



Scott Pearson
Executive Director

June 26, 2019

David Grosso, Chairperson
Council of the District of Columbia
Committee on Education
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Suite 402
Washington, DC 20004

BY EMAIL

RE: Monument Academy PCS

Dear Chairman Grosso:

Thank you for expressing your concerns regarding the students at Monument Academy PCS. In response to your letter dated June 5, 2019, there are no plans to close Monument Academy. The school has contracted with the Friendship Foundation to provide management services to the school. All students have the right to continue enrollment in Monument and we expect most will elect to remain enrolled. For more background on the events of the past month, I have attached a board memo from our June 25th meeting. Please reach out to me if you have any additional questions.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "SP", written over a light blue horizontal line.

Scott Pearson

Cc: Chairperson Mendelson
Members of the Education Committee
Paul Kihn, Deputy Mayor for Education
Charles Moore, Monument Academy PCS

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL BOARD

Charter Actions Requiring a Vote

- Approve a Charter Application
- Approve a Charter Renewal (15 yrs.)
- Approve Charter Continuance (5 or 10 yrs.)
- Approve a Charter Amendment Request
- Approve a Charter Agreement
- Give a Charter Notice of Concern
- Lift the Charter Notice of Concern
- Commence Charter Revocation Proceedings
- Revoke a Charter
- Board Action, Other_____

Non-Voting Board Items

- Public Hearing Item
- Discussion Item
- Read into Record

Policies

- Open a New Policy or Changes to a Policy for Public Comment
- Approve a New Policy
- Approve Revisions to an Existing Policy

PREPARED BY: Alyssa Noth, Senior Specialist, School Quality and Accountability Team

SUBJECT: Monument PCS, Discussion on School Year 2019-20 Plans

DATE: **June 25, 2019**

This hearing continues the DC Public Charter School Board’s (DC PCSB) May 20 public discussion on safety and other issues at Monument Academy Public Charter School (Monument PCS). Since that time the school submitted a plan in partnership with the Friendship Educational Foundation (FEF) that describes numerous steps the school will take to improve the operating environment at the school in the coming school year.

The purpose of this hearing is to explore the school’s academic and financial plan. If the DC PCSB Board concludes, based on this hearing, that the school is likely to be an unsafe environment next year or is not economically viable, it may conduct an immediate high-stakes charter review, as described below, before the beginning of the next school year.

As discussed further in this memo, while many elements of the plan remain vague, other elements signal that the school will likely be a safer environment next year. The plan calls for reducing enrollment from 120 to 100 students, installing an experienced school leader, Dr. Jeffrey Grant, enhancing the school

security team, and reconfiguring the daytime staffing to ensure more consistent coverage throughout the school.

Several areas of concern remain, specifically around staffing appropriately to ensure special education compliance and the adequate provision of specialized services. The school has a history of non-compliance with special education laws, as raised at the May 20 public discussion. The current plan reduces staffing and adds elements of training, auditing, and outside consultants. It is not clear whether this plan will fully address these previous failures. Success is ultimately dependent on quality of execution.

Monument PCS's SY 2019-20 budget relies on approximately \$1.7 million of philanthropy next year, of which the school represents that \$1.4 million has been raised. To reduce expenses the school has made cuts in several non-student facing areas involving management, planning for high school growth, compliance, and staff support. DC PCSB staff has significant concerns about the long-term economic viability of the program as a stand-alone entity.

Summary of Recent Events

Over the course of school year SY 2018-19, DC PCSB grew increasingly concerned with the safety and operating environment at Monument PCS. These concerns arose from the number and nature of community complaints, the continued high number of out-of-school suspensions, and a continuation of compliance-related issues, particularly regarding special education. In response, DC PCSB conducted a series of unannounced visits to the school in winter 2019, in addition to previously scheduled visits for the school's Qualitative Site Review that occurred in March. During the spring, DC PCSB heard from multiple senior employees at the school about grave concerns that the operating environment would deteriorate significantly in the next school year given large planned staffing cuts coupled with a proposed 20% increase in the student body.

In addition, board members from DC PCSB and Monument PCS met to discuss plans for next year, at which time the Monument PCS board also expressed concerns about low enrollment and an unsustainable financial model. At that time, the Monument PCS board also shared that not all students at Monument PCS attend the boarding component.

DC PCSB met with the school's board and staff to review the SY 2019-20 financial and academic plans in more detail, with the school providing supplemental documentation. Because of ongoing DC PCSB staff concerns, the issue was explored at a public board meeting. On May 20, the DC PCSB Board raised questions with Monument PCS about safety, academics, and finances, as well as

concerns that staffing and enrollment plans for SY 2019-20 could substantially deteriorate the school environment.

Since that time there has been considerable activity by the Monument PCS board. On June 4, the Monument PCS board voted 5-0 with one abstention to voluntarily relinquish the school's charter. However, two weeks later, on June 18, the school's board reconvened and voted 4-1 with one abstention to rescind this relinquishment, and additionally voted 5-1 to enter into a turnaround relationship with Friendship Education Foundation (FEF). Because the reversal of the board's relinquishment decision occurred prior to that decision being made official by being read into the record by DC PCSB at a board meeting, the board's June 18 vote effectively nullifies the June 4 vote.

In reversing its decision, the Monument PCS board found that:

Given the presentation of a new, viable option for a Monument PCS turnaround partnership with FEF that addresses the serious concerns that initiated this board's consideration of and vote to close, which would furthermore allow Monument PCS to continue operation in its existing building, with its existing academic model, the board now finds that it is in the best interests of students and the mission for the school, the Monument PCS Board hereby votes to rescind the Monument PCS Board resolution of June 4, 2019, to relinquish its charter and cease operation at the end of the current academic year.

Furthermore, given the lack of viable, equivalent-or-better educational options for Monument PCS students at this late date, as well as the positive academic, behavioral, and transition benefits to Monument PCS students and families presented in the FEF turnaround plan, which includes enhanced services and supports that address student security, enhanced academic focus and financial stability, we hereby resolve to accept and adopt the FEF turnaround plan, effective immediately.

DC PCSB Decisions and Possible Actions

Per the School Reform Act, a school's charter continues for 15 years, unless sooner terminated, at which time it expires. During the life of a school's charter, DC PCSB conducts periodic reviews, which can lead to charter revocation due to failure of a school to meet its goals and academic achievement expectations, violation of law or the school's charter, or for financial reasons. These reviews must occur at least once every five years. Monument PCS's five-year charter review is scheduled for fall 2019.

Given the concerns around the school, DC PCSB raised the possibility at the May 20 public hearing that the scheduled charter review could be accelerated to take place over the summer, which would allow the DC PCSB Board to determine whether to initiate charter revocation before the start of SY 2019-20.

Tonight's public hearing will allow the Board to hear from Monument PCS and FEF about the plan and the expected environment at the school for the coming school year to determine if serious concerns remain.

The FEF Proposal

Monument PCS plans to open in SY 2019-20 with support from FEF, a non-profit spun off from Friendship Public Charter School (Friendship PCS) several years ago that provides academic supports and school management services to charter schools nationally. FEF's proposal is to operate as a contractor providing turnaround support to Monument PCS.

Central to the plan is an enrollment reduction to improve safety: The school will reduce its enrollment to 100 students, compared with previous plans to serve 120 students or more.¹ Currently, 96 of Monument PCS's SY 2018-19 enrolled students do not have an alternative placement for SY 2019-20. The school is confident it will meet its enrollment target of 100.

FEF will provide Monument PCS with Dr. Jeffrey Grant, an experienced DC school leader. Dr. Grant, who will be a Monument PCS employee and report to the Monument PCS board, will lead all functions at the school. He will manage an Academy Director for the day program and a Director of Student Life for the boarding program, among other staff.

The plan calls for multiple levels of staffing to ensure a safe and orderly school environment. Classrooms will serve no more than 15 students, and each classroom will be supported by one lead teacher and either a teacher assistant, elective teacher, or behavior support coach, providing a minimum of two adults in every classroom. In addition, the school will employ six special educators who will each have a projected caseload of 8-9 students. Students will rotate through three elective classes in the afternoon: PE/Health, Music, and Art, each staffed by a full-time teacher. Elective teachers will push-in to support core-content instruction in the morning. Foreign language instruction will be provided by part-time staff.

¹ On page 10 of the plan reference is made to limiting enrollment to "100 – 110 students". The school has confirmed to DC PCSB staff that the plan is not to exceed 100 students.

The school will add three full-time security guards assigned to duty posts, supported by three additional school safety specialists who will rotate through classrooms and be available to intervene as needed. Security guards patrolling outside, combined with improved alarming of doors, is intended to sharply reduce elopement incidents. A three-person behavior management team will also address behavior.

FEF will maintain Monument PCS's residential model. The school will operate 13 houses with no more than 8 students per house. The school expects most current house parents to return. All students who attend Monument PCS will be required to board. Maya Angelou PCS has agreed to share its "residential playbook" with FEF as a resource on best practices. Milton Hershey School will serve on an advisory group to the school. The current head of the Monument PCS boarding program will continue in this role.

As part of the re-launch of Monument PCS, FEF proposes to restart the Monument PCS Board of Trustees as a "transformation board" who will be responsible for running the school. The board will be chaired by Patricia Brantley, CEO of Friendship Schools. The board includes several well-respected community and education leaders.

DC PCSB Analysis

Some elements of the plan are vague and still under development; therefore, it is not possible for DC PCSB staff to conduct a comprehensive assessment.

However, there are elements that signal that the school will likely be a safer environment next year: reducing enrollment from 120 to 100 students, installing Dr. Grant, enhancing the school security team, and reconfiguring the daytime staffing to ensure more consistent coverage during the day. The new plan reduces staff in non-student-facing roles and increases staff in student-facing roles which, if well-implemented, should improve security and safety.

Based on a review of the plan and subsequent interviews, staff has the following concerns, which the DC PCSB Board should explore in the hearing:

- *Support for teachers.* The plan reduces current teaching support staff by three academic coaches and a chief academic officer. Senior leadership will provide coaching and professional development and Friendship Schools will also enter into an MOU with Monument PCS to share best practices through participation in professional learning communities. But there will be fewer individuals to coach and support teachers. Moreover, the school is still deliberating as to what curriculum and textbooks to use

next year. Given the historical stresses Monument PCS teachers have faced, and the relative lack of tenure of much of the Monument PCS staff, reduced ability to provide professional development and coaching could be an issue in the coming school year.

- *Possible challenge with new hires.* The school has several openings, including three special education teachers. The new school leader also needs to evaluate current staff, make offers for staff to return, and fill any vacancies resulting from staff departures. All of this comes just weeks before the school will open and in the midst of a broader turnaround. Per the school, DC PCSB on June 25, there are 18 open positions to fill including three School Security Specialists, seven Houseparents, and two School Counselors.
- *Staffing levels around compliance may be low.* The school has reduced its special education coordinators from three to one. The school has a history of non-compliance with special education laws. The current plan reduces staffing while adding support from consultants, includes a compliance audit conducted by Dr. Grant, and added training and coaching. Large cuts were made to other back office and administrative staff as well including merging the data and IT functions.
- *Support from FEF is limited.* Dr. Grant, an experienced school leader with a strong track record of success, will be placed on the Monument PCS payroll as head of school. Beyond this, there is no payment for FEF services and no clear services to be provided. There is no commitment for FEF to provide teacher coaching, professional development, management services, or other services, other than as provided solely by Dr. Grant in his capacity as Head of School. Friendship PCS will provide some additional supports through a no-cost MOU, specifically, access to their professional learning communities and their community office clinical, student services, and academic senior leadership.
- *FEF expertise.* Several aspects of Monument PCS present different challenges than FEF has experienced in the past, including boarding, and educating and supporting an alternative student population.
- *Financials raise questions of long-term economic viability.* The school's proposed budget requires 20% of its total revenue to come from philanthropy. Even with deep staff cuts, for the coming year, the school needs at least \$1.7 million of philanthropy. As of the time of this writing,

the school has raised \$1.4 million. In the longer term, it is not clear that the school model is viable as a stand-alone entity.