



DRAFT

David C. Hesse, Commissioner
NJ Department of Education
100 River View Plaza
PO Box 500
Trenton, NJ 08625

Dear Commissioner Hesse:

Thank you for the opportunity to review and submit comments regarding the application for Fulbright Academy Charter School of Montclair. As your office reviews the Charter's French immersion plan, please keep in mind the ultimate decision will significantly affect every member of the Montclair community. Representing the Montclair Public School District and the many in our community who have voiced their thoughts publicly and privately, we have detailed a series of concerns regarding Fulbright's French immersion plan for your review:

- Fulbright estimates an enrollment of between 250 students the first year and eventually increasing to 450. For any resident students who enroll in a charter school, we have a formula-based tuition (N.J.S.A. 18A:36A-12) that essentially amounts to approximately 90% of our per pupil tax levy. While the precise amount is subject to change, the total that the district will lose is approximately \$10,500 per student, so for every 50 students who leave our public schools for a charter school, the district must transfer approximately \$525,000 to the charter school. At 250 students, the district needs to accommodate for a loss of \$2,625,000. At 450 students, that amount will rise \$4,725,000. And then on top of that the district has to provide a per-capita share of our federal and state categorical aids for students who count toward those aid calculations. That amount equates to approximately another \$100,000.
- This diversion of funds would be a tremendous financial burden to the school district due to Montclair's magnet school philosophy. If Montclair had to reduce its budget that much, we would seriously stifle the magnet model, a 40-year-old program put in place after the desegregation regulation in order to create a more racially-balanced school system. The district's magnet schools have been showcased nationwide and is the reason many families move to Montclair.

If the application is approved the district stands to lose 250 students along with \$2,625,000. To reduce the budget by that much, the district would have to reduce the technology and curriculum and instruction accounts by \$1 million and cut approximately 25 staff members. When the charter school's enrollment reaches 450 students, it would be necessary to reduce the curriculum and instruction accounts by an additional \$1 million and cut an additional 30 staff members. This will result in loss of programs to all of the remaining elementary school students in the district.

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Furthermore, budget reductions due to the loss of state aid have already impacted staff, programs and services, including reductions in reading instruction, guidance services, library services, world language instruction, after-school and summer programs, among many others cuts. *Our efforts targeted at supporting at-risk student populations will be severely impacted by the additional cuts brought on by the proposed Charter School.* For instance, in a district that already has an average of more than 23 students in elementary classrooms, the district would need to dramatically increase class size and reduce the extra support teachers that are assigned to the at-risk students.

- The application calls for a 90/10 immersion program. The 90/10 immersion program concept provides that the target language would be taught 90% of the time with at least half of the class speaking the target language. Montclair currently only has two children who have identified themselves to the district as French speaking with English as a second language. Therefore, the validity of Fulbright's premise is questionable.
- The original purpose of an immersion program, as defined by the state, was to serve the ESL population. Montclair's ESL population is miniscule as it is less than 1% of our enrollment.
- The claim that an immersion school will reduce the academic gap that Montclair currently has and has existed for over 20 years and also exists in many school districts throughout the country is also faulty. Many of the children in the gap are two and three years below grade level and have auditory discrimination issues. Teaching someone a foreign language who is not literate in their native language and/or has auditory discrimination issues will not be successful.
- In general, the application does not provide information about how the Fulbright School would propose to address students with special needs.
- The parent surveys taken by the applicant are seriously flawed. There is no explanation of how many potential survey takers there were, and if there is any duplication of people in the same household taking the survey. For example, a hundred surveys were counted at Northeast Elementary School and its total population is 436.
 - Data is represented by a total of 600 surveys and our K-5 population is 3,053; not quite 20% surveyed.
 - 90% of a very small group of people does not represent the district's opinion of immersion as stated in Fulbright's application.

Regarding educational data:

- Most importantly, Fulbright fails to outline in the application how it will address requisite New Jersey Common Core State Standards.
- This data, as presented, is extremely misleading. It combines NJASK scores of both proficient and advanced proficient. When you combine NJASK scores for proficient and advanced proficient students to determine a total passing grade, the range of passing scores goes all the way from 200 to 300.
- Using total data by percentage does not show the individual student's progress from year to year which should be assessed by using the scale score.

- Student growth should be individual and longitudinal, not based on percentages.
 - The data does not demonstrate the diversity for economic, racial, and Special Education subgroups. To truly analyze a program it is essential to include those factors. That testing data used to support Fulbright's academic case is not evident.
 - The data is inconclusive based on Fulbright's presentation.
- The district compiled the Englewood City data from the NJDOE website. Englewood started an immersion program in the '90s for K-8 students. It is apparent from this longitudinal data that there is no phenomenal growth as indicated in the application. (Data attached).
 - The Montclair Public Schools is under a desegregation order, and in section three of the Fulbright application, there is no mention of how they will have a racially balanced population as we do in the Montclair Public Schools. It is our understanding that any publicly funded school based in Montclair must be subject to the same regulations with regard to racial balancing. Therefore, Fulbright's failure to address this issue should be an additional disqualifying element.
 - The property at 151 Forest St., Montclair, does not seem suitable, without major renovations, for a K-8 school. This property is also only one block from Montclair High School and Renaissance Middle School which serve a combined total of nearly 2,300 students. The property abuts railroad tracks in active daily use by NJ Transit. This area is severely congested with traffic and has another private school at the same intersection. As evidence of the traffic, on April 29, 2016 there was an accident involving a driver hitting a school bus outside of Renaissance School.

For the reasons stated above, we believe that the Fulbright Charter School would negatively impact the educational landscape of Montclair. We appreciate the opportunity to outline our concerns and are available to speak further if necessary.

Sincerely,

Ronald E. Bolandi
Interim Superintendent

Jessica de Koninck, President
On behalf of the Montclair Board of Education