

FINAL APPLICATION REVIEW 2015-2016

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| Proposed School Name (Commonwealth): | Libertas Academy Charter School |
| Grades Served At Full Capacity: | 6-12 |
| Number of Students At Full Capacity: | 630 |
| Proposed School Location: | Springfield |
| Proposed Opening Year: | 2017-2018 |

Mission Statement:

Through rigorous academics, character development, and strong supports for every learner, Libertas Preparatory Charter School prepares all sixth through twelfth grade students to succeed within the college of their choice and to be positive, engaged members of their communities.

Proposed Growth Plan for First Five Years of Operation:

| School Year | Grade Levels | Total Student Enrollment |
|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| First Year | 6 | 90 |
| Second Year | 6-7 | 180 |
| Third Year | 6-8 | 270 |
| Fourth Year | 6-9 | 360 |
| Fifth Year | 6-10 | 450 |

The 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 below 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.

Public Comment:

At the public hearing, 20 speakers spoke **in support** of the school, including: City Councilor-elect Adam Gomez, community members, and 8 members of the applicant group. Two speakers spoke **in opposition** to the school. Both are teachers, including one who is president of the Springfield Education Association. Two speakers at the hearing submitted their comment for the record. The Department received no additional written comment either in support or in opposition.

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

Identified Evidence

- The mission indicates the key design elements proposed to achieve outcomes: rigorous academics, character development, and strong supports for every learner, and is generally reflected throughout all sections of the application. (I.A.)
- The application describes each of the key design elements. The key design element of rigorous academics is to be achieved by providing extended instructional time, frequently assessing student progress, and providing targeted interventions. The key design element of character development is oriented around school community values of focus, integrity, respect, selfless service, and tenacity (FIRST), and will be embedded in the school's program. The key design element of strong supports for every learner will be possible because of the school's extended instructional time. (I.B.)
- The application articulates the educational philosophy of the applicant group, and how their values align with the school's mission and key design elements. The applicant group's philosophy is expressed as a set of seven core beliefs: (1) Literacy provides the foundation for all learning; (2) Academic rigor benefits all students; (3) Extended time, frequent assessments, and targeted interventions propel achievement; (4) High quality teaching drives student learning; (5) Character development is essential to academic success; (6) Students thrive within structure, joy, and high expectations; and (7) Families and community partners are critical for success. Each of these beliefs is described in some detail, including research support noted throughout the narrative. (I.B.)
- The application describes the key academic and non-academic goals for students. Academic performance goals include benchmarks for performance over time. Goals are consistent with the stated mission and key design elements. (I.B.)

Limited Evidence

- The application lacks clarity with regard to what is innovative or unique about the proposed program. The application states that the 6-12 model is unique in the area, as is the relatively smaller size of the school. During the interview, the applicant group said the high quality of the program being offered is unique for the community where the school is to be located. (I.B.)
- Goals tied to the key design element of character development appear to lack rigor. For example, it isn't clear how participating in a set number of community learning experiences is a meaningful outcome measure for the school's character development program. (I.B.)

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

Identified Evidence

- The rationale for the school and the proposed location in Springfield takes into account a variety of demographic and school performance measures, as well as a familiarity with local school reform efforts (other charter schools and the Springfield Empowerment Zone). (I.C.)
- Members of the proposed board have strong connections to the Springfield community. (I.C.)
- The application specifies current community partnerships, as well as a comprehensive, detailed plan for publicizing the school and developing further partnerships. During the interview, members of the applicant group said they have met with hundreds of families who support the school. (I.C.)
- The applicant group proposes to open with grade six, and to add a grade each year until reaching maximum enrollment in the seventh year of implementation. (I.D.)
- During the interview, the applicant group expressed a desire to make the school accessible to as many students as possible. The school initially plans to backfill through 10th grade during the first charter term. The applicant group reported the desire to backfill beyond tenth grade once the proposed school is fully established. (I.D.)

Limited Evidence

- Supporting evidence for the projected student enrollment includes waitlist data for charter schools in the Springfield area, but does not include documented evidence of demand from families with eligible potential students. The applicant group has proposed an extended planning period with a recruitment period beginning after charter award for an opening date of 2017-2018 school year. (I.C.)

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

Identified Evidence

- The proposed school's calendar includes 185 days of instruction, plus 10 days of summer remedial instruction for students who need it. The school day begins at 7:50 and ends at 4:30, and includes 110 minutes of English language arts instruction daily in the middle and high schools, 110 minutes of mathematics instruction daily in the middle school, and a daily intervention block. (II.A.)
- Teachers' schedules include ample time for collaboration, data analysis, and professional development. Teachers will also receive 20 days of professional development during the summer. (II.A.)
- The application incorporates explicit research citations to demonstrate how elements of the proposed program, including extended time on task, targeted instruction, and a culture of high expectations, may result in high academic achievement for the anticipated student population, including students with disabilities and English language learners. (II.A.)
- The proposed school will implement curricula to be developed from existing commercial sources. The proposed head of school will begin planning the curriculum during planning year, and will be assisted towards the end of the planning year by a director of instruction. The head of school, director of instruction, and the principals to be hired later in the charter term will be responsible for evaluating the curriculum's effectiveness. (II.B.)
- The application clearly describes the instructional methods all teachers will be expected to follow. These practices include setting clear expectations and holding students accountable, providing multiple means for students to engage in the learning process, infusing literacy across the curriculum, and maximizing accommodations. (II.B.)

Limited Evidence

- It is unclear whether the number of staff the school plans to hire for each grade level (6 general education teachers, a special education teacher, and an English as a Second Language teacher for 90 students) will be able to deliver the high level of differentiation and individualized tutoring support that is part of the proposed program. This may be especially true for the earlier grades, when the school anticipates taking in many students who are below grade level. (II.A.)
- While teachers are to be provided 110 minutes daily for planning, the application provides few details regarding how this time will be structured or how teachers will use this time effectively. (II.B.)

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

Identified Evidence

- The application includes a realistic plan for systematically collecting and analyzing a range of different kinds of student data, both academic and non-academic. Academic measures include both local assessments and nationally normed assessments such as NWEA MAP, PSAT, and SAT. Non-academic measures include student-level measures such as weekly behavioral reports and school-level measures such as visitor and family surveys regarding student character. (II.C.)
- Data analysis will be used to inform re-teaching, to plan interventions, to determine professional development needs, and to assess the performance and progress of the school as a whole. (II.C.)
- Data will be systematically collated and disseminated in various forms to different stakeholders. Parents will receive reports on student academic and behavioral performance in weekly reports and in report cards at the end of each trimester. The school will send monthly newsletters and will compile an annual report. The board will receive regular reports on academic performance disaggregated by student subgroup. (II.C.)

Limited Evidence

- No primary concerns noted.

Supports for Diverse Learners (II.D.)

Identified Evidence

- The application provides a clear description of the processes and procedures the school will use to identify, assess, and serve students who are English language learners (ELLs). The application demonstrates an awareness of the school's obligations with regard to serving ELLs. (II.D.)
- The application provides a clear description of the processes and procedures the school will use to identify, assess, and provide specialized instruction to each student in need of special education. The application demonstrates an awareness of the school's obligations with regard to serving students with special needs. (II.D.)

Limited Evidence

- The school's plan to hire one half time English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher in Year 1 and no more than one full-time ESL teacher for each grade level may be problematic, given the levels of direct ESL instruction and push-in services described in the application, and given the high percentage of ELLs the school anticipates it will serve. (II.D.)

Culture and Family Engagement (I.E.)

Identified Evidence

- The proposed school's FIRST values (focus, integrity, respect, selfless service, and tenacity) are central to the culture of the school. During the first week of the school year, students will be oriented to these values and their expression in the operation of the school. A focus on building and maintaining the school's culture will be an element of morning advisory and monthly community meetings. (I.E.)
- The proposed school will provide services and/or programs to address students' physical, social emotional, and health needs, including a nutrition program, a nurse, and individual or small group counseling. (I.E.)
- All students and their families will receive a visit at home by the head of school or another staff member prior to the start of school, as an initial step in inviting the participation of parents/guardians in their children's schooling. Parents/guardians may also attend a monthly meeting with the head of school. (I.E.)
- The application describes partnerships with community organizations the applicant group plans to use to provide enrichment programming for students. During the interview, board members indicated their connections to the Springfield community will facilitate these partnerships. (I.E.)

Limited Evidence

- While the application clearly describes infractions against the school's code of conduct and outlines the progression of consequences, it is less clear how positive behavior is rewarded, or what behavioral supports may be provided to students who struggle to meet expectations. (I.E.)

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

Identified Evidence

- As a group, the proposed head of school and board members possess a range of relevant experience and qualifications (education, law, finance, and development), along with tangible ties to the Springfield area. (III.A.)
- The application provides sufficient information to establish understanding regarding the role of the board in overseeing 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 application describes processes related to board sustainability, including processes to recruit and select new board members. (III.B.)
- Building Excellent Schools will provide board development services and support during the board's annual self-assessment. (III.B.)

Limited Evidence

- The application indicates Building Excellent Schools (BES) will provide a wide range of services as a partner organization (including support in the areas of professional development for teachers, board development and assessment, leadership development, operations, school culture, instruction, and assessment). The applicant group submitted descriptions of the services that would be provided by BES within its request for proven provider status at the prospectus stage. These details were not integrated within the application in areas relevant to BES supports. At the time of the interview, the applicant group did not have a plan for how it would evaluate the services provided by BES once the school is in operation. (III.B.)

Management (III.C.)

Identified Evidence

- The application includes school organizational charts for year one of operation and for when the school is at full enrollment. The chart includes all employees of the proposed school, the board of trustees, and Building Excellent Schools, the proposed school partner. (III.C.)
- The application describes the roles and primary responsibilities of the school's leader and other administrative staff, articulating key role distinctions with regard to curriculum development and implementation, instructional leadership, personnel decisions, financial management, and operations. (III.C.)
- The proposed head of school was identified through Building Excellent Schools' selective recruitment process, and will complete a two year fellowship prior to opening the school. (III.C.)
- The proposed head of school and a proposed board member have extensive professional connections through Teach for America that they plan to use to recruit staff. (III.C.)

Limited Evidence

- The proposed head of school salary was set significantly below the average Massachusetts principal salary as a way of adding some additional flexibility in the budget. The school's budget, as currently projected, would not support a replacement at a competitive rate. (III.C. and III.E.)
- Proposed teacher salaries are based on average salaries for Springfield Public Schools teachers, even though the number of hours required for teachers at the school to fulfill their responsibilities would appear to be significantly greater. During the interview, the proposed head of school said that the mission-driven nature of the school and the additional professional development provided to teachers would serve to recruit and retain teachers. (III.C. and III.E.)

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

Identified Evidence

- The application lists the facilities requirements for the proposed school. The applicant group is working with Charter School Support Services (CSSS) to identify a suitable facility. CSSS will also assist the school in securing financing and managing any needed renovations. (III.D.)
- Springfield Public Schools would provide transportation to students of the proposed school in adherence with district policies. (III.D.)
- The application explains the systems and procedures for managing the school's finances. The director of operations will manage the daily financial operations, with support from Central Source, an established business management organization supporting charter schools. (III.E.)
- The application describes the fiscal controls and financial management policies the board of trustees will employ to oversee the school's finances. (III.E.)
- The application states that the budget was developed by the proposed head of school, with input from Building Excellent Schools and proposed board members. The cash flow projection narrative adequately explains the assumptions behind the projections. (III.E.)

Limited Evidence

- To date, the applicant group has not identified a suitable facility in the North End. While the group is committed to the area, it is possible the school may need to be located elsewhere in Springfield. (III.D.)
- Although the budget and cash flow projection submitted by the applicant group reflect careful planning, concerns remain regarding the potential strain on the proposed school's financial resources during its first charter term due to the slow growth plan for student enrollment and the targeted high needs student population in Springfield. During the interview, the applicant group demonstrated awareness of and planning for the challenge of building an effective educational program with adequate qualified and mission-aligned administrators and faculty with the limited resources available during the initial years of operation. (III.E.)