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Mississippi Charter School Authorizer Board

Charter School Application Report 2015

New Charter School Application for
Joel E. Smilow Collegiate & Joel E. Smilow Prep

Submitted by
RePublic Schools, Inc.

Evaluation Team

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National Association of Charter School Authorizers

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Introduction

Following the passage of the Mississippi Charter Schools Act of 2013 (HB 369) in April 2013, Governor Bryant created the Mississippi Charter Authorizer Board (MCSAB), a statewide charter school authorizer with exclusive charter jurisdiction in the state of Mississippi. The mission of the seven-member MCSAB is to authorize high-quality charter schools, particularly schools designed to expand opportunities for underserved students. To that end, the MCSAB executed a rigorous, high-quality process to solicit and evaluate charter school proposals.

Focus on Quality

The 2015 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 2015 RFP cycle, MCSAB 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 three 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. In the case of experienced school operators, the MCSAB and NACSA supplemented this written evaluation with due diligence to verify claims made in the proposal related to past performance.

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 MCSAB-approved evaluation criteria. The authority and responsibility to decide whether to approve or deny each application rests with the members of MCSAB.

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; pupil performance standards; high school graduation requirements; 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: organization charts; legal status and governing documents; 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.

For applicants seeking waivers, conversion from an existing school to a public charter school, or for experienced operators or operators proposing to engage an education service provider, an analysis of: [Request for Waivers](#) (if applicable), [Conversion Charter Schools](#) (if applicable), and [Existing Operators](#) (if applicable).

Rating 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 many respects, but lacks detail and/or requires additional information in one or more areas.

Does Not Meet the Standard

The response meets the criteria in some respects but has substantial gaps in a number of areas.

Falls Far Below the Standard

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

Proposal Overview

Nonprofit Applicant Name

RePublic Schools, Inc.

Proposed School Name

Joel E. Smilow Collegiate & Joel E. Smilow Prep

Mission

The mission of both Joel E. Smilow Collegiate (“Smilow Collegiate”) and Joel E. Smilow Prep (“Smilow Prep”) is to educate students in grades kindergarten through eight and to build the academic and character foundation necessary for success in the most demanding colleges and a life of active citizenship.

All students, regardless of their backgrounds, deserve to receive a high-quality public education that prepares them to enter and graduate from the most competitive colleges. RePublic Schools, Inc. (“RePublic Schools”) recognizes that demographics need not be the determinant of one’s destiny, and a college education is the key variable in breaking the cycle of poverty. To enable all students to graduate from a competitive four-year college, RePublic Schools maintains a dual focus on solid academic preparation combined with a mastery of personal discipline and character.

Proposed Location

Smilow Collegiate and Smilow Prep: Jackson Public School District/North Central Jackson

Enrollment Projections

Academic Year	Planned # Students	Maximum # Students	Grades Served
2016-17	198; 119	237; 142	K-1; 5
2017-18	297; 238	356; 285	K-2; 5-6
2018-19	391; 351	469; 421	K-3; 5-7
2019-20	482; 459	578; 550	K-4; 5-8
2020-21	602; 459	722; 550	K-5; 5-8
Capacity 2023-24	942; 459	1,130; 550	K-8; 5-8

Executive Summary

Joel E. Smilow Collegiate & Joel E. Smilow Prep

Recommendation

Approve

Summary Analysis

The evaluation team recommends approval of the application for Smilow Prep and Smilow Collegiate. The application, in combination with information provided in the capacity interview, provides a compelling case that RePublic Schools is fully capable of opening and sustaining the proposed high quality college preparatory schools. The educational program design, based on RePublic Schools' two high performing middle schools in Nashville, is rigorous and comprehensively developed. The applicant explained clearly how the different elements of the highly structured educational program will support the goals to fill students' remedial gaps and build fundamental skills and rigor. The identified principals of the schools are well-qualified, with proven track records of success in achieving significant gains among students from similar socio-economic backgrounds. Another strength of the application is the support provided by RePublic Schools' experienced and qualified leadership team and its governing board of professionals with a wide diversity of skills, described in detail in the application.

The applicant has secured critically important funding to support a comprehensive startup plan and the schools' first years of growth, including more than \$1.8 million in philanthropic funds, and access to \$400,000 loan funds. The applicant has identified a suitable facility to house both schools and has secured an advantageous agreement with a local foundation which will purchase and renovate the property and lease it to RePublic Schools based on square footage utilized.

The evaluation team recommends that prior to opening, the applicant team provide documentation on its planned revision of RePublic's grievance policy, an amendment regarding board structure to the governing bylaws, and identification of potential sources of philanthropic funding needed to support the schools in years 2 and 3.

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.*

Educational Program Design and Capacity ▼

Meets the Standard

Request for Waivers (if applicable) ▼

N/A

Operations Plan and Capacity ▼

Meets the Standard

Conversion Charter Schools (if applicable) ▼

N/A

Financial Plan and Capacity ▼

Meets the Standard

Education Service Providers (if applicable) ▼

N/A

Plan Summary

Smilow Collegiate and Smilow Prep will provide a rigorous, college preparatory curriculum with the goal that all students will graduate from a four-year college or university. Both schools will offer a longer school day and school year and an intensive focus on literacy and math. The middle school program will also provide coding as a core subject. The middle school curriculum and standards will be based on those used at RePublic's successful Nashville middle school programs. The elementary curriculum will be developed by the school's principal and curriculum team based on selected high-performing charter elementary schools.

A "joyful, yet structured" school culture will feature a disciplinary system of consequences and incentives; it be introduced through a four-day student orientation. Recruitment efforts will include "three touches" or contacts with families of potential students.

The local leadership team includes RePublic's CEO, the Mississippi Regional Director, the Community Organizer, and the two Smilow Principals.

Analysis

The Educational Program Design and Capacity section of the application meets the standard for approval because it presents a clear and realistic plan for the educational program as well as convincing details that the applicant has the capacity and successful track record to carry out the plan effectively.

RePublic Schools' two flagship schools in Nashville have consistently high achievement results, documented by Tennessee Department of Education data. Their populations of predominantly minority, impoverished students are similar to the Smilow schools' target population of minority students of whom more than 90 percent qualify for free and reduced lunch. The application describes a comprehensive, quality curriculum and sound instructional strategies. Both schools will offer a longer school day and school year; extra blocks of literacy and math instruction; daily tutoring; computer coding instruction; and data driven instructional practices. These strategies clearly address the stated goals to build fundamental skills, fill remedial gaps, and build foundational rigor.

The applicant makes a convincing case that its planned "joyful, yet structured" school environment will create a safe and orderly learning environment. The plan is supported by the description of the schools' core values, the "day in the life" narrative for a Smilow teacher and student, and the discipline plan. Plans for serving the anticipated 12 percent special education population are specific, well-developed, and demonstrate a thorough understanding of and capacity to fulfill state and federal obligations. Budget allocations for special education services and the staffing plans are adequate to support the plans. The applicant expects to attract a slightly larger (2 percent) special education population than the district average by "aggressively seeking students in need."

The applicant's description of supplemental services in the written application is inadequate. The applicant provided the following additional information in the capacity interview to satisfactorily augment that description: staff will be trained to address students' basic medical needs; the University of Mississippi Medical Center will provide counseling and mental health services; the local Boys and Girls Club will provide after school programming; and each classroom will have its own library. The evaluation team recommends that these arrangements are in place prior to school opening.

Plan Summary

RePublic's vision is to operate a network of high-performing charter schools across three states modeled on its two high-performing middle schools in Nashville. The network currently includes four middle schools, including ReImagine Prep- its first school in Jackson- and one high school in Nashville. Smilow Collegiate, Smilow Prep, and two middle schools in Nashville are planned to open in 2017. A Mississippi Regional Office will oversee the development and operations at the Smilow schools and ReImagine Prep in conjunction with RePublic's Nashville office. School performance is monitored quarterly through organization-wide data dashboards.

RePublic's leadership team consists of the Chief Executive Officer, Chief Financial Officer, Chief Information Officer, and Chief Academic Officer (to be hired). RePublic Schools is governed by a board of nine professionals (a parent from ReImagine Prep will be added this year). Two former teachers from the Nashville schools will serve as the principals of the Smilow schools. The Mississippi Regional Office will be staffed by a Regional Director and a Community Organizer.

Analysis

The Operations Plan and Capacity section of the application meets the standard for approval because it presents ample evidence that RePublic Schools has the financial, organizational, and management capacity to start and operate the Smilow schools.

RePublic's leadership team overseeing the Smilow schools clearly possesses the knowledge, experience, and capacity to carry out the proposed plan. Qualified personnel will utilize a network-wide data system to monitor and evaluate school performance. Clear, measurable goals include first and sixth graders matching or outperforming the highest performing county in state assessments. The nine-member governing board of professionals represents a wide range of knowledge and skills. RePublic's Mississippi Advisory Board is assisting with fundraising and community outreach. Local donors have already committed \$325,000 to the schools.

RePublic Schools will provide ample professional development for Smilow staff, including a month-long summer session, and 11 full days and 3 hours of professional development every Friday during the school year. The two identified principals will spend a year in residency programs and training through Building Excellence Schools and the National Principals Academy Fellowship (a program of the Relay Graduate School of Education and Uncommon Schools) and receive individual coaching during the school year.

A detailed start-up plan in Attachment 22 specifies tasks, time lines, and responsible individuals and provides evidence of careful planning and a strong understanding of the school start-up process. The large number of teacher applicants (236) at ReImagine Prep - RePublic's first Jackson school - indicates that recruitment goals are realistic.

The two schools will share a facility with appropriate space in the first four years - a 130,000 square foot former biblical seminary - through an advantageous lease agreement proposed at approximately \$7.50 per square foot. The James W. Hood Family Foundation in Jackson has agreed to purchase and renovate the facility and charge Republic Schools only for the square footage used each year.

During the capacity interview, the applicant group addressed all concerns raised by the evaluation team with honest and informative answers. In particular, the applicants acknowledged they need to revise their grievance policy and board bylaws. The evaluation team recommends that these revisions take place prior to school opening.

Plan Summary

Smilow Prep budget -- Year 1: \$1,581,214 in revenues with expenses of \$1,481,615 and ending fund balance of \$89,599 (\$7,467 per month of cash). Year 5: \$4,125,289 in revenues with expenses of \$4,110,145 and ending fund balance of \$15,144 (\$1,262 per month of cash).

Smilow Collegiate budget - Year 1: \$2,205,311 in revenues and \$2,187,934 in expenses, with ending fund balance of \$17,376 (\$1,448 per month of cash). Year 5: \$5,313,660 in revenues with expenses of \$5,311,046 and ending fund balance \$2,614 (\$218 per month of cash).

Budgets include a contingency of 3 percent of revenues in year 1 and 1 percent thereafter. CMO management fees will be 7 percent of certain expenses in years 1-2 and 5 percent thereafter.

Revenues include \$800,000 in committed philanthropic funds in the startup year and \$944,000 in year 1, with \$650,000 to be raised in years 2-3. The schools are expected to be self-sustaining in year 4.

Analysis

The Financial Plan and Capacity section of the application meets the standard for approval because the applicant provides a detailed and realistic financial plan for both schools, and demonstrates that RePublic Schools has the capacity to implement the financial plan successfully.

Members of RePublic's management team and board of directors have documented experience with successful charter school startup, operations, and financial management. RePublic's Chief Financial Officer, Glenn Turtel, has 15 years of experience working in charter school finances, including a number of charter school startups. Catherine Cooper, Mississippi Regional Director, has experience in successful charter schools facilities development and management. She will oversee the facilities acquisition and ongoing operations of the Smilow schools. The Board of Directors includes three board members with extensive financial management experience to provide oversight.

The start-up and five-year operating budgets are well-conceived and follow revenue guidelines established by the state. The budget narrative in Attachment 26 clearly explained reasonable, well-supported revenue and cost assumptions. The allocations for administrative and instructional staffing, technology, staff development, recruitment/marketing efforts, and facility lease aligns with to the program design and budget narrative. The applicant expects that the schools will self-sustaining on recurring funding beginning in Year 4. The narrative includes a contingency plan outlining several reasonable options should revenues come in lower than expected or expenses are higher.

The applicant has secured commitments of nearly \$1.8 million in local and national philanthropic funds to support the startup and first years of the schools' operations, as well as access on an as-needed basis to a portion of a \$400,000 loan from the Charter School Growth Fund for RePublic's school network. In years 2-3, the applicant will need to raise an additional \$650,000 for both schools. The applicant has a strong track record, as well as staff and board capacity, to raise these additional funds. If the application is approved, the evaluation team recommends that the board should establish and monitor progress toward meeting fundraising objectives as needed to ensure its confidence in each schools' ongoing financial viability.

Request for Waivers *(if applicable)*

Joel E. Smilow Collegiate & Joel E. Smilow Prep

Rating ▾

N/A

Plan Summary

Analysis

Conversion Charter Schools *(if applicable)*

Joel E. Smilow Collegiate & Joel E. Smilow Prep

Rating ▾

N/A

Plan Summary

Analysis

Education Service Providers *(if applicable)*

Joel E. Smilow Collegiate & Joel E. Smilow Prep

Rating ▾

N/A

Plan Summary

Analysis

Evaluator Biographies

Evaluator's Name

[Amy McClellan](#)

Amy is an independent grant writer and non-profit consultant. She has worked extensively with the Florida charter school movement since 1999 and with the state charter school association, the Florida Consortium of Public Charter Schools. She served as program director for the Walton Family Foundation's Florida Grant Partners Program from 2003-2009. Amy has also served as a reviewer and editor for charter school applications in Louisiana, New Jersey, Tennessee, and Mississippi through the National Association of Charter School Authorizers. Amy received a B.A. from Occidental College, Los Angeles and an M.F.A. in Art History from Princeton University.

Evaluator's Name

[Dr. Kimberly Dorsey](#)

Dr. Dorsey is a native of Holmes County Mississippi. She received her B.B.A in Banking and Finance from Mississippi State University and her M.B.A. and Ph.D. in business from Jackson State University. She is currently an associate professor of management at Mississippi University for Women.

Evaluator's Name

[Abby Farber](#)

Abby is a financial and operations consultant with over 30 years of experience in nonprofit and government sectors. She has extensive knowledge of budget creation and management, financial reporting, accounting software, audit oversight and management, banking and cash management, internal audit, and fiscal policies and procedures. She has worked with the Newark Charter School Fund, Charter School Business Management, Education Reform Now, Ascend Learning, Achievement First, Amplify, Northeast Charter School Network, New York City Charter School Center, and Bronx Preparatory Charter School.

Evaluator's Name

[Dr. Tommye Henderson](#)

Dr. Henderson is currently an assistant professor in the School of Education and Leadership at Mississippi College. With over 30 years in the education field, she has served in many capacities, including as superintendent of Clinton Public School District and as director of personnel for Columbus Municipal School District. She has also served as a principal and teacher and is active in many community organizations in Clinton. She graduated with a B.S. in elementary education from the University of Southern Mississippi, an M.Ed. and an Ed.S. from Mississippi State University, and a Ph.D. in educational leadership, also from Mississippi State University.