

January 9, 2012

Dear Acting Commissioner Cerf:

We are writing you this letter to make you aware of an unexpected new development that could hurt the reputation of the Quest Academy Charter School application and the founders. First, some background... As you may know, the Quest Academy Charter High School of Montclair founding committee met with the NJ Department of Education last Friday, January 6th, because our application for a charter passed the second round of evaluation for the fourth time in five attempts. This is the third time it passed into the third round of evaluations. (The first time it failed. The second time, by following directives from the Office of Charter Schools to amend the application, the founders created a flaw in the application for which they then failed) The fourth time the application was denied because your representatives determined that, while our application was quite impressive, our team did not impress them enough during the interview. Even so, each time the application was re-submitted, the application re-addressed the state's identified reasons for denial of a charter. Each time, the application and our founding team grew stronger. Initial reactions to this latest application by the committee at DOE were complimentary.

In the past, the founding committee of Quest, through OPRA requests, reviewed not only the applications of other charter founders but the written evaluations those applications received by the state's review committees. The committee learned repeatedly that state and private evaluators working for the DOE scored and evaluated the Quest application higher than many of the charter schools submitted elsewhere, schools which, in fact, have been granted charters and have opened their doors to students already.

The quality of the educational program for Quest is undoubtedly among the best submitted to the department of charter schools in New Jersey.

The question seems to be whether or not Montclair Township needs an alternative to Montclair High School. This is a town where students have the benefit of school choice from pre-kindergarten through eighth grade, but have no choice in public education at the high school level. School choice in Montclair is a core value upon which our magnet system operates, a system greatly admired across the USA for its ability to integrate the classrooms and give flexibility to all families. Families can choose between very large elementary schools (Nishuane) or smaller schools with a family focus (Rand) and several in between. Quest Academy founders simply want that same choice available to students and families up through and including twelfth grade. However, Dr. Alvarez, the superintendent of Montclair Public Schools states that he does not believe that a charter school is needed in Montclair.

On January 6, 2012, the same day that we met with state interviewers regarding our application, Dr. Alvarez released to the press the recommendation letter submitted to the Office of Charter Schools regarding our application. In that letter, Dr. Alvarez accused the founders of misrepresenting and distorting the facts about the high school in our application regarding the needs analysis. He stated that our application does not mention a narrowing of the achievement gap at Montclair High School, citing the recent scores for subgroups in language arts. However, missing from that letter are the scores for mathematics, which continue to expose a significant achievement gap between subgroups. These scores show 95% of White students scored proficient/advanced

proficient, as compared to 59% African American, 39% Special Education, 52% Economically Disadvantaged and 62% Hispanic students. Based on these numbers, the achievement gap continues to persist.

The founders made no attempt to distort or misrepresent Montclair High School in any form or fashion. The focus on the achievement gap shown in past reports was done because the recent test scores were not available at the time that the application was submitted. The New Jersey School Report card had not been released yet and the District only released the HSPA results on October 17th, the same day that the application was due. With this tight timeline, it was impossible to include the gains in language arts mentioned by Dr. Alvarez. The graduation rate and dropout rate were not included because they are self-reported and are not as reliable as the verifiable documentation that is included in the needs assessment, i.e., four NJ School Report Cards and the 2008 NJ DOE CAPP report. While, the results of these reports clearly show that Montclair High School does not meet the needs of all of its students, we also ask you to also consider the following:

Montclair High School serves approximately 2000 students. Here are two stories told to Quest founders that illustrate the inability of MHS to meet the needs of all its students.

One woman reported that her son had just graduated with a diploma that read "Attendance Diploma". A bit of investigation revealed that an "Attendance Diploma" is not an "Academic Diploma" and her son could not go on to college with the one he 'earned'.

Another woman reported a phone call she received from her son's guidance counselor telling her he was not on track for graduation because he was not going to pass biology. The advice to her was that she remove him from "the roll" because the family could not afford summer school in another district (Montclair does not provide summer school options) and he was not going to graduate. The advice was to enroll him in a program at Essex County Community College before he was required to take the HSPA (that is in March of 11th grade). The ECCC program allows students to attend and earn a GED. The student is removed from "the roll" at MHS as a transfer, not a drop-out or a failure to graduate. As a result the district's percentage who graduate is unaffected by this student's failure. The district loses track of these 'transfer' students once they leave the district. A founding member's niece was encouraged to leave MHS and enter the ECCC program. She did not complete the program due to the difficulty due to the geographic location out of town.

These practices protect the system's ratings but do not serve all of the students.

Dr. Alvarez also said that on top of past budget reductions, the imposed budget reduction of \$3.4 million if Quest were approved, would severely impact the K-12 program. However, Dr. Alvarez did not include any information about what impact, if any, did the recently discovered \$10 million dollar surplus have on the District's budget. It would seem that the recovery of such a large sum of money last summer would have cured many of the negative conditions discussed in his letter.

As for the AYP issue ... Montclair High School was first listed as "in need of improvement, Year 1" in 2003. In order to receive that classification, the school had to fail for two consecutive years in the same subgroup. To be removed from the "in need of improvement" list a school must achieve AYP for two consecutive years. In 2011, Montclair High School was classified as "Year 5". What does this all mean? In eleven (11) years, Montclair High

School has been unable to attain AYP for two consecutive years to get off that list and is now considered a “failing” school by NCLB standards. The same populations that failed then are still failing today.

Look only at students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged students and African American students (subgroups). In 2011, 61% of students with disabilities, 48% of Economically Disadvantaged and 41% of African American students failed the HSPA in math. Scores in those ranges are the norm for these student populations at Montclair High School.

The district seems to address this inequity in test scores by urging students to leave the district rather than provide resources to prepare them to pass the test.

In 2009-2010, 72% of students with disabilities, (136 students) 36% of economically disadvantaged students (42 students) and 47% of African American students scored partial proficient (98 students). Partial proficient means they did not pass. With these numbers, it appears that 276 students needed to retake and pass the math section. How then did the district get these students to pass the test in a matter of months so they could continue on and graduate?

What is frustrating about these numbers is that the district, which is required to release these statistics in each category in September, has not released the actual numbers of students in each sub-group for math. We cannot determine how the percentage improvements compare with the actual number of students remaining enrolled in the district. Is it possible the number of students was reduced? That certainly would improve the reported percentages, or, did the district in fact educate our students to achieve that improvement in the ‘achievement gap’?

In 2010-2011 school year, approximately 40-50 students were enrolled in the Essex County Community College program prior to the March date when they would have sat for the HSPA test. This number is unconfirmed because it is difficult to get anyone at the high school to answer the question directly. A contact at Essex County Community College told the Quest founding committee members they did NOT want to enter into a similar arrangement with Quest Academy Charter High School, but that they would partner with us on other educational programs.

It seems that any program that helps make Montclair High School appear to be meeting the needs of its students is accepted with enthusiasm, all except a second high school in town, a public school willing to serve the needs of all students, including these students who are asked to leave because their presence at Montclair High School does not serve Montclair High School. Governor Christie has said that the achievement gap is the civil rights issue of today. If that is the case, the students in Montclair have civil rights just like the students in urban districts. In light of all this, we ask you to please review the Quest Academy Charter School application based on its merits and potential to meet the needs of the children in the Montclair community.

Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

Sincerely,

Quest Academy Charter School of Montclair Founders