

January 13, 2020

Mr. Matt Underwood
Executive Director, Office of Innovation
Atlanta Public Schools
130 Trinity Avenue SW
Atlanta, Georgia 30303

Dear Mr. Underwood:

Please submit this formal appeal to the Administration and the Board of Atlanta Public Schools, on our behalf, requesting their assistance in helping us address what has become a very serious and urgent situation with respect to Centennial Academy (CA).

In 2014, The Atlanta Board of Education and the State of Georgia Department of Education approved Centennial Academy's Charter Petition to become a "Conversion Charter School with a Mandated Attendance Zone." The specific designation was proposed to us by then Superintendent Erroll Davis in response to the desire by the community stakeholders, school parents, school leadership, teachers and community stakeholders of the Centennial Place Elementary School to seek permission to enter into a Management Contract with APS for the management of the school. At the time, we were given a verbal commitment by APS leadership that, if the Petition was approved, the system would work with us to generate clear policy and guidance to support the designation.

As of the writing of this letter, Centennial Academy is still the only school in the entire District with such a designation and there has yet to be such a policy established. ***This is a formal request for the Board of Atlanta Public Schools and Centennial Academy to collaborate to develop general policies regarding Conversion Charter Schools with Mandated Attendance Zones and specific considerations surrounding Centennial Academy, in light of our unique student population.*** The lack of clear interpretation between a conversion school with a mandated attendance zone, start-up charter, and traditional school, has created a tremendous amount of instability in our ability to offer the support that is critical to a whole child education approach.

If the Board of Atlanta Public Schools is unable to generate clear policy and guidance to support our unique designation at this time, then at minimum we are requesting relief as follows:

1. As long as Centennial Academy does not admit any out-of-zone scholars after conducting the initial lottery in the spring and accounting for enrollment preferences as indicated in the charter contract, then APS will provide full funding for enrolled scholars, and CA will not be penalized for any increases resulting from having to enroll scholars per the Mandated Attendance Zone requirement throughout the school year.
2. That the annual transportation cost premiums associated with providing daily transportation to scholars residing in the Mandated Attendance Zone be funded by APS.

3. That CA will be exempt from having to contribute to the funding of the APS Unfunded Pension Liability similarly to all other charter schools in the district.

To aid in understanding the tremendous instability this has caused surrounding the education of our scholars and our ability to offer the support that is critical to a whole child education approach, we offer the following basic facts as context:

- As a charter school with a Mandated Attendance Zone, CA is required to admit any and all In-Zone scholars throughout the year regardless of when they move into the Zone. They cannot be placed on a Waiting List. Though the logic behind the board policy to ***limit the number of out-of-zone scholars that a charter school may admit*** is understandable, there is no distinction being made between CA as a Conversion Charter School with a Mandated Attendance Zone and a start-up charter school (with no Mandated Attendance Zone).

Each year, Centennial Academy receives indications from currently enrolled families about their intent to return to CA for the following year. Once returning scholars and new in-zone families have been accounted for, and all enrollment preferences are applied, CA administers an Out-of-Zone Lottery to fill the remaining spaces to get to the 800-student limit (only if seats are available). After the lottery is conducted in the spring, Centennial does not admit any additional out-of-zone scholars from the waitlist during the subsequent school year.

CA currently serves an Attendance Zone that has the largest number of school-aged children living in homeless shelters (~ 15% of our scholars) and other transitional housing that any other school in the district. This is, by far, the largest number of such scholars served by any APS school, charter or traditional. With that reality comes a Mobility Rate of approximately 30% (compared to the low- to mid- single digit rates for all other charters). CA is serving the breadth of its zone, with no ability to administer a Waiting List for In-Zone scholars. Yet, if a number of new scholars show up at CA's doorsteps as a result of relocating to the City or due to new families entering the shelters after the school year has begun, CA must admit them, but will receive a penalty if the enrollment count exceeds 800. This became more than just a notion when CA received a bill in December from APS for \$24,000 for having 802 scholars enrolled – i.e. 2 more than the 800-student limit – after the FTE count in October due to APS administration following board policies.

We are not seeking to avoid serving any In-Zone scholars admitted after the start of the year, but we are seeking to not be penalized if those subsequent admissions cause the student enrollment to exceed 800. This discriminatory treatment of CA is akin to an Unfunded Mandate that is devastating to our ability to manage enrollment, with the consequential damage to the whole child education of our scholars.

We also believe that APS should recognize the high number of young people living in transitional housing as a system problem, and not simply something that should be a CA problem. Indeed, the resources required to serve that population effectively is something about which we all should

care and take ownership. We propose as a separate matter that CA Leadership and APS meet to discuss a more equitable system to manage this challenge.

- Unlike every other Charter School, CA is required to contribute to the ***Unfunded Pension Liability*** ("UPL"), putting CA in a position to have to litigate in order to pursue appropriate treatment. We believe that the \$650,000 per year cost impact is discriminatory and punitive, and should be removed.
- Due to Centennial's mandated attendance zone, we are required to provide daily transportation to scholars. Again, this is unlike any other charter school in the entire district. Yet, we do not receive a transportation subsidy to support this mandate. Instead, CA finds itself with another unfunded mandate, which has resulted in a ***transportation cost premium*** of approximately \$380,000 per year.

We are convinced that a presentation of the specific facts surrounding a Conversion Charter School with a Mandated Attendance Zone, generally, and Centennial Academy specifically, will cause a thoughtful and fair minded analysis and result in a response that would address our concerns and mitigate the impacts. Ultimately, such a response will be required if we are to do what is in the best interest of the scholars that we serve, especially the many fragile scholars in our zone that rely on fair-minded adults to work in their best interests.

Thank you in advance for your submission of this letter to the Board of Atlanta Public Schools. We are requesting for this matter to be added to the agenda for the upcoming February Board Meeting. We truly appreciate your support in ushering a thoughtful response to our urgent request.

Sincerely,



Egbert L. J. Perry
Chair, Governing Board
Centennial Academy

cc: Dr. Meria J. Carstarphen, Superintendent, Atlanta Public School
Tequila Lamar, Head of School, Centennial Academy
Centennial Academy Board of Directors