

Minutes
Charter Authorizing Panel Meeting
August 17, 2023

I. Call to Order

The Charter Authorizing Panel met on August 17, 2023. Panel Chair Dr. Matthew Sutherlin called the meeting to order at 9:02 AM.

Present: Dr. Matthew Sutherlin, Ms. Karli Saracini, Dr. Sonya Wright-McMurray, Mr. Kim Davis (virtual), Mr. Phil Baldwin, Ms. Toyce Newton,

The transcription of this meeting may be accessed on the Division of Elementary and Secondary Education website at the following:

<https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/about/archived-minutesvideo>

II. Action Agenda

II.1. Consideration of Garfield Scholars' Academy New Open-Enrollment Charter School Application

Presenter: Dorie Summons, Public School Charter Office

Shastady Wagner, DESE Legal Counsel reviewed the procedure for hearings. She also indicated that NLR has been pulled from the schedule.

Description: Garfield Scholars' Academy has submitted an application to establish an open-enrollment charter school beginning in the 2024-2025 academic year. The charter will follow a traditional educational model.

Ms. Joyce Sawyer presented on behalf of the applicant. She introduced the team that would be presenting on behalf of the applicant.

She spoke about the vision, the need, the mission, the board members, the curriculum, key programmatic features, the population that the school would serve,

They presented a progressive growth model which adds a grade each year until the school is PK-8. The initial year would be K-5.

There will be a focus on technology, economics, agriculture, mathematics, and science.

Dr. Melanie Kennon addressed the budget for Garfield Scholars Academy. She talked about the new physical location, the budget concerns, and the new enrollment cap.

She spoke about the recruitment and retention plan for students and families.

She highlighted the changes to the budget and talked about the partnership with the local Baptist Church.

She spoke about the budget shortfall in the budget and talked about local charitable donations.

They will seek Federal nutrition reimbursement, IDEA funding, and Rural school funding.

She also addressed possible other sources of funding, both federally funded and privately funded.

There was a public comment period. State Senator Justin Bryans spoke on behalf of the applicant. He spoke about the town hall meetings that he attended, and that the community support was robust.

Shastady Wagner, DESE Legal, presented the final legal review. She explained waiver requests and shared any final legal concerns.

There was one legal concern about the status of 501c3 as this must be in place before students attend.

The applicant indicated that the 501c3 application was submitted and they are waiting for the IRS approval.

Scott Smith, APSRC, indicated that they have provided technical assistance to the applicant, but the application would need to stand on its' own.

Dr. Wright-McMurray asked about the intended mission.

Ms. Sawyer addressed the question by speaking about the mission.

Dr. Wright-McMurray asked about attendance at the interest meeting. She wanted an explanation as to how the applicant would meet the projected enrollment based on the interest meeting attendance.

Ms. Sawyer talked about the recruitment plan and possible reasons for the lower attendance.

Dr. Wright-McMurray talked about the CTE offerings and that she did not see those mentioned in the application.

Ms. Sawyer said that the anticipation is that the school would follow the CTE requirements. She indicated that folks would be hired to teach CTE courses and technical skills.

Ms. Saracini asked if there was a plan in place should the school not have 150 students. What structures were in place to mitigate negative balances.

Ms. Sawyer indicated that they would be able to add a Pre-K. She said that they believe that they would keep their 5th graders as they matriculate to 6th grade.

Ms. Saracini asked about an ABC Program.

Ms. Sawyer said that they would consider that as it is a funding source for the school.

Ms. Saracini asked about the TESS evaluation and that without a current evaluation system, teachers would not be eligible for merit pay.

Ms. Sawyer indicated that the intention was to build trust and collaboration amongst new staff.

Ms. Saracini asked about potential pledges.

Ms. Sawyer indicated that with current pledges, the school would be in the black.

Mr. Baldwin asked why Rogers decided to close the school.

Ms. Sawyer indicated that her understanding was that it was for financial liability.

Gary Blackburn, the Mayor of Garfield, spoke about the ADA requirements and how Rogers SD didn't want to invest in making the building ADA compliant.

Mr. Baldwin asked about the agreement with the church. He asked for the applicant to talk about how the facilities would be utilized and operational.

Ms. Sawyer responded by talking about the facilities, the kitchen, and the space to accommodate students.

Mr. Baldwin asked about the agreement and the time length.

Ms. Sawyer said that the church had agreed to at least two years of use.

Mr. Baldwin asked how many students actually attend the school currently.

Ms. Sawyer said that last year there were 104 students and this year there were 94 students.

Ms. Baldwin encouraged the applicant to plan for different numbers so that the applicant would not be in financial trouble in the future.

Mr. Baldwin asked about staffing.

Ms. Sawyer indicated that the staff from last year was moved, and she believes that the previous staff will return.

Mr. Baldwin asked about the financial support based on the staff structure in the application.

Dr. Kennon spoke about potential hires to help handle the financial management of the school.

Ms. Sawyer talked about community members who would serve as valuable resources for the school and who might donate their time and services.

Ms. Newton asked about the comfort level of those attending school at a church. She also asked about the agriculture focus. How do we address the interest of students who are not drawn to agriculture endeavors.

Ms. Sawyer indicated that all the students would either go into Rogers or Pea Ridge. She believes that agriculture can be woven into business endeavors not solely related to agriculture.

Ms. Newton expressed concerns about the use of a church.

Ms. Sawyer acknowledged her concern and said that the applicant was aware that the use of the church might be an issue for some.

Ms. Newton's greater concern was that if the student wasn't interested in or focused on the agriculture component, then what would they do.

Ms. Sawyer spoke to the importance of student success plans.

Tripp Walter, spoke to Ms. Newton's concerns about the use of the church. He spoke about the historical use of religious facilities.

Ms. Newton said that there were not options in Garfield which is different than the case in Little Rock.

Ms. Sawyer indicated that there were options as Rogers SD and Pea Ridge SD provided transportation for those students wanting to attend other schools.

Mr. Davis questioned: 501c3 does not exist yet. Scott Smith spoke for APSRC and stated Arkansas law does not require the 501c3 to be in place for a charter to apply for approval to open, only applied for.

Dr. Davis also asked about the financial standing of the charter and how long it will be before the charter operates in the black.

Dr. Kennon spoke again about additional funding sources and donations.

Ms. Newton asked how many students were needed to effectuate a positive budget without additional funding.

Dr. Kennon said that 115-120 students would be the minimum to break even.

Ms. Saracini asked about the per student funding.

Ken Rich, APSRC, clarified the new amount for student funding. He also indicated that the staffing model could change. There was flexibility within the financial structure.

Ms. Saracini indicated that funding was usually based on third quarter enrollment.

Mr. Rich indicated that they would put in projected students for first quarter and would be adjusted based on actual enrollment.

Scott Smith also talked about other private and federal options that would allow the school to address budgetary concerns.

Ms. Newton asked if these anticipated funds were based on actual funding or if the applicant made the budget based on the 60% threshold for free and reduced lunch.

Mr. Smith indicated that the presented budget was not based on either of these factors.

Ms. Sawyer indicated that Garfield has historically met the 60% threshold for free and reduced lunch.

Mr. Davis didn't want to lean into the thinking that there would be anticipated funding.

Mr. Davis asked a question about staffing. He questioned the proposed number of full-time staff being around 15/16.

Ms. Sawyer indicated that if the church were used, then there would no longer need to be a janitorial position.

She also spoke about collapsing/combining positions if the employee agreed to reduce staffing costs.

Mr. Rich indicated that APSRC offered back-end services for start-up charters. Although there have been no conversations to point, they would be happy to continue discussions.

Mr. Davis asked about ADA compliance.

Ms. Sawyer indicated with the change in location that ADA compliance would no longer be necessary as the church is already compliant.

Dr. Sutherlin asked about academic goals.

Ms. Sawyer indicated that they based their goals on the available information in MySchoolInfo.

Dr. Sutherlin asked about the Board structure. Will staff members be a part of the Board?

Ms. Sawyer indicated that this would not be the case.

Dr. Wright-McMurray asked about sustainability. How will the school plan for long-term success and sustainability?

Ms. Sawyer indicated that area is growing, and that Rogers is landlocked. There are 175 homes that have been approved to be built in the area. The geographical growth will help them to sustain. She also indicated that there is a tremendous community support that may not be fully understood if you are not from the community.

The mayor, Gary Blackburn, spoke to the nature of the community and the willingness to support endeavors.

There was a motion by Mr. Baldwin to approve the application.

The motion was seconded by Mr. Davis.

There were three votes in favor and three votes against or abstentions. Dr. Sutherlin voted to deny the application.

Dr. Wright-McMurray clarified that she wanted more work done on the front end of the application. Her desire is to ask the applicant to return with more information. Dr. Sutherlin indicated that it was his intention as well.

Dr. Wright-McMurray made a motion to defer the vote for Garfield for 60 days.

There was a second by Mr. Baldwin.

Mr. Davis voted against the motion, but the motion passed.

Dr. Sutherlin asked if that would give the school time to enter into an agreement with APSRC. Scott Smith indicated that they would try to work.

I.2 Consideration of the Freedom Learning Academy New Open Enrollment Charter School Application

Presenter: Dorie Summons, Public School Charter Office

Description: Freedom Learning Academy has submitted an application to establish an open-enrollment charter school beginning in the 2024-2025 academic year. The charter will follow a blended educational model.

Dr. Andrew Curry presented on behalf of the applicant. He spoke about his background, the purpose, and the expectations. He also spoke about blended learning centers. The learning model would be blended schoolhouse model and career and college advising. He also spoke about what sets them apart from other educational opportunities for students. He indicated that the purpose was to bridge the gap between public schools and home schools.

Shastady Wagner, DESE Legal, conducted the legal review.

She asked that Dr. Curry provide more rationale to the panel about the waiver requests and indicated that he would need to add additional waivers based on the model. Dr. Curry indicated that we would also request a waiver for clock hours and recess.

Dr. Sutherlin asked about the need for a waiver for Library Media Specialists. Dr. Curry said that the current plan was to hire a licensed LMS.

Ms. Newton asked a question about mandatory days for attendance. Would the applicant be obligated to give a minimum number of days.

Ms. Wagner clarified that the applicant is not asking to waive instructional days but rather to waive the instructional time (6 hours).

Ms. Newton asked about attendance and learning time.

Dr Curry talked about how the school would monitor students for engagement and completion of work.

Ms. Wagner indicated that Dr. Curry would serve in the role of superintendent/principal. The board would have the final say in hiring and firing personnel.

Dr. Curry confirmed that this was correct.

Ms. Wagner confirmed that Dr. Curry would not be serving on the board.

Dr. Sutherlin asked if there was a need for a waiver of the board's policies.

Ms. Wagner indicated that the 501c3 could not take foundation funding.

Ms. Nancy Dill, Child Nutrition, will meals be waived or not? Questions about federal funding.

Dr. Curry wanted to provide meals for parents who wanted to come pick up and meals for those on site.

Ms. Cassandra Barnett, LMS, encouraged the applicant to pursue a school librarian to act as a facilitator and mentor to the students.

Dr. Curry agreed with that recommendation.

Yvonne Green, SPED, asked how the student needs would be met (Least Restrictive Environment).

Dr. Curry indicated that a LEA Supervisor would be hired.

Mr. Davis indicated that the responses are based on conjecture, not what will happen should the applicant be approved. He wanted more specificity related to what would happen.

Dr. Curry indicated that there has not been a conversation yet with any food service provider.

Mr. Baldwin asked more questions about the board. Dr. Curry indicated that a board had been named for the 501c3 and it was the intention to use those individuals as the board.

Ms. Linsey Graham talked about the professional composition of the board (math specialist, reading specialist, Arkansas Extension Agency Employee, federal programs employee of Watson Chapel SD)

Mr. Baldwin asked about additional support other than Dr. Curry and his wife.

Dr. Curry indicated that he would work with APSRC as well as potential partnership with a local education service cooperative.

Mr. Baldwin asked if they would be recruiting students from across the state.

Dr. Curry indicated that initially the focus would be on NWA with a plan to expand to other areas. He also addressed questions and concerns about the in-person learning days.

Mr. Baldwin asked about the budget and when the statewide budget/recruitment would start. Would the proposed enrollment cap of 1000 be all from Springdale/NWA.

Ms. Wagner indicated that for the applicant to receive full ADM funding, the students would no longer be homeschooled students but full-time students in the charter.

Ms. Saracini asked if the model was blended or totally digital?

Dr. Curry indicated that the students would choose the model that they wanted.

Ms. Saracini asked for clarification about who would be the director if Dr. Curry were to be the principal.

Dr. Curry said that he would serve in both roles.

He indicated that he could serve in both capacities depending on enrollment.

Ms. Saracini asked if they would work with APSRC for bookkeeping/finance.

Dr. Curry said that was an option.

Tripp Walter, APSRC, indicated that they do not support the application. Should the panel see fit to approve, then APSRC would be happy to discuss support for the school.

Mr. Baldwin asked why APSRC didn't support the application. It was stated that Dr. Curry never presented his model to APSRC.

Dr. Wright-McMurray asked about the learning centers. Are these established places for students to attend.

Dr. Curry indicated that there would be a physical place in Springdale for students to meet. Other options would be available upon the agreement of parents, teachers, and students. The face-to-face site has not yet been determined.

Dr. Wright-McMurray asked about CTE options.

Dr. Curry indicated that there would be virtual opportunities as well as apprenticeships.

Dr. Wright-McMurray asked about college and career planning for the students.

Dr. Curry said that those services and support would be available through community colleges and regional career centers with the goal of creating a comprehensive plan for the students to have opportunities.

Dr. Wright-McMurray asked about the potential for a CMO.

Dr. Curry indicated that the applicant would not be seeking a CMO at this point.

Mr. Davis asked about the goals. Is the applicant suggesting that 100% of students will meet or exceed the state average.

Dr. Curry indicated that the intention would be that there needs to be a more realistic expectation there.

Dr. Davis asked a similar question about internships and apprenticeships.

Mr. Davis asked what happens if a student never shows up in person.

Dr. Curry indicated that truancy laws would be followed.

Mr. Davis asked if the guidance counselor would be responsible for monitoring?

Dr. Curry affirmed.

Mr. Davis asked when the school would move on a FINS petition.

Dr. Curry said that they would do what most public schools would do. Didn't provide specific details.

Mr. Davis asked if there had been a curriculum identified for Personal Finance.

Dr. Curry-no

Mr. Davis asked about the marketing/outreach for the community in order to connect and attract supporters/students.

Ms. Graham indicated that there are boots on the ground in AR, word of mouth. The target has been homeschoolers. There has not been a plan beyond that.

Mr. Davis said that the budget only reflects three classroom teachers.

Dr. Curry said that the initial thought was to hire three but would add more based on October 1 counts.

Mr. Davis asked about the disparity between classroom teachers and "elite" staff on the leadership side. Has the school identified the assistant director?

Dr. Curry said that Ms. Graham would be the assistant director. These positions might not be necessary until the growth occurs.

Mr. Davis asked DESE if the applicant had not identified a location, who would be responsible for the student safety and who is responsible.

Ms. Wagner indicated that the charter applicant will be responsible for student safety. The applicant will need a lease and a plan for safety.

Mr. Baldwin asked about whether the blended model is being used in Arkansas.

Dr. Curry indicated that he believed that they were the only one model.

Dr. Sutherlin indicated that LISA Academy had a hybrid model which is similar.

Dr. Wright-McMurray asked for further clarification related to the reporting requirement for students.

Dr. Curry indicated that the requirement would be that the students be on site all day in the learning center. He didn't provide details of what that would look like other than a full school day.

Ms. Newton asked about what other contacts outside of the learning center would look like.

Dr. Curry addressed what those interactions might look like with students and teachers.

Dr. Sutherlin mentioned that the education freedom accounts could also impact potential students.

Ms. Newton had concerns that the questions were not answered to the extent to which she would have liked.

Ms. Newton moved not to approve. Ms. Saracini seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

A motion to adjourn was made by Dr. Wright-McMurray. The motion was seconded by Mr. Baldwin.

The motion passed unanimously, and the meeting adjourned at 1:01PM

Minutes prepared by Thomas Coy

Dr. Matthew Sutherlin, Charter Authorizing Panel Chair