



# SCHOOL BOARD OF THE CITY OF RICHMOND

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Via Electronic and First Class Mail

Patrick Henry School of Science and Arts  
Board & Community  
P.O. Box 2459  
Richmond, Virginia 23218

To the Patrick Henry Board and Community:

As Patrick Henry School of Sciences & Arts (PHSSA) approaches its first year and a half of operations, I am writing on behalf of the Richmond School Board to bring the community up to date on the status of PHSSA's progress toward fulfilling its Charter obligations. PHSSA's first year of operation has involved many complex and challenging issues and it is the Richmond School Board's goal to minimize confusion or miscommunications with the PHSSA community by providing clear communications and transparency.

Let me begin by expressing the Richmond School Board's goal to offer innovative and creative educational opportunities for all families and students. The Richmond School Board has strived to be innovative in many educational contexts, and our approval of the PHSSA Charter Agreement was another example of this commitment. Of course, innovation must be accompanied by academic achievement, quality instruction, and responsible administration. No matter how much innovation we would like to implement, the Richmond School Board remains responsible for the educational experience of Richmond's children as well as the use of precious limited public funds appropriated for their educations. As the ultimate fiduciary authority for Richmond Public Schools, the Richmond School Board must continue to monitor the success of our efforts in innovation.

To that end, in June 2011, after a full year of PHSSA school operations, the Richmond School Board undertook a year-end Compliance Review to assess the PHSSA's Board of Director's fulfillment of its commitments under the Charter Agreement. This process was designed to exercise Richmond School Board's fiduciary oversight role and to provide the PHSSA Board of Directors with an opportunity to correct any deficiencies in the exercise of their fiduciary purview.

A brief chronology of that review process follows:

- June 2011: The PHSSA Board received advance notice of the upcoming review and the PHSSA Board submitted documentation to support its efforts to fulfill the Charter Agreement.
- July – August 2011: Richmond Public Schools (RPS) administration reviewed the information provided by the PHSSA Board, as well as records from the Virginia Department of Education and

the school system to evaluate the level of progress made on each provision of the Charter Agreement.

- August 29, 2011: The Richmond School Board initially discussed the results of the compliance review with the PHSSA Board and leaders, which included significant cited deficiencies.
- September 2011: The PHSSA Board was provided an opportunity to submit additional documentation to address the noted deficiencies and did submit additional information.
- October 17, 2011: The Richmond School Board discussed the findings following receipt of the supplemental documents with PHSSA Board representatives. During this meeting, the PHSSA Board was provided another opportunity to submit responses/documentation that addressed lingering financial and curriculum concerns.
- December 5, 2011: The final report on PHSSA's progress and deficiencies was issued.

Throughout the Compliance Review process, RPS administration provided ongoing administrative support to PHSSA, including training and consultation as well as technical assistance to remedy the deficiencies in academics and operations. Despite this assistance, however, significant deficiencies remained.

As we approach the end of the calendar year, the Richmond School Board believes that we have an obligation to keep the PHSSA community apprised of the challenges and issues that still confront PHSSA. The deficiencies that remain are of sufficient magnitude and urgency that it is important to share our concerns and expectations. Moving forward, we believe that full transparency is essential. We also want to assure the PHSSA community that the best interest of students and parents is our first concern—they deserve an academic experience of the highest possible quality in a learning environment that is stable and financially secure. Unfortunately, PHSSA remains seriously challenged on all three of those fronts. The deficiencies below are among the most serious identified by the compliance review.

### **Financial Accountability and Sustainability**

As you are aware, RPS provided \$1.86 million of PHSSA's operational dollars for this school year, through its Per Pupil Fund allocation. This substantial amount of funding represents the serious commitment of RPS and the taxpayer to the success of PHSSA. As a charter school, PHSSA also has the unique responsibility to raise additional funds to advance the goals and the specific commitments of the Charter Agreement. PHSSA's Board of Directors has secured external funding through a federal charter school grant, other public/private grants, and individual contributions. However;

- actual revenues consistently have been well below the projections reported by PHSSA
- reporting of these funds has been inconsistent and repeatedly incorrect; and
- the school board still has not received a professional audit of the PHSSA nonprofit funds for the fiscal year ending July 2011, and
- significant turnover of contract accountants and volunteer treasurers on the PHSSA Board of Directors has contributed to PHSSA's lack of progress in this area.

It is a basic expectation for any organization—especially one that draws upon limited taxpayer funds—to provide sound and consistent reporting and revenue outcomes that meet commitments. PHSSA's Board of Directors has not met this expectation. For example, the PHSSA Board committed to raise \$300,000 in the 2010-2011 school year. When it did not, it then sought to use \$200,000 in public funds to pay for a construction loan. Half way into the current (2011-2012) school year, the PHSSA Board still needed a second loan to have enough funds on hand to complete Phase 1 construction. Going into debt as a funding approach for two successive years also contributes to the challenges of long-term financial stability.

As a charter school with an external governance structure, the PHSSA Board's ability to plan, raise, and account for these nonprofit funds is paramount to the school's long-term sustainability. The Richmond School Board has not received a clear picture of the financial health and sustainability of PHSSA's nonprofit arm, nor have the incomplete and incorrect reports offered assurance of PHSSA's Board's capability to provide the supplementary funds needed to ensure program longevity and stability. This is a material concern because one of the core premises justifying the diversion of limited RPS funds to PHSSA was the PHSSA Board's commitment to leverage private contributions to match the public investment.

### **Innovative and Integrated Curriculum**

The principal educational objective stated in the PHSSA charter application was to fill an academic gap not currently available to RPS students. PHSSA's Board of Directors committed to offering a comprehensive and integrated curriculum with a focus on science and the arts. Curriculum development was a mission critical expectation of the PHSSA Board of Directors explicitly stated in the application, agreement, and planning processes through the school's operational phase. Despite the necessity and assurance in the 2008 Charter Agreement, the 2011 Compliance Review indicates that:

- an integrated science and arts curriculum has not been developed or implemented;
- for the past and current school years, PHSSA has been using an existing RPS curriculum to fill this deficiency.

Creation of its own unique curriculum was to be the cornerstone of PHSSA's innovative educational mission. This element was a critical factor in Richmond School Board's approval of the PHSSA charter. The failure to produce a curriculum is a most serious matter in need of correction. Because curriculum is a necessary "ladder" for each child's academic development (ensuring that concepts and information build upon one another from grade to grade), RPS administrators are now working with PHSSA teachers to develop a curriculum by July 2012.

The absence of an innovative curriculum is of serious concern to Richmond School Board, not only because it is a violation of the Charter Agreement and defines the very reason the charter was approved, but more importantly because the absence of a comprehensive science and arts curriculum for two consecutive years is detrimental to the progress of PHSSA's students and their preparation for secondary school and beyond.

On a related note, PHSSA committed to providing each student his or her own, unique Personalized Education Plan (or PEP). This was another core promise in PHSSA's application and was influential in the charter's approval. That commitment has not been fulfilled. Without a curriculum, it is hard to envision how PHSSA will fulfill its commitment to develop a PEP for each student. Completing this foundational aspect of this school's establishment also will require additional time and resources from RPS and PHSSA staff.

### **Personnel**

Concerns remain over personnel issues at PHSSA. PHSSA has experienced significant staff turnover in a very short time period. This turnover has occurred despite (1) PHSSA's autonomy to recruit, select, evaluate, and provide supplemental/incentive pay above the RPS salary scale, and (2) established guidelines and substantive and ongoing support from RPS administration to deal with personnel problems. Continual churning of faculty and administrative staff is detrimental to the educational environment at PHSSA and puts the academic experience of students in jeopardy.

### **Follow-up to Charter Agreement Deficiencies**

Since it authorized the PHSSA Charter School in 2008, the Richmond School Board has devoted substantial time and energy to fulfilling our role as charter school authorizer and ultimate fiduciary. We have completed a number of tasks that have made RPS a model throughout the state for best practices and resources for charter school oversight. In addition, since PHSSA was authorized, RPS administration has invested significant time and resources to the program. In the first school year alone, RPS administration dedicated more than 3,000 hours, at no cost to PHSSA, to honor our commitment to provide every child with equal opportunity for academic success.

Richmond School Board recognizes the successes of PHSSA in its first school year and acknowledges the many challenges that occur in any “start-up” organization. We have seen the hard work of many, including PHSSA volunteers, RPS administrators, staff members, community contributors and parents, students, and families to bring the Patrick Henry School of Science and Arts from concept to reality. We also recognize the challenges that must be overcome when administrative leadership has been inconsistent. For this reason, RPS has sought to provide stability and professionalism through the staffing of interim positions as needed.

At the same time, the major issues summarized above are fundamental concerns that have been raised on several occasions with the PHSSA Board of Directors. The Board of Directors bears the responsibility for PHSSA’s fulfillment of its charter commitments generally and the academic success of each child in its classrooms. Failure by the PHSSA Board to remedy these deficiencies would constitute a serious breach of trust with the school’s students, parents, families, teachers and volunteers who have worked so hard for so long. The importance of fulfilling the terms of the Charter Agreement and laying the foundation for each student’s academic achievement cannot be overstated.

However the improvements are effected, Richmond School Board assures the PHSSA community that we will keep all stakeholders informed about and involved in these issues. And we will inform you of our steps as we look for productive ways to establish financial accountability, program stability, and the reality of an innovative integrated Arts and Science curriculum at PHSSA.

Most importantly, the Richmond School Board is committed to minimizing the impact of deficiencies and transitions of improvements on our students and families. Again, Richmond School Board supports innovative approaches to raise student achievement. With this ultimate objective in mind, we encourage the PHSSA community to work together with the Richmond School Board to improve PHSSA and the educational experience for the good of our students.

### **ADA Construction and Phase 1 Renovation of the Patrick Henry building**

The use of the closed Patrick Henry building was a major component of the creation of PHSSA. To ensure full ADA accessibility in compliance with the School Board's responsibilities under a federal legal settlement, this school required extensive renovations. As these factors prompted its closure by the Richmond School Board, those limitations and associated costs were shared fully in the application and review process and with PHSSA’s Board of Directors prior to it undertaking the significant challenge of renovating the building. To assist, Richmond School Board has approved every request made by PHSSA to help facilitate completion of the first phase of school construction, including:

- use of a temporary school site for a year;
- extension of the lease and additional time of six months for usage of the temporary site; and
- use of Per Pupil Funds to fund remediation (despite previous shared expectations that the construction would be funded through non-public sources).

The latest construction completion date reported to Richmond School Board by PHSSA leaves doubts about the ability of PHSSA to open on time immediately following winter break. The lack of contingency planning available at the most recent School Board meeting needlessly places the educational mission of PHSSA at risk for the second half of the current academic year. The Richmond School Board is monitoring this situation closely to ensure that all PHSSA families are kept apprised of contingency plans.

### **Conclusion**

I recognize that the timing to share these major concerns may not be optimal, however, the School Board has an obligation to keep the PHSSA community apprised of the concerns and issues that we are considering. Please know that the Richmond School Board remains committed to the students and parents who have put their trust in PHSSA. The PHSSA community should be assured that Richmond School Board and the administration of RPS will continue to consider the needs of PHSSA students as we strive to ensure that it meet everyone's expectation of excellence in all aspects of its charter school, both administrative and academic. If you have suggestions or input related to this information, we invite your comments at [alewis@richmond.k12.va.us](mailto:alewis@richmond.k12.va.us).

Sincerely,



Kimberly M. Bridges

- c: School Board Members  
Dr. Yvonne Brandon, Superintendent  
The Honorable Dwight Jones, Mayor  
Dr. Patricia Wright, Superintendent of Public Instruction  
Mrs. Eleanor Saslaw, President, Virginia Board of Education  
Mr. David Foster, Vice President, Virginia Board of Education