

LEXINGTON CITY SCHOOLS

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November 14, 2014

Mr. Joel E. Medley
Director, NCDPI/Office of Charter Schools
6303 Mail Service Center
Raleigh, NC 27699-6303

Re: Impact Statement for Lexington City Schools
Charter School Application filed on behalf of Fortis Academy, Inc.

Dear Charter School Advisory Board Members and State Board of Education:

Lexington City Schools appreciates the opportunity to give the Boards feedback on the recent charter application submitted by Dylan Parkes on behalf of the Fortis Academy group. Lexington City Schools' response will focus on the following three areas of the Fortis group's application efforts: quotes out of context in the application and skewing of relevant statistical data, a lack of community interest in a charter school, and a loose and unqualified academic plan of action.

In the application, Mr. Parkes' justification for a charter school is tied to End of Grade test results for grades 3-8 from 2013 in Lexington City Schools. The system readily admits to scoring low on the initial Common Core exams in 2013. This trend occurred statewide and dips were more severe among school systems such as Lexington City Schools with a higher percentage of economically disadvantaged students. If Mr. Parkes had dug into more recent data, he would have obtained the growth results from the 2014 EOG scores. Of the five Lexington City schools that the Department of Public Instruction rates for academic growth, three achieved the distinction of **Exceeding** expectations and the remaining two **Met** state expectations for academic growth.

Furthermore, State Superintendent June Atkinson recognized Lexington Senior High School for having the highest percentage increase of students graduating in four years from 2006-2013. During that period the graduation rate at Lexington Senior High School went from the state's worst at 43.7% to 84.7% in 2013, surpassing the state average. In fact, the North Carolina Graduation Task Force requested that Lexington City Schools present best practices to the Task Force in the spring of 2014 at its annual meeting.

Within the application, Mr. Parkes alludes to the fact that Lexington City Schools is not meeting the academic needs of the children in the district. We do not believe Mr. Parkes is looking close enough at student data. If he had, he would have seen that 83.4% of the economically disadvantaged students, 87.7% of the black students, and 80% of students with disabilities graduated from Lexington Senior High in 2014. And most importantly, 82% of students that graduated in the spring of 2014 were accepted into a two or four year college or signed up to serve in the military.

Additionally, in 2014, Lexington City Schools' students raised their average SAT scores 121 points versus a 4 point increase in the state average. Additionally, in 2014, the average ACT score



for all North Carolina students increased 0.2 while Lexington City School's students improved their average ACT scores by 1.9.

Mr. Parkes' application quotes the superintendent as saying in the local newspaper, "Do we have a ways to go in increasing growth in our students? Absolutely. We do have challenges." What Mr. Parkes does not point out is that the challenges the superintendent references are the 85.11% of economically disadvantaged students in the school system. This along with the cultural diversity of 32% Hispanic, 31% black, and 27% white, create unique challenges for the school system. Additionally 1/3 of the school system's students live in homes where English is not spoken. This is a definite challenge, but one the school system is meeting. Evidenced by the aforementioned statistical data, Lexington City Schools would challenge Mr. Parkes to find another school district in North Carolina with similar demographics whose students are performing as well.

Lexington City Schools would like the Boards to consider the data that Mr. Parkes submitted as formative in nature. While elementary and middle grade data is important for formative adjustments, the important data comes in the culmination of a student's academic life in the school system. Because of the cultural diversity and economic challenges, Lexington City Schools spends 13 years closing the achievement gap that some students bring with them through the schoolhouse door. In that light, Lexington City Schools are meeting the academic needs of their students as evidenced by graduation rates, national testing results, and acceptance into post secondary institutions.

The second area of the school system's concern focuses on the lack of community interest in a charter school option. The Fortis group led by Mr. Parkes held a highly publicized community informational meeting at the local YMCA in August. In attendance at that meeting were approximately two dozen local citizens. Of that group, one fourth or six of the approximate 24 were representatives of the Lexington City Schools' Board of Education and administration. Two Lexington City School families attended and the rest of the group were parents from the Davidson County School System and the Thomasville City School System. As indicated in their application, Fortis Academy projects that roughly 70% of their enrollment would be made of students domiciled within the Lexington City Schools' attendance area. As a result, the Lexington City Schools would experience an additional diminution of State and local operating dollars from its operating budget during a current downturn in the economy and in the future when it is nearly certain that the school system will be required to operate with additional significant budget cuts. Based on its projected enrollment in the first year of operation of 322 students from the Lexington City Schools' attendance area, the cost of Fortis Academy to the Lexington City Schools is estimated at over \$1,600,000.00 in State funding and over \$350,000.00 in local funding. This effort has the potential to reduce Lexington City Schools' revenue by in excess of \$2,000,000.00. If this project is pushed forward only to falter through a lack of interest or quality, all the children of Lexington City Schools will suffer. Staff, materials, and educational experiences will be cut or reduced. The children who need the most will suffer the most.

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The third and final area of concern for Lexington City Schools is the academic plan of action and the unqualified individuals who might carry that plan forward. During the informational forum held by the Fortis group, Mr. Parkes was asked about curriculum specifics and instructional direction for the school. In response, vague generalities were given to the questions similar to what is included in the application. Mr. Parkes emphasized that movement and physical activity would be a focal point along with nutrition. When questioned about the Common Core and the North Carolina Standard Course of Study, Mr. Parkes responded with noncommittal statements that shed little light on his knowledge and background in curriculum design or instructional delivery. When asked about the school's philosophy for teaching math and reading, the response was that the state curriculum would be followed. Mr. Parkes admitted that he had no formal training or experience in education, but he did attend a charter school as a child. He said he had a good experience as a child and had a desire to create that for others. When asked about how the school would address students with physical or mental handicaps, his answers were incomplete and noncommittal. This is similar to the application areas that address students with special needs. In the application, generalities and umbrella descriptors such as extended time, small group instruction, and peer tutoring are listed as a few of the strategies.

In the application, on pages 14 through 20, Fortis describes its instructional program and curriculum design. Mr. Parkes explains in the document that direct teacher instruction, repetition, and physical play will be the instructional delivery modalities used in grades K-4. Nowhere in the application is reading instruction addressed. Leveled reading materials, formative diagnostic tools, and remediation strategies for young students are not mentioned or addressed in the Fortis application. Because 30% of the students in Lexington live in homes that do not speak English, a specific plan of action for English Language Learners is essential when addressing teaching reading to this population of students. Nowhere in this plan is reading instruction for ELL students addressed.

The instructional plan for grades 5-7 does not provide the specific information on how the curriculum will be developed, who will develop the curriculum, how it will be delivered, or how it will be assessed. Specifically, one is left to wonder if Shakespeare will be introduced, and if so, when? How will students be prepared for the complexities of Shakespeare's language? Will they be introduced by poetry of English authors? Who will decide this? Will it be the principal, the teachers, or the governing Board?

Adding to the complexity of instructional design is the fact that ELL students, AIG students, and EC students will all be in the same classroom. Thus, a high level of differentiation must be evident in all classrooms. Nowhere in the document does Mr. Parkes address how the essential differentiation of instruction will take place.

On the application in the area of Curriculum and Instructional Design, the emphasis is on the physical makeup of the classroom and the movement of the students within the classroom. This lack of specificity in curriculum design creates red flags for those who care about the academic well-being of Lexington students. The application articulates at length the excellence of the historic Greek model of education. Physical training, memorization of facts and rules, and recitation are cited as important tools that will be utilized in Fortis Academy. While these are

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admirable and time-tested strategies, nowhere on the application are the data driven effective strategies of cooperative learning, think-pair-share, graphic organizers, peer/self-assessment, kinesthetic assessment, white boards, or visual representations mentioned. Lexington City Schools feels the application is a hollow shell of instructional jargon. The school system fears what might happen to students whose parents unknowingly allow their children to attend such a loosely organized school.

In the area of budgeting, projections for classroom technology of \$8,600, instructional software of \$7,500, wiring, and classroom interfaces of \$5,000 each seem woefully inadequate. Classrooms equipped with an interactive white board, teacher device and multiple student devices will cost upwards of \$16,000 per classroom. This is not including the hardware wiring or the cost of software which likely will cost in the area of \$10,000 to \$20,000. Additionally, the application states a budget of \$7,500 for maintenance supplies. From my experience, regular and routine maintenance along with larger maintenance projects cannot expect to be handled on a daily basis by contracted outsourcing or a custodian who is being paid \$26,000. The one food service worker listed in the application document would be hard pressed to provide meals for the 462 students projected in year one. Financial shortfalls in budget estimates would likely create a damaging effect for the instructional program. Again, this precarious situation causes Lexington City Schools great concern for the children who reside in the district.

During the informational meeting, Mr. Parkes said that he would be the principal. On page 31 of the application, a process for the governing board to select a principal is outlined. On the same page, Mr. Parkes is also listed as a Board member. Given Mr. Parkes' admission to having no educational experience other than attending a charter school and college, it concerns Lexington City Schools that the principalship duties outlined on page 38 of the application will be put in the hands of an untrained individual. These duties and responsibilities include the following: hiring, evaluation, discipline, promotion, and assignment and termination of faculty and staff.

Of paramount concern, we ask that the application be examined to determine the qualification and experience necessary to implement the proposed education plan so as to satisfy the six purposes of Charter Schools as defined by N.C.G.S. §115C-238.29A. In particular, we are concerned that the Applicant may not truly offer any substantive programs or opportunities that are not currently being provided by existing local public schools, including but not limited to programs specifically tailored for students identified as at-risk of academic failure or academically gifted.

Lexington City Schools believes all parents have the right to choose the best education possible for their children. But, Lexington City Schools also believes that academic institutions that are created without the proper forethought and without the proper accountability are doomed to failure. If a charter school is founded in Lexington, and that school does not adequately meet the needs of the children that it serves, those children may never recover academically or emotionally. As previously stated, the Fortis group application targets 70% of its potential students as coming from the Lexington City School District. As previously stated 85.11% of Lexington students are economically disadvantaged. Yet, nowhere on the application does it make any mention of training the teaching staff to understand and teach children of poverty.

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For the inexperienced, that piece may not seem important. But, for educators who work daily to break the cycle of generational poverty it is extremely important.

Lexington City Schools stands on its data as proof that it is meeting the needs of all children in the district. And the district refutes the misuse of the superintendent's quote for an attack on the school district's success. While we know there is no silver bullet when it comes to educating children, the district repeats its challenge to find a district in the state of North Carolina with similar demographics who is producing more successful results than Lexington.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Fortis group's application.

Sincerely,



Rick Kriesky, Superintendent

Lexington City Schools

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