



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 17, 2012
Subject: Charter Renewal and Major Amendment Request – Initial Discussion and Vote for Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School

This month, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board) will discuss and vote on the charter renewal and major amendment requests for Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School (PVCICS). The school submitted an Application for Renewal and two major amendment requests in August 2011. Based on the evidence summarized below and further outlined in the attached Summary of Review, I recommend that PVCICS be granted a renewal with conditions related to charter school governance. Further, until the school successfully addresses the conditions, I am not recommending that the Board grant PVCICS either of its major amendment requests.

Basis of Recommendations Regarding the Renewal of Charters

The charter school regulations state that “[t]he decision by the Board to renew a charter shall be based upon the presentation of affirmative evidence regarding the success of the school’s academic program; the viability of the school as an organization; and the faithfulness of the school to the terms of its charter” 603 CMR 1.12. Consistent with the regulations, recommendations regarding renewal are based upon the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s (Department) evaluation of the school’s performance in these areas. In its review, the Department has considered both the school’s absolute performance at the time of the application for renewal and the progress the school has made during the past four years of its charter.

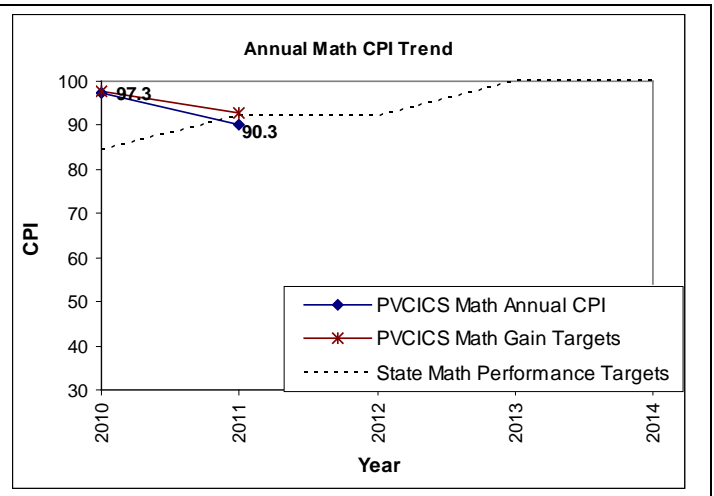
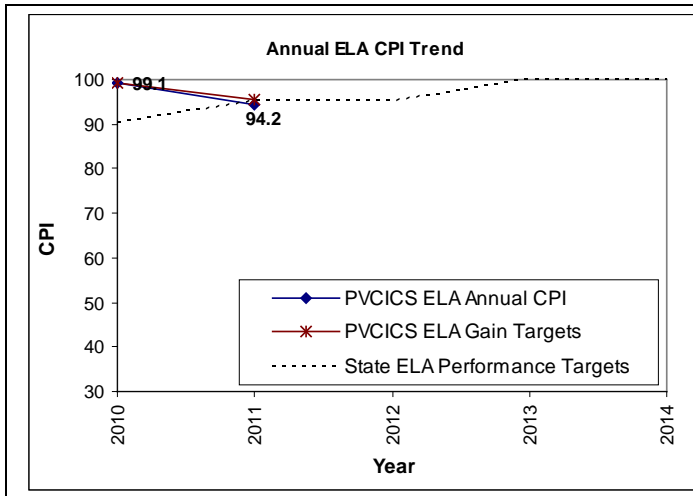
The accountability process for charter schools recognizes that in exchange for increased freedom, a school must demonstrate results within the term of its five-year charter or risk non-renewal. The summary documents that follow this memorandum compile the school’s record for the term of this charter.

The superintendents of the districts sending students to PVCICS were invited to submit written comment to the Department regarding the renewal of the school’s charter. No written comments were received.

Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School

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 will serve the Pioneer Valley region and will offer 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.”

<i>Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School (PVCICS)</i>			
Type of Charter	Commonwealth	Location	Hadley
Regional/Non-Regional	Regional	Districts in Region	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
Year Opened	2007	Year(s) Renewed	NA
Maximum Enrollment	300	Current Enrollment	241
Students on Waitlist	92	Chartered Grade Span	K-8



		Adequate Yearly Progress History								NCLB Accountability Status
		2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	
ELA	Aggregate	-	-	-	-	-	-	Yes	No	No Status
	All Subgroups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
MATH	Aggregate	-	-	-	-	-	-	Yes	No	No Status
	All Subgroups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	

Renewal Evidence and Recommendation

PVCICS is before you to receive approval for its first charter renewal. As can be noted from the graphs provided above and as you will read in the school’s Summary of Review, PVCICS is an academically successful school. In its first two years of MCAS testing, PVCICS has demonstrated strong results. Additionally, the school is providing students with a Chinese immersion education as outlined in its charter. External assessments that measure students’ Chinese language proficiency levels have demonstrated that PVCICS students are acquiring language proficiency levels in line with the school’s mission.

However, as evidenced in multiple site visit reports and the renewal inspection report, the Department has concerns about the capacity of the school’s board of trustees to fulfill its duties and its effectiveness as the governing body of a public charter school. Charter school boards of trustees are akin to school committees and are meant to provide strong oversight of the school’s program and hold school leaders accountable for results. The board of trustees is the entity that “holds” the school’s charter and is ultimately responsible for the school’s operation. Based on the evidence described in the attached Summary of Review, and further summarized below, PVCICS’s board of trustees has not demonstrated adequate oversight of the school or a clear understanding of their governance duties. Throughout the charter term, site visitors have documented the following governance concerns:

- During multiple interviews, board members have displayed a lack of knowledge about their role, their responsibilities, and general governance practices.
- The board has not developed adequate systems and structures for governing the school.
 - The board does not have a clear set of goals or plan for continual programmatic improvement.
 - The board does not utilize ongoing tools or measures of progress to monitor school performance.
- The board relies on school leadership for planning and oversight.
 - During multiple interviews, board members have not been able to articulate or explain school goals, school accountability documents, or school policies. Site visit teams found that board members would often defer to the school's leaders to provide answers to such questions. In contrast, site visitors have found that the school's executive director and principal are able to clearly articulate programmatic and fiscal school goals, programs, and policies.
 - Board meeting minutes have been very brief. Board minutes do not include questioning of school leaders, review of financial information, or discussion about accountability measures by the board members.
- The board's oversight of school leaders is minimal and is based primarily on the school leaders' own self-evaluation.
 - According to the school's organizational chart, the executive director is meant to evaluate the school's principal. Because the executive director and principal are married to each other, the board is tasked with the evaluation of both school leaders.
 - Board evaluation of school leaders consists of an informal mid-year meeting, and a final review in late summer/early fall. The review is based on *The Professional Standards for Administrators* and goals generated by the school leader, but as stated above, is based primarily on each school leader's self-evaluation in those areas.

In addition to the regular site visits conducted by the Charter School Office, PVCICS received a visit from Department staff at the request of another state agency. In May 2011, the Department of Children and Families (DCF) concluded an investigation into alleged abuse and neglect of a student attending PVCICS by staff members. The DCF report found that allegations of neglect were supported by the evidence gathered, but the allegation of abuse was not. The cited PVCICS staff members are currently appealing the DCF finding.

Subsequent to the DCF investigation and report, the Department conducted a June 2011 visit to PVCICS to gather evidence about the school's policies and practices in the areas of concern which were raised in the DCF report that fall within the Department's purview as the school's authorizer. Areas of review included discipline, special education, governance, and leadership of the school. The purpose of the visit was not to reinvestigate the incident described in the DCF report, but rather to execute the Department's duty to maintain ongoing oversight of charter

school operation. As a result of the visit, the Department issued a letter on December 5, 2011 requiring the school to take corrective actions in the areas of discipline, special education, governance, and leadership. PVCICS submitted a plan on January 5, 2012 and was asked to revise it by the Department. On February 5, 2012 the school resubmitted the corrective action plan. The Department has required that the school monitor its implementation of its corrective action plan. The Charter School Office will also monitor compliance with the plan during all accountability visits.

Our concerns about the school's governance practices have been long-standing and have been documented in multiple site visits reports. I am recommending that the Board renew the school's charter with conditions to ensure that these issues will be fully addressed within the next year.

Conditions for Renewal

I recommend that the following conditions be included as part of the school's charter renewal:

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, measureable, 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.

PVCICS will demonstrate that it has met these conditions through, at a minimum, an inspection visit conducted by the Charter School Office. I will provide information to the Board on the school's success in meeting the condition.

Major Amendment Request and Recommendation

In 2011, PVCICS submitted two major amendment requests. The first amendment request is to increase the school's maximum enrollment from 300 to 420 students, an increase of 120 students to the school's K-8 educational program. The second request is to change the school's grade span from K-8 to K-12 and to increase the school's maximum enrollment cap from 300 to 660 students, an increase of 360 students. The school submitted its amendment requests at the same time as its application for renewal.

The school's board requests these amendments for a number of reasons. The primary reason for the first request is that the school anticipates a "pinch" in the school enrollment in the future. The primary reason for the second request is that the school reports there is a strong desire from currently enrolled students and their families to have the option to continue in a Chinese language and culture school after the 8th grade and the statewide effort to infuse global education into grades K through 12 public education.

As required for requests that seek an increase in maximum enrollment and/or grades served, comment was solicited from the superintendents in the school districts within the charter school's district or region. In regards to PVCICS the Department received a letter from the superintendent in Hatfield. The letter is attached.

At this time, I am not recommending approval of either major amendment request. As noted above, PVCICS must improve its governance practices in order to operate in a manner consistent with Department expectations. With such a task ahead of it, I not recommending either amendment request until PVCICS's board of trustees demonstrates a clear capacity to govern the school effectively.

If you have any questions or require additional information, please contact Marlon Davis, Director of Charter Schools, Innovation, and Redesign, at 781 338-3222; or Jeff Wulfson, Deputy Commissioner, at 781 338-6500; or me.

Enclosures: Summary of Review for Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School
Major Amendment Requests from PVCICS
Letter from Hatfield Superintendent
Motion