

THE RANCH  
CHARTER SCHOOL  
APPEAL COMMISSION  
ANALYSIS &  
RECOMMENDATION

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APPEAL OF “THE RANCH CHARTER  
SCHOOL” PROPOSAL DENIED BY THE  
SARASOTA COUNTY BOARD

## APPEAL OF "RANCH CHARTER SCHOOL" APPLICATION

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### SUMMARY OF PROCEDURAL TIME LINE

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There are no procedural anomalies in this Appeal as represented by the following timeline of events.

August 2002	District submits press release announcing the charter school application process.
August 2002	District holds half-day orientation for interested parties.
On or before 01 October 2002	Applicant submits proposal.
09 October 2002	District Charter School Review Board (CSRBM) members meet to discuss and share ratings of proposal
23 October 2002	Applicant presents before district school board in a workshop.
24 October 2002	CSRBM meets to reach a decision on the application, whether to recommend denial or approval to the Superintendent
27 October 2002	District CSRBM members, staff and Board Members receive letter from Applicant responding to areas of concern cited at the 10/24/02 workshop.
18 November 2002	District school board votes unanimously to deny the Ranch School application for a charter school.
28 November 2002	Applicant receives letter of denial.
21 December 2002	Appeal is filed with Agency Clerk of the Department of Education.
29 January 2003	District school board responds to Appeal.

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**SUMMARY OF REASONS FOR DENIAL BY SARASOTA COUNTY BOARD**

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**1. Educational Concerns**

- a. The educational design contains too many approaches, with no specifics with regard to how the various approaches would be implemented and integrated into a cohesive program.
- b. The design contains *too* little emphasis on the core subjects
- c. There is concern for the extent to which the design will prepare students for the FCAT
- d. There is lack of specifics for reaching out to minorities and to serving ESE and LEP students
- e. Admissions procedures do not comply with state statute.
- f. There is concern for the articulation of entering and exiting students

**2. Business/Management Concerns**

- a. There is no documentation of the applicant's non-profit status
- b. The proposed lines of authority seem to conflict
- c. The applicant has made too little progress identifying a site
- d. With the exception of the listing of names of a few local citizens associated with 4-H, there was little evidence of community support.

**3. Previous Charter Performance**

- a. A prior school was closed in year four due to safety concerns
- b. In earlier years, the school was non-responsive to district concerns
- c. There was inadequate or inconsistent student achievement
- d. Financial reports not submitted on time
- e. The school experienced excessive turnover of board and staff members
- f. There was very high student attrition
- g. The school had a poorly defined curriculum
- h. The founder acted as President of Board and Director of the school, leading to questions of conflict of interest.

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**EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT AND/OR REFUTE OBJECTIONS RAISED BY  
THE SARASOTA COUNTY BOARD**

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**(1) EDUCATIONAL CONCERNS**

- a. *District school board is concerned that the educational design contains too many approaches, with no specifics with regard to how the various approaches would be implemented and integrated into a cohesive program.*

Pages 1-1 through 1-8 comprehensively describe the theories and philosophies behind the “Progressive” program of study. District states that the educational design contains “too many approaches;” however, the plethora of instructional methodologies cited is a description of the type of “progressive” education that the applicant is proposing. On the other hand, the district also states that Applicant offers “no specifics with regard to how the various approaches would be implemented and integrated into a cohesive program.” A “progressive” educational program is considered to be a student-directed, unstructured, and innovative approach to education. Because of the nontraditional nature of this approach, it would have served the Applicant well to have operationally described, in detail, what a typical day for a student would look like in a “progressive” educational program. The emphasis of the “Academic Design” section of the application was placed on “process” with little to no information provided regarding “product.”

- b. *The design contains too little emphasis on the core subjects.*

The “Standard Application Format” for charter school applicants clearly requests that an application “Describe the educational program of the school, providing an overview of curriculum objectives and content of the main subject areas.” The only reference Applicant makes with regard to objectives and content is found in the “Student Assessment” section of the application. In it, there is a reference to a “Continuum of Goals and Objectives based on the Florida Sunshine State Standards and supplemented with content suggestions from the Core Knowledge series by E.D. Hirsch.” Additionally, Applicant supplied, in “Appendix Q,” a list of “indicators, behaviors and skills” which students would be expected to achieve. What is not clear in the “Academic Design” section of the application, is any type of grade-level scope and sequence of what the students will be expected to know, understand and be able to do – especially in the core subject areas. Here again, the Applicant has described in detail “processes” with little or no information provided regarding “products” or “outcomes.”

- c. *There is concern for the extent to which the design will prepare students for the FCAT*

In the “Student Assessment” section of the proposal, Applicant states that the “Florida Sunshine State Standards, [would be] the foundation of our program.” The FSSS are the grade-specific standards, which are tested annually in the FCAT. However, what the Applicant does not include is an overview of the proposed Ranch Charter School curriculum and its alignment with the Florida Sunshine State Standards.

The district school board, in its response to the Appeal, expressed concerns with the proposal’s “flexi-schooling” concept. It is important to note that this approach is one of the components of the “Progressive” program of study and is an innovative methodology that the Applicant theorizes will yield good results. Related FTE questions may be worked out between the parties in contract. Additionally, the district school board expresses

concerns with the applicant's lack of references to "gains scores" of the students. In fact, there is no mention in the proposal of expected "learning gains" or anticipated benchmarks for students at specific grade-levels. The applicant did not address the section of the Standard Application Format for Florida Charter Schools which requests that the proposal include "outcomes to be achieved." While there is reference to a "Continuum of Goals and Objectives based on the Florida Sunshine State Standards and supplemented with content suggestions from the Core Knowledge series by E.D. Hirsch," and certain goals, skills and behaviors are included in "Appendix Q," these outcomes are not for the most part in concert with the Florida Sunshine State Standards – those measured by the FCAT. The Applicant does submit that students will be subject to state testing and will additionally use the Peabody Individual Achievement Test as well as some placement and diagnostic reading tests. However, levels of achievement – specific academic goals for students – are not delineated.

- d. *There is lack of specifics for reaching out to minorities and to serving students participating in Exceptional Students Education (ESE) and students of Limited English Proficiency (LEP).*

The Application is clear on its approach to fulfilling federal and state guidelines for providing the least restrictive environment (see page 1-8 of the application) for its ESE students. On the other hand, LEP student needs are discussed in generalities, without clear demonstration of understanding as to the processes, which must be implemented for LEP compliance. There is nothing in the application, which would present, in particular, any educational barriers to minorities.

- e. *Admissions procedures do not comply with state statute.*

"Target student population" is defined vaguely by the Applicant as, "the general population." In addition, the term "acceptance" also used by the applicant connotes that there is a "selection" process; however, this selection process is not well defined. Because the target population is defined as "general," it is also unclear as to how or why there would be a selection process.

- f. *There is concern for the articulation of entering and exiting students*

Neither statute nor the Standard Florida Charter School Application requires that articulation for entering and exiting students be delineated in the proposal. Rather, this should be a contractual issue to be agreed upon by both parties.

**(2) BUSINESS MANAGEMENT CONCERNS**

- a. *There is no documentation of the applicant's non-profit status*

While it is the policy of the district school board to approve charter school status only to Applicants that have already acquired nonprofit status, neither statute nor the Standard Florida Charter School Application makes this requirement. Additionally, the Standard Florida Charter School Application, Part V., Final Documentation, states that "After the charter is executed, the school's start-up may be conditioned on the performance of or providing a reasonable timetable for the performance of duties such as:" and lists the school's organization such as articles of incorporation as one of the duties. It is also important to note that in its Response to the Appeal, the district school board agrees with the Applicant in that the Ranch Charter School did in fact apply for nonprofit status but was incorrectly (agency clerical error) issued a for profit certificate.

- b. *The proposed lines of authority seem to conflict*

Here again, the Applicant is proposing a non-traditional approach to governance and management. Statute and the Standard Florida Charter School Application require that the Applicant delineate "responsibilities and the policies and practices needed to effectively manage the charter school" (FS 1002.33(7)(a)(9)). In addition the Applicant must "describe the governance structure of the school" FS 1002.33(7)(a)(14). The Applicant has offered a great deal of detail in the areas of management and governance, including guidelines for the various management positions, various committee members and the board of directors. Appendix H, in particular, maps out an organizational chart (See section II pages 2 and 3 as well as Appendices H, I, J, K, L, M and N).

- c. *The applicant has made too little progress identifying a site*

Statute does not disallow a charter school to be approved prior to securing a facility. In fact the Standard Florida Charter School Application suggests that facilities documentation may be produced "after the charter is executed." District school board may address facilities at the time of contract. Additionally, Applicant did provide several facilities solutions, which they considered viable. However, without district school board approval Applicant expressed being unable to pursue certain financial arrangements for potential school sites.

- d. *With the exception of the listing of names of a few local citizens associated with 4-H, there was little evidence of community support.*

Neither statute nor the Standard Florida Charter School Application requires that the Applicant provide evidence of community support.

**(3) PREVIOUS CHARTER PERFORMANCE**

The following are a list of concerns that the district school board cites based on one of the nine founder's (Ms. Melissa) previous charter school history in other counties.

- a. *A prior school was closed in year four due to safety concerns*  
b. *In earlier years, the school was non-responsive to district concerns*  
c. *There was inadequate or inconsistent student achievement*  
d. *Financial reports not submitted on time*

- e. *The school experienced excessive turnover of board and staff members*
- f. *There was very high student attrition*
- g. *The school had a poorly defined curriculum*
- h. *The founder acted as President of Board and Director of the school, leading to questions of conflict of interest.*

Ms. Melissa has been a founder of three charter schools in Florida, one of which was terminated due to a safety issue in the facility, which could not be resolved. The relevance of addressing past performance in this Appeal is questionable. The district school board itself, in its Response to the Appeal, states, "The applicant's reference to other districts is irrelevant for the appeal." Therefore, it carries that the district school board's reasons for denial, which pertain to one founder's dealings with other counties, should also be "irrelevant for the appeal."

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### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

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Based on the available evidence to support and/or refute the objections outlined in the School Board's "Written Reasons for Denial" and its "Arguments in Response to Notice of Appeal," the following is a summary of findings:

#### **(1) EDUCATIONAL CONCERNS**

While the Applicant comprehensively describes the theories and philosophies behind the "Progressive" program of study - a nontraditional approach to education, it would have served the Applicant well to have described, in greater detail, what a typical day for a student would look like in a "progressive" educational program. The emphasis of the "Academic Design" section of the application was placed on "process" with little to no information provided regarding "product." Also unclear in the "Education Design" section of the application, is any type of grade-level scope and sequence of what the students will be expected to know, understand and be able to do - especially in the core subject areas. Here again, the Applicant has described in detail "processes" with little or no information provided regarding "products" or "outcomes." Applicant does not include an overview of the proposed Ranch Charter School curriculum and its alignment with the Florida Sunshine State Standards. While there is reference to a "Continuum of Goals and Objectives based on the Florida Sunshine State Standards and supplemented with content suggestions from the Core Knowledge series by E.D. Hirsch," levels of achievement - specific academic goals for students - are not delineated.

Finally, "Target student population" is defined vaguely by the Applicant as, "the general population." In addition, the term "acceptance" also used by the applicant connotes that there is a "selection" process; however, this selection process is not well defined. Because the target population is defined as "general," it is also unclear as to how or why there would be a selection process.

#### **(2) BUSINESS MANAGEMENT CONCERNS**

Concerning nonprofit status, while it is the policy of the district school board to approve charter school status only to Applicants that have already acquired nonprofit status, neither statute nor the Standard Florida Charter School Application makes this requirement. In the area of governance and management, Applicant is proposing a non-traditional approach and has,

according to statute, offered a great deal of detail in these areas - including guidelines for the various management positions, committee members and board of directors. With regard to facilities, statute does not disallow a charter school to be approved prior to securing a facility. Finally, in terms of community support, neither statute nor the Standard Florida Charter School Application requires that the Applicant provide such evidence.

### **(3) PREVIOUS CHARTER PERFORMANCE**

The relevance of addressing past performance in this Appeal is questionable. The district school board itself, in its Response to the Appeal, states, "The applicant's reference to other districts is irrelevant for the appeal." Therefore, it carries that the district school board's reasons for denial, which pertain to one founder's dealings with other counties, should also be "irrelevant for the appeal."

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### **CONCLUSIONS**

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In conclusion, this application contains five areas of significant weakness in its Academic Design and Admissions; they are:

- 1) Applicant did not operationally describe the proposed Progressive Program of Study
- 2) Applicant did not define grade-level scope and sequence of what the students will be expected to know, understand and be able to do – especially in the core subject areas – based on the Florida Sunshine State Standards.
- 3) Applicant did not include an overview of the proposed Ranch Charter School curriculum and its alignment with the Florida Sunshine State Standards.
- 4) Levels of student achievement – specific academic goals for students – are not delineated.
- 5) "Target student population" is defined vaguely by the Applicant as, "the general population." In addition, the term "acceptance" also used by the applicant connotes that there is a "selection" process; however, this selection process is not well defined. Because the target population is defined as "general," it is also unclear as to how or why there would be a selection process.

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### **RECOMMENDATION OF THE APPEAL COMMISSION**

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Rendered this 6<sup>th</sup> day of March, 2003

It is recommended that the decision of the School Board of Sarasota County to deny the Ranch Charter School Application be upheld because of numerous weaknesses in the proposal's Academic Design and Accountability Plan. However, it is also strongly recommended that should the Applicant choose to reapply for the 2004-2005 school year, the district school board should work with the Applicant to strengthen said specific weaknesses in an otherwise promising and innovative proposal.