*Proposed* Phoenix Academy Public
Charter High School, Lawrence

Executive Summary

*This was prepared by the Phoenix Academy Public Charter High School applicant group.*

*Phoenix helped me do something that people said was impossible to achieve, but now I’m getting my high school diploma and going to college.*

Hacheley Legagnuer, Phoenix Academy Public Charter High School, Chelsea, Class of 2017

Phoenix schools are founded on the unwavering belief that not graduating high school is preventable for even the most disengaged and off-track students, and that all students can achieve at high levels given the right conditions. In 2006, Phoenix Chelsea opened its door to 75 students in direct response to the urban high school dropout crisis and the lack of rigorous, college-preparatory options for those on the fringes of the traditional public education system.

Twelve years later, this innovative idea that was seeded in our Chelsea school has turned into a powerful movement in education reform. The Phoenix Network now serves over 550 students across the state, operating three schools: regional Commonwealth charter schools in Chelsea (opened 2006) and Springfield (opened September 2014) and an in-district school in Lawrence (opened 2012). The Phoenix Network and the Lawrence Public Schools District collaboratively decided to have the Phoenix Network and its Board of Trustees apply to open Phoenix Academy Public Charter High School, Lawrence and, if chartered, close Phoenix Academy Lawrence. Both the Phoenix Network and the Lawrence Public Schools District believe that a regional Commonwealth charter school model would provide Phoenix with the opportunity to expand its impact in Lawrence and its surrounding communities of Methuen and Haverhill.

**Mission, Vision, School Design**

**Mission:** Phoenix Academy Public Charter High School, Lawrence challenges resilient, disconnected students with rigorous academics and relentless supports, so they take ownership of their futures and succeed in high school, college, and as self-sufficient adults.

**Vision:** Phoenix schools exist to serve young people that are the most disconnected in their communities, providing pathways to college and the possibility of economic freedom. Phoenix schools target students who have dropped out of high school, students who are parenting children of their own, students who are or have been involved with the juvenile justice system, students who are older and new to the country and cannot gain access to public schooling, and students who are under-credited relative to the number of years they have spent enrolled in high school. We believe that these students, like all students, are completely capable of developing the skills necessary to set themselves up for lifetimes of economic prosperity and success. The Phoenix Network aims to show the world that all young people can and will defy the limitations of societal assumptions, classism, and racism.

**School Design:** When we applied for a charter in 2005, we set out to do something that no other school was doing in Massachusetts – prepare the most at-risk and disconnected students for college. Through a myriad of proof-points (MCAS results, 253 graduates, college enrollment and college persistence rates), we have proven that the disruptive Phoenix mission is possible. With these twelve years of success and game-changing outcomes for the most disconnected and at-risk youth, we are ready to amplify the success of our mission by increasing the percentage of students who graduate from our schools academically and social-emotionally ready to be successful in college. As a result, we launched the Phoenix Forward design process, which will evaluate the effectiveness of all of Phoenix’s current practices, explore best practices from the broader field, develop policies and programming that will allow students to move more quickly through our program, and create structures to implement a safe and supportive school culture grounded in positive youth development practices. The Phoenix Network will design school programming throughout the 2017-2018 school year, will solidify design shifts by the spring of 2018, and will begin implementation in the 2018-2019 school year.

Through the Phoenix Forward design process, we are demonstrating our commitment to continuous improvement, ensuring that all students who graduate from Phoenix demonstrate college readiness and economic success. Yet with 253 graduates across the network, Phoenix continues to prove that this mission is possible. Phoenix’s success hinges on our lasting commitment to implementing our key design elements. Regardless of the practices that may shift through the Phoenix Forward design process, the key design elements, shared by every Phoenix school, will be core to Phoenix Academy Public Charter High School, Lawrence. These key design elements include: 1) serve disconnected youth, using a high-risk student population definition,[[1]](#footnote-1) 2) relentless supports, 3) rigorous academic instruction through use of data and professional development, and 4) preparing students for college success.The essence of these key design elements are described briefly below and are detailed in the full charter application.

*Serve disconnected youth, using a high-risk student population definition:* Our schools serve youth who are most disconnected from the education system and provide a college-preparatory environment that allows students to access and graduate from college. These students often include: students who have dropped out of or been expelled from school, have struggled with truancy and chronic absenteeism in the past, are court involved, are pregnant or parenting children of their own, and/or are recent immigrants to the country. Phoenix is specifically designed to reach those students our country and the education system has largely given up on, in those communities that are most marginalized. Leveraging a regional Commonwealth charter school model, the Phoenix Network will have the ability to be more targeted in the student population it currently can serve in the greater Lawrence community as an in-district school. Phoenix Academy Public Charter High School, Lawrence aims to not only more broadly serve the most disconnected and at-risk students from Lawrence, but also serve students from the Haverhill and Methuen communities.

*Relentless supports:* Phoenix schools target the most disconnected and at-risk students in a community and as a result, we strategically utilize relentless wraparound supports and positive youth development practices to reinforce and build scholarly habits for a population of students who bring a wide range of challenges that are daily barriers to their success. A few examples of these challenges include: a student’s housing is unstable, an adult supporters is incarcerated, a student and/or his/her family members are at risk of deportation, or a student needs to work full-time outside of school to support him/herself and his/her family.

Phoenix schools recognize and address many student challenges in order to promote student persistence and success by building in purposeful supports for students who combat the challenges that students face both in and outside of school and foster the development of students’ metacognitive and social-emotional skills. Examples of our schools’ comprehensive student support services include an on-site Social Worker who connects students to collateral supports in the community, an on-site childcare center that offers and coordinates services for teen parents, and a Student Support Team who tirelessly endeavors to keep students connected to and engaged in school. These non-traditional supports, necessary for a non-traditional population of young people, help students manage external struggles so that they can focus on academic growth in the classroom.

*Rigorous academic instruction through use of data and professional development:* Many students will enroll at Phoenix multiple grade levels behind; thus to provide students with the necessary supports to excel academically – including passing the MCAS, graduating from high school, and succeeding in college – we leverage a rigorous academic program that prepares students for college-level work. Phoenix students come in with major skill gaps and have individual learning needs; thus, we are committed to providing rigorous, relevant, and engaging academic experiences that provide college bound students with academic and social-emotional skills that they need to succeed in college and as self-sufficient adults. Designing the academic program through the Phoenix Forward process will ensure that:

* Graduates master the Phoenix priority academic standards for core content areas: foundational academic skills, personal and social-emotional development, and college and career readiness.
* Graduates demonstrate the ability to apply these skills in new environments through a variety of assessments and activities.
* Graduates obtain the skills necessary to successfully complete college and/or other post-secondary opportunities.
* Graduates obtain the skills necessary to advocate for themselves within the systems and structures that govern society.
* Graduates are confident in their next steps toward economic viability.
* Graduates believe in themselves and their ability to succeed.

In order to ensure that graduates demonstrate these characteristics, the academic program is currently in the process of shifting to a mastery-based and asynchronous progression system, which will allow students to advance as soon as they demonstrate mastery. As students progress through their academic journey, they will experience student-centered lessons in classrooms that require them to learn actively and engage in high levels of cognitive rigor and critical thinking. Students will have access to a variety of personalized and blended resources so that their learning experiences meet the specific needs mapped out in their graduation plans so that they can engage deeply in learning and progress rapidly toward graduation.

Two core components that Phoenix schools utilize to promote rigor within the academic program include data-driven instruction and professional development. Phoenix Academy Public Charter High School, Lawrence will leverage a wide range of ongoing core data-driven instructional practices and professional development structures that are embedded in all Phoenix schools. These core practices are described in more detail in the full application.

*Preparing students for college success:* At the core of Phoenix’s mission is to ensure that its graduates are ready for college. Unlike many other schools, the Phoenix academic model specifically targets and is backwards planned from college success; a goal that extends far beyond minimal high school graduation requirements. As a result, Phoenix Academy Public Charter High School, Lawrence will offer AP courses, dual enrollment opportunities with local community colleges, and access to advanced math classes (such as Pre-calculus and Calculus).

**Communities to be Served**

In direct response to our country’s dropout crisis, Phoenix Academy Public Charter High School, Lawrence aims to serve Lawrence, Haverhill, and Methuen. Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education results indicate that, although the number of students dropping out of school has fallen since 2016, students of color comprise a disproportionate share of the more than 5,000 students who dropped out in the 2016 school year.[[2]](#footnote-2) Civic leaders are painfully aware of the economic and social consequences for these young people and for their communities, including: higher unemployment rates, lower lifetime earnings, and higher risk of incarceration and/or economic dependency. The unemployment rate of high school dropouts is three times[[3]](#footnote-3) that of college graduates, and high school dropouts are at greater risk of being incarcerated or qualifying for government services. Additionally, on average, each dropout costs the United States $275,000 over the course of his/her lifetime, compared to a high school graduate who on average provides a $180,000 benefit to the United States.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Phoenix Academy Public Charter High School, Lawrence’s target communities face the reality of the dropout crisis on a daily basis. Between the 2014 and 2016 school years, Lawrence, Haverhill, and Methuen had a total of 878 dropouts. Additionally, Lawrence and Haverhill had four-year graduation rates of 71.4% and 74.5% respectively; both significantly lower than the statewide four-year rate of 87.5%. Similar to the communities Phoenix Chelsea and Phoenix Springfield serve, Lawrence and Haverhill also had lower MCAS scores, higher teen birth rates, higher percentages of students with disabilities, and higher rates of poverty as compared to the state average. While holistically, the city of Methuen does not demonstrate the same level of need, given that Methuen is contiguous to both Lawrence and Haverhill, we want students living in Methuen, who could potentially benefit from our model, to have the opportunity to attend Phoenix Academy Public Charter High School, Lawrence. In 2016-2017 Methuen High served 1,891 students and in 2015-2016, 35 Methuen High students dropped out. With no dedicated alternative school, Methuen may have students who would benefit from Phoenix’s smaller environment and wraparound supports.

**Network Governance and Management**

Based on our results over the past twelve years, we believe that Phoenix developed a powerful model for serving high-risk youth. This is evidenced by the following MCAS, college, and accountability results, demonstrating the unbounded potential of Phoenix students and Phoenix schools:

* In 2017, as compared to eleven alternative schools,[[5]](#footnote-5) all three Phoenix schools outperformed the average percentage of students who earned advanced or proficient on both the Math and ELA MCAS exams.
* In 2017, as compared to Phoenix’s sending districts, all three Phoenix schools outperformed the average percentage of students who earned advanced or proficient on the ELA MCAS exam.
* In 2017, as compared to Phoenix’s sending districts, both Phoenix Chelsea and Phoenix Academy Lawrence outperformed the average percentage of students who earned advanced or proficient on the Math MCAS exam.
* Over the past twelve years, 253 young people who were never expected to graduate walked across a Phoenix graduation stage, earning their high school diplomas.
* Despite working with the highest-risk students, Phoenix’s college enrollment rate is comparable to (and sometimes higher than) national college enrollment rates. Nationally, 69.2% of students enroll in college compared to Phoenix’s 77% college enrollment rate.[[6]](#footnote-6)
* 79% of Phoenix students who enrolled in college persisted in college for two or more semesters.
* Phoenix Chelsea, the flagship school, was renewed twice without conditions.
* The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education granted Phoenix proven provider status twice.

As described in the full application, the Phoenix Network currently has a robust Board of Trustees, bringing a tremendous amount of expertise to the board, including experience with charter school replication. If the Board of Trustees is granted this charter, Phoenix plans to close Phoenix Academy Lawrence and as a result, the same governance and management structures that were dedicated to running this school will be redirected to launching and overseeing Phoenix Academy Public Charter High School, Lawrence. In anticipation of opening a regional Commonwealth charter school in Lawrence, Haverhill, and Methuen, the Board of Trustees is currently pursuing candidates from these communities to join the Board of Trustees. Additionally, Phoenix Academy Public Charter High School, Lawrence will be opening with Tamara Soraluz as the Head of School. Tamara is Phoenix Academy Lawrence’s current Head of School and she brings tremendous experience leading a Phoenix school and is deeply connected to the Lawrence community.

The Board of Trustees, galvanized by the success of Phoenix’s current schools and the possibilities that come through the Phoenix Forward design process, is eager to magnify Phoenix’s impact in Lawrence and the surrounding communities and is prepared to do so. We are grateful to the parents, friends, community partners, and students who have supported Phoenix and its bold mission in unchartered waters and to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education for their consideration.

1. The definition for high-risk student population is based on charter and alternative education research and includes the following high-risk groups: former dropouts, formerly truant, court involved, off-track based on age/credits accumulated, chronic behavioral challenges, students with documented substance abuse challenges, students currently/formerly homeless, refugees, students with emotional or psychological disorders, children of teen parents, parents substance abusers/incarcerated, highly mobile students, students with extraordinary skill deficits, or migrants/immigrants. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In 2015-2016, 61% of the students in Massachusetts who dropped out of high school identified as students of color, while only 35% of students enrolled in a Massachusetts public high schools identified as people of color. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/empsit\_02032017.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. http://www.doe.mass.edu/dropout/2014-05ImpactSummary.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Alternative schools used as a comparison: Boston Day & Evening, Lowell-Middlesex Charter School, High School Learning Center, Springfield High School, Springfield Public Day, Community Academy, Greater Egleston Community High School, Edison Academy (Brockton), Russell Alternative High School, Gateway to College @ STCC, and New Liberty Charter School of Salem. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16\_302.30.asp [↑](#footnote-ref-6)