



class size matters
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Comments on the proposed Great Oaks Charter School

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I write to oppose the application of the proposed Great Oaks Charter School, because of the following weaknesses, ambiguities, and/or omissions in its application.

HIGH LEVELS OF PROJECTED STUDENT ATTRITION

The new charter school law emphasizes that charter schools should enroll and retain comparable numbers of high needs students as are in the larger community. Yet the Great Oaks application projects a troublingly high student attrition rate:

C. Enrollment, Recruitment and Retention

Projected Enrollment Over the Charter Term						
Grades	Ages	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016	2017-2018	2018-19
6 th	11-12	99	99	99	99	99
7 th	12-13		99	99	99	99
8 th	13-14			89	89	89
9 th	14-15				78	78
10 th	15-16					68
Totals		99	198	287	365	433

This attrition rate of more than thirty percent from 6th -10th grade as shown by the chart above is excessive.

While it is understandable that the school may have substantial attrition between 8th and 9th grades, as some middle school students may choose to leave to attend a different high school, it is not acceptable that the school expects to have a 13 percent attrition rate between 7th and 8th grade, or 9th and 10th, as the above chart indicates.

CLASS SIZE

The application states that “*The Great Oaks (GO) Charter School will be a college preparatory charter school serving grades 6-12 that will replicate the successful methods of the Match Charter School of Boston.*” One of the central features of the Match charter school is its small class sizes, with an average class size of 22, according to state data.¹

¹ See the MA state class size data here for MATCH: http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/classsizebyraceethnicity.aspx
The school described itself this way: its “approach to learning consists of small *class size*” www.doe.mass.edu/charter/finalists/10/MATCHApp.doc

Yet the Great Oaks applicants are planning for a class size of 33, and state that this 50 percent increase in class size, which it calls “modest”, is unlikely to have any detrimental effect, without citing any studies to back this up. Instead of providing smaller classes, the application claims that 16:1 student teacher ratio and tutoring will provide the same benefits, though there is no research to prove this.

Moreover, the Great Oaks school leader, Ben Carson has given presentations to the Community Board, claiming the school will provide smaller classes, according to news reports:

“Great Oaks Charter School, a middle and high school in Newark, N.J., plans to open a new 450-student school accommodating grades 6-12 on Governors Island in Fall 2013. The program boasts small class sizes and two hours of daily tutoring for its students, according to Benjamin Carson, one of the founders of the Newark branch who presented the proposal to the committee at its Feb. 14 meeting...”²

INADEQUATE STAFFING

In place of smaller classes, the school plans to provide a cadre of inexperienced tutors to “differentiate instruction.” According to the application, the tutors will receive only two weeks of training, yet this is called “extensive.” Under what definition of the word is two weeks of training “extensive”?

Even though the school projects enrolling substantial numbers of students with IEPs, it does not plan to have any special education specialists on staff. Instead, the application says it will “likely contract with outside service providers for speech language pathology and audiologist services; psychological services, physical and occupational therapy ...counseling...etc.” How students will receive services without specialists on staff is not explained.

Similarly, though the school says it will reserve 25 percent of its seats for English Language Learners, it plans to have no certified ESL teachers in its first year.

There is also no mention in the school’s budget of a librarian or guidance counselor. The nurse will be hired only on a part-time contract basis, which seems very risky, considering the proposed location of the school on Governor’s Island.

In general, the school’s structure seems very top-heavy, with administrators 41 percent of total staff. See the chart on p.41 of the application:

Year	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Total Administrative Staff	4	5	6	14	20
Total Teachers	6	13	17	23	29

POTENTIAL CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Although the application repeatedly claims there will no financial relationship between the School and the for-profit EMO Victory Schools, Michael Duffy, the lead applicant, is also the Managing Director of Victory Schools.

² Aline Reynolds, “Great Oaks proposal sparks larger debate over charters ,” Downtown Express, February 22, 2012; at <http://shar.es/5d6A8>

In his questionnaire, Mr. Duffy writes, “*The salary I draw from Victory has been a pro bono contribution by Mr. Klinsky/Victory Schools toward the creation of that new non-profit endeavor.*”

This implies a troubling, if ambiguous financial relationship, with Mr. Duffy potentially employed at Great Oaks Charter & Victory Education Partners at the same time.

FINANCES

The facilities plan is unclear. More specifically, it is not stated what the school’s back-up plan is if it does not receive tax exempt bonds from the NYC Economic Development Corporation to renovate a building on Governors Island. In addition, the housing allowance for tutors of only \$5,000 per year seems quite low, considering the high rent of apartments in New York City.

SERIOUS OMISSIONS IN THE APPLICATION

Finally, Mr. Duffy left blank the sections of the questionnaire asking whether he had ever been convicted of a misdemeanor or felony, or currently has criminal charges against him.

At the very least, the reasons for these omissions should be made clear before the State Education Department approves this charter school.

7. Please indicate whether or not you have ever been convicted of a misdemeanor and/or felony in state or federal court in any jurisdiction.

This does not apply to me. Yes.

If the answer to this question is yes, please provide the following details regarding your conviction(s): (1) the name of the criminal offense(s); (2) whether the criminal offense(s) was a misdemeanor or felony; (3) the facts and circumstances surrounding your conviction(s); (4) the date(s) of your conviction(s); and (5) the date(s) of disposition(s).

Your response to question seven may also include any relevant written information that you wish to be considered in support of your application, including, but not limited to: certificates of conviction; any parole and/or probation documentation; any certificates, including any certificate of relief from disabilities; any proof of counseling and/or rehabilitation; any documentation attesting to your good conduct or your good character; and any letters of support from friends, family, co-workers, employers, etc.

8. Please indicate if you currently have any criminal charge(s) pending against you in state or federal court in any jurisdiction.

This does not apply to me. Yes.

If the answer to this question is yes, please provide an explanation.

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