BALTIMORE CITY
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Operator Renewal Report

Empowerment Academy #262

Baltimore City Public Schools
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REPORT INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Report

The renewal recommendation report is a summary of findings regarding renewal of the charter or contract for an operator-run school, and the resulting renewal recommendation. Baltimore City Public Schools ("City Schools") collects and analyzes documentation including the school's renewal application, and an evaluation of the school's performance based on the renewal rubric, the School Effectiveness Review ("SER") performed on site at each school, the 5Essentials Student and Teacher Survey Report, and consideration of all other relevant information.

City Schools' renewal criteria are based on state law (§ 9-101, *et seq*., MD. CODE ANN., EDUC.) and Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners ("Board"), Policy IHBJ and associated administrative regulations (IHBJ-RA and JFA-RA). Board Policy IHBJ requires that schools up for renewal be evaluated on multiple measures including, but not limited to, the following:

- **Student achievement** (performance on state assessments, growth measures/value added measures, unique indicators, academic programming for special student populations and a school's fidelity to its charter or contract)
- **School climate** (chronic absence, suspensions, enrollment trends, school choice data, and school survey results)
- **Financial management and governance** (annual audits, school budget submissions, grants management, board documentation; compliance/adherence with federal, state, and local laws, rules, and regulations)
- An overall finding of not effective in any of the key areas (Student Achievement, School Climate, or Financial Management/Governance) may be the basis of a non-renewal decision.

The renewal process is a component of City Schools' annual review of its schools, designed to ensure that students and families across the district have access to school options that meet their interests and needs. The framework was originally developed in 2011 by the Renewal Stakeholders Working Group (composed of school operators from a range of school types, Supporting Public Schools of Choice, the Maryland Charter School Network, and district staff) who worked to develop a methodology for evaluating the performance of operator-run schools. The result: a fair, transparent, and rigorous renewal framework that reflects schools' unique nature and innovative contributions to student achievement, used for the first time in the 2012-13 school year, and a process for reviewing and updating the framework each year.

At the conclusion of each year's renewal cycle, staff engages operators and other key stakeholders in a review of the process to identify areas for improvement that could be addressed while still maintaining a level of predictability for schools up for renewal in the following year. The most recent round of review considered the transition from the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers ("PARCC") to the Maryland Comprehensive Assessment Program ("MCAP"), as well as the lack of state assessment data for school years 2019-20 and 2020-21 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Key changes made to the framework as a result of this most recent review include the following:

- The timeline of the renewal process has been extended so that 2021-22 Maryland Comprehensive Assessment Program (MCAP) scores could be considered prior to renewal recommendations being made. MCAP scores were released by the Maryland State Department of Education ("MSDE") in January 2023. MCAP data is considered in three metrics used in the renewal rubric:
    - Absolute Student Achievement
    - Effective Programming for All Student Racial and Ethnic Groups
    - Effective Programming for Students with Disabilities

  MCAP Update (February 2023): The 2021-22 school year was the first administration of MCAP, the state's new assessments for ELA and Math. The majority of schools in Baltimore City performed similarly on these assessments with the average students performing at a level 2 for ELA assessments in grades 3-5, 6-8 and English 10, indicating that students demonstrate partial proficiency in this subject and need additional academic support to ensure success in the next grade level.

  For math, City Schools, like Maryland and school districts across the country, experienced decreases between 2019 and 2022, and the average performance level for Baltimore City students is a level 2 for Math assessments for grades 3-5, and level 1 for Math assessments in grades 6-8. Performance level 1indicates students do not yet demonstrate proficiency in the subject and need substantial academic supports to be prepared for the next grade level. For Algebra I, results were an equal mix of level 1 and 2.

  Additionally, for both ELA and math assessments, many schools' performance was so similar that the level of differentiation that allowed for ranking each school using percentile comparisons within an economic disadvantage group to determine ratings, as City Schools historically has done in operator renewal, was not possible. In some cases, if using percentile rankings, the difference between schools rated Effective and Not Effective in an MCAP absolute measure would be a difference of only two points in mean scale score, meaning schools with similar performance would receive very different ratings.

  In order to address the lack of differentiation evident in the data, for the current renewal process City Schools has adopted ratings for the MCAP absolute measure identifying schools as "Developing" when their average student performance level averages to a 2 or below, and "Effective" when the student performance level averages 3. Ratings of "Highly Effective" and "Not Effective" for MCAP Absolute will not be given in this year's renewal process.

- Trend in Student Achievement, along with Absolute and Growth data, is one of three ways assessment data is used in the renewal rubric. Because of the transition to MCAP, trend data is not available for use in this year's renewal process. The weight of this measure has been redistributed to other measures in the Academics section of the renewal rubric.

- The 5Essentials survey of students and instructional staff has been added to the renewal review in the Academic section of the rubric. This addition helps to reduce the weight on assessment measures considered in this section while providing valuable insights on school organization. The 5Essentials is a research-backed diagnostic survey administered to

instructional staff and students that identifies five indicators that lead to improved outcomes for all students, including improved attendance, graduation rates, freshman on track and larger test score gains.[1] The five indicators are:

- Effective Leaders
- Collaborative Teachers
- Involved Families
- Supportive Environments
- Ambitious Instruction

"Research shows schools strong on at least three of the 5Essentials were 10 times more likely to show substantial gains in student learning than schools weak on three or more of the five essentials. A low score in even just one of the five essentials reduced the likelihood of improvement to less than 10 percent."[2] Use of the 5Essentials in the renewal process gives Advisory Board reviewers, district leadership, the Board of School Commissioners, schools, and the public additional insight into how schools are organizing themselves for improvement in delivering high quality instruction to students.

The Terms

According to Board Policy IHBJ, City Schools may determine that a public charter school is eligible for an eight-year contract term, five-year contract term, three-year contract term, or nonrenewal. The eight-year renewal term is an option based on the updated Board Policy IHBJ. Board Policy IHBJ allows the Board to consider an eight-year term for schools that have "two or more consecutive full renewals, including demonstrating quality programming for all student groups" and that have met the standard for a five-year renewal in the year of the latest review. A non-renewal recommendation in most cases includes a decision to close the program.

The Process

The process uses the following components:

- Renewal Rubric (Updated to reflect the above changes)
- Application for Renewal
- Data Tables prepared by City Schools
- School Effectiveness Review
- 5Essentials Survey Report

The process starts with a review by the Charter and Operator-led Schools Advisory Board ("Advisory Board"), whose members represent foundations, nonprofit organizations, school choice advocates, school operators, and district representatives; and whose function is to provide advice to the CEO on renewal and other issues as they relate to operator-led schools. In performing its review, the Advisory Board looks at all data and information, both quantitative and qualitative, to assess strengths and weaknesses of each school program and make sound recommendations to the CEO.

[1] https://www.uchicagoimpact.org/sites/default/files/5EOnePager_Nov2019.pdf

[2] https://www.uchicagoimpact.org/our-offerings/5essentials

The CEO considers the recommendations and the quantitative and qualitative review of the Advisory Board, and then through administrative review, makes her recommendation to the Board. In some instances, the nature or severity of an issue raised during the renewal process is serious enough to give it extra weight in formulating the renewal recommendation and, ultimately, the renewal decision, especially in instances where the issue affects the wellbeing of students, staff, or the district as a whole. For the Financial Management/Governance section, a rating of not effective in any one of the three elements that make up that section can result in a rating of not effective for the entire section depending on the severity of the concerns.

The ultimate decision on all operator renewals rests with the Board, which considers the recommendations and rationale of the CEO, the operator renewal report, testimony given at public Board meetings and work sessions, the contents of the official record, and the factors listed in Board Policy IHBJ and Administrative Regulation IHBJ-RA for all operator-led schools and Policy FCA and Administrative Regulation FCA-RA for non-charter schools. This includes the Board's ability to consider prior partial renewal terms afforded to operators who have had serious challenges in the prior renewal that remain issues that continue to affect the wellbeing of students, staff, or the district as a whole, based on evidence in this renewal process. In particular, as Board Policy IHBJ states, "[t]he Board may decide that a public charter school is not eligible for two consecutive partial renewals."

Timeline

Actions	**Date**
Renewal application due from operators	September 1, 2022
Charter and Operator-led Schools Advisory Board reviews renewal applications and provides advice to the CEO on renewal recommendations	September to October 2022, January 2023
District presents preliminary findings of strengths and weaknesses to Board at public meeting	November 9, 2022
MSDE releases 2021-22 MCAP results	January 2023
Schools receive data on measures that consider MCAP results, including Absolute performance, and submit addendum addressing MCAP results	January-February 2023
Schools receive CEO's renewal recommendation	February 2023
Renewal recommendations presented to Board	February 14, 2023
Work Session providing operators the opportunity to provide oral testimony to Board in a meeting open to the public	February 16, 2023
Board vote on renewal recommendations; Board deferred vote on one recommendation for further consideration	February 23, 2023
Board vote on deferred recommendation	February 28, 2023

Empowerment Academy #262

Operator: Empowerment Center, Inc.
Configuration: Elementary/Middle
Type: Charter
Enrollment: 305[3]

Recommendation

8-year renewal with conditions to review operator's audits and financial health at year 3 and year 6

Discussion

On February 23, 2023, the Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners voted to renew the contract with The Empowerment Center, Inc. to operate Empowerment Academy for an eight-year term running from July 1, 2023 to June 30, 2031, with the condition that the school undergo a full review of its audits and financial standing in years three and six of the contract. The School was rated "Effective" in Academics, Climate, and Financial Management/Governance.

Empowerment Academy is rated "Highly Effective" in Fidelity to Charter/Application Overall, indicating that *the school has full implemented the mission expressed in its charter application*[4] to "be a place where students, educators, and families are at the center of learning in order to promote academic excellence through the arts while encouraging students to reach their fullest potential in a globally competitive society". The school's Literacy Through the Arts programming is supported by partners such as Arts Everyday and Arts for Learning to integrate arts into academic classes to enhance learning skills. The school also uses community events and other partnerships to showcase the artistic pursuits of its students while engaging with the broader city community. Empowerment Academy is *gathering data to assess its efficacy and has effectively addressed any challenges evident in the data*. The school uses a range of formal and informal assessments, such as DIBELS, iReady and Amplify to set schoolwide goals and identify students in need of additional interventions and enrichment while still delivering grade-level-appropriate content to all students. A complete and fully implemented data cycle is evident throughout the application. However, in the 5Essentials survey, the school was rated "Not Effective", indicating it is not yet organized for improvement in the future. The 5Essentials is a research-backed survey that identifies five indicators that lead to improved outcomes for all students, including improved attendance and larger test score gains and is predictive of school's ability to improve in future years[5].

The school was rated "Highly Effective" in PARCC growth for English/Language Arts (ELA) for grades 3-5 placing in the 95th percentile, for grades 6-8 placing in the 100th percentile, for math for grades 3-5 placing in the 93rd percentile and "Effective" for ELA grades 6-8 placing in the 68th percentile. The student growth percentile looks at the extent to which a school can improve individual student performance year to year for school years 2017-18 to 2018-19.

2021-22 was the first year that the state's new assessment, the Maryland Comprehensive Assessment Program (MCAP) was administered. The school is rated "Developing" in both MCAP

[3] Final 9/30 enrollment counts for 2022-23.
[4] Text in italics is quoted from the 2022-23 operator renewal rubric.

ELA for grades 3-5 and 6-8, as well as in math for grades 3-5 and 6-8. In both ELA tests, and math 3-5, the school's average student performance level was 2, indicating that students demonstrated partial proficiency and need additional academic support to ensure success in the next grade level or course and to be on track for college and career readiness. In math for grades 6-8, the school's average performance level was 1, indicating students do not yet demonstrate proficiency and need substantial academic support to be prepared for the next grade level or course and to be on track for college and career readiness. This performance is similar to other schools in the district in these assessments.

Empowerment Academy is rated "Highly Effective" in several climate indicators such as Suspensions, where *the school has positive behavior interventions and strategies in place and has implemented effective strategies that have kept suspensions low over the course of the contract*. The school uses its Six Pillars of Character to develop students' decision-making skills, as well as the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports framework to establish positive school culture. The school was rated "Effective" in Student Attendance: Chronic Absence, indicating the school *has processes in place to identify root causes, and provide supports to families*. The school uses an attendance team to monitor data and meet with families to identify barriers to regular attendance and provide support to ensure that students are attending every day. These practices led to the school's attendance rate outperforming district averages in each year of the contract. However, following the return from virtual learning, the percentage of students identified as chronically absent rose. Empowerment Academy was also rated "Effective" in all three School Effectiveness Review metrics used in the climate section of the renewal rubric, Effective Instruction, Talented People, and Vision and Engagement.

The operator was rated "Developing" in Audit Content/Internal Controls due to low level of liquidity and cash on hand in the years covered by the audit review. However, in 2022 the operator was awarded a grant through the Maryland State Department of Education to support its previously approved enrollment expansion of the school, which, along with expanding enrollment, is expected to improve its overall financial health. In order to monitor the financial health of the operator in the future, a thorough review of the operator's audits and other financial documents is recommended at year 3 and year 6 of the contract.

Findings (Elementary/Middle school rubric)

Category 1. Is the school an academic success?

Sub-Category	Renewal Metric	City Schools Rating
1.1 Absolute Student Achievement	Average Student Performance Level MCAP Math (grades 3-5)	**Developing**
	Average Student Performance Level MCAP ELA (grades 3-5)	**Developing**
	Average Student Performance Level MCAP Math (grades 6-8)	**Developing**
	Average Student Performance Level MCAP ELA (grades 6-8)	**Developing**
1.2 Student Achievement Growth	Growth in Average Mean Scale Score PARCC Math (grades 3-5)	**Highly Effective**

	Growth in Average Mean Scale Score PARCC ELA (grades 3-5)	**Highly Effective**
	Growth in Average Mean Scale Score PARCC Math (grades 6-8)	**Effective**
	Growth in Average Mean Scale Score PARCC ELA (grades 6-8)	**Highly Effective**
1.3 Fidelity to Charter/Application Overall	The extent to which the school has fully implemented the mission expressed in its charter application and this mission is clear to all stakeholders. The extent to which the school has delivered high quality programming for all student subgroups. The extent to which the school is gathering data to assess its efficacy and has effectively addressed any challenges evident in the data, particularly in the areas of subgroup performance, enrollment, student attendance, dropout rates, attrition and student choice data/school demand.	**Highly Effective**
1.4 5Essentials Student and Teacher Survey	The extent to which the school is organized for improvement.	**Not Effective**
Academics Overall		**Effective**

Category 2. Does the school have a strong school climate?

Sub-Category	Renewal Metric	City Schools Rating
2.1 SER, Highly Effective Instruction	School Effectiveness Review Score - Highly Effective Instruction	**Effective**
2.2 SER, Talented People	School Effectiveness Review Score - Talented People	**Effective**
2.3 SER, Vision and Engagement	School Effectiveness Review Score - Vision and Engagement	**Effective**
2.4 Family Survey	Family: School Survey Family Satisfaction Rating	**Highly Effective**
2.5 Cohort Retention	Cohort Retention Rating	**Effective**
2.6 Student Attendance, Chronic Absence	The extent to which the school has implemented effective strategies that have kept student attendance high and chronic absences low or led to significant decreases in chronic absence over the course of the contract.	**Effective**
2.7 Suspensions	The extent to which the school has implemented effective strategies that have kept suspensions low or led to significant decreases over the course of the contract.	**Highly Effective**

2.8 Effective Programming for Students with Disabilities	The extent to which the school has a demonstrated a strong trajectory of growth, is aware of its data and responsibilities to students with disabilities, does not have any gaps or has decreased gaps in the data as it relates to performance and climate metrics for students with disabilities over time, and has effectively and consistently implemented processes, interventions and strategies to support student outcomes over the course of the contract.	**Effective**
Climate Overall		**Effective**

Category 3. Has the school followed sufficient financial management and governance practices?

Sub-Category	Renewal Metric	City Schools Rating
3.1 Audit Content, Internal Controls	The extent to which the school's Independent Auditor's Reports offer unqualified opinions and no management points in each of the years of the charter term. The extent to which statements of cash flow and ratio of assets to liabilities indicate that the operator has strong performance on their short-term liquidity measure.	**Developing**
3.2 Operator Capacity	The extent to which the school has operated effectively, and the operator has consistently met all state, federal reporting requirements critical District or federal obligations and has not received any Notices of Concern or Notices of Reprimand during the contract period. (Evidence that may be considered includes compliance with state or federal reporting requirements, budget submissions and monitoring reports, quarterly reports, and the relative number, frequency and severity of Notices of Concern or Notices of Reprimand.)	**Effective**
3.3 SER, Strategic Leadership/Governance	School Effectiveness Review Score - Strategic Leadership	**Effective**
Financial Management/Governance Overall		**Effective**