

To: Superintendent Gdowski and the Adams 12 Board of Education  
From: Adams 12 District Accountability Committee  
Re: Stargate School Charter Renewal  
Date: December 19, 2018

Dear Superintendent Gdowski and members of the Adams 12 Board of Education,

The purpose of this memo is to provide you with a summary of the DAC's recommendation regarding Stargate School's request for charter renewal with the Adams 12 school district. In this brief memo, we will share about the sub-committee members, the application review process we undertook, our recommendation and the rationale for that recommendation. In addition, we are also submitting many documents with the information that we reviewed as part of our process that support the recommendation.

Members of the Review Committee:

- Josh Bastian - community member
- Brian Cohen - business community
- Radhika Prout - parent/district managed school
- Michelle Zeles-Hahn - parent/charter school
- Shelly Hora - parent/district managed school

Application Review Process:

DAC members used the rubric provided by CDE to score the application. As questions arose or items were missing from the application, additional information was requested and received from Stargate and then reviewed. The DAC spent the following time on this review:

- 20 hours of actual time spent at our District Accountability Meetings
- Between meetings, the DAC sub-committee reviewed the additional documents requested in order to make an informed and thoughtful recommendation. They were contributing a minimum of 5 hours of weekly "homework" over the course of the 16 week process.
- Most of the DAC sub-committee participated in a 3 hour site visit to Stargate
- The DAC members strongly believe in the Adams 12 district and community.

**Recommendation:**

*After months of thoughtful evaluation of Stargate School's renewal application, the District Accountability Committee for charter review provides the following recommendation for the Adams 12 Board of Education members to consider when making their decision for re-authorization:*

The DAC recognizes the great accomplishments as well as the significant challenges Stargate has faced since the last charter renewal, with all of this in mind it is the recommendation of the DAC that the Adams 12 Board of Education approve the charter renewal with conditions for Stargate School for 2 years.

## **Strengths**

Stargate had a solid academic performance last year and an received a SPF of 94. The year prior (2016-2017) showed a large dip in scores and the school worked diligently to get CMAS back up to their previous level. They had the third highest score in the state for the SAT. It is interesting to note that Stargate has a very small FRL population, while Hulstrom (with a higher FRL population and no minimum IQ score) constantly scores higher on CMAS in almost all grades during the last three years.

Stargate has proven very strong financial record with the purchase of the landing and building. They have had clean audits. Their Director of Operations and Finance has received an award from the Colorado League of Charters for her excellent work in charter finance. This year's audit did state "we continue to recommend that the School establish segregation of duties over the accounting functions where possible to detect errors and prevent fraud." It would be important for Stargate to create a solid succession plan should their director decide to leave.

During the Stargate site visit, the DAC saw really immersed students working on a variety of assignments and projects. The school has a feeling of deeply engaged learning. The hallways were filled with relevant student work. We especially enjoyed the "10 things you need to do to understand my gifted self" and the clay muscle sculptures in anatomy.

The new Adroit program and maker space are great additions to the school and can drive creative, gifted thinking to the next level. The makerspace is a dynamic building where students can create using tools and machines, including computers and 3D printing, and kitchen appliances for cooking. The DAC observed, groups of students retrofitting a toddler Barbie jeep, finger knitting, and engaging in cooking experiments. Although a great program for the school to continue to develop, we would caution against putting too much energy into this program at the detriment of other community issues.

Stargate is a highly regarded charter school in the area. It has a long history and was one of the first charter schools in the state with its opening in August of 1994. There is a on going waitlist of students wanting to attend the school. Their first graduation high school class will be at the end of this year since opening the high school portion 4 years ago.

## **Areas of concern**

### *OCR*

Although there have been many great moments, the past two years have exposed many weakness in the school and its leadership. The school received 7 OCR complaints during the past two years that centered around Title IX sexual harassment, special populations accommodations, and community issues of bullying/retaliation/favoritism behavior. These complaints are serious and costly to both Stargate and Adams 12. The school administration and board of directors appear to be working with the Office of Civil Rights and meeting most of

their requirements for resolution. However, it is interesting to note that neither of the principals have any yearly goals approved by their board of directors (meeting minutes 9/19/2018) centering around Title IX or school climate (addressing bullying/intimidation/favoritism). Only the elementary principal has been asked to dedicate 20% of her time to refining SPED procedures. The Office of Civil Rights asked the school to hire a Title IX coordinator, the school then hired a new HR director without Title IX training. In response to that, Adams 12 had to step in and help hire an outside independent Title IX coordinator at great expense to both Stargate and the district. Due to the lack of goals set by administration and approved by the board, there could be a perception that the leadership of Stargate does not take the OCR process seriously and is attempting to paper over the complaints rather than make lasting cultural changes at the school.

### *Leadership*

At the end of the 2017-2018 year, the executive director stepped down from his leadership role. This year the executive director duties have been divided between the elementary principal and secondary principal. The board has done their due diligence to determine if an executive director is the best model for Stargate. They have determined that they will post the executive director position in 2019. The independent investigation initiated by Adams 12 this fall found that the previous leadership tended to solve problems with a primary focus on expediency rather than by the rules and the law. It was found that the previous executive director asked to decrease staff training time on a presentation because the audience would “lose interest”, even when the training was one of many OCR requirements. This has created a culture of mistrust with worries about favoritism and retaliation. The culture and climate surveys conducted last spring revealed some surprising information:

- 58% of high school students “feel comfortable approaching my principal when I need to”
- 64% of middle school students “feel comfortable approaching my principal when I need to”
- 15% of parents are aware of the “retaliation environment”
- 20% of parents would not “recommend Stargate to a friend seeking employment”
- 38% of classified staff believe administration does not ‘make decisions based on what’s best for Stargate students and staff’
- 25% of classified staff believe the Governance board does not ‘make decisions based on what’s best for Stargate students and staff’
- 30% and 40% of elementary and classified staff do not think that ‘administration clearly defines expectations and applies them fairly’
- 30% of classified staff ‘perceive there to be an environment of retaliation at Stargate’
- 17.2% of all staff have ‘either witnessed or been retaliated against by an administrator, colleague, or other’
- 45% of elementary staff do not ‘believe professional development opportunities are an effective use of their time’
- 69% of elementary staff do not “have adequate technological support and access to necessary materials and services to perform my job”
- 30% of classified staff do not ‘feel trusted and respected’
- In 2016-2017, 8% of all staff would not ‘recommend Stargate to a friend for employment’, that jumped to 20% in 2017-2018

All of the above data show an increased lack of trust towards administration and the board. Moving forward, the board and administration need to work to heal these problems in their community. Overall, there is an air of “checking the boxes” to make the school compliant but not address the root of the issue or make effective change.

*Lack of diversity*

Compared to the neighboring schools, Stargate is lacking in diversity, specifically economically disadvantaged students. The FRL percentage is lower than the surrounding schools (see table below). The entrance exam policy is cost prohibitive to FRL families and limits their access to a free appropriate public education (FAPE).

	2017-2018 FRL Population	Distance from Stargate
STARGATE CHARTER SCHOOL	3%	-
ROCKY TOP MIDDLE SCHOOL	12%	1.6 miles
HUNTERS GLEN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	27%	1.8 miles
SILVER CREEK ELEMENTARY	12%	2.4 miles
WESTGATE CHARTER	16%	2.5 miles
CENTURY MIDDLE SCHOOL	34%	2.5 miles
TARVER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	27%	3.0 miles
ARAPAHOE RIDGE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	43%	3.1 miles
PRAIRIE HILLS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	14%	3.2 miles
HULSTROM OPTIONS K-8 SCHOOL	10%	4.5 miles

*IQ testing for Entrance*

Entrance requirement for Stargate includes a valid IQ test with a score above 125. This is not legal according to The Charter Schools Act [C.R.S. 22-30.5-104 (3)] and State Board Rule, 1 CCR 301-88, Sections 2.02(D)&(E)] “prohibits discrimination based on academic ability. Diagnostic or placement exams may be given to students after they have been officially enrolled.

As with all public schools, a charter school may create eligibility thresholds for enrollment that are consistent with their area of focus or grade levels, but the school’s methods for determining eligibility cannot be designed, intended, or used to discriminate on the basis of a child’s knowledge, skills, or disability.”

### *Special Populations*

When Stargate was smaller, they tended to handle special population services in a very informal way. Now that the school has grown, the school as a whole has a lack of understanding of and appreciation for the importance of formal protocols to deal with special education and disability matters rapidly became problematic. Independent investigator found that elementary has especially struggled to provide services for 504 and IEP students due to insufficient staffing and lack of understanding of legal obligations (not as a deliberate effort to deny services to students or to prevent students with special needs from enrolling). Focusing on SPED services is a goal set by the board of directors for the elementary principle for this 2018-2019 year. The goal is to “work collaboratively with Special Populations, the Adams 12 Charter School Liaison, and building administration to ensure compliance with Admin and board to ensure all OCR monitoring is on time and meets expectations.” With the OCR complaints and continued issues found during the independent investigation this fall, we believe more time and effort should be focused on this topic to not only comply with OCR requirements but to create real culture change around this issue.

### *Social/Emotional Education*

The Stargate’s mission statement is: *Stargate School will provide a differentiated program designed specifically to meet the needs of identified intellectually gifted learners in order to challenge each student’s academic abilities, support their unique emotional needs, promote individual character development and encourage a life-long love of learning.*

The school is just starting a social/emotional curriculum for the secondary school called Connect. There is no formal social/emotional curriculum for elementary students. As their mission statement includes emotional support, we would expect significant programming in this area.

From the climate and culture survey conducted last spring, here were some findings around social/emotional aspects of Stargate:

- 90% of high school students “feel physically safe at school” compared to 78% “feel emotionally safe at school”
- 95% of middle school students “feel physically safe at school” compared to 82% “feel emotionally safe at school”
- 80% of high school students “the school is meeting my academic needs” compared to 73% “the school is meeting my social needs”
- 90% of middle school students “the school is meeting my academic needs” compared to 78% “the school is meeting my social needs”
- ~25% of parents do not believe the social/emotional curriculum meets the needs of students
- 33% and 27% of elementary and classified staff do not feel the social/emotional curriculum and program meet the needs of students

The data above suggest that even the students are well aware that their social/emotional needs could be better met.

### *Gifted Endorsement*

Since its inception in 1994, Stargate has been a school for the gifted. All students should have an IQ score of 125 or greater. It is interesting that only 20% of the staff have any type of gifted endorsement. Only one principal out of the 5 has a gifted endorsement. The school has such a specific population that we would expect most of the staff to have significant training in this topic to further meet the needs of all gifted students.

### **Recommended Criteria for Renewal**

The DAC recommends a two year renewal with the following conditions:

1. Stargate must maintain their outside Title IX coordinator until the HR director obtains her title IX certification to maintain consistency, to follow through on finalizing OCR complaints, and to monitor and train the HR director until she receives appropriate certification
2. Hire an "Ombuds" type person to address concerns and help the community regain trust and heal. Track the efficacy of this position with student, parent, and staff surveys
3. Create policy to increase diversity (especially FRL population) throughout the school and provide data to support the policy
4. Adhere to the Law requiring entrance criteria to a public school
5. Create a school wide year long social/emotional curriculum (not just secondary), track effectiveness using discipline, attendance, extra curricular activity, and student survey data
6. Work in earnest with Adams 12 to create formal processes to document that all special populations receive appropriate services.

In addition, the DAC had some disagreement regarding on renewal condition but felt obligated to include this while acknowledging not all DAC were in agreement.

- The executive director search committee needs to include a representative from Adams 12 and an outside charter school leader (administrator or board member).

### **Summary**

Although there have been some significant legal issues at Stargate the past few years, it is a strong school that deserves some support and the chance to make positive changes. As the DAC, we support the mission and vision of Stargate and hope our input will help guide the school's bright future.