

STATE CHARTER SCHOOLS COMMISSION

MEETING MINUTES

April 29, 2020, 10:00 a.m.

Teleconference

1-888-808-6929; Access Code: 5206746



Attendees: Commissioners: Tom Lewis, Paul Williams, Carmen Dill, Jose Perez, Buzz Brockway, Hunter Hill, and Dr. Lina Millan. SCSC Staff: Lauren Holcomb – Executive Director; Morgan Felts – Chief Operations Officer; Cerrone Lockett – General Counsel; Kristen Easterbrook – Charter Development Manager; Katie Manthey – Director of Research and Evaluation; Rennie Laryea – Associate General Counsel; Sarah Beck – Associate General Counsel and Operational Accountability Manager; Terence Washington – Financial Accountability Manager; Darcy Callaway – Business Manager; and, Danielle Williams – Communications and Outreach Coordinator. State Charter Schools Foundation Staff: Michele Neely-President. Approximately 35 members of the public were also present.

I. **Call to Order** (Chairman Lewis)

- **Welcome-** The meeting was called to order at 10:02 a.m.
- **Public Health Emergency-** Due to COVID-19 concerns, the SCSC is holding a virtual meeting.
- **Public Comment-** Public comment procedures were announced.
- **Committee Meeting-** All District-Collaborative committee meetings are postponed.
- **Roll Call-** All commissioners were present.

II. **Approval of SCSC Meeting Minutes** (Chairman Lewis)

- Chairman Lewis called for the approval of the March 25, 2020 meeting minutes. Commissioner Perez motioned. Commissioner Milan seconded. The March 25, 2020 meeting minutes were approved by unanimous vote.

III. **School Status Update** (SCSC Executive Director)

- In response to the Governor’s Executive Order requiring all public K-12 schools to close for in-person instruction for the remainder of the school year, the State Board of Education (SBOE) waived a number of requirements, including those related to school calendars and accountability, for local school districts for the remainder of the school year. The SCSC staff is working with schools to provide information and resources needed to continue serving students. The Executive Director and Chairman Lewis are communicating with the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) and appointed bodies to comply and meet expectations. The SCSC is emphasizing pandemic planning for next school year and anticipates additional guidance for schools soon.

IV. **Legislative Update** (SCSC Executive Director)

- The Georgia General Session is suspended due to COVID-19 concerns but anticipates returning on June 11 to adopt the FY21 budget. The SCSC anticipates a decline in state revenues. Therefore, schools should proactively plan for a contingency budget. The SCSC staff provided guidance to schools regarding the FY21 budget adoption requirements.

V. **State Charter Schools Foundation** (SCSF President)

- The SCSF established a COVID-19 Relief Fund to support state charter schools in the areas of technology, internet, and remote tutoring support. Fourteen state charter schools received funds

through the grant. The Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta and United Way of Greater Atlanta awarded the SCSF a \$200K grant award reserved for schools in greater Atlanta.

- GOSA provided rural state charter schools with laptops. The biggest need for rural state charter schools is Internet connectivity.
- The SCSF created a Shining Star Teacher program to recognize teachers. To date, the program has received 241 nominations. Twenty-five teachers will be awarded with a \$50 Amazon gift cards.

VI. **Organizational Development Update** (SCSC Charter Development Manager)

- Georgia Connections Academy and Georgia Cyber Academy facilitated virtual learning webinars to provide support to schools transitioning to virtual learning.
- Consistent with the SBOE, the SCSC will extend its governing board training deadline to September 30, 2020. In addition, the SCSC will waive the direct instruction requirement so that pre-recorded webinars can be used to satisfy training requirements.

VII. **School Openings Updates** (SCSC Charter Development Manager)

- The SCSC anticipated opening ten new schools in addition to one existing school transferring from local authorization. To date, four schools have elected to defer their opening until Fall 2021. The remaining seven schools have met pre-opening checklist milestones. The SCSC staff has concerns regarding the impact of COVID-19 on facility plans for two of these schools. The SCSC is monitoring each school's projected enrollment to ensure financial viability. To date, all seven schools provided evidence that they have the enrollment necessary for a successful opening. The SCSC will continue to monitor enrollment trends and will provide a school readiness update at the next board meeting.

VIII. **Petitions Updates** (SCSC Charter Development Manager)

- The deadline for petition submission was extended until April 17th. In addition, the SCSC offered applicants the option to submit petitions on a rolling basis through Monday, May 11th. Schools planning to submit applications after April 17th were required to submit a letter of intent. The SCSC received six petitions by the April 17th deadline and 13 letters of intent. SCSC staff is currently reviewing submissions for legal compliance.

IX. **School Accountability Update** (SCSC Director of Research and Evaluation)

- Due to COVID-19-related school closures, GaDOE has waived all assessment and accountability requirements for the 2019-2020 school year. GaDOE will not produce a 2019-20 CCRPI score. Due to the lack of available data, the SCSC will not produce a 2019-2020 academic performance score. However, the SCSC will produce operational and financial performance scores. So that schools are not penalized and to allow adequate performance data for renewal consideration, SCSC staff plans to recommend extending charter contract terms by one year.

The contract extension would apply to all state charter schools except those that earned a 5-year renewal term at the February 2020 SCSC Meeting and schools that have already earned a 5-year renewal term through satisfactory performance in their current charter term. For these schools, 2019-2020 operational and financial scores will be included in renewal considerations only if the scores improve the schools' renewal status. SCSC staff shared its plan with schools in early April and gave schools the opportunity to submit feedback by May 8. SCSC staff will bring a final recommendation to commissioners at the next board meeting.

- Traditionally, schools that fail to meet CPF standards must participate in the SCSC performance review process. However, as schools are currently dealing with the COVID-19 crisis, the SCSC staff will extend flexibility in this area. Schools not meeting standards will still be asked to submit the questionnaire by June 30. SCSC staff will review responses and may require that schools present improvement plans to commissioners based on specific areas of concern. Nine schools are required to participate in performance reviews. Schools that just went through the renewal process are exempt from participation.

X. **Financial Accountability Update** (SCSC Financial Accountability Manager)

- The SCSC selected three auditors based on an evaluation rubric which grades the firms on experience, capacity, and value proposition. The firms selected include Bambo Sonaike, CPA, L.L.C; Mauldin & Jenkins, L.L.C.; and C. Douglas Erwin, Jr., CPA, Inc. Each firm meet applicable state and national accounting standards and have extensive charter school experience. The SCSC covers the cost of required annual financial audits for FY20 and any necessary Federal Single Audit for any state charter school choosing one of the SCSC selected auditors.
- The SCSC staff flagged seven schools as “financially high risk” due to CPF scores, fund balance deficits, financial irregularities, or because of a major enrollment shortfall. The SCSC will collect financial data from high-risk schools to more closely monitor financial viability. Those schools include Brookhaven Innovation Academy, Cirrus, Fulton Leadership Academy, International Academy of Smyrna, Ivy Preparatory Academy, South West Georgia S.T.E.M, and Utopian Academy for the Arts.

XI. **Action Items**

- **Rule Adoption:** Commissioners voted to initiate rulemaking procedures for these items at the February board meeting. The SCSC followed state rulemaking requirements, allowing for a 30-day comment period. There were no comments received on the items. The SCSC staff recommends that the SCSC adopt the proposed rules.

Recommendation: The SCSC staff recommends that the State Charter Schools Commission adopt amended rule 691-2-.01 Definitions and rules 691-2-.08 State Charter School Expansion and 691-2-.09 Transfer to State Charter Schools Commission Authorization, in accordance with the Georgia Administrative Procedure Act.

- **SCSC Action:** Chairman Lewis called for a motion to adopt all three rules as recommended by the SCSC staff. Commissioner Williams motioned. Commissioner Perez seconded. By unanimous vote, the SCSC adopted the SCSC staff recommendation to amended rule 691-2-.01 Definitions and rules 691-2-.08 State Charter School Expansion and 691-2-.09 Transfer to State Charter Schools Commission Authorization, in accordance with the Georgia Administrative Procedure Act.
- **Southwest Georgia STEM Charter School Amendment Request**

Recommendation: The SCSC staff recommends the denial of Southwest Georgia STEM Charter School’s (SOWEGA) charter amendment request to serve additional grade levels.

Public Comment: Five representatives from SOWEGA signed up to offer public comment. Each speaker was given three minutes to speak. Public comment was given by Tony Lee, SOWEGA Governing Board Chair, Ginger Almon, SOWEGA School Leader, Natalie Zajac, SOWEGA Staff Member, Alicia Babb, SOWEGA Parent, and Magan Hernandez, SOWEGA Student. Collectively, comments indicated support for the school’s proposed addition of tenth grade and noted recent improvements across several areas. The Board Chair and School Leader cited board turnover and decisions of previous leadership for the school’s existing track record. Representatives noted the impact of denying the expansion request on the class of 18 current ninth grade students, most suggesting the students would not have anywhere else to go.

- The School Leader responded to questions and comments from Commissioner Hill, Commissioner Milan, Commissioner Perez, and Commissioner Brockway. The School Leader noted the school’s recent improvements and explained that that if the expansion request were denied, ninth grade

students would have to return to schools in which they had previously been unsuccessful. She noted that although the school had the facilities to support tenth grade students, if allowed to expand, the school would have to purchase tenth grade curriculum. The School Leader acknowledged that if the school were permitted to expand, but failed to show the requisite academic improvement, students would be in the same situation next year; however, she indicated that she was up for the challenge.

- The SCSC Executive Director explained that school deviated from its original plan to end its contract at the ninth-grade year and then later ask for additional grades. Due to low enrollment and to assist the school financially, early in the charter term, the governing board deviated from the original enrollment plan and added two grade levels in one year. Without authorization or authority, the school promised students that it would expand to serve tenth grades. The SCSC Director of Research and Evaluation added that the school failed to meet academic standards for the last few years.

SCSC Action: Chairman Lewis called for a motion to approve the SCSC staff recommendation. Commissioner Williams motioned. Commissioner Brockway seconded. By unanimous vote, the SCSC adopted the SCSC staff recommendation to deny Southwest Georgia STEM Charter School's request to amend the charter contract to allow the school to serve additional grade levels.

XII. **Additional Items from Commissioners**

- There were no additional items from commissioners. Chairman Lewis announced that the May meeting may be canceled.

XIII. **Public Comment**

- There was no public comment.

XIV. **Adjourn**

- Meeting adjourned at 11:35 a.m.