New Charter School Application for
Eugene Edwards Technology Charter School

Submitted by
Save The Youth

Evaluation Team
TEAM LEAD: Justin Testerman
EVALUATORS: Harold Lee
              Anthony Oliver
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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 OVERVIEW

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

PROPOSAL EVALUATION

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

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.

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.
Application Name: 

Save The Youth

Proposed School Name: 

Eugene Edwards Technology Charter School

Mission:

The educational mission of Save The Youth (STY) is to educate at-risk students by administering a specialized STEM education program to meet the academic needs of each individual, resulting in the continuation of student success or overcoming academic challenges.

Proposed Location:

City of Bessemer, Jefferson County

Enrollment Projections:

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<th>Maximum # Students</th>
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Eugene Edwards Technology Charter School

Recommendation:
DENY

Summary Analysis:

Save the Youth's proposal does not meet the standard for approval.

The Educational Program Design & Capacity section does not meet the standard for approval because the applicants failed to present a coherent and comprehensive education program or school culture, and the founding team lacks sufficient professional K-12 experience.

The Operations Plan & Capacity section does not meet the standard for approval because of a lack of governance capacity, a failure to adequately describe the relationship with the proposed education service provider (ESP), and an inadequate performance management plan to track the performance of the school.

The Financial Plan and Capacity does not meet the standard for approval because it is incomplete and contained significant errors and omissions in the budget.

Save the Youth is an existing non-profit corporation that has provided a variety educational and social services to the community for over twenty years. The governing board is comprised of accomplished community members with long track records of public service and deep connection to the Bessemer community. The proposed STEM focus is a great fit for the region's aerospace industry and could provide many opportunities for rich partnerships.

The Alabama Public Charter School Commission's 2018 Application did not require evidence of success in the ESP's, Pinnacle Behavioral Services, current schools or the ESP contract, which are critical pieces of evidence to consider in order to determine the viability of Save the Youth's success in Alabama. If the application is approved, the evaluation team recommends that the Commission (1) obtain detailed and current academic, operational, and financial performance information; and (2) review the contract between the governing board and Pinnacle Behavioral Services to ensure alignment with the application.

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
EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM DESIGN & CAPACITY

Plan Summary:

The applicant, Save the Youth, proposes to partner with an education service provider (ESP) to create an elementary STEM-focused school to serve students with significant behavioral and/or learning challenges. Robert Marzano's "Dimensions of Learning" would provide a framework for the educational program, which is aligned to the Alabama College and Career Ready Standards.

Pinnacle Behavioral Services, the ESP, would provide therapeutic and mental health services to students and families. The school would open with grades K-2 and grow to grades K-7, adding one grade each year. The school will use Positive Behavior Interventions Strategies and Restorative Justice to guide the creation of a positive school culture and discipline system.

Analysis:

The Educational Program Design & Capacity section does not meet the standard for approval because the applicant failed to present a coherent and comprehensive education program or school culture, and the founding team lacks sufficient professional K-12 experience.

The school overview section describes a vision for a STEM-focused program that is not supported by the responses in this section and the description of the planned curriculum and instructional practices lack any substantive detail. For example, the only reference to the curriculum are several passages that are cut and pasted (without attribution) from the website of the science curriculum website (Science4Us). No information on curriculum for Math, English Language Arts, Social Studies, or other subjects is provided. The proposal responses do not present a strong framework for a STEM program; for example, the daily schedule provided is fairly traditional and does not reflect any additional time spent on STEM-focused activities.

In both the proposal and capacity interview the applicant identified general ideas about the type of school culture they wish to create, but failed to provide specific details on how they would go about creating it. The proposal did not contain a well-developed plan to develop school culture. The applicants outlined elements from the Ron Clark Academy (Atlanta) that they would like to replicate—Restorative Justice, Positive Behavior Intervention Strategies, and Satori Alternatives to Managing Aggression—but failed to describe how these programs would work together in the proposed school with an elementary-aged population.

The founding board has strong experience in youth development work and social services but lacks sufficient professional K-12 experience, as no board members have experience working in a K-12 setting. During the capacity interview, board members were unable to provide substantive details about the planned curriculum and conflated the state standards with a planned curriculum for the school, indicating a lack of capacity to effectively govern a public school.

The school's proposed STEM focus is well-aligned to local aerospace industry career opportunities and could be a strong fit for the community. The board is well-positioned to broker relationships that can bring local professional expertise in STEM fields into the school.
Plan Summary:
The applicant, Save the Youth, is an existing non-profit corporation that has provided a variety educational and social services to the community for over twenty years. The governing board is currently comprised of nine individuals with diverse skills sets such as business, finance, nonprofit management, and science. The board has no immediate plans for adding new members and is supported by an Advisory Board.

The board of Save the Youth is proposing to launch a charter school in partnership with Pinnacle Behavioral Health, who would act as the ESP. Pinnacle will work with the board to staff the school and will provide professional development before and during the school year. The applicant proposes to use Accucess as its main assessment to measure academic progress every nine weeks. The proposed school will be located in a former elementary school in Bessemer that is owned by Save the Youth.

The school leader has not been identified.

Analysis:
The Operations Plan & Capacity section does not meet the standard for approval because of a lack of governance capacity, a failure to adequately describe the relationship with the proposed ESP, and an inadequate performance management plan to track the performance of the school.

The current governing board for Save the Youth does not demonstrate the capacity to govern a public charter school. Though the board has operated for many years as a non-profit, they did not adequately describe the changes to the board's operation that would be necessary if approved for a charter. The applicants also failed to describe an effective governing structure, for example, the board does not include any standing committees, instead relying on ad hoc committees "on an as needed basis, such as finance or audit." Additionally, the board does not include any individuals with substantive experience working in a K-12 public school and have no immediate plans to add more capacity.

The applicants were also unable to adequately describe the relationship between the governing board and Pinnacle; this lack of clarity carried through the proposal and attachments. Pinnacle operates several private and contract schools in the Huntsville area, with a heavy emphasis on teenagers. The proposal contains numerous references to the proposed school providing teen programming, despite the fact that the applicant is proposing an elementary school application. This misalignment indicates that the partnership has not been well though out. The proposal lists several services and staff that Pinnacle will provide to the school (such as professional development, therapeutic services, counselors, and a financial manager) but there is a general lack of clarity of how involved Pinnacle will be in the day-to-day leadership and operation of the school or their role vis-a-vis the school principal and governing board. This lack of clarity led evaluators to conclude that the overall organizational structure is not well-planned.

The performance management plan put forth in the application does not provide an adequate system of measuring academic progress. The main assessment that is proposed, Accucess, is a diagnostic assessment and is not appropriate for measuring growth. The Accucess assessment is intended for grades 5-12. The school will open as a K-2 and grow to K-7 and no assessments are identified that would allow the school to monitor the progress of grades K-4.
FINANCIAL PLAN & CAPACITY

Eugene Edwards Technology Charter School

Plan Summary:

The proposal includes a five-year budget and narrative, description of financial policies, and plans for an annual independent audit. The ESP will employ a Chief Schools Financial Officer (CSFO) to manage the finances of the school and this position reports directly to the governing board, according the organization chart provided. During the first year of the budget, the school will have revenues of $1,070,400 with expenditures of $1,008,387. During the fifth year of the budget the school will have revenues of $3,211,200 and expenditures of $2,088,196. The ESP fee is 30.8 percent of the budget in year one and 21.7 percent of revenue in year five.

Analysis:

The Financial Plan and Capacity section does not meet the standard for approval because it is incomplete and contained significant errors and omissions in the budget.

The applicant did not provide a response to the Financial Management Capacity section, therefore the evaluators could not assess the quality of the plan. During the capacity interview, the applicant did not demonstrate a strong understanding of the budget. For example, they were unable to identify the potential cost of building out the facility so that it is suitable for a school and did not identify any other occupancy costs such as utilities, maintenance, and upkeep.

The budget contains a number of questionable assumptions that could have a significant impact on the bottom line. For example, per pupil revenue is budgeted at $10,704, which is roughly equivalent to the total of Bessemer City Schools (inclusive of federal, state, and local dollars); however, Alabama charter schools receive only a portion of local dollars (10 mills, or 1 percent). This would reduce the per pupil revenue by several thousand dollars per student and have a substantially negative impact of their ability to fund the program.

Additionally, the budget did not contain any expenses related to occupancy costs (lease, utilities, maintenance, etc). Save the Youth owns the proposed building and acknowledged that it needs additional work to be able to accommodate the school, but did not provide an estimated cost or source of funding. The budget also did not include any expenditures related to transportation or food service. Together, these omissions make it difficult to determine if the school is financially viable.
EVALUATOR BIOGRAPHIES

Evaluator's Name

Justin Testerman

Justin Testerman is an education professional with over 20 years of experience creating high-quality education opportunities for at-risk youth. Most recently, Justin co-founded and led Project Renaissance, a nonprofit focused on doubling the number of Nashville children in high-quality schools. He also served as the Chief Operating Officer of the Tennessee Charter School Center, the state’s charter support organization. Prior to coming to Nashville, Testerman served as the Director of Education Programs for Volunteers of America of Minnesota where he started the nation’s first nonprofit charter school authorizing program, which authorizes 17 schools and has been recognized nationally for its work. In this role Testerman was also responsible for the operation of three contract alternative high schools for the Minneapolis school district and an adult basic education program. Testerman began his career in education as a middle school teacher in Newark, New Jersey through the Teach for America program.

Evaluator's Name

Harold Lee

Harold (Harry) Lee is an independent education consultant specializing in charter school authorization, new school development, school oversight/evaluation, renewal services, and board training/capacity building. Most recently, Harry worked as the Chief Strategy Officer at iLearn Schools, a non-profit charter management organization based in New Jersey. From 2011-16, he worked at the New Jersey Department of Education, Office of Charter Schools serving as the School Performance and Accountability Manager for 3 years and the Director for two years. In 2014, Harry completed the NACSA Leaders Program, the nation's only professional development opportunity for current and upcoming leaders in charter school authorizing offices. He holds a B.A. from Yale University and an M.P.A. from Rutgers University-Newark.

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.