

ALABAMA PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL COMMISSION

# CHARTER SCHOOL APPLICATION RECOMMENDATION REPORT 2018

*National Association of Charter School Authorizers*

**May 7, 2018**

*New Charter School Application for*

Woodland Preparatory

*Submitted by*

Washington County Students First

*Evaluation Team*

**TEAM LEAD:**     **Beth Seling**

**EVALUATORS:**   **Rachel Ksenyak**

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## INTRODUCTION

Following the passage of the Alabama School Choice and Student Opportunity Act (Act 2015-3) in March 2015, Governor Bently created the Alabama Public Charter School Commission (Commission). The mission of the eleven-member Commission is to authorize high-quality public charter schools in accordance with the powers expressly conferred on the commission in the act. To that end, the Commission executed a rigorous, high-quality process during 2018 to solicit and evaluate charter school proposals.

### Focus on Quality

The 2018 Request for Proposals and the resulting evaluation process are rigorous and demanding. The process is meant to ensure that approved charter school operators possess the capacity to implement a school model that is likely to dramatically increase student outcomes. Successful applicants will demonstrate high levels of expertise and capacity in the areas of curriculum and instruction, school finance, educational and operational leadership, and non-profit governance, as well as high expectations for excellence in student achievement and professional standards. An application that merits a recommendation for approval will present a clear, realistic picture of how the school expects to operate; be detailed in how this school will raise student achievement; and inspire confidence in the applicant's capacity to successfully implement the proposed academic and operational plans.

### Evaluation Process

For the 2018 RFP cycle, the Commission partnered with the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) to manage the application process and to provide independent, merit-based recommendations regarding whether to approve or deny each proposal. NACSA assembled an independent evaluation team that included both national and local expertise related to charter school start-up and operation. This report from the evaluation team is a culmination of the following stages of review:

#### PROPOSAL EVALUATION

The evaluation team conducted individual and group assessment of the merits of the proposal based on the complete written submission.

#### CAPACITY INTERVIEW

After reviewing the application and discussing the findings of their individual reviews, the evaluation team conducted an in-person interview to assess the team's overall capacity to implement the proposal as written in the application.

#### CONSENSUS JUDGMENT

Following the capacity interview, the evaluation team came to consensus regarding whether to recommend the proposal for approval or denial. The duty of the evaluation team is to recommend approval or denial of each application based on its merits against Commission-approved evaluation criteria. The authority and responsibility to decide whether to approve or deny each application rests with the members of the Commission.

### Report Contents

This evaluation report includes the following:

#### PROPOSAL OVERVIEW

Basic information about the proposed school as presented in the application.

#### RECOMMENDATION

An overall judgment regarding whether the proposal meets the criteria for approval.

#### EVALUATION

Analysis of the proposal based on three primary areas of plan development and the capacity of the applicant team to execute the plan as presented:

**Educational Program Design and Capacity:** curriculum and instructional design; student performance standards; high school graduation requirements and post-secondary readiness; school calendar and schedule; school culture; supplemental programming; special populations and at-risk students; student recruitment and enrollment; student discipline; parent and community involvement; and educational program capacity.

**Operations Plan and Capacity:** legal status and governing documents; organization charts; governing board; advisory bodies; staff structure; staffing plans, hiring, management and evaluation; professional development; performance management; facilities; start-up and ongoing operations; and operations capacity.

**Financial Plan and Capacity:** start-up and five year budgets; cash flow projections; revenue and expenditure assumptions; financial policies and controls; and financial management capacity.

## RATINGS CHARACTERISTICS

Evaluation teams assess each application against the published evaluation criteria. In general, the following definitions guide evaluator ratings:

### Meets the Standard

The response reflects a thorough understanding of key issues. It addresses the topic with specific and accurate information that shows thorough preparation; presents a clear, realistic picture of how the school expects to operate; and inspires confidence in the applicant's capacity to carry out the plan effectively.

### Partially Meets the Standard

The response meets the criteria in some respects, but lacks detail and/or requires additional information in one or more areas.

### Does Not Meet the Standard

The response is wholly undeveloped or significantly incomplete; demonstrates lack of preparation; is unsuited to the mission of the authorizer or otherwise raises substantial concerns about the viability of the plan or the applicant's ability to carry it out.

## PROPOSAL OVERVIEW

*Applicant Name:*

**Washington County Students First**

*Proposed School Name:*

**Woodland Preparatory**

*Mission:*

Woodland Preparatory's mission is to equip our students with 21st century skills by providing a safe and collaborative environment which will cultivate their individual academic and social development.

*Proposed Location:*

Washington County, Alabama

*Enrollment Projections:*

| <i>Academic Year</i> | <i>Planned # Students</i> | <i>Maximum # Students</i> | <i>Grades Served</i> |
|----------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|
| 2019-20              | 260                       | 260                       | PreK-7               |
| 2020-21              | 328                       | 328                       | PreK-8               |
| 2021-22              | 400                       | 400                       | PreK-9               |
| 2022-23              | 472                       | 472                       | PreK-10              |
| At Capacity          | 664                       | 664                       | PreK-12              |

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Recommendation:*

**Woodland Preparatory**

**Deny**

### *Summary Analysis:*

The Woodland Preparatory proposal does not meet the standard for approval.

The proposal partially meets the standard in the educational program and capacity section. The applicant presents a compelling need for a quality K-12 school option in rural Washington County; however, Woodland Prep's educational plan does not constitute a rigorous, quality instructional design that ensures students will meet or exceed standards, particularly in high school. During the interview, the applicant shared that Woodland Prep will be closely modeled after Harmony Public Schools in Texas; however, virtually no information was shared regarding Harmony's academic design or performance.

The proposal partially meets the standard in the operations plan and capacity section. The most significant concern is related to its engagement of Unity School Services (USS), its proposed education service provider (ESP). USS will provide comprehensive management services and operate Woodland Prep day-to-day. The application includes limited information about USS, its performance track record, or its capacity to support Woodland Prep. Additionally, the proposal does not address what other organizations were considered, how USS was selected, or a plan for holding the ESP accountable. A draft contract was not provided for review. While these elements are not requirements of the application, the applicant was not able to sufficiently address these critical aspects during the interview, which raises significant concerns about the viability of the ESP agreement.

The proposal partially meets the standard in the financial plan and capacity section. While the board has financial management expertise, no information is provided about its fundraising track record. This is a concern, as the applicant's plans include raising \$500,000 to launch the school and secure its facility.

### *Summary of Section Ratings:*

Opening and maintaining a successful, high-performing charter school depends on having a complete, coherent plan and identifying highly capable individuals to execute that plan. It is not an endeavor for which strengths in some areas can compensate for material weaknesses in others. *Therefore, in order to receive a recommendation for approval, the application must Meet the Standard in all areas.*

#### EDUCATION PROGRAM DESIGN & CAPACITY

Partially Meets the Standard

#### OPERATIONS PLAN & CAPACITY

Partially Meets the Standard

#### FINANCIAL PLAN & CAPACITY

Partially Meets the Standard

## EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM DESIGN & CAPACITY

**Woodland Preparatory**

**RATING:**

**Partially Meets the Standard**

### *Plan Summary:*

Washington County Schools First proposes a PreK-12 school that will open with 260 students in grades PreK-2 in Year 1; the school will reach capacity with 664 students through grade 12 by Year 6. Woodland Prep will be operated by Unity School Services (USS), an ESP founded by Dr. Soner Tarim, the founder and former CEO of Harmony Public Schools in Texas.

The vision of the school is to equip students with 21st Century workplace skills to address a workplace readiness gap in the area. Woodland Prep is based on five core values: Students First, Academic Excellence, Community Centered, and Accountability.

The school will implement a STREAMS-360 model (Science, Technology, Reading, Engineering, Art, Mathematics, and Social-Emotional Learning) developed by Dr. Tarim. The proposal identifies 26 non-negotiable elements/instructional strategies including Daily 5, Work in the Power Zone, University Collaboration, Field Trips, and Peer Tutoring.

### *Analysis:*

The Education Program Design and Capacity section partially meets the standard for approval. The applicant presents a compelling need for a quality K-12 school option in rural Washington County that effectively prepares students for success in college and area workforce opportunities. However, Woodland Prep's educational plan does not constitute a rigorous, quality instructional design that ensures students will meet or exceed standards. The application includes an extensive list of instructional strategies and explains how the strategies are research-based, but fails to convey how strategies will be used on a day-to-day basis within Woodland Prep classrooms. During the interview, the applicant shared that Woodland Prep will be closely modeled after Harmony Public Schools in Texas; however, virtually no information was shared regarding Harmony's academic design or performance.

The educational plan is particularly insufficient as it relates to high school. The high school plan includes Advanced Placement (AP) courses and dual-enrollment opportunities, and requires a 75-hour community service requirement in order for students to graduate. During the interview, the board stated that it has not yet identified dual enrollment partners, and will appoint a liaison to support students with community service opportunities -- demonstrating that plans for both programs are nascent. The applicant acknowledged that offering AP classes in such a small high school will be a financial challenge, and did not offer more than an assurance that it would be able to do so. (It is worth noting that the plan also does not address plans for pre-kindergarten, despite enrolling Pre-K students beginning in Year 1.)

The applicant also failed to present a comprehensive vision for the culture of the school. The proposal lists high-level concepts that contribute to culture (i.e. teaching social skills, role modeling, and clarifying classroom rules), and during the capacity interview, board members described the ideal culture as a warm, open environment. However, the applicant provided limited details about tangible systems, rituals, routines, and artifacts that would establish and maintain the desired school culture. Additionally, the application does not include clear plans for implementing student discipline, nor does it articulate how the selected discipline system will support and promote its school culture.

Finally, the applicant only partially meets the standard for education capacity. The applicant has engaged USS as its education service provider. The applicant provided limited information about USS, its performance track record, or its capacity to support Woodland Prep. During the interview, the board described that USS will be responsible for developing and delivering Woodland Prep's educational program: its curriculum, special education program, extra-curricular programming, principal search, and teacher professional development. Yet, when asked during the interview about USS' capacity to deliver these services, Dr. Tarim noted that USS has a staff of eight people, none of which are currently located in Alabama. No further information about roles or capacities was provided. Woodland Prep's proposal does not demonstrate K-12 education experience outside of USS, and given the lack of clarity around USS's services, staff and capacity, the overall capacity of the applicant to implement a quality educational program is a concern.

## OPERATIONS PLAN & CAPACITY

**Woodland Preparatory**

**RATING:**

**Partially Meets the Standard**

### *Plan Summary:*

Woodland Prep will be governed by a founding board consisting of seven members. The board will have the final authority to approve hiring and firing the principal and the ESP, approval of budget, and school policies and procedures. The ESP will be accountable to the board and will provide quarterly reports. The principal will report to the ESP weekly regarding operational and academic issues. The principal will also provide monthly reports to the Board during regularly scheduled board meetings.

The key members of Woodland Prep's leadership team will include but not limited to: principal, assistant principals, business manager, management company liaison, and Washington County Students First Board members. A principal candidate has not yet been identified.

The school will most likely be located on a newly constructed modular campus on a piece of land in Chatham, AL, offered to the board for purchase for \$100.

### *Analysis:*

The Operations Plan and Capacity section partially meets the standard for approval.

Woodland Prep's governance plan is partially developed. The board is fully formed and board member biographies and resumes are provided for seven members with relevant expertise including education, finance, legal, and non-profit service, and at least one prospective parent. The application identifies an appropriate delineation between board and staff responsibilities. Yet, while the board brings expertise in several key areas, members do not have extensive professional experience in K-12 education, charter schools, or school startup; for this, they have engaged USS and Dr. Tarim. The board's ability to hold USS accountable is a concern. The application does not address what other organizations were considered, how USS was selected, or a plan for holding the ESP accountable. During the interview, board members appropriately indicated that they would use an evaluation matrix; however, when listing the components of the matrix board members did not reference critical components such as academic or financial performance. Notably, the list of board responsibilities does not include overseeing and evaluating the ESP.

Staffing plans are also a concern. The staffing chart is not useful for determining how sensible or aligned staffing plans are, as it does not break down staffing for the K-8 program versus the high school program. Reviewers were unable to assess how well the staffing model aligns to the academic program, particularly as it relates to unique elements like college and career counseling, job shadowing and internships, and arts integration. One staffing assumption that is a particular concern is that the principal is the sole administrator through Year 2, when (s)he will be responsible for overseeing 328 students in grades K-9 and 29 instructional staff. At scale, the principal is responsible for managing and evaluating all 36 instructional staff, which raises further concerns about organizational capacity.

Performance management plans are underdeveloped. The frequency and use of interim assessments—and their alignment to the curriculum – is unclear. The applicant failed to articulate how teachers would be trained, empowered, and expected to use data to drive instruction. Corrective action plans, and levels of performance that would trigger corrective action, are not developed.

Finally, Woodland Prep's facilities plan raises concerns around facilities financing. While the applicant provided a plan for purchasing land and constructing a facility, as well as a letter of intent from a school developer and facilities financing company called American Charter Development (ACD), there are several questions and concerns regarding this arrangement. During the interview, the applicant stated that ACD offered a 9 percent interest rate on the loan, which is high for charter school financing. While the applicant noted that they are exploring lending options with local banks as well, they did not identify other non-bank lenders beyond ACD, nor did they solicit a third party opinion on ACD and its proposed terms. No contingency plans are provided in the event that the primary facility plan falls through.



## FINANCIAL PLAN & CAPACITY

**Woodland Preparatory**

**RATING:**

**Partially Meets the Standard**

### *Plan Summary:*

The board delegates to its ESP, Unity School Services, the responsibility for purchasing, accounts payable, accounts receivable, payroll, human resources, benefits administration, information technology, and insurance.

The principal or business manager will prepare detailed financial statements for analysis. The board will review these financial statements during regular meetings.

Woodland Prep's startup (Year 0) budget assumes a startup loan for \$200,000.00 and expenses totaling \$198,600.00. Woodland operates with a positive fund balance in each of its first five years of operation. In Year 1, total revenues are projected at \$2,236,762.00 and expenses at \$2,223,462.00. In Year 5, total revenues are projected at \$4,267,053.00 and expenses at \$3,987,506.00. Combined federal, state, and local per pupil is estimated at \$8,869 per student.

### *Analysis:*

The Financial Plan and Capacity section partially meets the standard for approval. Woodland provided detailed financial plans; however, unreasonable fundraising assumptions raise concerns about the budget's viability. The Woodland prep team demonstrates limited development capacity and roles and responsibilities related to fundraising are unclear.

The proposal contains reasonable assurance that if granted a charter, the school will have sound systems, policies, and processes for financial planning, accounting, and internal controls. The proposal also speaks to the organization's plan to outsource its day-to-day financial management, but the financial plan section does explain safeguards that will be in place if the school has to manage its own finances.

Overall, the financial plan assumptions are reasonable. The applicant provided detailed start-up and five-year budgets that show a positive fund balance in each of the first five years of operation. The budget includes a 15 percent management fee for ESP for operating the school, which is aligned with market rates.

Despite the reasonable budget assumptions, the applicant proposes to secure a \$200,000 start-up loan, and facilities financing, both from ACD at a 9 percent interest rate, which is relatively high. When asked about the rate during the interview, the applicant stated that it would first try to fundraise startup and facilities shortfalls, identifying \$500,000.00 as a fundraising target. The board did not provide evidence of its fundraising track record or capacity, nor did the application include letters of interest or support from potential donors, which is a concern.

## EVALUATOR BIOGRAPHIES

### *Evaluator's Name*

Beth Seling

Beth Seling is an independent consultant specializing in charter school startup and authorization. She began her career with the KIPP Foundation, supporting the organization's expansion as it grew from two flagship schools to 68 schools across the U.S. After KIPP, Beth joined Chicago Public Schools as their senior director of recruitment and selection in the district's charter schools office. In that position, she directed the evaluation of new charter and turnaround schools under the Renaissance 2010 Chicago school reform initiative. Most recently, Beth was the founding Chief Operating Officer of 4.0 Schools, a New Orleans-based incubator of new schools, education services, and technologies. Beth consults with authorizers and organizations nationwide on developing and instituting high quality authorizing practices, evaluating authorizer practice, capacity building, and strategic planning.

### *Evaluator's Name*

Rachel Ksenyak

Beth Seling is an independent consultant specializing in charter school startup and authorization. She began her career with the KIPP Foundation, supporting the organization's expansion as it grew from two flagship schools to 68 schools across the U.S. After KIPP, Beth joined Chicago Public Schools as their senior director of recruitment and selection in the district's charter schools office. In that position, she directed the evaluation of new charter and turnaround schools under the Renaissance 2010 Chicago school reform initiative. Most recently, Beth was the founding Chief Operating Officer of 4.0 Schools, a New Orleans-based incubator of new schools, education services, and technologies. Beth consults with authorizers and organizations nationwide on developing and instituting high quality authorizing practices, evaluating authorizer practice, capacity building, and strategic planning.

### *Evaluator's Name*

Anthony Oliver

Anthony Oliver is currently an assistant principal in the Jefferson County School System in Birmingham, Alabama. Most recently, Anthony served as executive director at Breakthrough Birmingham, an education non-profit dedicated to providing high-quality academic programming to underserved students and preparing the next generation of teachers. Anthony has also served as a high-school mathematics teacher and coach, and has worked as a principal intern at Newton North High School where he worked to create access to challenging academic curriculum for African American students and students from low socioeconomic classes. Anthony holds a B.A. in mathematics from the Virginia Military Institute, an M.A.E. in secondary education - mathematics curriculum and instruction from the University of Alabama at Birmingham, and an Ed.M in school leadership from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.