

**IN THE ILLINOIS STATE  
CHARTER SCHOOL COMMISSION**

<b>Connected Futures Academy</b>	)	
	)	
v.	)	<b>No. SCSC 16-001</b>
	)	
<b>Chicago Public Schools District 299</b>	)	

**FINAL DECISION OF THE COMMISSION**

On February 9, 2016, the Illinois State Charter School Commission (the “Commission”) voted to affirm the Chicago Public Schools District 299 (“CPS”) decision denying a charter school proposal submitted by Connected Futures Academy (“CFA”) to establish an alternative charter school of the same name and to open five campuses (CFA or “the School”). The Commission finds that the establishment of the Connected Futures Academy would not be in the best interest of the students that CFA intends to serve. 105 ILCS 5/27A-8. Therefore, the Commission affirms the CPS decision to deny CFA’s proposal.

**I. Jurisdiction**

The Commission exercises jurisdiction in this matter pursuant to the Illinois Charter Schools Law, 105 ILCS 5/27A-8. The local educational agency, CPS, voted to deny the CFA charter school proposal on October 28, 2015. On November 30, 2015, in compliance with the statutory deadline, CFA submitted an appeal to the Commission. The submission also included the necessary documentation. Thus, the appeal is properly before the Commission under 105 ILCS 5/27A-8(g).

**II. Procedural Background**

CFA submitted its charter school proposal to CPS for consideration in response to the CPS Request for Charter School Proposals on April 8, 2015 (Tier 1 submission) and in August 2015 (Tier II submission). The proposal submission was complete upon CFA’s delivery of the Tier II submission.<sup>1</sup> CPS conducted an interview with CFA regarding its proposal. On September 30, 2015, the district held a public hearing on charter school proposal. On October 28, 2015, the CPS Board of Education voted to deny CFA’s proposal. On November 4, 2015, CPS submitted to the Commission its board report denying CFA along with a summary of its evaluation of the proposal. On November 30, 2015, CFA filed an appeal with the Commission based on CPS’s decision to deny. The Commission voted to accept jurisdiction over the appeal on December 15, 2015.

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<sup>1</sup> CPS maintains a multi-tiered process for the procurement of charter school proposals. During the relevant period, Tier 1 of a proposal included responses to all major sections of the RFP (Parent and Community Engagement, Academic Capacity (including track record), Operational Capacity, and Economic Soundness). Tier 2 required applicants to submit answers to an additional set of questions, primarily regarding evidence of parental involvement and community support and key operational updates.

Upon receipt of CFA’s submission, Commission staff began its process of review and analysis of the CFA proposal and appeal. The Commission retained a team of experts to analyze the CFA proposal and appeal. Commission staff and the evaluation team conducted a capacity interview with representatives from CFA and CPS on January 6, 2016. On December 18, 2015, CPS submitted a written statement responding to CFA’s appeal. At the interview, both parties were asked and responded to questions about the proposal, CPS’s review, the appeal submission and the CPS’s response to the appeal. The majority of questions involved CFA’s educational/academic program, proposed facilities, the organization’s finances, and the proposed governance structure. Additional requests for information were made to both parties during the interview, to which submissions were provided to Commission staff on January 13, 2016. Prior to the interview, on December 17, 2015, Commission staff conducted site visits at the proposed CFA school facilities. CPS representatives and CFA Design Team members also attended the site visits. Additionally, counsel reviewed the appeal and all submissions for legal compliance.

After the interview, on January 14, 2016, the parties participated in a public hearing to receive comment on CFA’s appeal. Commissioner Troy Ratliff, Commissioner Catherine Rich, and Interim Executive Director Hosanna Mahaley Jones and Deputy Director Shenita Johnson represented the Commission at the hearing. At the public hearing, the Commissioners heard comments from nine (9) speakers and from each party.

Having reviewed all the materials submitted by the parties as well as the analyses performed by experts and having concluding due diligence, Commission staff prepared its recommendation to the Commission. On February 4, 2016, Commission staff met with the parties to this appeal and informed them that Commission staff would recommend that the appeal be denied. On February 9, 2016, the Commissioners met and voted on Commission staff’s recommendation regarding CFA’s appeal. Seven (7) Commissioners were serving on the Commission as of February 9, five (5) participated in the discussion of the appeal and vote at a duly noticed public meeting. Five Commissioners voted to adopt the staff recommendation and to deny the appeal and none voted to grant it.

### **III. Findings of Fact**

#### **A. Overview of CFA’s Proposal**

1. According to its proposal, the mission of the Connected Futures Academy Charter School is “to prepare youth who have not been successful, or have not found value in the traditional high school setting to excel in college, a rewarding career and life.”
2. CFA proposed to provide an academic program with a blended learning curriculum of computer-based instruction, direct instruction, and career and social skill development. “Patterned after the Early College Model,” CFA would offer a curriculum that would simultaneously provide STEM-related career training pathways to college. A dual-enrollment component would be made available with the City Colleges of Chicago.
3. The school would be governed by the CFA Board of Directors. The CFA Board currently has six members, with combined expertise in education, alternative education, community relations, human resources, business and law.

4. CFA does not currently operate any schools; however, the design team leader and proposed Managing Director has experience managing a network of alternative schools in Chicago.
5. CFA would serve grades 9-12 at each of its five campus sites. Each campus would have a maximum enrollment of 165 students. The first campus would open in fall 2016 and an additional campus would be added each year thereafter, for a total of five campuses.
6. CFA proposed two alternative locations for its first campus. The first location was in Greater Grand Crossing and the second was in the Grand Boulevard community. CFA initially identified Chicago Lawn as the location for its first campus when its proposal was submitted to CPS. On appeal, the Chicago Lawn location was listed as third, alternative area. Potential sites for additional campuses were not identified.

## B. CPS's Reasons for Denial

CPS denied CFA's proposal due to numerous concerns with the proposal's educational plan, governance plan, and finances. Those reasons include, but are not limited to the following:

1. *Education Plan.* The CPS review team or Comprehensive Evaluation Team (CET) report stated that while CFA's mission, vision, and educational philosophy encompassed "a variety of instructional approaches, goals for students, and community partnerships," it was "unclear how the various pieces would be implemented to form a cohesive school design." CPS was also concerned that the "educational model and school culture do not explicitly connect the design of the academic program with the needs of the student population." (CET Recommendation Report 6.)
2. *Governance Plan.* CPS expressed concerns that even though proposed governance plan was strong, there were limited descriptions of mechanisms that would be available to the Board to enable it to monitor progress of the academic program. (Id. at 15.)
3. *Financial Plan.* CPS contends that the budget is overly reliant on the receipt of an annual \$75,000 Workforce Investment Act (WIA) grant for each campus. Without the grant, the CFA budget, as proposed, would not be sustainable.

## C. Commission Due Diligence Findings

1. CFA proposes to implement a blended learning curriculum. It identifies three "primary learning modalities" -- 1) computer-based instruction, 2) direct instruction, and 3) career and social skill development.
2. CFA sets a target for student academic growth in reading and math. The expectations for the average growth percentile on the STAR Reading assessment is incremental beginning at 4, and ending at 5 over a five-year period. In math, CFA intends that 70% of students will rank at the 40th percentile after attending for two years.
3. CFA indicates that the needs of diverse learners will be met through a "highly personalized, engaging, rigorous, and post-secondary and career-focused education." CFA intends to partner with *LightStreet* to provide support for the range of students with diverse needs.

4. CFA also proposes to have a partnership with *Lumity*, which supports “exposing Chicago's youth to science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) careers to inspire students to stay in school, find a meaningful career path, and ultimately, a satisfying job.” Additionally, CFA intends to ensure that its students dual-enroll in the City of Colleges of Chicago (CCC) by their second year.
5. The CFA governing board, described as the school’s “thought partner to executive management and staff,” (Original Proposal, p. 108) is diverse in expertise.
6. CFA identified two potential school sites to locate its first campus. Upon request by Commission staff, CFA provided a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for its preferred site, located at 754 E. 77<sup>th</sup> Street, Chicago.

## IV. Analysis

### A. Standard of Review

The Commission may reverse a local school board’s decision to deny a proposal when the Commission finds that the proposal (i) is in compliance with the Charter Schools Law and (ii) is in the best interests of the students the charter school is designed to serve. 105 ILCS 5/27A-8(h); *Comprehensive Cmty. Solutions, Inc. v. Rockford Sch. Dist. No. 205*, 216 Ill. 2d 455, 471 (2005). To determine whether a proposal satisfies this standard, the Commission conducts a *de novo* review of the proposal and the school district’s response. 23 Ill. Admin. Code 650.110 (d)(1). *See also Bd. of Educ. of Rich Twp. High Sch. Dist. No. 227 v. Ill. State Bd. of Educ.*, 965 N.E.2d 13 (Ill. App. Ct. 1st Dist. 2011).

As required under the Law, the Commission shall give preference to proposals that: “(1) demonstrate a high level of local pupil, parental, community, business, and school personnel support; (2) set rigorous levels of expected pupil achievement and demonstrate feasible plans for attaining those levels of achievement; and (3) are designed to enroll and serve a substantial proportion of at-risk children; provided that nothing in the Charter Schools Law shall be construed as intended to limit the establishment of charter schools to those that serve a substantial portion of at-risk children or to in any manner restrict, limit, or discourage the establishment of charter schools that enroll and serve other pupil populations under a nonexclusive, nondiscriminatory admissions policy.” 105 ILCS 5/27A-8(a).

### B. Legal Compliance

The Charter Schools Law provides for the establishment of charter schools that are “devoted exclusively to re-enrolled high school dropouts and/or students 16 or 15 years old at risk of dropping out may operate at any one time in any city having a population exceeding 500,000. . . . [E]ach such dropout charter may operate up to 15 campuses within the city. Any of these dropout charters may have a maximum of 1,875 enrollment seats, any one of the campuses of the dropout charter may have a maximum of 165 enrollment seats, and each campus of the dropout charter must be operated, through a contract or payroll, by the same legal entity as that for which the charter is approved and certified.” 105 ILCS 5/27A-4(b).

The proposal submitted by CFA seeks to establish an alternative charter school that would be governed by Section 4(b).

Having thoroughly reviewed CFA's appeal and all related submissions, the Commission has determined that there are no material questions that exist as to whether CFA's proposal complies with the Charter Schools Law. *See* 105 ILCS 5/27A-7 and 5/27A-8.

### C. Best Interests

The Commission's decision to affirm CPS's decision on CFA's proposal is based exclusively on its conclusion that establishment of the school as proposed by CFA at this time would not be in the best interests of students it is designed to serve. *See* 105 ILCS 5/27A-8(h)(ii).

To assess whether the authorization of the CFA school would be in the best interest of the students CFA intends to serve, Commission staff conducted an independent analysis of four aspects of the proposal: (1) the academic program, (2) governance and management, (3) finance and facilities, and (4) evidence of overall capacity. Commission staff then rated CFA's proposal on each of the four areas; giving the proposal a rating of either does not meet the standard, meets the standard or exceeds the standard. Upon review and analysis of CFA's proposal and all the information collected during due diligence, the Commission staff concluded that CFA's academic program does not meet the standard, that on governance and management, CFA meets the standard; on finance and facilities does not meet the standard; and CFA's overall organizational capacity does not meet the standard that has been established by the Commission. As a result, the Commission staff determined that having failed to meet Commission standards in three areas, approval of CFA's proposal was not in the best interests of the students it was intended to serve. Commission staff recommended that the Commissioners deny the appeal.

The Commission finds that many components, including proposed partnerships to the overall proposal present an innovative model of engaging previously disconnected and disengaged youth. CFA's mission and vision seems well-suited to the target student population. However, notwithstanding some strengths of CFA's educational plan and the obvious need in Chicago for more quality alternative school seats, the Commission must concur with CPS and Commission staff that the establishment of a multi-campus charter school as proposed by CFA at this time would not be in the best interest of the students. The Commission arrives at this conclusion primarily due to two fundamental concerns. Both concerns stem from the Commission's finding that CFA's overall proposal lacked cohesiveness and did not demonstrate sufficient alignment between the academic program CFA proposed and CFA's overall organizational capacity to deliver that program.

*Proposal Lacked Necessary Cohesiveness.* CFA's "immersion model of integration" has not been fully developed and relies heavily on teacher/student development as the school evolves. Each modality is well-presented, based on research and current trends in education. However, the proposal did not provide a rationale by subject area for the use of computer-based and/or direct instruction (Appendix 3, pages 4-6).

Furthermore, throughout the appeal process, it remained unclear how CFA and its team members would work to integrate digital learning and direct instruction – two critical components of the educational program. CFA did not provide a sufficient explanation of this in its written documentation or during the interview.

CFA failed to fully develop the scope and sequence for the described “personalized curriculum,” which relies on independent learning through technology *and* direct instruction. Based on the curricula identified in the academic program, CFA did not make clear whether the metrics for student outcomes align with the data reports inherent within the proposed assessments.

*Insufficient Alignment Between Academic Program and Organizational Capacity.*

Overall, CFA’s proposal did not demonstrate that the team had devised a systematic plan for (a) how the data from various assessments would be collected; (b) analyzed; (c) disseminated to stakeholders; and (d) interpreted and applied to further inform instruction. Even though CFA identified a Site Director as the individual responsible for collecting data, the Site Director was also designated to perform a plethora of other responsibilities. Without any other staff person assigned to handle this responsibility, the proposal left it unclear how teachers would be supported to interpret and utilize the data and ensure that the tailoring of student instruction, informed by that data, would be implemented to deliver a personalized learning experience. Further, the overall staffing model lacked alignment with the proposed academic program and best practices.

CFA’s proposed contractual partnership with Lumity adds value to utilizing, “technology enhanced student monitoring,” yet both the proposal and the explanation CFA offered during the interview lacked sufficient detail about how the STEM-focused training would be integrated with the overall blended learning curriculum.

The evidence CFA presented to demonstrate its overall capacity to deliver the personalized learning experience as proposed is limited and ultimately, insufficient. While at least two members of the design team have experience working with “alternative school populations,” it became apparent through the appeal process that CFA team members and partners were not unified in their approach to alternative education and did not necessarily understand what their respective roles would be at CFA.

In addition, certain aspects of CFA’s financial and operational plan raises serious concerns. CFA’s proposal and the accompanying budget contained variances and inconsistencies in the projected student enrollment. The LEA budget lacked the detail and additional support needed to determine if it was realistic. There were several discrepancies between the narrative and the budget. Although some of the inconsistencies related to staffing were clarified during the appeal process, the revenue projections remain unclear due to CFA’s inclusion of substantial grants and fundraising. Moreover, CFA did not, after requests were made, provide any supporting documentation for grants or any evidence to support CFA’s assessment of its fundraising objectives. Additional documentation to confirm expenses

associated with key partnerships, was also requested, but not provided. Finally, while the proposal includes financial controls, CFA fails to provide detailed information regarding actual strategies that will be employed to ensure proper management and control of the school's finances.

For all of these reasons, and those stated at the public meeting of February 9, 2016, the Commission agrees with Commission staff that, at this time, establishment of Connected Futures Academy Charter Schools would not be in the best interests of the students CFA intends to serve.

## **V. Conclusion**

On the basis of the information presented to the Commission on appeal, the Commission concludes that reversal of CPS's decision to deny CFA's proposal to establish the Connected Future Academy Charter Schools is not warranted at this time. The appeal is DENIED.

Dated: February 16, 2016