

## **Westchester Secondary Charter School Response to County Staff Findings to Deny Charter Renewal Petition**

Westchester Secondary Charter School was initially formed because its founders were concerned about the young people in the community who were “falling through the cracks” at the local public schools. We believed that with consistent academic program expectations and personalization a small charter school could make a difference. We also were sensitive to the transportation of students out of the community to get arts programs that were unavailable locally. We employed faculty who engaged with students personally and challenged them academically. This year, we are graduating our first class of seniors, all of whom have applied to college. One is a Posse Foundation finalist. 20% are students with disabilities.

Targeting the school for Westchester was, in part, due to the long-standing reputation of the founder/principal in the community as an educational leader and her relationships with the community-at-large.

### **Facility**

WSCS did not expect the massive degree of facilities challenges when we wrote the petition, as we knew that there was room for our school at either Westchester High School or Emerson Adult School, both operated by the Los Angeles Unified School District (“LAUSD” or the “District”). Our assessment has proven to be true over time, although the District’s Prop. 39 office has pretended otherwise. We were fortunate to find a private space in our first year, and continued to work with the District’s Prop. 39 office in subsequent years. We have a contract with Turner Agassi to build private site once a location can be identified.

### **Enrollment Projection**

*(Page 19) Westchester has received an offer through the Prop 39 process to remain co-located with Horace Mann Middle School. The current offer provides space for an ADA of 233. This is significantly below the petitioners projected enrollment of 287 students, and would significantly affect their budget. It is unclear how the school would provide the facilities needed to operate the size and scope of the educational program proposed in the charter should its enrollment exceed 233.*

The staff findings question whether the space offered by LAUSD to WSCS for the 2017-18 school year will be sufficient to accommodate the 287 students projected by WSCS for that school year. For the reasons explained below, WSCS is confident that the space to be provided by LAUSD will be sufficient to allow WSCS to accommodate such students.

In its October 31, 2016 Proposition 39 application to LAUSD for the 2017-18 school year, WSCS projected an in-District ADA of 259.2 (from a projected enrollment of 270 in-District students) and a total ADA (in-District and out-of-District) of 296.64 (from a

projected enrollment of 309 total students). (All ADA figures set forth herein are based on WSCS's 96% ADA-to-student ratio as accepted by LAUSD.) In its January 3, 2017 response to WSCS's ADA projections and its March 31, 2017 final offer, LAUSD projected that WSCS would have an in-District ADA of 233.28 (from a projected enrollment of 243 in-District students).

For the 2017-18 school year, LAUSD offered WSCS 10 teaching stations, an office, and a room for special education. LAUSD also offered WSCS 31% of the shared use facilities on the Mann campus (Auditorium, Computer Labs (2), Library/Faculty Lounge, Dining, Parent Center, Band / Music Room, Gymnasium, Boys' & Girls' Locker Rooms, Learning Center, Outdoor Lunch Shelter, Baseball Field, Running Track / Blacktop / Field, Dance Studio, Outdoor Basketball / Blacktop / Field, Outdoor Volleyball / Blacktop / Field, Quad, and Science Labs (5)).

As a matter of historical perspective, for the 2016-17 school year, LAUSD offered WSCS nine classrooms, an office, and a room for special education, based upon an accepted in-District enrollment of 224.64 (from an enrollment of 234 in-District students). LAUSD also offered WSCS 30% of the shared use facilities on campus (*i.e.*, the same shared use facilities identified in the prior paragraph). In exchange for WSCS agreeing to give up certain of the shared use facilities, Mann agreed that WSCS could have exclusive use of two additional classrooms. As a result, during the 2016-17 school year, WSCS has had exclusive use of 12 classrooms in addition to shared use of other facilities. WSCS anticipates similar agreements for the 2017-18 school year.

WSCS notes that LAUSD's offer to WSCS for the 2017-18 school year of 10 classrooms for an ADA of 233.28 translates to an in-District ADA-to-classroom ratio of 23.3:1. WSCS expects that Mann will again agree to allocate it exclusive use of two shared use classrooms at Mann for the 2017-18 school year in exchange for giving up its right to certain shared use facilities. With 12 classrooms and a projected total ADA of 275.52 (based upon WSCS's projected 2017-18 enrollment of 287), WSCS's total ADA-to-classroom ratio would be 23:1 – less than the in-District ADA-to-classroom ratio reflected by LAUSD's Proposition 39 offer.

WSCS notes that LAUSD's District-wide student-to-classroom norming ratios are 30.5:1 for grades 4-6, 28:1 for grades 7-8, and 30:1 for grades 9-12. Even at 10 classrooms, WSCS's student to-classroom ratio for 287 students would be 28.7:1, consistent with LAUSD's District-wide norming ratios.

In summary, the amount of space that LAUSD has offered WSCS for the 2017-18 school year will be sufficient to accommodate WSCS's projected enrollment of 287 students.

### **Enrollment and Attrition**

*(page 14) As stated on pages 1-2 of this Report, Westchester has failed to meet its enrollment projections for all four (4) years. Despite approved material revisions to significantly decrease these projections, the school has continually missed its enrollment targets by more than 25%.*

Stability of location has impacted WSCS in many ways. Our enrollment grew from year one to year two, when we could advertise and plan on the same building. The negative enrollment trends of the past two years reflect the changes in location, sometimes late in the year.

We have accepted the Prop 39 offer for Mann Middle School for next year. As we establish our school in this community, we will be better able to reach our enrollment targets. WSCS well understands why the stability of its enrollment is a concern for County staff, as it is something the Charter School's leadership has lived with throughout this process. Unfortunately, the reputation of our current site contributed to families from Westchester and Playa del Rey choosing not to make the 8-mile journey to South Central to continue with us. This has resulted in a significant change in the number of new students and an increase of socially economically disadvantaged students from 30% to 65% of our student population.

We believe our program is an asset to this community. Councilman Marques Harris-Dawson has welcomed us and we are working to establish relationships with other community groups and will be performing on May 20<sup>th</sup> at New Testament Church, which is hosting a community-organizing event.

### **Charter Renewal Requirements**

The timing of the Charter School's opening was very challenging. It occurred in the middle of a state-wide transition from one type of assessment and accountability system to an entirely new system, CAASPP and the California School Dashboard.

A significant impact of the changes in facilities location is that we do not have consistent cohorts of students from which to assess progress in a meaningful manner over time. All of our seniors have been with us for at least 3 of the 4 years.

*County finding: 2. Alternative assessment data provided by Westchester shows decreases in academic performance for the student groups tested.*

### **PSAT/SAT**

Students taking the SAT this year were our students with disabilities who delayed taking the test until the last offering as they were currently enrolled in Algebra 2.

The PSAT for 9<sup>th</sup> grade is different than the one for 10<sup>th</sup> and only 25% were returning students.

The change from grade 10 to grade 11 is -60 and we had 20% new students enroll with few grade level credits.

WSCS submitted 25 pages of documents with our internal data, but some groups were too small to be numerically significant.

It is unreasonable to state that we do not serve English learners when the one or two who attended the Charter School in 2015-16 did not follow us to Mann in 2016-17, in order to assess progress using the CELDT.

On page 8 of the County staff report, there is a comparison table for span schools. LA Center for Enriched Studies (“LACES”) is a gifted magnet that is exclusionary in its admission practices. The Incubator School only goes to grade 9 and is closing its high school this year.

### **Measurable Outcomes**

Goals were set by the requirement of LACOE per the old AYP expectations of 100% proficiency. Those goals are unrealistic.

Data is available for 2013-14, but not at the same level as later years, as state standardized tests were in development that year. We did give benchmark assessments in 2013-14. We provided a list of all of the formative and benchmark exams given during our four years of operations. And this information is available in disaggregated form by ethnicity, students with disabilities, EL status, and gender, through the work we did in the Online Assessment Reporting System. WSCS does not believe it was in a format (NWEA MAPS) that was preferred by County staff, which lead to staff’s consternation. Some of our numbers were so small as to make some of the disaggregated samples too small to provide actionable information.

We submitted our data showing the rate of progress in every year with our internal assessments, but neglected to provide useful narrative on how it was used to make program changes.

A careful look at the results shows that we nearly met our targets (e.g. 94.95% is 0.05% short of the goal of 95%, but represents such a slight difference as to be virtually negligible (less than one student) and within any reasonable rounding). Our inability to meet our retention rate goal of 80% is clearly a reflection of our shift in school facilities - a factor which is not taken into consideration by County staff. Finally, we did provide data indicating 100% of our students participated in performing arts as evidenced by course rosters.

Retention of students was addressed above.

The CDE will not report on subgroup if it falls below a numerically significant number. WSCS has not had enough EL students enrolled, prior to 2016-17, to allow for data reporting at the state level.

### **Special Education**

*(Page 13) In 2014, Westchester received a complaint from the Office of Administrative Hearings (OAH) and in 2015, from the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) for issues related to special education.*

The Office of Administrative Hearings (“OAH”)/Office for Civil Rights (“OCR”) complaint was resolved and the parent has subsequently sued the following two schools of attendance.

All of our delayed individualized education programs (“IEP”) have been corrected. Our entire special education program is in compliance at this time.

Our special education families have been the most loyal through our facilities challenges, and those students have showed great academic and progress in our full inclusion program.

## **WASC**

*(Page 13-14) Westchester received initial accreditation from WASC on June 30, 2014 (expiring June 30, 2017). The 2014 Initial Visiting Committee (VC) Report notes several critical areas for follow up, including developing expected schoolwide learning results, and identifying internal and external data to be collected in a systematic way and used to drive instruction.*

It was unfortunate that our Western Association of Schools and Colleges (“WASC”) team leader was never in communication with WSCS, and then resigned from WASC three weeks before our review was scheduled. The newly assigned WASC team leader informed us that there is an option available to delay review for a year and that our unique circumstances, operating in a new community and with so many new students, would have made us eligible for this common delay. However, we were not given that option in a timely manner. We believe our action plan will address many of WASC’s concerns and know that building a successful school program is a process that takes time.

WSCS respectfully disagrees with the findings of the WASC team that our action plan should serve a specific community. All students deserve a high quality education with a strong, supportive culture and our action plan will reflect the improvement in our instruction for all students.

## **Suspensions and Expulsions**

*(Finding 2, Page 9) The discipline program at Westchester may present the likelihood of...educational, or psychological harm to the affected pupils. The school has a suspension rate that is well above the suspension rates for the resident schools and the district’s.*

It is not appropriate to compare our suspension rate to that of LAUSD, which has the ability to transfer students to its other schools as an alternative to suspension or expulsion. Our suspension rate is a testimony to our determination to work with students with behavioral challenges, rather than expel them. Suspensions are most commonly for in-school suspension, which allows us to tutor students to get them back on track academically, in case that is the cause of their behavior, or to counsel them extensively to practice better choices and also to develop relationships with administration. We could have a higher expulsion rate, but instead work hard to keep the students in school with us. There are a small group of students who generate the majority of our suspensions. All suspensions involve a parent conference to identify what other supports might be needed and provide them. Having a safe campus is our number one priority. Expulsions are an action taken to protect students and staff from harm.

## **Staffing**

*(Page 15) Westchester began this school year lacking the proper teacher clearances for three (3) out of the last four (4) years. This has included staff working without proper clearance from the Department of Justice (DOJ) as well as teachers working without proper credentials for the subjects which they are teaching.*

All of the administrative and office staff have remain unchanged since opening, and have grown with additions. Math, Science and Special Education positions have changed, as those jobs are in high demand and are very competitive. Arts, English, History and PE have been constant. We have had a reduction in overall staffing as a result of lower enrollment so some of the positions for senior staff were no longer needed. 50% of WSCS's current staff have been with the Charter School since its founding.

Fingerprint background clearance was a problem that LACOE assisted with during year one, and has never been an issue since. It takes several months to establish an account with the Department of Justice for a school. LACOE provided that clearance.

The CDE is four months behind in processing credentials. We worked with LACOE staff to make sure all our teachers met the criteria to be serving students in their respective areas.

## **Board of Directors**

*(Page 15) The Westchester Board has failed to record several of its meetings and has received two (2) written notices of Brown Act Violations, as well as two (2) notices of violations of the Monitoring and Oversight Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with regard to board meetings.*

In four years of recording our many meetings for the County's Charter Schools Office, we have had 1.5 technical failings. This year, the CEO had to make the recording and made the human error of pressing "play" twice, which resulted in the recording pausing

and not recording. A similar action happened to our Secretary during our meeting that also included the Brown Act training. The meeting was recorded but not the training session. We did supply the PowerPoint used by our counsel in the training.

*(Page 15) The board does not have proper representation as outlined in its bylaws. The bylaws indicate that the board shall include one (1) to two (2) parent representatives. While Westchester has historically had a parent representative, these positions are currently vacant.*

WSCS has taken many steps to recruiting a parent to the current Board, but none have been willing to make the commitment. This has been a year of building trust with the community and teaching them about the opportunities for engagement.

### **Financial and Business Operations; Fiscal Stabilization Plans**

*(page 16) Due to deficits in the school's budget, primarily related to the school's inability to meet its enrollment projections, Westchester has received three (3) letters from LACOE's Business Advisory Services Division requesting a Fiscal Stabilization Plan.*

We have demonstrated fiscal responsibility in securing a strong reserve in years 1-2. WSCS has demonstrated its fiscal diligence in meeting the Stabilization Plan provided to LACOE.

Concerns regarding the deficiencies in the Finance and Accounting Policies – once brought to our attention --were corrected by the board in action at the March meeting.

### **Finding 6: Not Reasonably Comprehensive**

WSCS will agree to make changes to its petition deemed necessary by the Board and County staff as a condition of charter renewal.