



January 9, 2015

Commissioner Mitchell Chester  
Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education  
25 Pleasant Street  
Malden, MA 02148-5023

Dear Commissioner Chester,

On behalf of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Charter School board of trustees and our entire school community, this letter requests that you recommend extension of the time to satisfy the conditions on our charter in lieu of recommending probation.

MLK is a true community initiative; we are a school with a teaching staff that is as diverse as our student body, a wait list at every grade level, deep partnerships with local agencies and colleges, high levels of parent engagement, and strong organizational and financial viability. We serve a high needs student body, and the school board of trustees and school administration are aggressively implementing an academic improvement program in the following areas: curriculum, assessment, and instruction. This plan is confirmed by the report of the October 29, 2014 DESE site visit and is addressing issues raised in that report.

In addition, the school is pleased to report the hiring of a new, highly experienced principal, Chip Wood. MLK also hired this school year an experienced math coach and more recently an experienced ELA coach to guide instruction in those content areas. Two accomplished educators who previously worked at high-performing charter schools serving low income students consult with MLK's academic leaders and teachers to accelerate the pace of academic improvement and help the school maintain focus on successful practices.

MLK Charter School expects to provide substantial evidence of continuing academic program improvement and increased student achievement as the school works to satisfy the conditions. As a reason to continue the conditions without probation, the school notes that while the MCAS results in the first year of implementing the ELA Action Plan required by the conditions did not evidence academic success, the second year of implementation is encouraging. MLK Charter School requests that it be allowed to continue on conditions without probation based on the progress of the strategy described below and the other strengths of the school. The Board of ESE placed MLK Charter School on conditions in January 2013. In spring 2013, MLK Charter School contracted with SchoolWorks to review the school's ELA program and then created its ELA Action Plan incorporating the recommendations from SchoolWorks. Early in 2014, during

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the first year of implementing the ELA Action Plan, MLK Charter School realized that the ELA Action Plan as implemented was not producing academic success. The school contracted with SchoolWorks to return in the spring to update its review.

During the spring of 2014 prior to learning the results of 2014 MCAS, MLK Charter School developed an ambitious strategy to expand implementation during 2014-2015 to progress toward academic success. MLK Charter School's 2014 MCAS results were poor despite being in its eighth year. Evidence from fall 2014 confirms that the strategy is being implemented successfully and that we have made significant steps toward academic success: the report of the October 29, 2014 site visit; improved scores on the Achievement Network ELA and math interim assessments; employment of an impressive educator as principal; and hiring talented instructional coaches for ELA and math.

### **Life at MLK Charter School**

MLK Charter School provides the children with a beautiful facility. In addition to 750 square foot classrooms with natural light, the school includes spacious art, music, and all-purpose (recreation and other uses) rooms. The school also has a library, computer room, health suite, and numerous spaces to provide pull-out services. The 9+ acre site includes a playing field, play scape, half basketball court, woods with a nature trail, picnic tables, and a quiet grassy area.

The diversity of the faculty and staff reflects MLK Charter School's commitment to its mission of building Dr. King's beloved community. MLK Charter School provides the children (almost all are black and/or Latino) with many role models who look like them. This appears to be very important to the students and their families. The school has expanded its efforts to help teachers pass MTEL tests. While the school and a Mt. Holyoke College education faculty member previously provided one free prep course for an MTEL test each summer, we have now expanded that to other school breaks. In December for the first time, MLK paid the fee of the related MTEL test as part of the prep course. In response to the October site visit, the board of trustees is developing a policy to address the teacher licensing issue at the school. The trustees expect to approve the policy at their January board meeting. The anticipated policy will require immediate, substantial progress toward licensing and will include mandatory timelines consistent with Massachusetts law.

Parents and guardians feel comfortable at MLK Charter School, visiting the school and attending school events in large numbers. Many parents and guardians feel very connected to the MLK Charter School community.

Every MLK Charter School student has a 45-minute specials class daily – technology, art, music, and physical education.

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Consistent with Dr. King's vision, the MLK Way approach to behavior management maintains a peaceful culture in which children are ready to learn.

MLK Charter School annually achieves high growth in 5<sup>th</sup> grade math. The 5<sup>th</sup> grade math teacher is Garth Bariffe, a Jamaican artist and Springfield resident. Anecdotally, some parents and educators familiar with middle schools report that MLK Charter School produces exceptionally well-prepared middle school math students.

MLK Charter School has been fully enrolled every school year. Student attrition in 2013-2014 was only 6.6% for all students and 6.9% for high needs students. The school has a waiting list at each grade level. The annual parent/guardian satisfaction survey confirms that more than 95% are satisfied with MLK Charter School.

The independent audit annually confirms that MLK Charter School maintains a healthy balance sheet, operates within its budget, has no cash flow issues, has low financial risk, and has no material weaknesses in its internal financial controls.

### **Academic leadership**

Last spring, MLK Charter School contracted for the services of two educators to lead the redesign of the school's academic program delivery and to work with the school through the 2014-2015 school year. These educators have experience at high-performing charter schools serving low income students. Starting in May and working through the summer, our school's administrators and these consultants developed a plan for our new academic program delivery, wrote the draft Instructor's Manual, and designed the professional development and instructional coaching to implement the new program. MLK Charter School's new principal started on December 1. Chip Wood brings a life of impressive achievement to the challenge of leading MLK Charter School to academic success.

This school year, MLK Charter School added weekly Monday afternoon professional development. The school's fulltime math coach and three contracted part-time literacy coaches work with the teachers to implement the techniques taught during professional development. Since the site visit, the school has hired a full-time ELA coach who will coordinate the ELA coaching. The teachers appreciate the professional development and coaching and are rapidly improving practice.

With the consulting expertise of Schoolworks, professional development has focused on unit planning and standards-based lesson planning in ELA, lessons that gradually release responsibility for learning to the children, delivering rigorous lessons, and overall fidelity to the Instructor's Manual developed last summer. The Instructional Leadership Team, created last summer and comprised of grade level and other constituent representation, meets bi-weekly with

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a current intense focus on ELA and use of MCAS questions for daily homework review in class in grades 3-5.

Recently MLK Charter School transitioned strategic academic leadership to the new Instructional Planning Team comprised of the principal, math and ELA coaches, data specialist, special education coordinator, and executive director, which meets weekly.

## **ELA Improvement**

MLK Charter School executed the ELA Action Plan created in spring 2013 as required by the Board of ESE's 2013-2014 conditions. Realizing early in 2014 that its implementation of the ELA Action Plan was not producing immediate significant academic success, MLK Charter School created a strategy to improve implementation by revamping the (1) curriculum, (2) assessments, (3) instruction, (4) academic leadership, and (5) professional development and instructional coaching in the 2014-2015 school year.

The strategy constitutes dramatic change in the school's academic program over a short time period. The school is quickly implementing the strategy, and indications are that MLK Charter School is moving toward academic success. MLK outscored the Achievement Network network schools in both ELA and math on the first and second ANet tests of this school year. MLK also outscored successful Boston charter schools in the ANet network.

Improvements to the academic program continue. New this month are new ELA unit plans matched to Common Core standards created by our ELA consultant, implementation of lesson-planning skills learned during the fall professional development, and addition of one full-time experienced ELA teacher whose priority will be grade 4 writing.

## **Assessment**

*“Finding: The school collects multiple sources of data. A significant shift for this school year is that the primary assessment system is aligned to the taught curriculum. There are systems and structures in place for stakeholders (including the board of trustees and staff members) to review the collected data.” “Finding: School staff is using data to drive outcomes in the classrooms. Plans to increase data usage are in place.” [SVR 13-14]*

Applying the Common School Performance Criteria, this fall MLK Charter School improved its “assessment and program evaluation” from yellow (partially met) to green (met).

## **Instruction**

This school year, MLK Charter School created an Instructor's Manual that details the academic program. General education "teachers reported that the instructor's manual provided a valuable resource to them as to how to teach. The school's professional development sessions have also focused on the instructor's manual." [SVR 12] Two months into the school year, implementation of the new instructional model varies across the school. However, "isolated examples occurred in the upper grades, where visitors noted that students were independently writing using examples from the text or working on more challenging math problems." "Visitors also observed examples of more successful rigorous questioning, particularly in upper grade ELA classrooms where teachers asked students to prove their conclusions using evidence from the text. In these classrooms, students could explain the task they were being asked to do and drew conclusions beyond basic recall, such as inferring the author's tone." [SVR 12]

Applying the Common School Performance Criteria, this fall MLK Charter School improved its "instruction" from red (falls far below) to yellow (partially met).

## **Curriculum**

"During the ESE site visit to MLK last year, site visitors found that the school's purchased ELA curriculum, Journeys, was as sequenced, not aligned to the school's chosen assessment system (ANet). Additionally, the curriculum, as implemented, was not found to be appropriately rigorous to engage students in Common Core level work. In academic year 2015, the school is still using Journeys as a curricular tool, but no longer using the suggested sequencing of the curriculum. Instead, the school is teaching Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks (MCF) standards in a sequence aligned with the school's assessment system (ANet testing in grades 2-5) by following an Achievement Network document called the schedule of assessed standards (SAS). The SAS currently serves, essentially, as the scope and sequences for the ELA and mathematics courses taught in grades 2-5. In addition, teachers have been directed to use Journeys as a supplement, but to create more rigorous ELA lessons that call for students to focus on reading comprehension and writing. The school continues to use the purchased curriculum Expressions for mathematics. However, in the 2015 school year, the math curriculum has also been re-sequenced to align to the Achievement Network (ANet) SAS. The Anet SAS documents ensure vertical alignment and alignment to the MCF in both mathematics and ELA." [SVR 10-11] This month MLK Charter School completed Common Core-aligned ELA unit lesson plans for the first three months of 2015 that include guidance for teaching using gradual release, rigorous questions, and higher-order thinking.

In summary, this school year MLK Charter School upgraded the scope, sequence, and rigor of its ELA and math curricula.

## **MLK Charter School partnerships**

MLK Charter School has a history of deep partnerships within the community and with local institutions of higher education; MLK students benefit greatly from these partnerships as they support their academic and personal development, and post-secondary success.

- The Dr. King Scholars Program since 2009 has provided three or four \$3,000 scholarships annually to MLK Charter School 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade students. Our partner Young Scholars Fund invests the money that will be paid for college expenses. Their web site, [Youngscholarsfund.org](http://Youngscholarsfund.org), includes a video clip that describes the program. The Dr. King Scholars Club at MLK Charter School provides the Dr. King Scholars with peer support, supportive adults, and enrichment activities.
- MLK Charter School's partner Academy Hill School, a small independent school in Springfield, provides a full scholarship to Academy Hill to one MLK student at a time. The first MLK student to receive the scholarship for 5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grades, then received a scholarship to the prestigious Connecticut boarding school Loomis Chaffee Academy. The child is now an award-winning 9<sup>th</sup> grader at Loomis Chaffee. As a Dr. King Scholar, he still attends events at MLK Charter School. The second recipient of the 5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade scholarship is now in 5<sup>th</sup> grade at Academy Hill. Academy Hill also provided an afternoon summer enrichment program to complement MLK's morning summer school in 2014. Academy Hill also presents professional development for MLK specials teachers.
- MLK Charter School has a 2-3 acre woods behind the school. MLK's partner, the Student Conservation Association, created our nature trail – Perseverance Path, maintains the trail and the educational markers, and returns to MLK each school year to lead various outdoors education activities. Teachers take students on Perseverance Path whenever they choose.
- Mt. Holyoke College, its president, and a philosophy professor are our partners in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade philosophy for children program. Over eight years, approximately 100 Mt. Holyoke College students and 500 MLK Charter School students have participated in this program. The Mt. Holyoke students in groups of two meet with groups of 10 MLK students weekly for seven weeks to use picture books as the jumping off point for discussion of philosophical issues. Mt. Holyoke College hosts the MLK Charter School 2<sup>nd</sup> grade for a culminating event. The Mt. Holyoke College/MLK Charter School philosophy for children program has been widely disseminated including an article in the Harvard Education Letter and the documentary *Big Ideas for Little Kids: Teaching Philosophy through Picture Books* that recently aired on public television in Springfield.

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- MLK Charter School continues its partnership with Martin Luther King, Jr. Family Services, Inc., our school's founding partner. MLKFS operates the after-school program at the school, has a seat on the board of trustees, and annually includes the school in the city-wide MLK Day celebration.
- Annually Springfield College and Smith College graduate schools of social work place graduate students for year-long internships at MLK Charter School. These interns are a valuable resource helping MLK students address their social-emotional needs.

Thank you for considering our submission. Everyone at MLK Charter School is working very hard to achieve academic success. We know we must deliver academic success to our children. We are confident that we are on the path to that success and that every month we are making significant progress.

Sincerely,

Alan M. Katz  
Executive Director

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