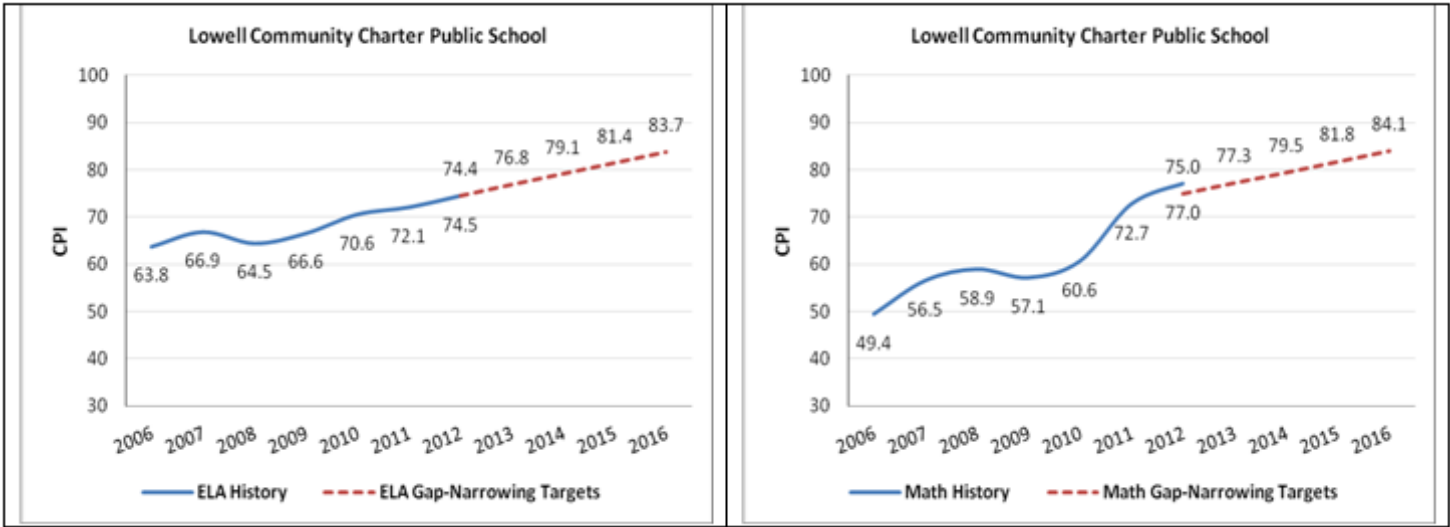
Condition 2: By December of 2011, Lowell Community Charter Public School shall demonstrate that it is an academic success by:

- a. meeting academic growth targets in English language arts and mathematics, as established by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, or
- b. achieving Adequate Yearly Progress in the aggregate and for all statistically significant subgroups in English language arts and mathematics in 2010 and 2011, and

c. by meeting the goals and objectives established the school’s Accountability Plan.

Status: Met

In 2011, LCCPS made AYP in the aggregate for both mathematics and ELA, but not for all subgroups in either subject area. The school has met academic growth targets in English language arts and mathematics for the past three years. Finally, during the 2011-12 school year, LCCPS met a majority (nine out of ten) of the academic measures established in its accountability plan.



LCCPS Median Student Growth Percentile				
Year	2009	2010	2011	2012
English Language Arts	37.0	53.0	49.0	57.0
Mathematics	38.0	50.5	64.0	60.0

Recommendation

As shown in the graphs above, LCCPS has demonstrated improvement in academic results over the past three years. Additionally, site visits conducted by the Charter School Office have documented improved structures, systems, administrative management, and oversight of the school by the board of trustees. The board of trustees has engaged an external consultant to help manage school operations and to provide board training with the purpose of sustaining the turnaround efforts. Based upon this evidence, I recommend that the Board remove LCCPS from probation. Furthermore, given the school’s academic progress over the past three years, I find that the school makes a compelling case to keep the number of students that it currently serves. Therefore, I recommend that the Board remove the conditions imposed on the school’s charter and allow the school to serve its current K-6 grade span and a maximum of 640 students. If the school continues to demonstrate academic progress, I encourage LCCPS to request the addition

of grades 7 and 8 and additional seats next year.

Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School

On February 28, 2012, the Board renewed the charter of Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School (PVCICS) with five conditions relating to governance and oversight by the board of trustees.

Mission statement

“The Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School (PVCICS) is a K-8th grade educational program that produces academically strong students highly proficient in Chinese and English. The program goals are: to develop proficiency in Mandarin Chinese; to maintain and extend students’ proficiency in English; to develop high levels of academic attainment, meeting or exceeding national and state standards, through rigorous study and instruction aligned with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks; to develop students’ understanding of other cultures and the ability to interact successfully with others whose language and/or culture differs from their own. PVCICS serves the Pioneer Valley region and offers a diverse group of students an innovative educational opportunity unavailable in Massachusetts. PVCICS will work to disseminate the school’s experiences and serve as a resource for schools trying to develop similar programs.”

Type of Charter	Commonwealth	Location	Hadley, MA
Regional/Non-Regional	Regional	Districts in Region	39 ¹
Year Opened	2007	Year(s) Renewed	2012
Maximum Enrollment	300	Current Enrollment	280
Students on Waitlist	113	Chartered Grade Span	K-9 ²

Conditions:

The following conditions were imposed in February 2012:

1. By September 30, 2012, Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School’s board of trustees will revise and strengthen the evaluation systems for the executive director and principal to ensure regular, systematic, measurable, and transparent evaluation that aligns with best practices and provides school leaders with robust supervision and evaluation.
2. By April 30, 2012, Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School’s board of trustees will engage in a self-evaluation of its own capacity and recruit additional members who have the needed expertise.
3. By September 30, 2012, Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School’s board of trustees will engage in training on the roles and responsibilities of a charter school board of trustees.
4. The school will fully implement all elements of the corrective action plan submitted to the Department on February 5, 2012.
5. The school may operate a ninth grade program in FY13 provided such program is limited to students currently enrolled in eighth grade at the school.

Report on Conditions:

Condition 1: By September 30, 2012, Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School’s board of trustees will revise and strengthen the evaluation systems for the executive director and principal to ensure regular, systematic, measurable, and transparent evaluation that aligns with best practices and provides school leaders with robust supervision and evaluation.

Status: Met

The Department received drafts of the evaluation policies for both the principal and executive director from PVCICS on August 6, 2012. The Department has since worked with a representative from the PVCICS board of trustees (the board) on several rounds of

¹ Agawam, Amherst, Amherst-Pelham, Belchertown, Chesterfield-Goshen, Chicopee, Conway, Deerfield, East Longmeadow, Easthampton, Frontier, Gill-Montague, Granby, Granville, Greenfield, Hadley, Hampden-Wilbraham, Hampshire, Hatfield, Hawlemont, Holyoke, Leverett, Longmeadow, Ludlow, Mohawk Trail, Northampton, Pelham, Pioneer Valley, Shutesbury, South Hadley, Southampton, Springfield, Sunderland, West Springfield, Westfield, Westhampton, Whately, Williamsburg, Southwick-Tolland.

² The school is currently operating a 9th grade program for the 2012-13 school year for three students.

edits to these documents. Following the site visit, the final drafts of the evaluations for both the principal and executive director were received and approved by the Department. The executive director and principal evaluations are based on the new Massachusetts Model System for Educator Evaluation, including a self-assessment, SMART goals, announced and unannounced observations, a mid-year report, and an end of year evaluation.

In order to ensure that the evaluation system is regular, systematic, measurable and transparent, the board of trustees created a personnel committee composed of three members to oversee the process. Members of this committee must have experience in the field of education. The committee oversees the evaluation of both the executive director and the principal. The committee meets monthly, typically on the same dates as board meetings.

The review process for the principal includes both quarterly scheduled visits to the school by the whole committee and unannounced visits by the chair of the committee. At the time of the visit, the committee had already conducted one announced and one unannounced site visit to observe the principal. The chair of the personnel committee is responsible for preparing the evaluation of the principal. The two other members of the personnel committee will prepare the evaluation of the executive director annually and then bring it to the full board for a vote.

Condition 2: By April 30, 2012, Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School's board of trustees will engage in a self-evaluation of its own capacity and recruit additional members who have the needed expertise.

Status: Met

The Department received a copy of self-evaluation report of the board of trustees on April 27, 2012. The self-evaluation took place at a board retreat on April 1, 2012. The board was led through this self-evaluation process by a facilitator who is the executive director and former trustee of another charter school. The form for the self-evaluation included fourteen "considerations" for ranking and discussion by the members of the board and the trustees' reflections on the results of the previous year of the charter term. The self-evaluation process included reflection, deliberation, building consensus, and goal-setting. The board of trustees used the results of the self-evaluation to identify several areas of expertise needed for the board, including education policy and fundraising. Since the condition was imposed on PVCICS, the school has recruited six new board members; two members were recruited prior to and four after the self-evaluation.

The board has nine active board members. One board member has been inactive and his term expires soon. During the focus group with the board, they described the process of recruiting new members as ongoing. According to the focus group, the board has not developed a systematic way of identifying and recruiting new members, instead relying

on referrals from parents at PVCICS and board members' existing networks.

Condition 3: By September 30, 2012, Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School's board of trustees will engage in training on the roles and responsibilities of a charter school board of trustees.

Status: Met

During the 2011-12 school year, the board engaged in two trainings. The first occurred on December 12, 2011, where a consultant presented board best practices. The second took place as part of the self-evaluation training on April 1, 2012 and included a review of the roles and responsibilities of a board and a presentation on the top ten characteristics of a highly effective charter school.

During the site visit, the board reported that they have engaged in several trainings subsequent to the April 2012 training, including training on the Open Meeting Law (OML) and how to evaluate using the new Massachusetts Model System for Educator Evaluation. These trainings are reflected in the minutes of the board of trustees.

Condition 4: The school will fully implement all elements of the corrective action plan submitted to the Department on February 5, 2012.

Status: Not Met

Please see the attached Year Six Site Visit Report regarding the review of progress made towards meeting the corrective action plan.

Condition 5: The school may operate a ninth grade program in FY13 provided such program is limited to students currently enrolled in eighth grade at the school.

Status: Met

In the 2011-12 school year, PVCICS had seven students in 8th grade. The school is currently operating a ninth grade program with three students enrolled. The principal stated that these students are receiving a high school experience, including an off campus lunch privilege once a week, and dedicated space for core subjects and activities. The principal explained that the teachers working with these students all have had previous high school teaching experience. The school submitted an amendment request to expand the school to include grades 9-12.

Recommendation

Based upon this evidence, I recommend that the Board remove the conditions placed on the charter of PVCICS. The school has substantially met the conditions imposed and is working to comply with the all elements of its corrective action plan. The Department will maintain oversight of implementation of these requirements through the routine accountability procedures conducted at all charter schools.

If you have any questions regarding these recommendations or require additional information, please contact Cliff Chuang, Associate Commissioner (781-338-3222); Jeff Wulfson, Deputy Commissioner (781-338-6500); or me.

Attachment: Motions
Year Six Site Visit Report for PVCICS