



Charter Schools Institute
The State University of New York

Summary of Findings and Recommendations

Application to establish the New Roots Charter School

August 28, 2008

Executive Summary

The New Roots Charter School (“New Roots”) application was submitted to the Charter Schools Institute (the “Institute”) by lead applicant Tina Nilsen-Hodges on June 2, 2008. New Roots would open in Ithaca in September of 2009 with 125 ninth and tenth grade students and grow to serve 225 students in ninth through twelfth grade during the term of its charter. The mission of the proposed charter school is to prepare students to meet the challenges of citizenship, work, and life-long learning in the 21st century through an inter-disciplinary program based on sustainability that is hands-on and community based. Students would earn a Regents diploma and demonstrate readiness for higher education by earning college credit. If approved, this would be the first charter school in Ithaca approved by the Board of Trustees or any other authorizer.

The Institute recommends that the Board of Trustees approve the charter application for the New Roots Charter School.

Background and Description

The Institute conducted a rigorous review of the application, including an extensive staff review as well as a review by a panel of nationally renowned experts in fields such as education (charter and traditional schools), school administration, charter and traditional school policy, finance, and curriculum. The application has also been subjected to a fiscal soundness review conducted by independent school finance experts. Pursuant to its review protocols, the Institute also met with the applicant and the other members of the founding team. In addition, the Institute has required the applicant to revise, clarify and otherwise amend the application in various respects. Lastly, member(s) of the Board of Trustees’ Charter Schools Committee have had an opportunity to interview the lead applicant and proposed board of trustees.

The mission of the New Roots Charter School is to meet the challenges of citizenship, work, and life-long learning in the 21st century through an inter-disciplinary program that is hands-on and community based. The founding team designed a rigorous, four-year college preparatory curriculum that meets or exceeds the state’s 28 Learning Standards. In addition to earning a Regents diploma, students would be required to create a graduation portfolio and to demonstrate readiness for higher education by earning college credit. The focus of the school program would be sustainability education, which the school defines as “environmental education, [which] integrates the social, economic, and ecological dimensions of the human endeavor, emphasizing the relationship between all three of these critical realms and building young people’s competence as systems thinkers.” The application responds to Governor Paterson’s call for “New York to take the lead in showing the world how to make the sweeping changes necessary to make the transition to sustainability” as well as the call to action issued as a result of the New York Education Summit to address the crisis and inequity in high school education.

The key program design elements include an integrated curriculum, service learning, mentoring communities (i.e., advisory groups), and concurrent enrollment for college credit. Students would take courses in all four core subjects each year, and would rely on the Environment as Integrating Context (EIC) model for curriculum development (used in 130 schools nation-wide). This model was developed by the State Education and Environment Roundtable in cooperation with 16 state departments of education, and some of the results reported by schools adopting the model include better performance on standardized measures of reading, writing, mathematics, science and social studies, reduced discipline and classroom management problems, and increased engagement in learning. The application also cites the success of Expeditionary Learning and the Cloud Institute for

Sustainability Education as key considerations in designing the proposed school. The school plans to demonstrate achievement of all of the state’s 28 Learning Standards through exhibitions and digital portfolios and by assessing reading and mathematics at each grade level annually, likely using a standardized test such as the Terra Nova.

The school day would run from 9:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m. Funds would be sought to support activities before and after school. According to the application, “on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, students would attend core subject-area courses in hour-long blocks, in addition to a one-hour advising and school governance class called “Mentoring Community.” On Tuesdays and Thursdays, students would spend time in 90-minute labs, art studios, internships, and field trips related to core subject areas, in addition to an extended period of mentoring community.” The school proposes an “experience-based” curriculum, with students spending significant time outside the classroom such that they “will apply academic learning to projects that meet community needs.” The school also plans to implement a Farm-to-School meals program, which would integrate the study of agricultural science and hands-on applications at local farms.

At the time of submission of the application to establish the New Roots Charter School, the proposed board of trustees included 10 members. However, based on information shared during the founding team’s interview with Institute staff and with Charter Schools Committee members, the school’s founding board had identified additional future members who would diversify the membership and enhance its areas of expertise. The school would also elicit community input through an advisory committee and a community council. Based on conversations with the proposed trustees, they appear to clearly understand the board’s roles and responsibilities and have the ability to ensure the appropriate and effective operation of the proposed charter school.

The board bylaws indicate that board membership can range from five to fifteen members. The proposed initial members of the board of trustees are set forth below.

1. Tina Nilsen-Hodges (applicant and founding principal) – Sustainability Educator, Ithaca College and Ecovillage at Ithaca.
2. Peter Bardaglio – Senior Fellow, Second Nature Education for Sustainability.
3. Jennifer Bokaer-Smith – Assistant to the Director, Study Skills Center, Cornell University.
4. Kathryn Caldwell – Assistant Professor of Psychology, Ithaca College.
5. Christine Coveney – Director of Curriculum and Instruction 6-12, Union-Endicott CSD.
6. Jason Hamilton (Chair) – Associate Professor of Biology, Ithaca College.
7. Laura Lamash – Challenge Enrichment Coordinator, Binghamton CSD.
8. Karl Madeo – Director, CollegeNow, Tompkins Cortland Community College.
9. Conrad Metcalf – Vice President for Operations and Development, Performance Systems Development.
10. Linnett Short – Communication and Administrative Coordinator, Tompkins County Solid Waste Management Division.
11. Principal (*ex officio*, non-voting) - as noted above, Ms. Nilsen-Hodges will serve as founding principal.
12. Parent Representative (*ex officio*, non-voting).
13. Faculty Representative to the Board (*ex officio*, non-voting).
14. Student Representative to the Board (*ex officio*, non-voting).
15. Alumni Representative to the Board (*ex officio*, non-voting).

The school plans to lease a private building that provides access to a meadow that can support gardening projects. The building owner will incorporate renovation costs in the monthly rent. The school would also have a satellite office that would facilitate access to Tompkins Cortland Community College's (TC3) facilities, such as computer labs. The application notes support from the community and local higher education institutions, including: TC3, Cornell University and Ithaca College, as well as the EcoVillage at Ithaca, and indicates considerable input from people with expertise in alternative education and sustainability.

The fiscal impact of New Roots on the district of residence, the Ithaca City School District, is summarized below.

Number of Students	Per Pupil Aid (does not include special education and federal entitlement grants)	Total Dollars to Charter School from Ithaca CSD	Total Budget for Ithaca CSD (in billions)	(%) of Total Ithaca Education Budget
125 (2009-10 school year – year 1)	12,476	\$1,559,549	\$98,574,018	1.58%
225 (2013-14 school year – year 5)	14,042	\$3,159,515	\$110,945,926	2.85%

The calculations conservatively assume that there will be a modest (3%) annual increase in per pupil aid and in the overall budget of the Ithaca City School District over the life of the proposed charter. The Institute's calculations do not account for special education, federal Title I funds or other grants or funds provided by the district and to be received by the school. However, the school has included in the application calculations accounting for special education, federal Title I funds or other grants or funds provided by the district and to be received by the school.

The applicant made an assessment that the programmatic and fiscal impact of the proposed school on both the Ithaca City School District and nonpublic schools in the same geographic area would be modest.

The Institute has notified the school district as well as public and private schools in the same geographic area of the proposed school, and as of August 25, 2008 the only comment was from the Ithaca City School District, which is attached hereto. In sum, the district "does not support the application to establish the charter school." The district superintendent is concerned that the district cannot support the charter school financially. The Institute notes that charter schools receive between 65 and 80 percent of the funds used to educate district school students netting the district 20 to 35 percent of each charter school student's per pupil cost. In addition the district would not have to educate the students attending the charter school with resultant savings. The Institute finds that the school district's comments are not sufficient to change the Institute's recommendation for the application.

The founding team has expended significant energy to engage the community in the design and development of the application for the New Roots Charter School and to obtain support from a variety of community organizations, agencies and businesses. First, the founding team notes that the only alternative high school in the Ithaca community, the Lehman Alternative Community School,

had a waiting list of 300 students as of May 2008 for openings in 7th through 12th grades. Second, the founding team collected 576 signatures on petitions. Of this total, 401 represented parents who indicated they were interested in having New Roots as a high school option for their child(ren); 175 signatures represented community members who expressed general support for the approval of New Roots as a high school option. Third, the founding team received 75 letters from parents who would be interested in enrolling their child in the school, if approved. Lastly, 45 letters were received from various community organizations and businesses committing their involvement and support for the school, if approved. The organizations and businesses include a wide spectrum of the Ithaca community, TC3, Cornell University, Ithaca College, Ecovillage at Ithaca, The History Center in Tompkins County, The Learning Web, Lehman Alternative Community School (note that the Ithaca City School District noted their objection to the school doing so in its comments to the Trustees), and numerous others. Mr. Will Burbank, Tompkins County Legislator, District 12, also lends his support for the establishment of the charter school.

Findings

Based on the comprehensive review of the application, discussion with national experts and interviews of the applicant and the proposed board of trustees, the Institute makes the following findings.

1. The charter school described in the application meets the requirements of Article 56 of the Education Law and other applicable laws, rules, and regulations as reflected in (among other things):
 - the inclusion of appropriate policies and procedures for the provision of services and programs for students with disabilities and English language learners;
 - the required policies for addressing the issues related to student discipline, complaints, personnel matters, health services, Freedom of Information Law (FOIL), and the Open Meetings Law;
 - the inclusion of proposed by-laws for the operation of the board of trustees; and
 - the inclusion of an analysis of the projected fiscal and programmatic impact on surrounding public and private schools.
2. The applicant has demonstrated the ability to operate the schools in an educationally and fiscally sound manner as reflected in (among other things):
 - the articulation of a culture of self-evaluation and accountability at both the administrative and board level;
 - the student achievement goals articulated by the applicant;
 - the appropriate roster of educational personnel;
 - a sound mission statement;

- a comprehensive assessment plan;
 - the provision of sound start-up, first-year, and five-year budget plans;
 - the plan to acquire comprehensive general liability insurance to include any vehicles, employees, and property;
 - evidence of adequate community support for, and interest in, the charter school sufficient to allow the school to reach its anticipated enrollment; and
 - the inclusion of procedures for programmatic and independent fiscal audits, at least annually.
3. The Board of Trustees' approval of the application is likely to improve student learning and achievement and materially further the purposes of the Charter Schools Act (as amended). This finding is reflected by (among other things):
- the inclusion of a curriculum framework document that specifies how the proposed curriculum would ensure that students will meet or exceed the performance standards of the Board of Regents;
 - a comprehensive plan to assess student achievement through the use of state tests, externally-verifiable standardized tests and other diagnostic assessments;
 - the articulation of strategies to amend and differentiate instruction where assessment data indicates such need;
 - a focus on high-quality teachers to allow for concentrated, focused and differentiated instruction;
 - the inclusion of significant opportunities for professional development of the school's instructional staff throughout the year;
 - daily blocks of time scheduled for literacy and numeracy;
 - the plan for the education of students at-risk of academic failure; and
 - a commitment to providing an educational program focused on outcomes, not inputs.
4. The character and nature of the comments of the Ithaca City School District are not sufficient to override the Institute's positive recommendation for the application.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on its review and findings, the Charter Schools Institute recommends that the Board of Trustees approve the application for the New Roots Charter School to open in Ithaca in September 2009.

New Roots Charter School

Basic Identification Information

Lead Applicant(s):	Tina Nilsen-Hodges
Management Co.:	None
Other Partners:	None
Location (District):	Ithaca, New York
Student Pop./Grades:	Opening with 125 students in 9 th and 10 th grades; growing to 225 students in 9 th through 12 th grades
Opening Date:	September 2009

School District of Proposed Location Profile

Ithaca City School District			
Enrollment (2006-07):		5,384	
Percent (2006-07):			
American Indian or Alaska Native		1%	
Black or African American:		12%	
Hispanic or Latino:		5%	
Asian or Native Hawaiian/ Other Pacific Islander:		11%	
White:		71%	
Percent Participating in Federal Lunch Program (2006-07):			
		36%	
Percent Proficient on State Exams (2006-07)			
English Language Arts		Mathematics	
Grade	Percent Proficient	Grade	Percent Proficient
3	77.5	3	89.2
4	80.7	4	86.5
5	87.4	5	84.3
6	77.9	6	86.4
7	81.3	7	84.3
8	64.8	8	71.5

Source: Demographic data is from the New York State Accountability and Overview Report 2006-07; test data are from the 2007-08 results released on the State Education Department website.