SONORAN DESERT SCHOOL

WHERE LEARNING IS THE JOURNEY OF A LIFETIME

TO: Arizona State Board for Charter Schools
FROM: Shawn Dalman
DATE: 2/20/2012
SUBJECT: Consideration Narrative

This narrative applies to a written request to have our Added Grades Application reviewed by the Arizona State Board for Charter Schools. Our initial application was found to be administratively complete with no identified compliance issues, but the curriculum samples included required clarification; we have submitted revisions of the curriculum samples for staff review. The administrative review also noted AIMS Math and Reading scores were below the state average percent proficient and more than one standard deviation below the state median growth percentile for 2011 and that these scores have decreased since 2007. The purpose of this narrative is to explain why we would like to add grades as it relates to our efforts to improve AIMS scores.

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. For example, we administer diagnostic tests in reading and mathematics to every enrolling student; these tests indicate students are performing significantly below grade level, and a report covering those test results from 8/3/11 to 2/2/12 showed that 42% of students tested at a 7th grade level or below in reading (9% 4th grade or below), and 60% of students tested at a 7th grade level or below in math (20% were 4th grade or below).

We believe that students need to be better prepared at an earlier age so that they will be able to pass AIMS at the age level when it becomes a high-stakes test that affects whether or not they earn diplomas. 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 administration 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.

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Sonoran Desert School is an alternative school because the majority of students who have needed our services have academic problems. The majority of our students in the last 13 years have been to a number of high schools prior to attending our school, and many of them have struggled with behavior problems, poor grades, poor attendance, and previous poor AIMS scores. The volatility of this student population introduces special challenges when it comes to implementing and tracking a program of achievement.

As a small school of under 100 students, another of the challenges we have experienced with objective measurements such as AIMS scores is the statistical variance associated with small sample sizes. For example, the charts for math and reading prepared by the AZ Charter Schools Association only measure the performance of 10th grade students who are taking the tests for the first time and who were at the school for the Full Academic Year. At our school, where the majority of students tend to come and go and are entering at an older age for credit recovery purposes (88% of our current students are 16 or older), this is likely to be a very small sample size (perhaps even a single student).

We are working continuously to increase the AIMS scores. We have added remedial classes, individualized computer study plans, and one-on-one tutoring. We have voluntarily developed and implemented a Continuous Improvement Plan for our school to help us overcome the challenges we face. Above all, we remain committed to high standards. Our school has been accredited since 2003 by AdvancED, a division of North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement. Our Quality Assurance Review from AdvancEd completed on April 13, 2011 had the following comments about our school:

- "The school staff creates a safe and orderly environment through the establishment of respectful relationships with students and by providing a well-maintained facility."
- "The Quality Assurance Review (QAR) team observed an orderly and safe environment with an observable positive rapport between students and staff. Research supports that a clean and orderly environment denotes a sense of pride on the part of stakeholders. It also suggests that students' learning increases when they feel a sense of safety and belonging."
- "A welcoming, caring, and dedicated staff supports student needs. Through observation and interviews, it was evident that the school community has created an environment of caring and committed educators who work together to support the mission as noted in the mission statement. Overall, the learning climate seemed conducive to student learning, and, in a review of documentation, student survey results revealed that 86% of the student respondents reported that clear expectations and procedures for behavior were communicated. Students stated, "Teachers will help you for as long as it takes for you to learn it…they'll spend hours with you."

- "After interviews of stakeholders and review of documents, the QAR team confirmed that the school has developed and implements curriculum based on expectations for student learning. This is clearly linked to the mission statement which says, "…SDS offers a self-paced, challenging curriculum featuring computer applications and individualized instruction to meet the needs…" Through observation and student interviews, it was clear that course expectations are clearly communicated and course plans are provided to every student and used as a basis for instruction. Course guides are clearly linked to the Arizona Academic Standards."
- "The school utilizes effective strategies and interventions to promote student success."
- "The school's monitoring, professional collaboration, and rapport with students creates an environment conducive to student learning."
- "The school utilizes a secure and well-maintained electronic system for student records and mandatory state reporting."
- "The QAR team confirmed that all teachers have appropriate certification, are highly-qualified, and appropriately assigned. The QAR team observed teacher-to-student ratio which did not exceed 25:1. A class size of 9:1 was observed for science and 6:1 for geometry. A review of documents revealed a detailed financial report that was successfully confirmed by an independent CPA audit. Teachers indicated that they have the necessary resources to instruct students, and they have input into the procurement of curricular materials."
- "The school embraced the ADE Continuous Improvement Plan template to guide and document its improvement efforts for student achievement and school effectiveness."

We view our upcoming move to a new facility as an opportunity to improve academic performance by building more parental involvement, using data more effectively, increasing academic rigor, and preparing students from an earlier age to perform well on AIMS. We believe that adding grades is an important part of this improvement strategy so that we can more effectively prepare students to perform well on the grade 10 AIMS tests. We trust that our school's good record of compliance and continuing accreditation status shows that we are committed to quality and improvement in spite of some of the unique challenges presented by our school population.