AGENDA ITEM: Request to Expand Charter School Operations – Arizona Autism Charter Schools, Inc.

Issue

Arizona Autism Charter Schools, Inc. (AACS) submitted a request to expand charter school operations to add grades 6 through 8 and increase their enrollment cap to 108. AACS has not met the Board's academic performance expectations because it is currently in its first year of operation, and is asking for additional consideration from the Board to be eligible to apply for an expansion request that would include a Demonstration of Sufficient Progress (DSP). The charter is authorized for and serving grades K through 5.

Background

In January 2013, the Board approved the new charter application for AACS to open Arizona Autism Charter School (AZ Autism) in Central Phoenix to serve grades K-5, with an enrollment cap of 99. AZ Autism opened in August 2014, serving 87 students in grades K-5 as observed during the 1st year site visit. Board staff conducted the 1st year site visit of AZ Autism and it was successfully closed out after addressing a single issue as noted in the 1st year site visit letter (see Appendix A).

During the 1st year site visit, Board staff observed classrooms for all grade levels and spoke with Charter Representative Diana Diaz regarding the implementation of the Performance Management Plan (PMP), which is a component of the charter. The methods of instruction observed included interventions through Applied Behavior Analysis. All classrooms had at a minimum of three instructional aides and the classroom teacher for a group of 8-10 students. Many of the students were using a tablet as their communication device, since some of the students are working on their verbal and fine motor skills. The classrooms visited ranged from high functioning to low functioning students. In the high functioning classrooms, students were seated as a group as they were performing their activities together. In the low functioning classrooms, students were provided one-on-one instruction and provided redirection continuously.

After Board staff observed the classrooms, Ms. Diaz provided an update on the implementation of the PMP in the areas of curriculum, monitoring instruction, and assessment. In the curriculum area, hiring experienced instructional staff was evidenced by reviewing the resumes of approximately 45 staff members that indicated experience of working with students with autism. Teachers are required to provide lesson plans in accordance with the students' needs. Data is collected daily to allow teachers and parents to monitor students' academic progress, communication skills, and fine motor development.

During the site visit, Ms. Diaz asked about the process for adding grade levels, specifically grades 6 through 8. She stated that at the time of writing and submitting the new charter application during the 2013-2014 Application Cycle, she was not made aware that she would not be able to ask for any expansions during the first and second years of operation of the school. New charter application instructions from prior cycles did not include information regarding restrictions for new charter holders on eligibility for expansion requests. In addition the eligibility criteria for adding grade levels had been revised in March 2014 to not allow a Charter Holder that does not have an overall rating to submit any expansion request. Prior to March 2014, Board staff processed expansion requests for charters in their first year of operation with a Demonstration of Sufficient Progress (DSP)Report.

The average daily membership (ADM) for the charter based on 40th day ADM for FY2015 is 79.

Request

In the Letter of Intent submitted on December 9, 2014 (see Appendix B), AACS states that they understand that these expansion requests are typically reserved for schools that have been in operation for at least a year, AZ Autism offers a unique model focused on best practices for students with autism and see the need to expand in their second year of operation. When the school opened in the fall of 2014, it met its first year enrollment goal,

and has a waitlist of 65 students. The charter was originally planned to open with 81 students in their first year of operation but was increased to 99 students, the proposed number for their third year of operation. About 50 percent of the students on the waiting list are for grades 4 and 5. In addition, AACS has a Middle School interest list of about 40 students. Currently, AZ Autism has one class of eight 5th graders that need to be promoted to 6th grade. According to AACS, "Most of these students have struggled previously in district and private day school setting and would like to continue at our school."

The program AZ Autism offers is grounded in Applied Behavior Analysis, a data-driven teaching strategy for children on the autism spectrum. The student to teacher ratio is at least 3:1. The Charter Holder's growth plan is to add one grade level every year and introduce 18 new kindergarten students yearly (a half-time program).

During the 1st year site visit, AZ Autism demonstrated that the school had begun timely implementation of their PMP in the areas of curriculum, monitoring instruction and assessment, Board staff recommends that if the Board allows AACS to submit the Adding Grade Levels Amendment Request and Increase to Enrollment Cap Notification Request, that the Charter Holder would also be required to submit the DSP Report with a site visit.

Board Options

Option 1: The Board may approve the request to be eligible to apply for expansion. The following language is provided for consideration: I move, based on the information contained in the Board materials and presented today, that the Board approve the request of Arizona Autism Charter School, Inc. to be eligible to submit an Adding Grade Levels Amendment Request to add grades 6 through 8 and an Enrollment Cap Notification Request to increase the enrollment cap to 108 with a Demonstration of Sufficient Progress that includes benchmark data through December 2014. Following their submission, the results of Board staff's review of these items will be provided to the Board for its consideration of Arizona Autism Charter School, Inc.'s expansion requests.

Option 2: The Board may deny the request to be eligible to apply for expansion. The following language is provided for consideration: I move, based on the information contained in the Board materials and presented today, the Board does not find sufficient support to consider an expansion request. The Charter Holder may submit a request in the future when the academic dashboard provides evidence of additional improvement.