*****Massachusetts Department of***

***Elementary and Secondary Education***

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| Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D.  *Commissioner* |  |

# MEMORANDUM

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| **To:** | Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education |
| **From:** | Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D., Commissioner |
| **Date:** | February 12, 2016 |
| **Subject:** | Charter Schools – Amendment Request of Pioneer Charter School of Science (Grade Span and Enrollment) |

Pursuant to the Charter School Regulations, 603 CMR 1.10(1), the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board) must approve changes to the maximum enrollment and grades served of charter schools. This year, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Department) received requests from nineteen charter schools and networks of charter schools to change their maximum enrollment and grades served. This month, I recommend that the Board approve amendments requested by Pioneer Charter School of Science (PCSS) and two specific requests for charter schools located in Boston. The amendment requests related to the Commonwealth charter schools in Boston are discussed in a separate memorandum.

The board of trustees of PCSS requests approval of an amendment to both its maximum enrollment and to expand the grades it serves to a total of 780 students in grades K-12. [[1]](#footnote-1)  The charter amendment requests the addition of **grades K-6** and an increase of **420 students**. The board of trustees oversees a network of charter schools that includes PCSS and PCSS II. PCSS II is located in Saugus and currently serves 270 students in grades 7-11 in its third year of operation and, at full size, will serve 360 students in grades 7-12.

The Department’s assessment of the school’s request is described below, in preparation for a discussion and vote at the Board’s meeting on February 23, 2016. The memorandum is organized into the following sections: (1) school’s request and plan for implementation; (2) change to grades served; (3) Department review; (4) proven provider consideration; (5) public comment; and (6) recommendation for growth. The following information is also attached to this memorandum for your review:

* the original amendment request and additional materials subsequently submitted by the school;
* a summary of the school’s academic performance, student demographics, attrition rates, and five-year financial summary; and
* a summary of the school’s credentials as a proven provider.

An overview of the terms of the school’s charter and the elements of its school design follows.

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| **Pioneer Charter School of Science** | | | |
| **Type of Charter**  (Commonwealth or Horace Mann) | Commonwealth | **Location** | Everett |
| **Regional or Non-Regional?** | Regional | **Districts in Region** | Chelsea, Everett, Revere |
| **Year Opened** | 2007 | **Year(s) Renewed** | 2012 |
| **Maximum Enrollment** | 360 | **Current Enrollment** | 360 |
| **Chartered Grade Span** | 7-12 | **Current Grade Span** | 7-12 |
| **Students on Waitlist** | 502 | **Current Age of School** | 9 years |
| **Mission Statement**  The mission of Pioneer Charter School of Science (PCSS) is to prepare educationally under-resourced students in Chelsea, Everett, and Revere for today’s competitive world. PCSS will help them develop the academic and social skills necessary to become successful professionals and exemplary members of their community. This goal will be achieved by providing the students with a rigorous academic curriculum with emphasis on math and science, balanced by a strong foundation in the humanities, a character education program, career-oriented college preparation, and strong student–teacher–parent collaboration. | | | |

1. **School’s Request and Plan for Implementation**

PCSS seeks to become a K-12 school serving 780 students by increasing its maximum enrollment by 420 to a total of 780 students and by adding grades K-6 over three years. The school proposes to add 180 students in grades K-2 during the 2016-2017 school year; add 180 students in grades K, 4, and 5 in year two; and add 60 students and reach full implementation of the K-6 grade span by year three in 2018-2019. The school intends to maintain 60 students per grade and is not proposing to add seats to its already established 7-12 school.

The proposed approach to adding new grades is similar to the growth plans implemented by PCSS during its first charter term as well as the establishment of its second charter school in Saugus, PCSS II. Similar approaches to growth have been employed by other charter schools implementing new K-8 grade spans.[[2]](#footnote-2) PCSS has also committed to continue to accept new students in grades K-9 of the proposed K-12 grade span, which exceeds the statutory requirement to fill vacancies in grades K-6.

The school currently provides regional transportation for residents of Chelsea and Revere, and will continue to do so under the proposed expansion. For K-6 students who live in the district in which the charter school is located and live more than two miles from the school that they attend, the school district of residence is required to provide transportation. G.L. c. 71, § 68; and G.L. c. 71,   
§ 89(cc).

1. **Change to Grades Served**

PCSS reports that employees with prior elementary school experience will support implementation of the new grade span. Additionally, PCSS will work with Neighborhood House Charter School (NHCS), a K-8 school in Boston. PCSS reports that its model of expanded learning time, with an emphasis on science, mathematics, and character education, will remain the same but with age appropriate approaches, including using time differently during the school day to support enrichment opportunities. The school has consulted other charter schools that have performed similar expansions to increase its preparedness for the potential challenges.

The school’s current executive director leads a K-6 task force that will prepare for and implement the K-6 expansion, including curriculum development, establishing school day routines and procedures, and developing a code of conduct. The K-6 task force will build a curriculum from NHCS’s scope and sequence and will review the units, lessons, and assessments developed by NHCS faculty for potential adaptation and use by PCSS teachers. In addition to the executive director, the school reports that there are twelve PCSS employees with elementary school experience or qualifications who will participate in the expansion. The school submitted additional materials that demonstrate planning and preparation to implement the proposed grade span, including curriculum overviews, school schedules, and descriptions of the behavior system and character education program.

The executive director of NHCS has submitted a letter of commitment to support PCSS in its development of curriculum and assessments, the implementation of school culture and operations, the delivery of professional development activities, and the provision of feedback from NHCS staff on the effectiveness of implementation. NHCS has previously assisted other schools under the Charter School Program Grant.

1. **Department Review**

Section 1.10 of the Charter School Regulations contains several criteria to consider in determining whether to grant a school’s request to amend its charter. The Department’s comprehensive review was based upon these criteria.

The Department’s review included the following considerations:

* the charter school’s compliance with applicable state, federal, and local law;
* affirmative, credible evidence regarding the faithfulness of the school to the terms of its charter, including the extent to which the school has followed its recruitment and retention plan and has disseminated best practices;
* affirmative, credible evidence regarding the success of the school's academic program;
* affirmative, credible evidence regarding the viability of the school as an organization;
* the merits of the school’s amendment request when judged against the criteria outlined in the Department’s [Charter Amendment and Notification Guidelines](http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/governance/) and the [Charter School Performance Criteria;](http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/governance/)
* the eligibility of the board of trustees for proven provider status based upon the criteria described in 603 CMR 1.04(4); and
* the public comment received regarding the request.

Overall, the Department’s records indicate that PCSS’s academic program is a success, that the school is a viable organization, and that it is faithful to the terms of its charter.

* PCSS has achieved Level 1 status for the past four years; had a school percentile of 89 in 2012, 96 in 2013 and 2014, and 92 in 2015; and has met PPI targets for all students and the high needs subgroup during the same four-year period.
* The school administered PARCC in 2015. PARCC scores are designated by Levels, with Levels 4 and 5 meeting and exceeding expectations respectively. In 2015, 68 percent of PCSS students received a Level 4 or 5 in English language arts (ELA), above the state average of 49 percent. Sixty-three percent of students received a Level 4 or 5 in mathematics, above the state average of 43 percent.
* Overall, the school has made gains in the recruitment of targeted student populations, including substantial recent gains in its enrollment of English language learners and students whose first language is not English, and in these two populations it currently exceeds Everett Public Schools (EPS), its primary sending district.[[3]](#footnote-3) During the current 2015-2016 school year, the school’s student population consists of 17 percent English language learners (EPS is 16 percent) and 64 percent students whose first language is not English (EPS is 59 percent).
* The school has lowered its rates of attrition and suspension over time. The school’s overall rate of attrition decreased from approximately 15 percent in 2011 to approximately 6 percent in 2015. The school experiences most of its attrition at eighth and ninth grade. The school has also seen a significant decline in its discipline rates since its first charter term; in-school and out-of-school suspension rates in 2015 were approximately 1 percent and 5 percent respectively.

* As noted in its 2012 renewal and evidenced by the current fiscal dashboard, PCSS has maintained sound and stable financial conditions and demonstrated a consistent history of strong performance on key financial metrics. The school received unqualified audit opinions and audits free of instances of deficiency or noncompliance for all reported fiscal years. The school also reports substantial financial resources in place to support the expansion and to address facility and staffing needs that may arise during implementation.
* The school submitted similar requests for a K-6 expansion in 2008, 2011, 2012, and 2014. These requests were not recommended by the Commissioner for Board approval or were withdrawn by the school for a variety of reasons, including two requests submitted prior to the first renewal of PCSS and opening a new charter school in 2012 to replicate its educational model in nearby communities. At the time of the 2014 request, the Department noted that PCSS II was in its second year of operation, and the Department required additional evidence of the network’s ability to grow successfully with its existing two charter schools. The board of trustees subsequently withdrew its request.

During the review of the school’s proposed amendment, the Department also reviewed the performance of the second school, PCSS II, and the oversight provided by the board of trustees and network staff. PCSS II demonstrated performance in its first two years of operation that is consistent with the flagship school. In 2014 and 2015, on both the MCAS and PARCC tests, PCSS II demonstrated student performance at or above the statewide average in proficiency and growth in the aggregate and the student subgroup of economically disadvantaged. In 2014, 84 percent of PCSS II students scored in the Proficient and Advanced categories in the ELA assessment, above the state average. In mathematics, 60 percent of PCSS II students scored Proficient and Advanced, also above the state average. The school’s SGP for 2014 was 76.0 in ELA and 73.0 in mathematics, both above the state median of 50. In 2015, PCSS II demonstrated slightly higher performance on PARCC than PCSS; 73 percent of PCSS II students received a Level 4 or 5 in ELA, and 69 percent of students received a Level 4 or 5 in mathematics.

School, network, and board leadership have responded to the Department’s concerns regarding the pattern of attrition for PCSS II. PCSS II experienced unusually high attrition between its first and second year of operation that the school attributes in large part to its temporary location in Everett for the first year of operation.[[4]](#footnote-4)  The school’s pattern of overall attrition has decreased since the school’s first year of operation from approximately 22 percent to 16 percent. The Department will continue to monitor the school’s progress in lowering overall attrition rates and its enhancement of retention strategies[[5]](#footnote-5) to respond to the specific needs of the students who reside in the cities and town which comprise the charter region of PCSS II.[[6]](#footnote-6)

1. **Proven Provider Consideration**

Proven provider status is required to award additional seats to PCSS for two reasons. First, the school’s charter region includes Everett Public Schools and Chelsea Public Schools, which have been identified as performing in the lowest 10 percent of all districts based on MCAS scores in 2012-2013 and 2013-2014. Second, the nine percent net school spending cap for Everett may be exceeded if the amendment request for PCSS is granted, and Chelsea’s total tuition payments to Commonwealth charter schools already exceed nine percent of the district’s net school spending cap due to previous charter awards.

After evaluating the performance of PCSS against the criteria for proven provider status, I identified the board of trustees of PCSS as a proven provider for the purposes of the current amendment request. I also determined the board of trustees of PCSS was a proven provider at the time it received a charter for PCSS II.

Included in your materials are the relevant student achievement and indicator data used to determine that the board of trustees of PCSS is eligible for proven provider status. Pursuant to 603 CMR 1.04(4)(b), the award of proven provider status to an existing board of trustees must include successful student academic performance over a three-year period. This is measured by using proficiency levels and growth measures on the MCAS or equivalent assessments for English language arts and mathematics in comparable grades for all students and for one or more targeted subgroups. The Department compares the school’s student performance data to statewide averages and to relevant district averages for the grades served by the charter school.

1. **Public Comment**

At the time of the school’s submission to the Department, PCSS also submitted copies of its request to all districts within its charter region, pursuant to 603 CMR 1.10(5). The Department subsequently solicited written comments from the superintendents of the affected school districts. No comment was received. The Department received letters in support of the school’s request from Senator Sal DiDomenico and Everett City Councilor Fred Capone (see attachment 2). At the time of the school’s 2014 request, the Department received letters and petitions of support from the school community that were resubmitted with this year’s request.

1. **Recommendation for Growth**

I have reviewed the school’s request, and it appears reasonable and consistent with the charter school statute and regulations. Overall, the amendment request, renewal of the school’s charter in 2012, and the Department’s accountability records indicate that the school’s academic program is a success, that the school is a viable organization, and that it has been faithful to the terms of its charter. I recommend that the Board approve the request. A motion for approval is attached for your consideration.

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

Attachments:

* Motion for Board Action on Pioneer Charter School of Science
* Correspondence from Pioneer Charter School of Science, including public comment submitted by the school
* Pioneer Charter School of Science Academic Performance Data, Student Enrollment Demographics, Student Attrition Rates, and Five Year Financial Summary
* Pioneer Charter School of Science Proven Provider Analysis Summary

1. The school submitted similar requests for a K-6 expansion in 2008, 2011, 2012, and 2014. The requests were not recommended by the Commissioner for Board approval or were withdrawn by the school. See Department’s review in section 3 for additional information. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Examples include Brooke Charter School-Mattapan and East Boston, Match Charter Public School, KIPP Academy Boston Charter Public School, and Codman Academy Charter Public School. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Everett residents are 42 percent of the school’s enrollment for the 2015-2016 school year. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. PCSS II temporarily located outside of its charter region during the first year of operation. The school was in consultation with the Department as it was preparing to open, regarding its facility challenges in Saugus, and was granted a charter amendment to permit a temporary location in Everett for one year. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Department reviews a school’s proposed enhancements to its recruitment and retention plan on an annual basis. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The charter region of PCSS II is comprised of Danvers, Lynn, Peabody, Salem, and Saugus. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)