

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*

Dr. Mary L. Ruffin Academy

*Submitted by*

Dr. Mary L. Ruffin Academy

*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 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 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:*

**Dr. Mary L. Ruffin Academy**

*Proposed School Name:*

**Dr. Mary L. Ruffin Academy**

*Mission:*

The mission of Dr. Mary L. Ruffin Academy is to educate and empower students of a diverse K-5 school to reach their maximum potential.

*Proposed Location:*

Bessemer, Alabama

*Enrollment Projections:*

<i>Academic Year</i>	<i>Planned # Students</i>	<i>Maximum # Students</i>	<i>Grades Served</i>
2019-20	180	180	K-2
2020-21	240	240	K-3
2021-22	300	300	K-4
2022-23	360	360	K-5
At Capacity	360	360	K-5

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Recommendation:*

**Dr. Mary L. Ruffin Academy**

**Deny**

### *Summary Analysis:*

Dr. Mary L. Ruffin Academy's (DMLRA) proposal does not meet the standard for approval. Although the DMLRA team brings passion and commitment to creating a quality school option for students in Bessemer, they do not demonstrate the collective qualifications to successfully operate a school.

The most substantial deficiency of the application is that the content is substantially similar to that of another proposal reviewed by evaluators during this application cycle, without any citation or reference to its source. At many points throughout the interview, members of the DMLRA team demonstrated a lack of familiarity with the content of the application.

The educational program and capacity section does not meet the standard because the proposal's education program is substantially underdeveloped. DMLRA's curricular and instructional program includes an extensive list of instructional approaches without a clear or cohesive narrative for how they are aligned to create a rigorous, aligned educational program for students.

The operations plan and capacity section does not meet the standard. The plan for effective governance of DMLRA is substantially underdeveloped. The application indicates that five board members have been identified, and one more is being interviewed; however, only one resume is provided with the application. DMLRA's staffing plan is also a concern because the organizational and staffing charts provided with the application do not align with the educational program or with each other. Finally, DMLRA's facility plan lacks detail and raises concerns about a conflict of interest that the applicant did not sufficiently address.

The financial plan and capacity section does not meet the standard because the financial plan is incomplete (only going through Year 2) and relies on fundraising that is unsubstantiated. Although the applicant provides assurances that it will have sound financial systems in place, the financial plan submitted with the application is not viable and the DMLRA team does not demonstrate sufficient financial capacity.

In terms of capacity, the application only identifies one team member, and although he has experience in teaching and information technology at the post-secondary level, he has no teaching or leadership experience in K-12 education. Three individuals attended the capacity interview, including the proposed principal, but his qualifications were not provided in the application and limited details were provided during the interview; thus, his capacity for leading the school is unknown.

### *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

Does Not Meet the Standard

#### OPERATIONS PLAN & CAPACITY

Does Not Meet the Standard

#### FINANCIAL PLAN & CAPACITY

Does Not Meet the Standard

*Plan Summary:*

DMLRA proposes a dual-language Spanish immersion school serving 180 students in kindergarten through second grade in year one, and 360 students in grades K-5 at scale. DMLRA's academic model emphasizes STEAM: Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math implemented through project-based learning. All classrooms will utilize a "platooning" model, with teachers serving as experts in one or more content areas rather than generalists. The academic focus at DMLRA is not geared towards any one curriculum, but rather aligned to the Common Core State Standards, Alabama Academic Content Standards, and Next Generation Science Standards.

DMLRA offers an extended day and extended academic year for its students. The school day runs from 7:40 am until 3:30 pm Monday through Thursday. Every Friday, school releases at 12:30 pm for students, allowing for purposeful and productive staff professional development time during the second half of the day.

DMLRA will encourage positive culture that feels safe and respectful through Positive Intervention and Behavior Supports (PBIS) and DMLRA's POWER values: Perseverance, Ownership, Wonder, Everything with Excellence, and Resilient.

*Analysis:*

The Education Program Design and Capacity section does not meet the standard for approval. The most substantial deficiency of the educational program is that the content of the plan is substantially similar to that of another proposal reviewed by evaluators during this application cycle, without any citation or reference to its source. When asked during the interview if DMLRA collaborated with and/or based their proposal on another school, the applicant noted that they looked at other charter schools as models, but did not explicitly state where the material came from and whether they had permission to use it. During the interview, members of the applicant team seemed unfamiliar with what was written in the proposal. When asked even the most basic questions about the education plan, such as a request to explain the school's plan to implement project-based learning – a key design element of the proposed school – the applicant was unable to reproduce what was written in the proposal.

Separate from this issue, the proposal's education program is substantially underdeveloped. DMLRA's curricular and instructional program includes many approaches and frameworks, without a clear or cohesive narrative for how they are aligned to create a rigorous, cohesive educational program for students. For instance, implementing 'platooning' with teachers who are content area experts seems at odds with a cross-curricular project-based learning approach. During the interview, the team did not sufficiently explain how the two programs worked in concert with one another.

The DMLRA education plan includes inconsistencies throughout the narrative. For example, the proposal narrative initially begins with a statement that the primary design feature of the school is its dual-language, Spanish immersion program, but this component is not addressed again in the description of the instructional and curricular program. Also, throughout the narrative the school's opening date wavers back and forth between 2018 and 2019.

Although the DMLRA team brings passion and commitment to creating a quality school option for students in Bessemer, they do not demonstrate the collective qualifications to successfully operate a school. The proposal only names only one applicant team member, Mr. Christopher Ruffin. Three individuals attended the capacity interview: Mr. Ruffin, Mr. Christopher Rice, and Mr. Renard Davis. In the application Mr. Ruffin is identified as the prospective executive director and board president, yet he has no K-12 teaching or leadership experience. During the interview Mr. Rice was introduced as the prospective principal, but his qualifications were not provided in the application and limited details were provided during the interview; thus, his capacity for leading the school is unknown. Mr. Davis attended the interview, and was introduced as a consultant and advisor who was involved in writing the application, but the details of this relationship are unknown. A fourth individual, Mr. Smith, is named in the proposal as a consultant, but he did not attend the interview and his qualifications and his role moving forward are unclear.

## OPERATIONS PLAN & CAPACITY

**Dr. Mary L. Ruffin Academy**

**RATING:**

**Does Not Meet the Standard**

### *Plan Summary:*

DMLRA's board consists of a minimum of five and maximum of nine members. The board will hold regular meetings at least once a month during the school year and the August meeting shall serve as the board's annual meeting.

The DMLRA leadership team will include the principal and the chief operating officer. The principal will report directly to the DMLRA Board of Directors. DMLRA employees will receive an annual employment contract, which outlines their terms of employment, annual pay, supervisor, and job description.

DMLRA will lease Triumph the Church and Kingdom of God in Christ facility located at 1431 13th Ave in North Bessemer. The facility includes more than thirty classrooms, a cafeteria, auditorium, and a designated space for art.

### *Analysis:*

The Operations Plan and Capacity section does not meet the standard for approval.

The plan for effective governance of DMLRA is underdeveloped. The application indicates that five board members have been identified, and one more is being interviewed; however, the only resume provided with the application is Mr. Ruffin's, and it is unclear whether he will be a board or staff member. No further credentials and/or documentation are provided to demonstrate the board's capacity. The proposal states that DMLRA has filed articles of incorporation, but copies of filings were not provided with the application.

DMLRA's staffing plan is a concern. The organizational and staffing charts provided with the application do not align with the educational program nor with each other. Key positions described in the narrative are not included in the organizational and/or staffing charts and vice versa. For instance, the proposal states that the DMLRA leadership team will be comprised of the principal and chief operating officer, to whom all non-instructional staff will report; the COO role is not reflected in the organizational or staffing charts or the budget.

DMLRA does not demonstrate an effective plan for measuring and evaluating academic progress. During the interview, when asked to describe the proposed assessment plan, the applicant looked through the proposal for several minutes, noted that they were unable to find the information at this time, and stated that they would do standardized testing. The applicant's inability to name specific assessments is concerning, and provides further evidence that the team is unfamiliar with the written proposal.

Finally, DMLRA's facility plan is underdeveloped and raises concerns. The applicant proposes to lease Triumph the Church and Kingdom of God in Christ facility, but it is unclear whether or how well the facility accommodates the school since space needs are not provided, and limited documentation is provided to substantiate the facility's size, configuration, or condition. Furthermore, the pastor of the church who signed the memorandum of understanding for its use is Mr. Ruffin's father. During the interview, the applicant failed to provide clear, appropriate plans to address this conflict.

## FINANCIAL PLAN & CAPACITY

**Dr. Mary L. Ruffin Academy**

**RATING:**

**Does Not Meet the Standard**

### *Plan Summary:*

DMLRA's school leader will be responsible for working with the finance committee of the board – with input from school staff – to prepare annual budgets. Variance reports will be prepared and sent to the board quarterly. The school leader will sign all checks and approve purchases; checks in excess of \$5,000 will require the second signature of a board member. During Year 1, the school leader will be responsible for day-to-day management of the school's finances; beginning in Year 2 these responsibilities will be transferred to the operations manager. The school will conduct an annual audit.

DMLRA proposes to secure \$309,000 in revenue during Year 0, including a \$195,000 charter startup grant and \$14,000 in board member contributions. Total expenses in Year 0 are \$254,850.

Total expenses in Year 1 are \$1,546,644 when serving 180 students, and \$2,347,526 in Year 2 when serving 240 students. Facilities lease costs are \$150,000 in Year 1 and \$175,000 in Year 2. In its first two years of operation, DMLRA assumes \$295,000 in charter school grants.

### *Analysis:*

The Financial Plan and Capacity section does not meet the standard for approval. Although the applicant provides assurances that it will have sound financial systems in place, the financial plan submitted with the application is not viable and the DMLRA team does not demonstrate sufficient financial capacity.

DMLRA's financial plan is incomplete: the application includes a startup (Year 0) budget and a budget for the first two years of operation, but does not include a budget for Years 3-5. The application budget includes reference errors throughout, meaning that budget formulas contained errors and did not calculate. As such, the evaluation team is unable to assess the annual bottom line, and ultimately, the plan's viability.

Despite the formatting challenges of the budget, fundraising assumptions alone raise significant concerns about the plan's viability. The startup budget shows \$295,000 in unsubstantiated fundraising and \$14,000 from board member contributions. During the interview, the team stated that it would raise \$673,200 during Year 1 (inconsistent with fundraising figures shown in the budget). However, the application does not demonstrate that the team has fundraising experience.

Finally, the DMLRA application does not address the team's financial capacity. Mr. Ruffin, the only identified member of the applicant team in the application, does not have professional financial management experience. During the interview, Mr. Davis, identified as a consultant for the team, addressed questions about the budget, although his role in launching and operating the school – and his financial management expertise – are unclear.

## 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*

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.

### *Evaluator's Name*

Rachel Ksenyak

Rachel Ksenyak is a Denver-based education consultant with a decade of experience in charter school authorizing, program development, strategy, and human capital. Rachel served as the Senior Director of Talent for STRIVE Preparatory Schools, where she was responsible for recruiting and hiring excellent teachers, leaders, and staff to serve more than 3,500 students. Rachel was the Senior Director of Recruitment and Selection for the Office of New Schools at Chicago Public Schools, where she managed the recruitment, selection, and authorization of new charter, turnaround, and other autonomous schools. Rachel also served as the Director of Authorizer Development at NACSA, providing strategic counsel to public school districts, nonprofits, and state education agencies across the country. Rachel is a founding board member of 5280 High School in Denver. Rachel earned an M.Ed. in educational leadership from the Broad Residency in Urban Education, an M.A. in the social sciences from the University of Chicago, and a B.F.A. in dance from Ohio University.