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District's Charter School Review Team Recommends Denial of Charter Application for The Environmental Charter School at Frick Park – An Imagine School

PITTSBURGH, January 8, 2007 – The lack of an environmental curriculum prompted the District's Charter School Review Team to recommend that the Pittsburgh Board of Education not grant a charter to The Environmental Charter School at Frick Park – An Imagine School. The Charter Review Team presented their recommendations at this evening's Business and Education Committee Meeting.

John Vater, Principal of Peabody and Chairperson of the Charter Review Team noted, "We honor the passion of the people who came forward in support of this charter school, but starting a school is a complicated enterprise. It is our role to ensure that the critical ingredients needed to put a school together are there." Vater added, "A satisfactory curriculum is clearly a key criteria for charter applicants, yet the Environmental Charter applicant has not provided the environmental curriculum that would make it unique."

In its charter application for 2007-08 school year, The Environmental Charter acknowledges that it currently does not have an environmental curriculum and that it is not scheduled to be developed until August 2007. Additionally, the charter applicant was not able to show that its other curriculum was in alignment with State and District requirements, including Mathematics, Social Studies, Reading and Writing/English Language Arts.

Although not part of the formal review process, the Charter Review Team raised issues with respect to the delivery of the academic and financial components, which the charter school has partnered to receive from Imagine Schools, Inc. As an external management company, Imagine Schools, Inc. has a documented history of failed charter schools. Many of these failed schools experienced debt, low standardized test scores and high personnel turnover.

Within its report, the Charter Review Team notes that the proposed The Environmental Charter School at Frick Park – An Imagine School – will not provide students of the District expanded choices in the types of educational opportunities currently being offered and is not able to serve as a model to other schools in the system, as required by Act 22 of PA Charter School Law. The Charter Review Team described the mission of the charter as "generic in nature and does not exemplify the proposed 'uniqueness' of the environmental focus." The Board will be voting on this application at the Legislative meeting on January 24, 2007.

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Curriculum

The Charter Review Team examined the applicant's education plan to evaluate if the curriculum focuses on a coherent set of age-appropriate learning goals that are aligned to the Pennsylvania Standards of Science and Technology and Environment and Ecology. Most importantly, the Charter Review Team evaluated how the proposed curriculum supports the uniqueness of the charter school.

The proposed The Environmental Charter School at Frick Park – An Imagine School – failed to submit an environmental curriculum. The applicant did not include a full description of its curriculum or a concise identification of the skills and content to be mastered at each grade level. Instead, a template for an environmental curriculum was submitted for grades 4 and 7.

The environmental curriculum is scheduled to be developed during a week long session in August 2007 by the principal, environmental specialist teacher, four teachers representing grades K-3 and two parents.

As indicated by Roger Bybee, the Executive Director of the Biological Science and Curriculum Study (BSCS), in the fall of 2006 News Journal of BSCS, "The 45-year history of the Biological Science and Curriculum Study demonstrates that the work of designing, developing, and implementing science curricula has become very specialized and quite sophisticated work. Most school districts and science teachers do not have the time, money, and expertise for the curriculum development of the quantity and quality produced by groups such as BSCS. Designing and developing innovative curriculum materials is not what professional teachers were trained to do. Their knowledge and skill center is on science teaching."

The applicant describes a seven step process of curriculum development. Similar processes have been used in the past to develop textbooks across the country by publishers and the results have been less than adequate according to Project 2061. Project 2061, the long-term science, mathematics, and technology education reform initiative of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) began an analysis of science textbooks based on the latest research. Not one of the widely used science textbooks for middle school was rated satisfactory by the expert reviewers. The Charter Review Team mentions this point because the development of curriculum materials by publishers with large financial resources, expert developers and time, until now, have been unable to deliver quality instructional materials based on a similar plan.

The applicant proposes it will develop the school's entire curriculum, gather all the assessment data and develop Individualized Learning Plans (ILP) for each student. The curriculum and ILPs consume more time than allotted in the proposal and if developed in this brief time frame would dilute the accuracy and depth of each task.

The boiler plate curriculum that was given to the applicants by Imagine Schools, Inc. needs additional professional development to produce a coherent curriculum with a meaningful scope and sequence across all grades level and content areas.

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Imagine Schools, Inc. – A History of Failed Charters

The proposed The Environmental Charter School at Frick Park – An Imagine School – will be operated by Imagine Schools, Inc., an education management company. Imagine Schools, Inc. operates elementary and secondary (K-12) charter and independent schools nationwide. In June 2004, Imagine Schools merged with Chancellor Beacon Academy and in 2005 became Imagine Schools Non-Profit, Inc.

As an external management company, Imagine Schools, Inc. has a documented history of failed charter schools.

- As of March 2006, 12 Imagine Charter Schools in Florida had a combined debt of more than \$8 million, according to the state's Auditor General Report, after five years of operation.
- Since 2002, at least 35 schools have cut ties with Imagine Schools or Chancellor Beacon Academies (acquired by Imagine in June of 2004) including:
 - ❑ Central New York Charter School for Math and Science
 - ❑ Philadelphia—cancelled all of Chancellor Beacon's contracts in the city
 - ❑ Michigan—13 schools have discontinued their association with Imagine or have closed since 2002.
 - ❑ Massachusetts—all of Imagine's 6 schools terminated contracts with the company.
- In 2006 in its eighth annual Profile of For-Profit Education Management Organizations, Arizona State University reported that “. . . Stories of mismanagement and financial troubles continue to emerge. For instance, management turmoil at Imagine Schools, Inc.—the firm changed ownership three times in four years.”

Expanded Choices

The applicant proposes longer school days. Pittsburgh Public Schools offer a longer school year and days through its eight Accelerated Learning Academies.

The applicant outlines involvement with business partners, community organizations, and local institutions of higher education. The Charter Review Team recognizes many of these organizations as current partners with the Pittsburgh Public Schools. These existing partnerships have been expanded upon by the District's Science Department to provide interesting and enjoyable activities that enhance curriculum in many Pittsburgh Public Schools.

The charter applicant links the 'greening' of the existing building to the increased achievement of its students. The Facilities Department of the School District of Pittsburgh presently uses many of the 'greening' initiatives outlined in the charter application. In addition, the District has won numerous awards for its 'greening' efforts, including Integrated Pest Management, asbestos abatement and electrical energy conservation.

District Charter Review Team – The Environmental Charter School at Frick Park

- **John Vater** (Chair) – Principal, Peabody High School, Pittsburgh Public Schools
- **Joseph Kaye Cupples** – Executive Director, Student Support Services, Pittsburgh Public Schools
- **John Garrow** – Director of Child Accounting, Pittsburgh Public Schools
- **Tracey Gilliard** – Budget Development Supervisor, Pittsburgh Public Schools
- **Virginia Hill** – Co-Principal, Faison Arts Academy, Pittsburgh Public Schools
- **Richard Mathews** – Assistant Principal, Carmalt Technology Academy, Pittsburgh Public Schools
- **Vidya Patil** – Chief of Construction, Pittsburgh Public Schools

The Public Can Obtain More Information

The findings and recommendations of the District's Charter Review Team are available by visiting the Pittsburgh Public Schools website at www.pps.k12.pa.us. A copy also can be obtained by calling the **Parent Hotline at 412-622-7920** or visiting the Division of Communications, Room 204, Pittsburgh Board of Education, 341 South Bellefield Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15213.

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