

ALABAMA PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL COMMISSION

# CHARTER SCHOOL APPLICATION RECOMMENDATION REPORT 2017

*National Association of Charter School Authorizers*

**May 31, 2017**

*New Charter School Application for*

University Charter School

*Submitted by*

University Charter School, Inc./University of West Alabama

*Evaluation Team*

**TEAM LEAD:** **Allen Mueller**

**EVALUATORS:** **Mark Martin**

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## INTRODUCTION

Following the passage of the Alabama School Choice and Student Opportunity Act (Act 2015-3) in March 2015, Governor Bentley 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 2017 to solicit and evaluate charter school proposals.

### Focus on Quality

The 2017 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 2017 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:*

**University Charter School, Inc./University of West Alabama**

### *Proposed School Name:*

**University Charter School**

### *Mission:*

The mission of University Charter School is to be a rural, diverse K-12 school that cultivates independent thought, promotes the building of character and civic responsibility and is committed to preparing all students for personal and professional success through the discovery of individual learning pathways in a rigorous and integrated Science, Technology, Reading, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics (STREAM) focused, project-based and place-based curriculum.

### *Proposed Location:*

Sumter County, Alabama

### *Enrollment Projections:*

<i>Academic Year</i>	<i>Planned # Students</i>	<i>Maximum # Students</i>	<i>Grades Served</i>
2018-19	150	150	PK-5
2019-20	275	275	PK-12
2020-21	350	350	PK-12
2021-22	425	425	PK-12
2022-23	500	500	PK-12
At Capacity (2027)	700	700	PK-12

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### University Charter School

*Recommendation:*

**APPROVE**

### *Summary Analysis:*

University Charter School's (UCS) application meets the standard for approval in its education plan, operations plan, and financial plan. The overall plan is focused, well written, and supported through a strong board and a critical strategic partnership with the University of West Alabama (UWA). The planned partnership with UWA adds capacity to the applicant team and strength to the application in all three application areas.

The education plan includes a partnership with UWA that gives UCS access to UWA instructional resources through the School of Education. UCS instructors can receive training and professional development through the university and UCS students can participate in dual enrollment through UWA and align their course schedules in preparation for their college career.

The operations plan allows UWA to lease on-campus facility space to UCS and will provide key support services to UCS, including maintenance and security services. Two UWA staff will be voting members of the UCS board and the agreement is memorialized through a cooperative endeavor agreement that details roles on both sides.

The financial plan also leverages a partnership with UWA that is extremely beneficial to the charter school. Key services are provided in-kind and the facility is leased to UCS at a cost of \$1.00 annually. UWA's offer to train UCS board and staff members in budgeting and financial management should be a critical support for the school.

Ultimately, the strong evidence of board capacity in all three plan areas and the strength of the UCS/UWA partnership convinced the review team that the application meets the standard for approval. The review team had initial concerns about the plan to add grades 6–12 in Year Two, but UCS's plan to add a second school leader, increase board size, and limit enrollment alleviated these concerns.

### *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

Meets the Standard

#### OPERATIONS PLAN & CAPACITY

Meets the Standard

#### FINANCIAL PLAN & CAPACITY

Meets the Standard

## EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM DESIGN & CAPACITY

**University Charter School**

**RATING:**

**Meets the Standard**

### *Plan Summary:*

University Charter School (UCS) proposes serving 600 students in grades K-12 in Sumter County. UCS's program focuses on a student-centered approach, the main characteristics of which are personalized learning, competency-based promotion and progression, off-campus learning opportunities, and student ownership of the education process. Curriculum will be geared toward college and career readiness, and UCS will partner with local businesses and UWA to create pathways that prepare students for life after high school. UCS will emphasize dual-enrollment and service learning.

UCS students will participate in the "Worlds of Work" program offered through Alabama's Region 3 Workforce Development Council. The program is a partnership between business and educational institutions that offers students an overview of high-demand careers. The majority of UCS's founding team are instructors or administrators at UWA. An ongoing partnership between UCS and UWA is central to the implementation of the plan and operation of the school.

### *Analysis:*

The Education Program Design and Capacity section meets the standard for approval. The proposed curriculum and instructional strategies reflect the needs of the target population and should ensure all students meet or exceed state expectations.

UCS's plan will focus on the five industry clusters selected by the Region 3 Workforce Development Council for their region—automotive, health care, construction, manufacturing, and professional and business services— and will increase the likelihood that students will graduate with training in areas offering higher-education and job opportunities (Application p. 6). The planned partnership with UWA creates dual-enrollment opportunities and a strong link to post-graduation opportunities for students.

The education plan is detailed and a strong research base is provided. UCS's four central instructional principals—personalized learning, competency-based learning, learning can happen anywhere, and increased student agency over learning—should support students who are at-risk of failing or dropping out by giving vulnerable students the time, attention, and support they need to be successful (Application pp. 10–11). Implementation of the Plan, Do, Check, Act (PDCA) model breaks down decision-making into logical steps that include goal-setting (plan), authentic experience (act), reflection (check), and to implement process improvements (act) (Application p. 13). This approach effectively demonstrates the applicant's focus on collecting and using data to improve student outcomes, as does the annual curriculum evaluation, review, and revision process (Application p. 21).

UCS's five core values—communication, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, and character education—align with the school mission and will create and sustain a positive culture of high expectations that is sound and inclusive of all students. The applicant clearly demonstrated the capacity to implement and sustain the plan during the capacity interview. The review team was impressed with the applicant team's passion and familiarity with the most detailed aspects of the plan and knowledge about the research base informing the plan. Applicant resumes provide persuasive evidence of capacity to implement this plan and the deep partnership with UWA, particularly the School of Education, should add important capacity and support during the start-up phase and after the school has opened.

## OPERATIONS PLAN & CAPACITY

**University Charter School**

**RATING:**

**Meets the Standard**

### *Plan Summary:*

The UCS governing board will have seven voting members, two of which are employees of UWA, and one ex-officio member, who is dean of the UWA College of Education. Two board members will be parents of children attending the school. The board will form a number of advisory councils; one governing board member will sit on each advisory council. The board plans to expand to 11 voting members upon reaching full capacity in Year Five.

UCS will have two principals, one for primary grades and one for middle and high-school grades. Operations will be overseen by a chief operating officer (COO) who reports to the principals. UCS will partner with UWA to recruit instructional staff. The school's initial facility and land for construction of its permanent facility will be leased from UWA. The partnership between UCS and UWA is memorialized through a cooperative endeavor agreement.

### *Analysis:*

The Operations Plan and Capacity section meets the standard for approval. The board structure is clearly described and lines of authority, roles, and responsibilities of the governing board, school staff, and strategic partners are explicitly delineated and demonstrate an understanding of the proper role of a policy-based governing board.

UCS's plan to elect two governing board members from UWA will ensure that this critical partnership remains strong and stable; the fact that those two members represent a minority of board members will ensure that the school's interests are not secondary to those of its largest strategic partner. The cooperative endeavor agreement provided with the application further delineates the relationship between UCS and UWA and underscores the school's independence and UCS's role as external partner and provider of key services (Application p. 599).

Proposed board members have a broad and deep set of skills that contribute significantly to the school's operational capacity. Current board members have demonstrated capacity in the following areas: administration, mathematics instruction, fundraising, coaching, public relations, grant writing, science education, business, marketing, and engineering. The review team believes that these skills demonstrate the capacity necessary to implement and monitor the proposed operations plan. The applicant's plan to expand the board to increase capacity over time is clearly described and sound (Application pp. 71–72). The plan to distribute school leadership between two principals, one over elementary grades and one over middle and high-school grades will create capacity to allow the school to add multiple grades in Year Two. The shared leadership model aligns with the school's core value of collaboration. Creating a COO position in the administrative structure creates focused attention and additional capacity over operations and allows the school's instructional leaders to remain focused on students' instructional needs. Having the COO report directly to the school's instructional leaders keeps lines of authority and priorities within the school building clear.

The facility plan is detailed and memorialized through an agreement with UWA. The proximity between the proposed school site and the strategic partner delivering services increases operational efficiency and communication between all parties.



## FINANCIAL PLAN & CAPACITY

**University Charter School**

**RATING:**

**Meets the Standard**

### *Plan Summary:*

University Charter School's annual budget will be created by the principal and chief operating officer, with support from the UCS board treasurer, finance committee, and UWA's vice president of financial affairs. UWA will provide training to the board and senior staff in the areas of budgeting, budget analysis and forecasting, financial management, financial systems development, accounting, and reporting.

UCS has budgeted \$346,500 in start-up revenue, of which \$51,167 is in in-kind services from UWA and \$295,333 has been collected through fundraising. Total start-up expenses are budgeted at \$309,477, of which \$124,893 are personnel costs, including tax and benefits, \$22,000 are contracted services, \$89,750 are operations costs, and \$72,834 are facilities costs.

Nursing, security services, and maintenance/cleaning services are provided through an agreement with UWA. Total anticipated revenue for Year One is \$1,186,822, growing to \$3,791,211 by Year Five. Expenses total \$1,124,319 in Year One, growing to \$3,690,032 by Year Five.

### *Analysis:*

The Financial Plan and Capacity section meets the standard for approval. The plan demonstrates an understanding of sound financial policies and processes. The plan for the principal to create and submit a "multi-year model for context and planning" annually to the board, in addition to the budget, demonstrates UCS's strategic approach and commitment to thoroughness (Application p. 100).

The description of internal controls and processes for self-monitoring indicates that the applicant understands the responsibility of being a strong steward of public funds. A sound plan is in place to document all financial transactions and submit to the board's finance committee for monthly review (Application p.101). The plan contains a highly-detailed table delineating financial roles, accountability, and responsibilities within the school. The review team was impressed with the clarity and thoroughness of the plan.

The facility has been secured at a cost of \$1.00 per year to the school, allowing these funds to remain in the classroom in support of students (Application p. 761). The services UWA will provide, such as utilities, facility repair and maintenance, security services, and cleaning, are documented in the budget, but are provided as in-kind services to the school, which is beneficial to the school's bottom line.

The review team was particularly impressed by the applicant's demonstration of fundraising capacity. The board's ability to raise and document \$357,150 to fund start-up activities is a powerful indicator of its ability to provide strong support for the school (Application p. 764). Board members have experience in fundraising, grant writing, and overseeing business. Through their familiarity with the plan and an understanding of their roles, board members demonstrated to the review team during the interview that they have the capacity to implement and oversee the plan presented in the application.

## EVALUATOR BIOGRAPHIES

### *Evaluator's Name*

Allen Mueller

Allen Muller is a Strategic Account Executive with Vantage Learning. He is the former Executive Director of New Schools for Georgia where he supported teams of charter school applicants as they developed, started, and ran new charter schools. Allen previously ran the Office of Innovation at Atlanta Public Schools, where he directed district authorizing, supported district charter schools, and facilitated best-practice sharing between all schools in the district. Allen holds an M.A. from San Francisco State University and is A.B.D. in English Literature from University of Wisconsin-Madison.

### *Evaluator's Name*

Mark Martin

Mark Martin is a Resident Fellow with Jobs For the Future's Pathways to Prosperity team. Mark just completed his third year as doctoral resident from the Harvard Graduate School of Education Leadership program (EDLD). As a Gordon M. Ambach Fellow he served with the Alabama State Department of Education's Division of Career/Technical Education and Workforce Development during the summer of 2015. As co-founder and School Director of Langston Hughes Academy, Mark led the preK-8 charter school to six consecutive years of academic growth. He authored the proposal to build New Orleans' first post-Katrina school, a \$32 million project. He is a founding Board Member of THRIVE, Louisiana's first urban residential school, which posted the highest academic gains in state history. Mark graduated with a B.S. in Finance from the University of Alabama and earned an MBA from the University of Georgia.

### *Evaluator's Name*

Anthony Oliver

Anthony Oliver is currently an Assistant Principal in the Jefferson County School System in Birmingham. Most recently Anthony served as Executive Director at Breakthrough Birmingham, an education non-profit dedicated to providing high quality academic programming to underserved students while preparing the next generation of teachers. Anthony has served as a high-school mathematics teacher and coach, and has also 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, M.A.E. in Secondary Education-Mathematics Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Alabama at Birmingham, and a Ed. M in School Leadership from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.