



Response to NACSA Recommendation Report on Paul Laurence Dunbar Charter School Application

Choice Foundation is appreciative of Orleans Parish School Board's process in managing our application, and we are equally appreciative of the NACSA Review Team's hard work and thoughtfulness in receiving our application, reading it carefully, and providing us with feedback on it and on our interview with them. We recognize that many people put in a lot of work and applied expertise on our behalf. Thank you to everyone involved!

It is our purpose here to delineate our responses to the NACSA recommendations, particularly to the concerns the Review Team raised regarding our application. We will do so in sections that clearly identify the main concerns of the report: enrollment; staffing; finance; past performance.

Enrollment

The Review Team says on page 6 of the report, "The application does not contain sufficient evidence to inspire confidence that Choice Foundation will meet its Year 1 enrollment target, which is significant given that the school proposes to open in August 2018." They reference enrollment throughout the report. In fact, it seems to be the Review Team's major concern. Of course, under-enrollment is one of our concerns in any school. We have a plan to increase enrollment by the October 1 MFP count date as follows:

1. We will continue our aggressive efforts in advertising in print, on radio, and with enrollment fairs.
2. We will continue our personal outreach in the Dunbar-Hollygrove community. Those efforts include visits to churches (we have worked with them for years), and we will walk door-to-door again to help parents enroll their children.
3. We will have staff at the Dunbar campus all summer to walk parents through the online application process.
4. We will offer to transport parents to Parent Resource Centers to enroll children.
5. There are still large numbers of New Orleans K-8 students who are not yet enrolled in any school. Summer enrollment is often very important to school budgets, and our advertising and outreach will be targeted to the parents of these students and to those who might want a change of schools.
6. In Round One of EnrollNOLA enrollment, almost 100 students who applied for Lafayette did not get in because of grade levels that were fully enrolled. Many of those students can be enrolled at Dunbar.
7. We will contact every parent who enrolled a child in Lafayette Academy to make sure that they did not enroll in that school by mistake. Because EnrollNOLA chose to label Dunbar "Lafayette extension at Dunbar" rather than "Dunbar," we know that there is a significant number of students now enrolled at Lafayette who intended to enroll their children at Dunbar.
8. In fact, Lafayette has the highest enrollment it has ever had at this point of the annual enrollment cycle, and our Lafayette office staff have told us that there is significant confusion of the term "Lafayette extension at Dunbar."
9. If any schools close in the city, we will work with the board and administration at those schools to help them place their students at Dunbar.

It is important to note the following regarding the challenge of summer enrollment:

1. Choice Foundation has had to fill seats in the summer in our previous schools when we took them over. In 2007, we started Lafayette Academy on July 1 with no students, no teachers, one administrator, no business office, no insurance. We opened the school in mid-August with over 700 students and a full faculty. In 2010, we did not know that we would have the charter for Esperanza Charter School until after the July 4 holiday! Again, we fully enrolled the school. That is no guarantee, of course, that we will fully enroll Dunbar, but we know how to get this done because we have done it before.
2. Budgets can be adjusted—up or down—based on the number of students. We do that every year, and we will do that for Dunbar. While low enrollment is an issue, it is not an issue, in our opinion, that precludes our starting the school in August.
3. While August is an important date, the October 1 MFP determination deadline is the more important date, not the August date.

People--Staffing

On page 8 of the Review Team's report they say, "the applicant's written proposal and capacity interview did not inspire confidence in Choice Foundation's capacity to be able to hire enough qualified staff in time for an August 2018 opening." We disagree with that assessment based on the following:

1. We have received over 200 teacher resumes.
2. We have interviewed 67 teachers.
3. We identified over 100 teachers who want to work at Dunbar.
4. We incubated our administrative leads in 2017-18.
5. We incubated some teachers in 2017-18 at Lafayette Academy and Esperanza Charter School.
6. Several Choice Foundation teachers have expressed interest in working at Dunbar.
7. Again, the number of teachers hired will depend on the number of students.
8. Again, we have hired many, many teachers in the summer for our other schools.

The Review Team also suggests that staffing at our two current schools is in jeopardy. "Choice Foundation may need to hire and on-board approximately 37 instructional staff members in the next 90 days, in addition to drawing staff and potentially filling positions at its current schools." We disagree with this conclusion based on our current staffing for next year. As of this writing, we have very few open positions at Esperanza and Lafayette.

People—Governing Board

The report states on page 8 that the board does not currently include a professional educator, which is true. We are unaware of any law or policy that requires that a board seat be reserved for a professional educator. We do have a number of people who currently serve on our board that have extensive experience in education, including three persons who have previously served as Chairman of schools, a member of the current Board of Xavier University and a variety of members who have served on boards of educational institutions. We have often had educators on our board and are currently vetting the Headmaster of a prominent local school as a potential board member.

Operations

A paragraph on page nine of the report speaks to start up financing.

"The revenue section of the budget contains inconsistencies. A letter from the Choice Foundation board chair states that the organization has allocated and approved \$300,000 in startup funding for Paul L. Dunbar. While the Startup Statement of Activities shows \$300,000 of this secured Choice

Foundation funding, the Operating Statement of Activities shows \$250,000 in Year 1. The Operating Statement of Activities shows an additional \$200,000 in Year 2. However, the board chair's letter authorizes only \$300,000. It is not clear that Choice Foundation has committed to providing the additional \$200,000 for the school.”

After the Part 1 Review, NACSA requested a letter from the board for the \$300K allocated from Choice to fund the Incubation Year...Year 0, which is this year. They did not request a letter from the board for any subsequent years. Further, they did not request letters for any specific amounts other than the \$300K. So, we provided the letter for Year 0 as requested for the \$300K commitment from Choice Foundation to fund the Incubation Year.

Here is specifically what NACSA stated in the Part 1 review:

“In the Operational and Financial Readiness section, the applicant did not include a complete start-up plan and also did not include any contingency plans to address a situation in which the school would not open on time. Also, the applicant did not demonstrate that a \$300,000 grant from Choice Foundation Funding is reasonably expected (through letters, evidence of support, or alignment to award criteria).”

The amounts listed in Years 1 and 2 as grants from Choice Foundation are essentially the forgiveness/reduction in CMO fee which is typical for any new Choice Foundation charter school in years 1 and 2 as the school reaches its demand enrollment. Had NACSA requested a letter or explanation for Year 1 and 2 grant amount, we would have provided the appropriate documentation/explanation.

Experienced Operator Addendum

Page ten of the Review Team’s report addresses Choice Foundation’s loss of our McDonogh #42 charter, a very painful experience, to be sure: “in 2017, upon completion of the fifth year of operation, Choice Foundation’s charter contract was not renewed and BESE assigned the school to another operator.” By noting that experience, the Team implies that Choice Foundation is not a good candidate to open Dunbar.

Our results in running McDonogh #42 were disappointing, and we know we have learned from that experience, but we would like to note the following circumstances. When we took over the school, it was performing so poorly that the RSD had determined that it was in the best interests of the students that a new operator be recruited. Based on what we were told, we were the only operator that was interested in attempting to turn the school around.

Although the trajectory of results was generally positive for the first three years, we suffered a significant decline in scores in the fourth year of the school’s operation. It is important to bear in mind that the school moved twice in this four-year period as the building was renovated. For two years, the school was operated in temporary trailers on the site of the former Desire Housing Project. Each time the school moved, we lost approximately half of our students, which made educational continuity difficult. In the fourth year we faced the unexpected resignation of the Head of School at the Christmas break, followed by the resignation of many teachers in testing grades that left to follow the former head to a new job. This set of circumstances were severely disruptive to our students. We requested an extension of our charter based on these anomalous circumstances, but the request was denied.

BESE’s decision was based on only one year of test scores (fourth year test scores), and it happens that the one year was the year in which the school leader and several teachers left mid-year. That policy is—wisely—not in OPSB policies. OPSB saw fit to change its accountability policy to look at more than one year of data and to have dialogue with the CMO/school before yanking a charter.

In questioning the capacity of Choice Foundation to add another school to our portfolio, the Review Team also points out that “Esperanza’s grade decreased from a "B" in 2016 to a "C" in 2017 and there was a significant decrease in Esperanza’s school performance score from 89 in 2016 to 68.3 in 2017.” Obviously, this is a concern of ours, too.

However, it is important to note several factors that impact Esperanza’s score, as it impacted the score of many schools with significant percentages of immigrant students statewide. The new tests are more rigorous, of course, which is good for our students. However, a significant portion of that rigor is due to the amount and type of writing that is required of students. Immigrant students and English Language Learners—and Esperanza, at 67%, has the largest percentage of those students in the state—develop their writing skills after they develop their speaking and listening skills. That is a normal progression of language acquisition.

Second, now that the test is taken online, immigrant students find it very awkward to speak into a computer, especially in the presence of their peers. Statewide test results show poor scores for immigrant populations in both writing and in speaking into the computer.

The state is researching those two factors, and Choice Foundation is supporting the state in doing so. In fact, one of the key players in the state’s pursuit of improving the tests is a Choice Foundation employee who was a member of our Interview Team for the charter.

We will also be working soon with a team from University of New Orleans and University of California at Santa Barbara that is devising a pilot that attempts to improve writing skills of immigrant populations because they recognize that this is a problem that exists nationally. They visited Esperanza because of large ELL population.

So, while we share the Review Team’s concerns about those areas of Choice Foundation’s performance, we disagree with their conclusion about the capacity of Choice Foundation to add Dunbar to our portfolio.

The Review Team also expresses concern on page ten about the potential of depleting staff at existing schools in order to staff Dunbar:

“Plans to transfer or promote current staff to roles at Paul L. Dunbar raise additional concerns about negatively impacting operations and performance at Choice Foundation’s existing schools. In addition to staffing needs at the new school, there is the potential for additional vacancies at the existing schools. The proposal describes efforts during the 2017-18 school year to “incubate” several key administrative and instructional staff members (including the school head, assistant head of school, and two experienced instructors). The 12-month incubation period is described as “allowing for training and planning in advance of the projected school opening.” However, the applicant does not describe the type of training offered, the planning activities that occur, and does not describe how this strategy leads to intended outcomes.”

Our two administrative staff members who incubated this year were not assigned to current schools. They were reserved to work on projects specific to the Dunbar Start Up plan. The two experienced instructors indicated in the application were both teachers at McDonogh #42 who exhibited exemplar performance through the closure of McDonogh #42. Choice Foundation recognized their strength and commitment to the children that we serve, and we assigned these teachers to instructional positions at Lafayette and Esperanza respectively. They carried out the normal teacher expectations, including professional development, in preparation for their roles at Dunbar. The incubation period extended to learning and

leadership cadres. In preparation for Dunbar's start up, incubating teachers participated in extended marketing meetings throughout the course of the school year and participated in student and staff recruitment activities.

Conclusion

Again, we thank OPSB, its staff, and the NACSA Review Team for the hard work associated with the charter application and review process. We hope our responses have clarified our positions, and we look forward to answering any other questions.