Minutes
Charter Authorizing Panel Meeting
February 14, 2023

I. Call to Order

The Charter Authorizing Panel met on February 14, 2023. Panel Chair Deborah Coffman called the meeting to order at 9:00 a.m.

Present: Ms. Deborah Coffman, Dr. Sonya Wright-McMurray, Ms. Karli Saracini, Mr. Kim Davis (Virtual), and Mr. Phil Baldwin (Virtual)

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. Consent Agenda

Dr. Wright-McMurray made a motion to approve the minutes of the December 13, 2022, and December 14, 2022, Charter Authorizing Panel meetings. The motion was seconded by Ms. Saracini. The motion carried unanimously.

III. Action Agenda

III.1 Old Business

III.1.a. Consideration of Scholarmade Achievement Place of Arkansas' Response to Charter Renewal Finance Questions

Dr. Phyllis Anderson spoke on behalf of Scholarmade Achievement Place of Arkansas, and assured the panel that the district was in balance and that previous errors in the initial budget had been rectified.

Dr. Wright-McMurray questioned the cap on the rent amount, and Dr. Anderson indicated that when the school stopped growing or met their enrollment cap, then the rent would also be capped.

Dr. Wright-McMurray made a motion to accept the report from Scholarmade Achievement Place of Arkansas. The motion was seconded by Mr. Davis. The motion carried unanimously.

III.1.b. Review of Charters

Presenters: Matthew Sutherlin, Coordinator of Standards and Systems Support and Charter and Tiffani Grayer, Coordinator of School Performance

The Charter Authorizing Panel reviewed data from the following open-enrollment and district conversion charter schools: Academics Plus, Arkansas Connections Academy, Arkansas Lighthouse Academies, Arkansas Virtual Academy, eStem Public Charter Schools, Exalt Academy of Southwest Little Rock, Friendship Aspire Academies, Future School of Fort Smith, Hope Academy of Northwest Arkansas, Imboden Charter School, KIPP Delta Public Schools, Lisa Academy, Scholarmade Achievement Place, Westwind School of Performing Arts, Hot Springs Junior Academy, Hot Springs World Class High School, Lincoln High School, Polk County Virtual (Mena), Driven Virtual Academy (PCSSD), Academies of Rivercrest High School, River Valley Virtual Academy (Van Buren), Adventure Online Academy (Waldron), Warren Middle School, Academies of West Memphis.

There was an opportunity for panel members to ask questions of DESE staff and school personnel.

Panel members asked about teaching staff (licensure/certification, training, and retention), instruction, achievement, and growth. There were also questions about student and parent engagement.

Each school had an opportunity to share their challenges, successes, and plans to move students toward higher achievement.

Dr. Wright-McMurray made a motion to accept the report. Ms. Saracini seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

III.2. New Business

III.2.a. Consideration of Amendment for Arkansas Lighthouse Charter Schools

Presenter: Dorie Summons, Public School Charter Director

The district requested:

1. A transfer of the Capital City Lighthouse Charter School (6050707) in North Little Rock and Pine Bluff Lighthouse Charter Elementary (6050704) and Middle Schools (6050708) in Pine Bluff to Friendship Education Foundation
    a. Starting July 1, 2023, the current Capital City Lighthouse School (6050707) would be operated as a Friendship Aspire school, and the current Pine Bluff Lighthouse Elementary (6050704) and Middle Schools (6050708) would be closed, and
    b. Existing Friendship Aspire Schools in Pine Bluff will absorb the students from the Pine Bluff Lighthouse Elementary and Middle Schools; and
2. The Arkansas Lighthouse Charter Schools, Inc. charter would continue with all of the remaining campuses continuing operations and with its enrollment cap reduced by five hundred (500) students.
3. Arkansas Lighthouse Charter Schools, Inc. supported the Charter Amendment Application request from Friendship Education Foundation concerning the actions contemplated in this Amendment request.

Ms. LaShonda Noel, Arkansas Lighthouse Academies Superintendent, spoke on behalf of Arkansas Lighthouse Academies to provide a history of the schools. She addressed dissolving the partnership with their previous charter management organization. Ms. Noel also addressed the current fund balance and answered panel member questions related to the decision to transfer campuses to Friendship. Ms. Noel explained how Lighthouse and Friendship engaged stakeholders throughout this process.

Dr. Sarper Turker, Lighthouse Academies Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, discussed how Lighthouse can continue to grow and succeed through this possible transition. He spoke about the PLC process, a guaranteed and viable curriculum, and curriculum pacing.

Mr. Baldwin asked about the business aspect of the merger, including projections and budgets indicating what the financial position of Arkansas Lighthouse Academies would be after the merger.

Ms. Salia Khazi from the DESE Finance unit addressed that the model appears to be sustainable for Lighthouse with a lower enrollment.

Dr. Wright-McMurray had additional budget questions related to the Capital City Lighthouse Elementary Academy location.

Ms. Noel indicated that the $800,000 to secure the Capital City Lighthouse Elementary Academy building is an agreement with the Walton Foundation. There is an agreement that Arkansas Lighthouse Academies will not owe any money on the existing building.

Ms. Coffman summarized that Arkansas Lighthouse Academies will close three schools: Capital City Lighthouse Elementary Academy (6050707), Pine Bluff Lighthouse Elementary Academy (6050704), and Pine Bluff Lighthouse Middle School Academy (6050708). This will take the charter district from six schools to three schools.

Ms. Coffman also had a concern about the reduction in the enrollment cap. The current enrollment cap is 2,395 students. If the cap is reduced by 500 students, the enrollment would still be well below the cap.

Ms. Wagner indicated that they could reduce the cap today and then address again in April.

Ms. Saracini made a motion to approve the amendment to close three campuses and decrease their charter enrollment cap by 500 students for a new total of 1895 students. There was a second by Dr. Wright-McMurray. The motion carried unanimously.

III.2.b. Consideration of Amendment for Friendship Aspire Academies of Arkansas
Presenter: Dorie Summons, Public School Charter Director

The district requested:

1. To receive the Pine Bluff Lighthouse Elementary (6050704) and Middle Schools (6050708) in Pine Bluff and Capital City Lighthouse School (6050707) in North Little Rock from Lighthouse Arkansas Charter Schools.
2. Starting the 2023-2024 school year, continue school operations at the current Capital City Lighthouse (6050707) school as a Friendship Aspire school, and accept students from the Pine Bluff Lighthouse Elementary (6050704) and Middle Schools (6050708) into the appropriate, existing Friendship Aspire schools in Pine Bluff.
3. To add a new K-5 Friendship North Little Rock campus (former Capital City Lighthouse School (6050707) located in North Little Rock, Arkansas
   To open the Pine Bluff school locations Friendship Aspire-Hazel Street Elementary (3544701) Grades K-5, Pine Bluff Downtown Elementary School Grades K-2 (3544707), South East Middle School (3545700) Grades 6-8, South East High School (3545703) Grade 9.
4. To open North Little Rock location (the Lighthouse transferred school Capital City Elementary Grades 1-5.
5. To open Little Rock School locations Friendship Aspire Elementary (6061701) Grades K-5, and Friendship Aspire Middle School (6061702) Grades 6-8 in school year 2023-2024.
6. To increase our enrollment cap from 2,285 to 2,785 students in order to accommodate the additional students to be served pursuant to above
7. To receive a one-year school, state academic accountability waiver for the single Capital City North Little Rock (6050707) school location for the 2023-2024 school year.
8. To grant pre-Lottery enrollment preference waivers for any former Lighthouse student wishing to enroll in any Friendship school although current enrollment preferences and lottery processes would remain in place for students with siblings and/or students of Friendship employees or board members.
9. To enroll students at the North Little Rock location and provide any new Lighthouse student with intervention and additional education supports, e.g., one-on-one intervention, before and after school tutoring. The 10 year North Little Rock Campus Enrollment Projections are located in the Amendment Request narrative.

Joe Ford spoke on behalf of Friendship Aspire Academies about the plan to close Pine Bluff Lighthouse Elementary Academy and Pine Bluff Lighthouse Middle School Academy, and to continue the operations at Capital City Lighthouse Elementary Academy. The intention is for Friendship Aspire Academies campuses to absorb the students from the Pine Bluff Lighthouse Elementary and Middle School Academies. Mr. Ford indicated that there were parent meetings and staff meetings with both schools. He presented a transition timeline and spoke of enrollment cap projections. Mr. Ford indicated that Friendship hoped to pursue a slow growth model similar to the one that it used in absorbing Covenant Keepers. This plan would allow the absorption and growth of the Pine Bluff Lighthouse campuses through the Friendship network.

Dr. Wright-McMurray expressed appreciation to both sides (Lighthouse and Friendship) for coming to a resolution that is best for kids.

Ms. Saracini asked if Friendship felt comfortable in making these changes. It was confirmed.

Mr. Baldwin asked a question if any cash was changing between the two schools and asked for confirmation that the only building changing hands would be the Capital City Lighthouse building in North Little Rock. He also asked about the projected enrollment.

Mr. Ford addressed the review/finance concerns and spoke about the possible need to replace the air conditioning and windows in the existing facility. They projected the cost to be around two million dollars and were currently in talks with their lender.

Mr. Baldwin asked if the Friendship Foundation had the capacity to take on the expected debt. Mr. Ford indicated that the debt could be incurred.

Mr. Baldwin asked about staffing. Mr. Ford indicated that they would do everything in their power to make it possible for anyone who meets the Friendship standard to be hired.

Ms. Coffman wanted to clarify that at Friendship Aspire Academy Downtown Pine Bluff would be a K-3 campus, Friendship Aspire Pine Bluff Hazel Street would be K-5 campus, and Friendship Aspire Southeast Pine Bluff would be a 6-12 campus. She indicated that this would help in making the necessary LEA changes.

Dr. Wright-McMurray made a motion to approve the amendment to accept the transfer, open a new LEA, to offer preferential enrollment to Lighthouse students in the effected campuses, and to increase the enrollment cap by 500. There was a second by Ms. Saracini. The motion carried unanimously.

III.2.c. Consideration of the Updates to the Open Enrollment and District Conversion Charter School Applications
Presenter: Thomas Coy

Motion to approve the applications was made by Dr. Wright-McMurray and seconded by Ms. Saracini. The motion carried unanimously.

III.3. Adjournment
A motion to adjourn was made by Dr. Wright-McMurray and it was seconded by Ms. Saracini. The motion carried unanimously, and the meeting was adjourned at 2:09 PM.

Minutes prepared by Thomas Coy

Deborah Coffman
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Ms. Deborah Coffman, Charter Authorizing Panel Chair