
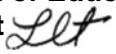


ILLINOIS STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION MEETING
March 19, 2009

TO: Illinois State Board of Education

FROM: Christopher A. Koch, Ed.D., State Superintendent of Education 
Linda Tomlinson Ed.D., Assistant Superintendent 

Agenda Topic: Prairie Crossing Charter School Renewal

Materials: None

Staff Contact(s): Patrick Murphy

Purpose of Agenda Item

The Board will discuss the request by Prairie Crossing Charter School to renew their existing charter for an additional five years.

Relationship to/Implications for the State Board's Strategic Plan

Prairie Crossing Charter School is the only charter school in the State of Illinois that is authorized by the Illinois State Board of Education. There is no question that Prairie Crossing has continued to show outstanding achievement of the Illinois Learning Standards. The 2008 Illinois School Report Card reports that the overall student performance for Prairie Crossing ranks at 96.3% of students meeting or exceeding the Illinois Learning Standards which relates to Goal 1. Fifty-two public comments were submitted in support of the renewal. Much of the praise is focused on the small class size and nurturing atmosphere. Parental comments also state that students are excited about going to school and learning as there are so many creative opportunities, these positive comments relate to Goal 3.

Expected Outcome(s) of Agenda Item

The Board will vote on whether to renew the charter for the requested term, to renew it for less than the requested term, or not renew it.

Background Information

Prairie Crossing Charter School (PCCS) was originally approved by ISBE in December 1998 in order for its doors to open for the beginning of the 1999-2000 school year through the 2003-2004 school year. The first charter renewal was submitted to ISBE in July, 2003, in order for PCCS to secure financial resources to begin construction of new buildings as the enrollment had out-grown the current facility. The school was granted a renewal charter, from the 2004-2005 school year through the end of the 2008-2009 school year.

The school is located in Grayslake, Illinois near the Prairie Crossing development, a conservation community designed in part, to combine responsible development with preservation of open land. The school focuses on an integrated, hands-on environmental curriculum including the use of the organic farm located in the development. In addition, the school uses principles of environmental stewardship in its operations, including its buildings which all contain environmentally friendly features and healthy interiors. For the 2008 school year, PCCS served 360 students from kindergarten through eighth grade.

The charter renewal proposal for PCCS was received by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) on December 19, 2008. The renewal application consisted of: the recharter proposal to ISBE; attachments to the recharter proposal including items such as test score information, curriculum samples, news articles, financial information, transportation policy, special education procedures, insurance and liability, Prairie Crossing Board of Director (the Board) policies and procedures, and a report from the Board Composition Task Force. An initial request for a 10 year renewal was submitted with the proposal and PCCS was informed that the maximum renewal term is five years.

Relevant portions of the proposal were distributed to reviewers in the following areas: legal, curriculum, assessment, special education, and finance in order to review for compliance with the Illinois Charter School Law and IDEA. Written and oral comments from nearly 60 persons concerning PCCS were received and reviewed by ISBE.

The following information regarding the renewal application is presented as follows:

- 1) Summary and Analysis of Public Comment
 - a. Comments in Support
 - b. Comments with Concerns
 - c. Comments with Suggestions
- 2) ISBE Concerns (Five items of primary concern were noted):
 - a. governance,
 - b. outreach,
 - c. transportation,
 - d. fiscal management, and
 - e. special education.
- 3) Conclusion
- 4) Conditions

1) Summary and Analysis of Public Comment

a) Comments in Support

A total of fifty two comments received were in support of the renewal of the charter for Prairie Crossing Charter School. The nature of the comments can be categorized as shown in the table below. The number of comments received in each category is also noted.

Comments in Support

Type of Support	Number
Positive educational environment of the school as a whole	29
Environmental focus of the curriculum	23
Quality of teaching staff	20
Excellent curriculum	13
Quality of administration	12
Small class size	11
Small school size	10
Special needs students are able to flourish in this type of school set-up due to the personalized attention	3
The moral and ethical atmosphere of the school	2

Creativity of the students is allowed to flourish	2
Ethnic diversity of the school	2
PCCS creates a safe environment for children to learn	1
The longer school day and year are conducive to better learning for the students	1
The after school program is so enjoyable for the students that they do not want to stay home during breaks, they would rather be at the school	1
The debt for the new buildings has been refinanced, saving the school nearly \$150,000 per year in interest costs	1

It should be noted that the school continuously ranks in the 90th percentile for the overall percentages of state test scores categorized as meeting or exceeding the Illinois Learning Standards as indicated in the chart below comparing PCCS with its feeder districts.

% of students Meeting or Exceeding on ISAT

	2005	2006	2007	2008
PCCS	91.5	95.8	95.3	96.3
Fremont	82.3	89.0	91.2	91.2
Woodland	78.4	86.0	87.6	86.3

b) Comments with Concerns

Ten comments were also in favor of the renewal of PCCS, but contained concerns with the way PCCS was operated. Those concerns are summarized below.

Comments with Concerns

Type of Concern	Number
Board of Directors-lack of accountability to the school; OMA violations; frivolous spending; inaccurate or missing minutes, private agendas; personal loyalties over objectivity concerning school matters	4
Board-election of members needs to be revised so that the majority is not self-appointed	3
Lack of communication between parents and teachers	2
Nepotism of Board family members and friends obtain jobs at the school	2
Special education services are not provided as required	2
Outreach activities do not focus on attracting all students of either district	2
No library at the school and students are forced to share books	2
Basic educational subjects are lost to accommodate the environmental focus	1
Not all students are allowed the same opportunities, i.e., to have tutoring, to be enrolled in AP math classes, etc.	1
Grading is inconsistent	1
ISBE should govern the Board of Directors	1
Lack of discipline for special education students who act out	1
Lottery needs to be monitored by persons outside the school	1
PCCS should stop subsidizing the organic farm	1
Too much fundraising	1
Students not residing in the Prairie Crossing development are not made to feel welcome	1

c) Comments with Suggestions

The following suggestions for required actions on the part of PCCS were received:

1. Outreach activities should include notices in the Pioneer Local and the Mundelein Review.
2. Board meetings need to be taped in order to ensure accuracy of minutes

2) ISBE Concerns

a) Governance

In addition to the comments noted above, from 2006 to 2007, ISBE received three complaints regarding the actions of the PCCS Board and selection process for Board membership. The concerns noted in these complaints were:

- Board make-up and the fact that six of the nine members were Board appointed;
- Board members were refusing to meet;
- Failure to establish a quorum when the majority would not be in favor of one group of individuals; and
- Meeting minutes were missing or did not accurately reflect the discussions or actions taken.

By 2007, the Board was divided into two factions exhibiting such hostility and opposition to each other that it was unable to conduct business. ISBE staff intervened to ensure the Board's actions or lack of actions did not negatively impact student instruction. ISBE staff requested that the Board seek training from the Illinois Association of School Boards and strongly encouraged the Board to consider modifying its electoral structure to allow a majority of parent-elected Board members.

i) Board Structure and Training

As noted in the "comments with concerns" table above, specific comments received from individuals throughout the renewal process included complaints that the Board:

- has no accountability to the charter school;
- continuously commits Open Meetings Act (OMA) violations;
- allows frivolous spending of charter school funds;
- conducts business so that the private agendas and personal loyalties of its members overshadow objectivity;
- needs to have its election structure revised so that the majority of members are not self-appointed and that a clearly defined line of authority regarding charter compliance needs to be instituted.

The Board received training from the Illinois Association of School Boards to ISBE's staff satisfaction. After commissioning a task force to determine whether or not restructuring the manner in which Board members are seated was necessary, the Board ultimately decided to maintain its current structure.

ISBE staff recognizes that ISBE does not have the authority to require the Board to restructure how members are seated. In fact, one of the cornerstones of charter schools laws is that it gives charter schools developers the flexibility to operate and organize the school as a discrete legal entity with the ability to appoint its Board as it

deems fit. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of charter schools in Illinois have *all* Board members appointed, as opposed to elected.

ii) Open Meetings Act (OMA) Violations

The Board was cited by the Lake County State's Attorney for an OMA violation concerning discussion of inappropriate topics during closed session. Currently, there are four additional OMA complaints being investigated by the Lake County State's Attorney concerning meetings of this Board.

ISBE investigated the concerns and found that PCCS is cooperating with the Lake County States Attorney to rectify this area of non-compliance. At this time ISBE has no other concerns regarding the OMA.

b) Outreach

Public comments submitted by parents specifically stated that outreach conducted by PCCS does not reach all areas of the two districts from which it enrolls students. Another comment indicates that students who reside outside the Prairie Crossing subdivision are not made to feel welcome at the school. PCCS has continually struggled with the public's perception that it is not open to any and all students residing within both of its districts. We provide below two tables. The first illustrates 2008 student enrollment by district.

2008 Student Enrollment by district

	Total Students	Fremont	Woodland
PCCS	360	65	295
Fremont/Woodland	9217	2087	7130

The second table illustrates how the student population of PCCS compares with the population of the two districts from which it enrolls students.

2008 Student Demographics by District

School Name	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian/ Pacific Islander	Native American	Multiracial / Ethnic	% Low Income	% Limited English Proficient
Prairie Crossing	76.7	2.2	4.2	12.8	0.0	4.2	2.2	0.0
Freemont	76.1	2.4	7.6	10.2	0.1	3.5	5.0	8.0
Woodland	59.5	7.0	18.4	11.2	0.2	3.8	18.2	7.7

ISBE is concerned that although the majority of students are from the Woodland district, the demographics of the Woodland students attending PCCS are not representative of the Woodland districts on the whole. Specifically, we are troubled by the fact that only 2.2% of Woodland students are low income (whereas 18.2% of Woodland students on the whole are low income) and 0% are Limited English Proficient (whereas 7.7% of Woodland students on the whole are LEP). We do recognize, however, that enrollment in PCCS is based on a lottery system; therefore the demographics of PCCS understandably may not be completely representative of the two feeder districts.

In November, 2007, ISBE staff required PCCS to submit a report of its advertisement and recruitment activities to ensure outreach to students of both districts. The Board formed an Administrative Task Force on Outreach to effectively implement the charter's Statement of Outreach Plan included in the charter agreement. The result of this endeavor is chronicled in the Outreach Initiatives Report 2007-2008 submitted to ISBE in June, 2008.

The Agency still believes PCCS needs to improve its outreach efforts, especially as those efforts relate to the low-income and LEP communities in the Woodland district.

c) Transportation

The recharter document states that if the outreach and recruitment initiatives indicate that the lack of door-to-door or other public funded-bus service is negatively affecting the School's commitment to geographic, economic, ethnic and ability diversity, the School's Board of Directors reserves the right to amend the transportation plan or policy or both with the advance concurrence of the Charter Authority in order to address such a contingency. ISBE requested an explanation of how PCCS is monitoring the issue as stated in the renewal proposal. PCCS responded by stating that staff pays particular attention to families of potential students with questions about transportation at open houses and through inquiries received through telephone conversations. It remains unclear, though, how PCCS will specifically address the transportation needs of low-income and at risk students. (The School Code requires all charter schools to offer a description of "how the charter school plans to meet the transportation needs of its pupils, *and a plan for addressing the transportation needs of low-income and at risk pupils.*" 105 ILCS 5/27A-7(a)(13) (emphasis added).).

Furthermore, the transportation plan is included in the packet sent to prospective parents, and beginning with the 2009-2010 school year, the school will provide a copy of the Transportation Policy to each enrollee annually as fees are being paid and other forms are being distributed.

d) Fiscal Management

Charter schools, by law, are allowed autonomy with respect to their finances, although each year they are required to submit an annual audit of the financial and administrative operations of the charter school (105 ILCS 5/27A-7(a)(9)). The charter renewal proposal must include a financial statement that discloses the costs of administration, instruction, and other spending categories for the charter school that is understandable to the general public and that will allow comparison of those costs to other schools or other comparable organizations.

The review of the fiscal information submitted by PCCS raised questions about its finances. ISBE requested additional information and PCCS complied, but the new information provided led to still more questions. The conclusion reached by ISBE is that the financial operations of the school need to be more transparent.

e) Special Education

According to the staff in Special Education Services at ISBE, PCCS has made considerable progress in its provisions for special education services since the last renewal in 2003. Since the last renewal, staff conducted two on-site monitoring reviews and four complaint investigations. These reviews were related to the following issues: personnel; technical assistance supervision; policies and procedures; referral process;

evaluation; and IEP development. As a result of these reviews, PCCS was required to remediate any area of noncompliance identified. To verify correction of noncompliance, staff conducted two on-site reviews and found all areas of noncompliance had been remediated; therefore the monitoring and complaint investigations have been closed.

During the course of the renewal process, a few individuals have raised concerns regarding their child’s special education services. The Division of Special Education Services has a formal process through which complaints may be submitted.

Through the renewal process, concerns have been raised regarding PCCS outreach to recruit and serve students with disabilities. The chart below illustrates the types of disabilities and numbers of students with disabilities served by each entity. The data reported in this chart reflects students receiving special education services provided by that entity for the 2007-2008 school year. Students receiving special education services provided by special education joint agreement or public or private day school are not included.

Number of Students Receiving Special Education Services by disability type – 07-08*

<i>Serving District Name</i>	<i>Learning Disabilities</i>	<i>Speech/Language</i>	<i>Emotional/Behavior</i>	<i>Mental Impairment</i>	<i>Traumatic Brain Injury</i>	<i>Visual Impairment</i>	<i>Hearing Impairment</i>	<i>Physical Impairment</i>	<i>Other Health Impairment</i>	<i>Autism</i>	<i>Developmental Disabilities</i>	<i>Multiple Disabilities</i>	<i>*TOTAL STUDENTS with IEPS</i>
Prairie Crossing	23 6.4%	24 6.7%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	1 0.3%	0 0.0%	2 0.6%	1 0.3%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	51 14.2%
Freemont District 79	113 5.4%	99 4.7%	4 1.9%	0 0.0%	1 0.05%	2 0.1%	2 0.1%	1 0.05%	26 1.2%	5 0.2%	16 0.8%	2 0.1%	271 13.0%
Woodland District 50	332 4.7%	438 6.1%	37 0.5%	39 0.5%	2 0.03%	1 0.01%	25 0.4%	11 0.2%	105 1.5%	62 0.9%	66 0.9%	0 0.0%	1118 15.7%

* To provide for an equitable comparison, counts are provided from 07-08 FACTS data by the student’s Serving District on December 1, 2007. These data do not reflect students enrolled in Freemont 79 or Woodland 50 whose IEP team decided that a placement in a separate placement was appropriate (e.g. a Special Education cooperative facility). Percentages are provided as a percent of total fall housing count provided through the annual Fall Housing report.

3) Conclusion

Prairie Crossing has continued to show high achievement of the Illinois Learning Standards as indicated in its 2008 Illinois School Report Card, where its overall student performance ranks at 96.3% of students meeting or exceeding. Fifty two comments were submitted to ISBE from parents of students at PCCS commending the school for their child’s academic success. The majority of the comments focus on how the small class size and nurturing atmosphere of the school has allowed their students to excel. Comments also cite the professionalism of the teachers and administration. Parents state that their students are excited about going to school and learning as there are so many creative opportunities and

that the environmental aspect of the school creates a family learning experience. Ten comments primarily focused on the Board and its lack of accountability, conflicts of interest, private agendas, and the personal agendas of its members. Complaints continue to be raised related to the structure of the Board and more specifically that the Board appoints the majority of its own members is still a concern for the parents, however, ISBE does not have the authority to require the Board to restructure how members are seated.

4) Conditions

Considering all the factors stated above, it is recommended that PCCS be renewed for up to five years contingent on the following items being required in their renewal contract:

i) Governance:

- (1) Minutes from meetings must be posted on the PCCS website in accordance with OMA and once posted, the link to the minutes must be sent to ISBE

ii) Financial:

- (1) The annual budget and end of school year financial report must be posted on the PCCS website and once posted the link must be sent to ISBE
- (2) The fees collected by PCCS are to be itemized and separated in the school's annual audit.

iii) Outreach/Transportation:

- (1) No later than September 15 each year, PCCS must submit for review and approval to ISBE the following items:
 - (a) Outreach materials (translated as much as possible into languages represented in the districts), such as flyers, press releases, newspaper ads, etc. Included in all materials must be references to:
 - (i) How transportation is provided and how assistance will be provided if required, especially to low-income and at-risk pupils
 - (ii) How fee waivers are determined and a description of the process to obtain them
 - (iii) How appropriate services will be provided to Limited English Proficient students
 - (iv) How services are available and provided for Special Education
 - (b) Listing of when, where, and how the information will be distributed and the contact info for each entity that receives the information
 - (c) Justification as to why these places were chosen and how this fulfils the outreach requirement to reach the entire geographic and demographics areas of both districts.
- (2) By April 1 of each year, PCCS will provide a report summarizing the applicant pool by district and the results of the lottery and comparing these results to their student enrollment demographics. The data from this report is to be used by PCCS to modify, as needed, the outreach activities for the next school year to ensure that efforts are being made to reach all students and families of both feeder districts.

iv) Fees:

PCCS shall demonstrate that any and all fees are comparable to those fees charged by the Fremont and Woodland school districts, and that fee waivers are offered as appropriate.

v) Exit Summaries

Provision to ISBE of all exit interview summaries-

Analysis and Implications for Policy, Budget, Legislative Action and Communications

Policy Implications: None

Budget Implications: None

Legislative Action: None

Communication: None

Pros and Cons of Various Actions

If this charter is renewed, the Prairie Crossing Charter School will continue to operate as a public school under the terms of the renewal charter. Parents in the School Districts will have the option of choosing a public school that is different from ones offered by the School District. General State Aid, and possibly other financial resources, will be deducted from payments to the School Districts provided directly to Prairie Crossing.

If this charter is not renewed, Prairie Crossing Charter School will no longer be able to operate or serve students in the School Districts. The current students will be required to transfer into the School Districts or enroll in a private school. The School Districts will once again become responsible for meeting the needs of students who attended the charter school, and will retain full funding for those students.

Superintendent's Recommendation

I recommend that the following motion be adopted:

The State Board of Education approves the renewal of the charter for Prairie Crossing Charter School for five years, contingent on Prairie Crossing continuing to meet the conditions noted above throughout the term of the renewal, and authorizes the State Superintendent and General Counsel to further negotiate with Prairie Crossing the specific terms of the conditions prior to execution of the renewal agreement so that progress can be objectively measured.

Next Steps

If the charter is renewed, the Board should authorize the Superintendent to so inform the school and the districts and to negotiate the final terms of the charter agreement, to include the conditions as stated above.

If the charter is not renewed, the Board should authorize the Superintendent to so inform the school and the districts.