



November 1, 2019

Dave Machado, Director
Office of Charter Schools
North Carolina Department of Public Instruction
6301 Mail Service Center
Raleigh, North Carolina 27699-6301

Dear Mr. Machado and Advisory Board members:

On behalf of the Durham Public Schools Board of Education and the DPS administration, we write in opposition to granting a charter to Oak Grove Charter Academy.

Guided by our 2018-2023 Strategic Plan, Durham Public Schools has made significant improvements, with enrollment growth for the first time since 2014 and the almost complete elimination of schools labeled as low-performing. This is despite an oversaturation—disproportionate to the rest of the state—of charter school operators in Durham County. Further charter school expansion would only serve to dilute support for public education at a time when momentum is essential to accelerating DPS's progress.

Our school board's opposition to charter school expansion is principled, unanimous, supported by our constituents, and well known. In addition, however, we have specific concerns with the proposed Oak Grove Charter Academy, some that have been noted by reviewers in the evaluative rubric and some related to the location and likely impact of the proposed school on existing school communities.

(1) Oak Grove Charter Academy would undermine the state's own school transformation efforts at Glenn Elementary, a designated Restart school. Glenn Elementary School is explicitly targeted in this charter application; the applicants seek to establish the school in the nearby Gorman community. As a Restart school, Glenn Elementary's new financial flexibility has enabled it to invest in new math and reading curricula with high-quality professional development as well as additional staff to support student learning and teacher development.

A new principal, largely new teaching staff, and new teacher incentive structure are combining to instill a positive new academic and socio-emotional culture. Especially in light of the disproportionate demographic draw of students from Glenn Elementary to the proposed charter, an unplanned and substantial decline in the school's enrollment could prove devastating to the economies of scale that drive needed resources to its students and teachers.

(2) The charter application and the management organization's past history suggest that Oak Grove Charter Academy would disproportionately draw engaged, affluent, and/or non-minority families from Glenn Elementary, Neal Middle, and The School for Creative Studies magnet school, thereby increasing segregation and the concentration of poverty. The applicant board, along with its management partner National Heritage Academies, makes few promises to market specifically to historically marginalized, underserved, or minority communities. Indeed, the application's projected enrollment (Question 16, page 8) blithely assumes that Oak Grove Charter Academy's enrollment will roughly mirror DPS's district-wide racial and ethnic demographic makeup. However, the marketing plan description in the application (page 76, 3.6.1) completely sidesteps the requirement to "provide a plan indicating how the school will market to potential students and parents *in order to reasonably reflect the racial/ethnic and demographic composition of the district in which the charter school will be located*" [emphasis added].

The experience of Wake Forest Charter Academy, another National Heritage Academies school which the applicants explicitly cite as a model, is instructive. Following the opening of Wake Forest Charter Academy in 2014, the demographic balance of nearby Wake Forest Elementary school changed immediately. According to data from WCPSS, the percentage of African-American students at Wake Forest Elementary jumped by more than four percentage points from 21.4 percent in 2013 to 25.8 percent in 2014 and continued to rise to 32.8 percent in 2018, illustrating a pattern of white flight facilitated by this National Heritage Academies school.

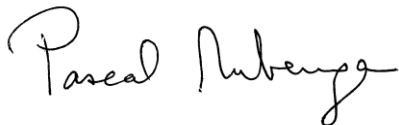
Application reviewers noted that it "needs elaboration in terms of meeting transportation and meal needs of all students" as well as "more detail on marketing and family engagement plans." Without such assurances, it is likely that Oak Grove Charter Academy will follow Wake Forest Charter Academy's pattern, reflecting neither the Gorman community's, nor the Durham community's, racial/ethnic or socioeconomic diversity—and will deepen the divisions between our communities and schools.

(3) Oak Grove Charter Academy’s proposed governing board has no representation from Durham County and no professional educators. Based on Oak Grove Charter Academy’s application, it is easy to believe that its board’s commitment to Durham families and students is driven simply by a perceived business opportunity. The lead applicant resides in Granville County. The registered agent for the private non-profit is located in Alamance County. The four directors reside in Granville, Lee, and Wayne counties.

While the application claims some community involvement and history in Durham for each member, evidence of deep and ongoing community engagement is lacking—and in section 3.2.12 (page 63) the applicants state, “We do not currently plan to create any formal advisory bodies, councils, or associations to assist in governance.” Durham families seek Durham ownership of Durham schools, yet the proposed governing structure separates the school community from the school owners.

Durham Public Schools is growing, improving, and thriving under dynamic administrative leadership, a passionate and activist teacher community, a responsive and principled school board, and a bold Strategic Plan. Approving Oak Grove Charter Academy would hamper our school transformation efforts at Glenn Elementary, increase segregation and socio-economic isolation in eastern Durham County, and reduce local accountability and community engagement. We urge you to reject this charter.

Sincerely,



Pascal Mubenga, Ph.D., Superintendent
Durham Public Schools



Mike Lee, Chair
Durham Public Schools Board of Education