***Proposed* Hampden Charter School of Science West  
Summary of Interview**

*Questions derived from review panel and documentation review*

***Note: The interview summary is not a transcript of the interview audio. Responses have been summarized by Department staff. The order of questions and responses within the summary may not reflect the chronology during the interview.***

**In attendance:**

**Volkan Yesilyurt**, board chair of Hampden Charter School of Science (HCSS)

**Nigar Khan**, board vice chair of HCSS

**Ahmet Gunay**, board treasurer of HCSS

**Diane H. Hunter**, board member of HCSS

**Tarkan Topcuoglu**, school leader of HCSS and proposed chief executive officer of the network

**Murat Polat**, dean of academics of HCSS and proposed chief academic officer of the network

**Robyn Nelson**, dean of special services of HCSS and proposed dean of special services of the network

**Not in attendance:**

**Zully Dinc**, board secretary of HCSS

**Saaida Crawford Carter**, board member of HCSS

**Pinar Karaaslan**, board member of HCSS

**Saad Syed**,board member of HCSS

1. **Please describe the process for preparing the application for submission. Who was involved? What opportunities did all board members have to review the application and provide input prior to submission?**

* We started two years ago. Members of the school staff were involved, including the director, the dean of academics, and heads of departments. The board wrote the governance part of the application. We met regularly with administrators to work on the application as it progressed. Everyone in the team was involved in the expansion.
* When I (Tarkan Topcuoglu, school leader of HCSS and proposed chief executive officer of the network) started at the school in August we went over the old application and I became part of the process.
* Everyone was involved to the extent that it fit with their committee duties. I (Ahmet Gunay, board treasurer of HCSS) was involved in the finance pieces. Other board members were involved with their committee related parts.

1. **Why replicate? Please describe the process that led up to the decision to seek to open a second school now.**

* After HCSS’s charter was renewed, the second thing we wanted to do was to expand. Now, it is time to replicate our school. We had a discussion about whether it should be an elementary school or high school. We decided based on our experience to replicate our middle and high school.
* We want to be faithful to our vision and mission. This represents further pursuing the mission to offer low income minority kids the opportunity for a college preparatory education. Our students are graduating and going to college and making a huge difference in their lives. There are many people waiting to get in the school. Other communities would like to have the same opportunities. We have the resources, assets, and passion to do it again.
* With the expansion and hiring more teachers, we have been able to hire wonderful teachers, and we have the capacity and processes to open a second school with our model.

1. **You are still expanding while looking to open and operate a second school. Tell us about the systems, structures, and processes that have made you successful.**

* Since the expansion we have created a detailed evaluation system that lets teachers know what they need to do to be successful. We have an induction program for new teachers. There is mentoring, a support team, and professional development. We have mentored our department heads, and we have increased the number of deans.
* When we open a second school, the network staff will carry the structure into the new school. We will move some of our current staff to the new school, to build the structure that we currently have.
* The extended startup period gives us extra time to train staff for their new roles.

1. **We have previously seen networks grappling with consistency when they have two schools. Will the two schools be the same, or will they take on distinctive characteristics?**

* Our vision is to make them as identical as possible. Using teachers we have now at the new school will help us replicate the model.

1. **What do you anticipate will be the instructional needs of prospective students from low performing districts who may be significantly below grade level compared to their peers from other districts?**

* We already have this challenge serving students from Springfield. Our teachers adapt the curriculum.

1. **What do you do with Springfield students to accelerate their learning?**

* We give them double periods of English language arts and math, and teachers pull them out and give them help during study hall. We also give them weekend school. We give all the extra help we can.

1. **Are weekends required or optional?**

* All the teachers come. Usually the parents work with us. This is why we also have study halls.
* We develop action plans at the end of each quarter. We look at student data, identify students who need extra support, and give them support based on the standards.

1. **Who is responsible for the action plans?**

* The teacher of the relevant content area is responsible, but others are also involved. Every student has an action plan that includes elements specific to each content area.
* In addition to identifying areas of weakness for individual students, we also identify areas of weakness for each class as a whole and do re-teaching days at the end of each marking period for three or four days.

1. **Please walk us through the rationale for the districts included in the proposed region.**

* Almost none of the districts met their annual targets. They achieved low or moderate growth. Students there did not meet their highest potential. Our current HCSS students meet their potential, so we can help those students to reach their highest potential.
* A 2013 survey of Holyoke students found that approximately 18 percent wanted to go to college. One hundred percent of our students say they want to go to college, so there is need for college prep there. In 2015 and 2016 we surveyed 139 people in malls in the communities to be served, and 88 percent of respondents said there is need for a college prep school.

1. **What is your rationale for the proposed growth plan and maximum enrollment of 588 (the flagship’s maximum enrollment is at 560)?**

* This is the model we have.

1. **Why open with grades 6-9?**

* That is the plan we followed when we opened our current school.
* There are financial reasons. If we start with fewer grades we might run into financial issues.
* Having that first graduating class as soon as possible makes a huge difference in the morale of the school. Until we have that, we can only talk about going to college.

1. **Can you reflect on your first opening, what occurred?**

* When we opened HCSS no one knew who we were. We didn’t have an athletic program or a gym. Students who left the school told us that was the reason. Now our school is well-known. We have an athletic program and a gym, and we are increasing the number of AP courses we offer. When we open the new school we will be able to implement the things that will make our students happy. The number of applications for the proposed school will be much greater than when we opened the first school.

1. **This is the year when the enrollment bubble hits ninth grade. What is your 9th grade size? Did you hit your target?**

* Yes.

1. **You didn’t do cohort sizes of 80, but larger. Why?**

* Our biggest success is when students start younger. If they start in sixth grade, their success is quicker.

1. **Your prior growth plan is predicated on keeping your enrollment. You have a growth plan that says you are steady state across the grade stack. That hasn’t been the school’s experience. If your plan is to have the same number across the stack, why not push the envelope on backfilling?** **Tenth grade?**

* We need time to prepare students. We don’t have enough time with students who first enroll in 11th grade. The credit requirements do not match if they come in their junior year. We really need the time from ninth grade, which is why we tend not to accept students in their junior or senior year.

1. **What are you doing to recruit new students in ninth grade?**

* We advertise the AP courses and dual enrollment courses. At the end of the high school program, students can get a good scholarship. Through the partnership program that we have with Westfield State, students can pursue their education at a higher level. We also developed our athletic programs to attract students.
* We go to middle schools to recruit students for the high school.

1. **Tell us about the communities to be served by the proposed school.**

* We know a lot about those communities because we have board members who live and work in those communities and teachers who live in those communities.
* They have high schools, but they are huge and not much individual attention is paid to the students. They need some alternatives like charter schools. We need smaller-sized schools. We need individual attention. For those reasons, we think having our new charter school serving those areas will be beneficial for kids living in those areas.
* We chose the communities because they are rich in culture, rich in diversity, and rich in organizations. We have partnerships in those areas, including with Westfield State University’s education department. We have targeted ten additional organizations in those communities with which we intend to establish new partnerships.

1. **How do you establish partnerships?**

* The way to start a partnership is to offer something that someone else wants. I (Robyn Nelson, dean of special services of HCSS and proposed dean of special services of the network) asked our staff members which college they went to. I learned thirty percent of our staff went to Westfield State, so when I initiated the partnership I was able to say that we are hiring their graduates. The same thing with Western New England. That is the number one school that our students get accepted to. When I contacted them I said forty percent of our students apply to your school and thirty-five percent are accepted.

1. **What are the benefits of the partnership with Westfield State?**

* We have practicum and pre-practicum students from the Westfield State education program working in our classrooms and serving as judges for our competitions. The more that they know about us and our culture, the more likely they are to want to work at our school. Some of the best teachers we get are from Westfield State.
* We also have a partnership with the Westfield State Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment (ICE) program. We have one student who is not ready to graduate or live in a dorm. He needs to be with college students but still be in a safe environment. The ICE program will allow him to go to the next level in a safe way. We will provide him a coach at Westfield State, but the program offers him the social piece he needs. He will audit a course in the ICE program and then take classes for credit.

1. **What is your focus in terms of dissemination?**

* Our biggest success has to do with the ICE program. I (Robyn Nelson, dean of special services of HCSS and proposed dean of special services of the network) am in the room with all these public schools that we are targeting and that we work with, as an equal. Our partnership with the ICE program brought us that.
* We have partnerships with all of the Springfield charter schools through our combined parent advocacy group. We have an opportunity there to reach out to all of the charter schools.
* Because we have more processes and are more established, we are able to offer professional development to other schools. I (Robyn Nelson, dean of special services of HCSS and proposed dean of special services of the network) went to Paulo Freire Social Justice Charter School to perform special education training and worked with them on their special education programming.
* In our accountability plan, we have as a goal to conduct at least six workshops for non-HCSS teachers to share innovative practices.
* Teachers from Martin Luther King Jr. Charter School of Excellence came to our school for a day to observe.

1. **[Board] How do you oversee efforts to recruit students reflective of the communities served?**

* The school has many ways of going about recruitment. The director describes for us what they are doing to share information about the school, whether by word of mouth, on the internet, or taking brochures to local libraries, churches, and community centers.
* The director provides an update at every board meeting on the current number of students. We compare that number to the number reported at the previous meeting and discuss why we lost students and how we might respond.
* Before each lottery we review the number of applications received by the school, the number received for each grade, and we look at where the applicants are coming from.

1. **How will the board be updated on the progress of the two schools?**

* The CEO will attend the board meetings and update us on both schools. The board’s governance committee will focus on the expansion to come up with an action plan that includes weekly and monthly plans for the startup period.

1. **Looking at the staffing chart, in 2018-2019 how many of the administrators are performing the same role at both schools?**

* We are not hiring a new person for each of these positions. Network staff members will also perform an administrative role at one of the schools. For example, the CEO will also be a school director; the chief academic officer will also be a dean of academics, and so forth.
* I (Robyn Nelson, dean of special services at HCSS and proposed dean of special services of the network) will be at both schools. Some of the things that I do for my department I will be able to delegate at the new school. I am training both middle school and high school staff to run meetings.

1. **[Tarkan Topcuoglu, school leader at HCSS and proposed CEO for the network] You have described a restructuring of how you do your work. How will you do more than what you already do and juggle responsibilities?**

* I strongly believe I can carry on the job duties and oversee the school. We have experienced staff in our current structure who will implement the model in the new school. The chief academic officer and curriculum coordinators will be a huge resource.

1. **Will all four department heads at the current school become curriculum coordinators?**

* Yes. Every member of my (Murat Polat, dean of academics at HCSS and proposed chief academic officer of the network) academic team is strong. I have worked with them for the last three or four years. We meet weekly to make sure that everyone is on the same page in terms of academics and expectations.

1. **How will curriculum be coordinated across the two schools?**

* We will have weekly meetings to be sure everything is in place. Curriculum coordinators will discuss their work in their meetings. We will share lesson plan checks and evaluations across both schools. We will identify needs in both schools. The internal assessments will be shared, and the data will help us create the action plans.

1. **Who will observe teachers and perform the evaluations?**

* In the current school, teachers get two to three walkthroughs in a week from various administrators. There are four observations a year, including one formal one (the fourth) by the director. Various administrators collect the data, but the evaluation is done by the director.

1. **[Tarkan Topcuoglu, school leader at HCSS and proposed CEO for the network] Will you do evaluations for all teachers at both schools?**

* No. The director of HCSS - West will do evaluations for teachers at that school.

1. **How will you work with the geographic distance between the two schools?**

* The distance is not too great. We are planning to have the network offices at the new school because of space constraints at the current school.

1. **Are there other individuals who will be shifting to the proposed school?**

* We are considering some of our experienced teachers for the new school, to make sure the transition is being done properly. There are also some teachers we currently only use half time who may be offered full-time positions.

1. **Individuals who indicate opposition to the proposed charter school often indicate concerns regarding an affiliation with a network of charter schools with ties to the Gulen movement. How do you respond?**

* This is a public school governed by state regulations. It is an insult to us and to the Department, because it means that we and you are not doing our jobs. We are reviewed regularly. We follow Open Meeting Law. These accusations are based on the Turkish background of some of our board members and staff.

1. **At the school’s last renewal, it was placed on conditions related to governance. How has the board ensured effective governance as required?**

* We quickly took steps to remedy the situation. We created a governance committee, held retreat meetings, and we fully complied with the regulations. All the conditions were met by the deadline. Since then we have conducted formal evaluations of the director and of our work as a board. We have become more aware of our responsibilities.

1. **What are the succession plans for the three board members nearing the ends of their terms?**

* We have discussed changing the term limits by submitting a request to amend our bylaws.

1. **Board terms cannot last indefinitely. What is the plan for succession if board members need to step off?**

* We recently added two new board members. We have a pool of candidates in case we need to leave the board, but we are waiting on the outcome of our attempt to replicate before determining whether to add candidates from the new communities.

1. **What was the recruitment process for the two new board members? Give us a sense of how you approach board member recruitment.**

* We developed criteria for recruiting new board members and created a job description. We wanted candidates with a STEM background or some other expertise such as in education, finance, law, or real estate. We looked at the resumes of the two candidates and invited them for an interview.

1. **How did they become known to you, and what about their skills and qualifications make them good board members?**

* I (Diane H. Hunter, board member of HCSS) knew that she (one of the new board members) has strong ties to the communities. She is a corrections officer. She is very passionate about the school success, parent of a graduate. She has traveled numerous times with the school on trips. She is a parent of students at the school.
* The other person is a friend who is an energetic young engineer. He is an example of the type of person we want our students to become. He is also very good with computers. He will be good with numbers. He liked the idea he will be helping students reach their full potential.

1. **As a case study in how decisions are made, how will the school and the board make the decision about a possible change in the schedule?**

* If we (members of the board) learn there is a problem going on in the school we want to solve the issue. If there is need for a change, the director brings a proposed solution. We discuss whether it makes sense, whether it fits with the strategic plan, and whether it is consistent with the mission.
* When we have our exit meetings with students who are leaving the school and their parents, I (Tarkan Topcuoglu, school leader at HCSS and proposed CEO of the network) have frequently heard that it is because of the school’s longer hours. There is a concern that students have no life after school. We had a discussion about this as an administrative team. If we change the schedule, we want to do it without cutting instructional hours or study halls, so we have talked about block scheduling. After we had our discussions as an administrative team, we opened the discussion to parents, students, and staff by administering a survey. We learned that 80-85 percent of parents approve changing the schedule.

1. **[Board] Why is Tarkan (Tarkan Topcuoglu, school leader at HCSS and proposed CEO of the network) the person you believe is most qualified to lead this growth to two schools?**

* When we hired Tarkan, we kept in mind that we needed someone who could lead one school and oversee the network. Tarkan has this experience. In New Jersey he led one (elementary) school and was the chief education officer of the school as a whole (which also included a middle school and a high school).
* After the former school leader left in June, 2016, we posted a job description and received approximately 12 applications. The board invited four applicants for interviews. We used a rubric to evaluate the candidates and identified two finalists. We then voted to hire Tarkan.

1. **Did any school employees apply?**

* No.

1. **Tarkan, why come back?**

* I achieved the goals I had for the school in New Jersey. I was already familiar with Hampden Charter School of Science and decided coming back would be a good challenge.

1. **Since the school’s first year of operation, it has typically lost 20-30 percent of its faculty annually. Growth requires a pipeline of mission-aligned, qualified, and invested faculty to support school success. How will the board and current school leadership ensure the recruitment and retention of the faculty needed to implement a high quality and consistent educational program year to year?**

* With the expansion, we put a few things in place. We started an induction program for new teachers, five days before other staff. That has been helpful. The teacher mentoring program is the life of the teacher at our school, especially during the first year. We still lose teachers, but fewer and fewer. Last year was better than the year before, and this year will be better. We do more positive reinforcement, highlighting the good things teachers are doing and sharing their best practices. We have staff member of the week, staff member of the month, breakfasts for teachers, and a homemade lunch for teachers on Fridays.
* Training our current teachers is one of my (Tarkan Topcuoglu, school leader at HCSS and proposed CEO of the network) biggest goals. I will consider myself failing if my teachers fail. Telling teachers their success is my success will give teachers the sense that we are working together.
* Discipline is an important piece. Since teachers burn out because of discipline problems in class, we increased the number of deans of students to give more support to teachers.
* During the planning year, our department heads will train experienced teachers as department heads. This is in preparation for when our current department heads become network curriculum coordinators.
* We customize our professional development based on feedback from teachers. We also encourage staff to attend outside workshops, and we offer reimbursement for graduate courses.
* We will use Westfield State as a resource for recruiting teachers.
* As a board, we consult teachers about the school, trying to identify the most important problems they face and come up with solutions. We email them regarding our budget and ask them what they need, whether new equipment or textbooks. We create a budget based on their needs. We also give our staff bonuses and gifts and increased our base salaries from $38,000 to $40,000. We implemented a system for increasing staff salaries based on performance.

1. **Please describe the current planning for facilities and for the location of the school. Does the final application still accurately reflect your thinking?**

* We are still investigating our options with the help of a realtor. We would like to locate in Westfield. That is our priority. We will do everything that we can to have the school in Westfield. We believe that will be most suitable for our purpose in opening the school and for our mission and our strategic plan.