AGENDA ITEM: Adding Grade Levels to Charter Amendment – Sonoran Desert School – Sonoran Desert School

Issue

Sonoran Desert School (SDS), a non-profit entity, submitted a complete amendment to add grades 7 and 8 to the charter which currently serves grades 9-12.

Background

SDS was granted a charter in 1998 and opened the school Sonoran Desert School in 1999. Sonoran Desert School has been listed by ADE as an alternative school since FY2008.

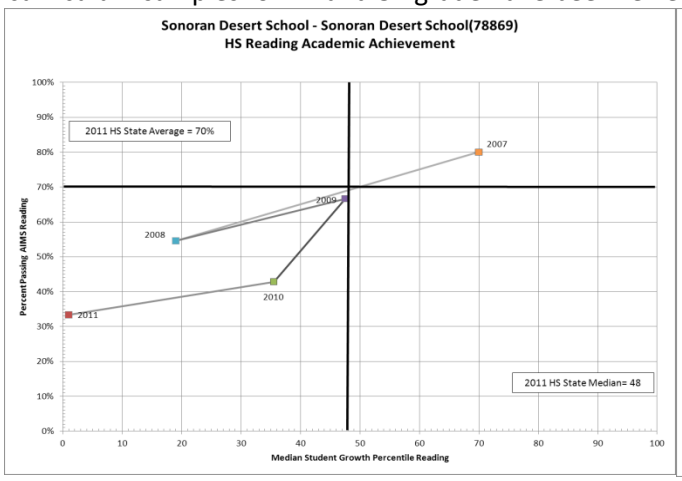
A Change of Mission Amendment request was submitted on May 10, and is being considered by the Board on the current Consent Agenda. The new mission language is to "meet the needs of students who would benefit from learning in an innovative, personalized school setting." The narrative submitted describes how the addition of grades 7 and 8 supports the new mission in that it would "allow us to help students to prepare to function as self-directed, participatory learners who are able to meet the challenge of excelling in grades 9-12."

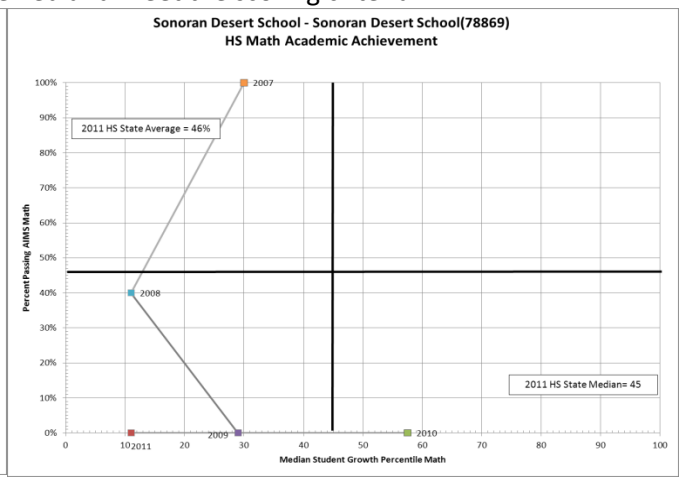
On April 9, the ASBCS approved a Charter Holder Location Notification and a School Site Location Notification for Sonoran Desert School, both of which described a move from the current location in Mesa to a new location 19 miles east in Gold Canyon for the 2012-2013 school year. The narrative submitted with the Adding Grade Levels to Charter Amendment request, SDS states "Last fall, we successfully completed lease negotiations to move our school facility to a community that does not have a middle school or high school (all of the students are currently bused). The community has a K-6 school. We would like to offer grades 7-8 so that the K-6 students can easily transition to our school. We see an important academic benefit to this kind of transition; it would allow us to provide more instruction prior to grade 10 in order to help students prepare to perform well on the AIMS tests. We currently struggle because many students are unprepared for the requirements of high school."

On May 7, in a telephone conversation with Charter Representative Patricia Dalman, Board staff was told that not many students from the current site would be attending the new site. She said that many had graduated, and that SDS had found placement for 99% of the others. She also described the students of the new location as being college prep and accelerated, with some credit recovery students.

As stated in Board policy, prior to a charter school being placed on an agenda, staff conducts a compliance check as part of the amendment approval process. This compliance check included an assessment of whether Sonoran Desert School met or demonstrated sufficient progress toward the Board's level of adequate academic performance.

As shown in the FY2011 academic graphs that follow, Sonoran Desert School has not met or demonstrated sufficient progress toward the Board's level of adequate academic performance. The charter holder is compliant in all other areas and curriculum samples for 7th and 8th grade have been reviewed and meet the scoring criteria.





In the narrative, SDS presents the following explanation of their 2011 AIMS scores as shown on the above graphs: "Because students often enroll at our school after experiencing problems elsewhere, we have often had a very limited

opportunity to help students prepare for the grade 10 administrations of AIMS. In our current student population, 34% of students are 18 or over, 34% are age 17, 20% are age 16, 11% are age 15, and only 1% are age 14. We would like to attract students earlier and retain them longer so that our test scores are a better reflection of our instructional program." The 2011 percent passing scores in the above graphs are based on 3 students, and the growth scores are based on one student.

To support its request, SDS submitted school-generated student performance data and analysis predicting AIMS scores in 2012. The analysis submitted with the data made the following points:

- "Because we have a small school of 75-100 students with a high percentage of students enrolling after the 10th grade, our AIMS results are being based on a very small sample size (3 or fewer)."
- From 2010 to 2011, the number of students passing AIMS Math went from 9% to 14%.
- From 2010 to 2011, the number of students passing AIMS Reading went from 26% to 52%.
- From 2010 to 2011, the number of graduates increased from 30 to 35.
- The analysis referred to data generated by STAR Math and Reading, which are "norm-referenced diagnostic test[s] from Renaissance Learning. [They are] computer-adaptive, so the test questions are selected in response to correct or incorrect answers. In 2011-12, we administered the STAR tests in the fall and in the spring, and then analyzed the data for students who had started within the first two months of school and who were still at the school in the spring, with the following results:
    - For Math:
        - 73% of students showed improvement in Scale Score and/or Grade Equivalent.
        - Average increase in Scale Score of 50.82 points
        - Average increase in Grade Equivalent of 1.32 years.
    - For Reading:
        - 67% of students showed improvement in Scale Score and/or Grade Equivalent.
        - Average increase in Scale Score of 91.73 points
        - Average increase in Grade Equivalent of 1.07 years.

Board Options

Option 1: The Board may approve the addition of grades 7 and 8 to the charter held by Sonoran Desert School. Staff recommends the following language for consideration: I move, based on the information contained in the Board materials and presented today, that the Board approve the addition of grades 7 and 8 to the charter held by Sonoran Desert School.

Option 2: The Board may deny the addition of grades 7 and 8 to the charter held by Sonoran Desert School. The following language is provided for consideration: I move, based on the information contained in the Board materials and presented today, that the Board deny the requests to add grades 7 and 8 to the charter held by Sonoran Desert School, for the reasons that:

- (Specific reasons the Board may have found during its consideration.)