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Re: Imboden Area Charter School

Dear members of the State Board of Education,

I am writing to describe my daughter's experience at the Imboden Area Charter School (IACS) to support their request to renew their charter. Having the opportunity to attend IACS was life-changing for my daughter, Kiri, and gave her the opportunity to receive an exceptional education that fit her highly specialized needs. Below, I explain how the school's specific philosophy worked to promote her success and how it has led to her current level of academic achievement. I apologize that my comments are somewhat long, but my daughter has received a world-class education that has opened doors to wonderful opportunities and we credit IACS with giving her both the academic foundation and the self-motivation to make that happen.

Kiri attended four schools prior to beginning study at IACS as a fourth grader. We had been unable to find any program that was a good fit for her. She didn't fit in and was often unhappy. When she was in kindergarten, we took her to a psychologist as her distress was so great. For example, she took school rules and regulations very seriously and was deeply upset when the entire class was punished and she had done nothing wrong. The requirements needed to try to manage the difficulty disciplinary issues in a large class took a toll on her and the schools were unable to meet her academic needs, as much as she loved her teachers and wanted to enjoy school.

At IACS, Kiri was able to have a personalized educational plan that let her work at her own pace. Not only did this provide her with an appropriate academic environment, but it also taught her to take responsibility for her own work and progress. It helped to develop a maturity and philosophy about educational work that has persisted to this day.

In addition to thriving academically, Kiri found a welcoming and accepting environment that provided a safe and supportive culture for those who are different in some way or another. She made friends with the other students and the approach resonated deeply with her. Unlike previous colleagues from her prior schools who struggled with bullying issues, which are difficult to eradicate in large schools even with the best efforts of teachers and administrators, Kiri found an environment in which children were able to be accepted and celebrated for their uniqueness and where students were supported for their individual accomplishments and progress. Instead of working competitively against each other for awards, each student was celebrated and awarded for their individual growth.

When Kiri was eleven and in seventh grade, she took the ACT and scored well enough that she was offered a place in a class at Williams Baptist University. Instead of placing obstacles in her way or saying it was inappropriate, the IACS director said, "We will find a way to do it" and worked it into her schedule. It was a great success, providing wonderful academic stimulation.

Kiri graduated from IACS at the end of eighth grade and prepared to start at the local public school. They wanted to help her, and we are grateful to everyone who met with us and who tried to make it work. However, a big school simply can't offer the flexibility of IACS and can only function by constantly making students aware of regulations. As an example, Kiri was told she might receive in school suspension during her first week because some paperwork that she had turned in had gone missing and, because we had turned it in, we had missed a deadline. For a child who works exceptionally hard to be cooperative and to meet requirements, that sort of statement – which may roll off the backs of most children – is devastating. She was also no longer allowed to take her college classes and was instead put in Advanced Placement classes, which was a dramatic change. College classes allow students with the necessary maturity to study at their own pace and extensive time to talk with the professor. Although the amount of actual work in the Advanced Placement classes was probably similar, the structure (with large amounts of work due every day) interfered with Kiri's ability to participate in other activities (such as taekwondo and music). For a college class, a student can choose to work long hours on one day and then less on a different day because schedules are generally more flexible. She lasted three weeks before we filed to homeschool because she had again become desperately unhappy. One person at the public school commented that the work must have been too hard, but the reality was simply that the environment was very different – which is understandable because it is challenging to maintain order and to support large numbers of students, but which allows some students to fall through the cracks.

Instead, Kiri became a homeschooler taking most of her classes at Williams Baptist University and Arkansas State University through standard campus classes. She took an AP class online and two AP tests (one without taking a class) and passed both. She also earned a top score on a college algebra CLEP test based on her work at IACS and was therefore able to move directly to trigonometry at the college level without taking any other prerequisites.

Kiri is currently 15 and applying to colleges to complete a double major in English and music performance, having skipped tenth grade. She has completed 46 college credits at Williams Baptist University and Arkansas State University with a 4.0 GPA so far and is waiting for a final grade for 6 additional credits at Arkansas State University this fall (in addition to having credit for her AP and CLEP work). She takes essentially a full-time college load (e.g., she took 13 credits this semester plus homeschool work). She has almost completed the general education requirements for both universities and is taking challenging classes. For example, she has taken junior and senior level English classes, calculus, and physics I. This semester, her English professor said that she writes at a graduate student level.

She is a National Merit Semifinalist waiting to find out if she is a finalist and has already received significant scholarship offers. She has already been accepted to the Honors Program at Arkansas State University and has applied to colleges around the country and to the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. She is eligible for a Governor's Distinguished Scholarship if she remains in Arkansas, with both ACT and SAT scores above the cutoff without superscoring. She was recently covered on our local news ([Local Student a semifinalist for National Merit Scholarship Corporation \(kjnbtv.com\)](https://www.kjnbtv.com)) and credited IACS in her interview.

In replying to our request for a recommendation for the National Merit Program, Kiri received a letter from her physics professor that included the following quote. "Really, what I've observed is that not only is Kiri inherently intelligent, but she knows how to work hard and pay attention to details - this has

allowed her to acquire a high level of intuition about mathematics so that she is more likely to know how to do things correctly when she has to learn something new. Her habit of good study and learning skills acquired over many years makes learning natural for her now.”

When I read this feedback, I thought immediately of IACS because their program taught her far more than academics – it taught her to take responsibility for her own learning and to learn to manage her time. It also taught her the value of effort. It taught her to plan and to set goals for what she wanted to complete.

One of my fondest memories of IACS is of when Kiri won a math award there. She has always been stronger in English than in math and had never thought of herself as being good at math, so she reached some material that required her to work very hard. That effort was what earned her the award. Previously, at other schools, she always received awards in her areas of strength and that sort of award can feel meaningless because it is earned without effort. Not only did this celebrate her hard work, but she built on it to gain so much confidence that she is taking challenging math and physics classes now that aren't even required for her degree. She is taking physics II in the spring and hoping to take calculus II, which clearly is not necessary for an English/music major.

We were once told by a teacher that Kiri should work more slowly so she wouldn't run out of work to do at her grade level. At IACS, we were told, “we aren't going to stand in her way.” As a result, she is profoundly grateful to IACS and credits it with her accomplishments and quality of life today. She is thriving and able to enjoy throwing herself into difficult academic work and meeting a challenge for the love of learning, not to compete for an award.

In closing, IACS provided my daughter with a personalized approach that allowed her to obtain a high quality education and life skills that have allowed her to be highly successful. I know that other students benefit greatly from IACS as well because my daughter has so many friends from there and knows their experiences. Friends around the country, even in big cities with many educational options, have told me they wished their children could have the same experience. I hope you will continue to support making this wonderful opportunity available to those of us in rural Arkansas.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ann V. Paterson', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Ann V. Paterson