**Curtis Sharif Charter School’s Neighborhood Advisory Council’s Capacity Interview - November 25, 2013**

**Interview Questions**

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| **Question** | **Criterion** | **Assigned NAC Member** | **Responses** |
| What is your elevator speech? | NA | Facilitator | Responses included below. |
| 1. Does your curriculum include learning opportunities that children can relate to from their cultural perspective? | 2.4.a. |  | Responses included below. |
| 2. What percentage if your students do you estimate will have IEPs and what are your plans for these children to achieve academic proficiency? | 2.4.c. |  | Responses included below. |
| 3. What is your discipline policy, and does it address specifically the needs of African American males, in a way that is corrective, without building a case, followed by expulsion? | 2.1.f. |  | Responses included below. |
| 4. What is your track record for academic proficiency and retention of students from the community that you will be serving? | 2.2.a. and 2.2.b. |  | Responses included below. |
| 5. How does the racial make up of your staff represent the racial make up of the population of students that you will be serving? | NA |  | Responses included below. |
| 6. What is your reason for wanting a school in this neighborhood? | 1.1. |  | Responses included below. |
| ***Final question to be asked in the last 5 minutes:***  **We have one minute left, if there is one thing that you need to make sure we know at the end of the interview, what is it?** |  |  | Responses included below. |

**Responses to Capacity Interview Questions:**

**What is your elevator speech?**

In order to prepare children to lead productive, meaningful lives, there must be a Master Plan for their educational experiences that is developed out of an end-goal objective of educating the student for a world in which he/she will be a contributor and a leader. The Curtis-Sharif STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) Academy Charter School (CSSA) utilizes student-centered and learning-focused educational systems that have the greatest success in preparing urban youth for college and productive careers.

The guiding principles and pillars for the school are: 1) At CSSA, teaching and learning are the top priority; 2) we have high expectation for the success of every student; 3) parents are partners in their child’s education, thus we forge positive, healthy relationships with the child and his/her family. Our Motto is: “It takes a *healthy* village to raise a *healthy* child” (italics mine); 4) we instruct students in the cognitive aspects and content areas of standardized tests to prepare them to exceed performance standards; 5) we have exceptional academic leadership which is supported administratively by outstanding operational leadership; 6) we have a school culture that promotes academic excellence, intellectual achievement, respect, safety, integrity, order, positive school/family relations; and the celebration of instructors as honored, capable professionals; 7) we utilize job-embedded professional development to integrate the notion of life-long learning on all levels; and 8) collectively, we are engaged in community outreach and social justice initiatives, transforming families and the community.

**The Curtis-Sharif STEM Academy Mission**: To provide a college preparatory elementary education that integrates a S.T.E.M. curriculum, the humanities, fine, cultural and performing arts, character education and healthy living in an academically and intellectually rigorous, culturally nurturing, socially empowering, safe, orderly, environment to create respectful scholars and leaders who are empowered to be positive influences in their homes and communities.

**The Curtis-Sharif STEM Academy Vision**: To empower every CSSA stakeholder to support student achievement on every level to develop life-long learners, problem solvers and engaged citizens, who are intellectually accomplished, culturally conscious, ethically focused and socially compelled to utilize their academic prowess and leadership capabilities as involved citizens and contributors to the global economy.

**The CSSA Educational Philosophy:** Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character -- that is the goal of true education.” CSSA activates Dr. King’s pronouncement in that academic excellence and moral integrity are the by-products of an academically and intellectually rigorous, culturally nurturing, socially empowering, safe, orderly, quality, holistic, research-based, outcomes-driven, elementary education environment. These elements are essential to positively impact each child’s education during the years that the foundation for academic excellence is established and is a major factor contributing to an individual living a productive, meaningful life. CSSA advances the idea that the educational capital of a learner is developed during preschool, nurtured in primary school, matured in middle school, expanded and accelerated in junior high. Studies indicate that by eighth grade a student’s intelligence quotient for college readiness has already been established. When students do not receive a quality education at any juncture in their educational journey, deficits develop that must be corrected. CSSA eliminates deficits to prevent children from dropping out of school academically and emotionally at an early age and becoming casualties of the ‘call of the wild’ and the influences of ‘criminal minds’ enticing and capturing their focus. CSSA has a preschool through 8th grade ‘Pipeline to Excellence’ that admits students at various points along the pipeline and provides the necessary interventions to ensure that every student excels. CSSA provides an educational system that eradicates the pipeline to prison. CSSA fills learning gaps and moves learners to a place of academic excellence, educational success, productivity and self-actualization.

**International Partnerships:** CSSA in partnership with the Minister of Education of Singapore, China will utilize its time honored curriculum to advance student learning. Singapore’s curriculum has been rated the highest in international assessments comparing the educational outcomes of students in 67 countries. This is a proven system to promote educational excellence that supports the CSSA Educational Philosophy to empower students and their families for success. Our Design Team has the experience, expertise and commitment to open a charter school that will have a profoundly positive impact on the educational, social and ethical outcomes of its students.

**Does your curriculum include learning opportunities that children can relate to from their cultural perspective?**

Yes, the curriculum includes learning opportunities that children can relate to from their cultural perspective. All lessons have a problem based learning component. This provides an opportunity for instructors to design the lessons with culturally significant content. One of the systems we will use is called TRIBES. This system allows students to form cohesive, culturally responsive and respectful groups that learn about the subject matter and the world through the lens of ethnic diversity; specifically focusing on the cultures from which the students come. There is space within each lesson for instructors to be creative in their inclusion of cultural content, history, current events, contributions, etc. This allows students to see themselves and their cultural heritage as significant and contributory in a world that is evolving and becoming increasingly ethnically diverse.

**What percentage if your students do you estimate will have IEPs and what are your plans for these children to achieve academic proficiency?**

Because students have individual learning requirements, CSSA’s learning environment is one in which each child is nurtured to achieve his/her highest level of academic success. In order to do this, the academic rhythm (learning style) of every child is identified, respected, nurtured and advanced. By taking the time to identify and understand the syncopation of a child’s learning rhythm, an educator can utilize the information to design an Individual Learning Plan that will support the child’s success in the academic environment. At CSSA, we develop an Individual Learning Plan for every child.

We understand that students will come to CSSA with IEPs. We anticipate that approximate 22% of the students will have IEPs. In order to ensure that these students achieve academic proficiency, we have a philosophy and practice that meld together to ensure the academic growth of all students whether the student is considered gifted or academically challenged. Although it is popular to label academically challenged students or students who have IEPs ‘special ed’, we prefer to call them ‘specially gifted’. We see the students as capable learners, with a purpose and special gifts they can share in learning environments and ultimately with the world. Our school culture is one of continual academic progress and academic excellence. This means that everyone has to believe in the capacity of every child to achieve academic proficiency, while our ultimate goal is mastery of the content. Children come to the learning environment with different prior educational experiences, some have been handicapped by their home environment and others stifled by inadequate academic instruction. Yet, each has the capacity to achieve success on some level. At CSSA, instructors are mandated to utilize differentiated instruction to support each students’ ability to achieve mastery of the subject matter at hand. Lessons are taught utilizing various instructional strategies, manipulatives, applications of the knowledge, and problem based learning projects to assist the student in learning the content and its relevance to the world in which they live.

CSSA also has adopted a Modified Response to Intervention Strategy that will support students in achieving proficiency and ultimately mastery. The plan is as follows:

CSSA will incorporate Response to Intervention (RtI) practices, which are research based and outcomes driven. All students in the school will receive Tier 1 Universal Interventions, which are preventive and proactive assessments. These assessments will be used to establish baseline data and determine who requires interventions and what kinds. The students will be divided into groups based on the outcomes of the assessment. ‘Specially Gifted Students’ (or those with IEPs) require high quality instruction and interventions to fill developmental gaps. These students will follow the standard RtI support system of Tier 2: Targeted Group Interventions for at risk students to provide each student with the research-based interventions needed to support their academic achievement and move them into the non-IEP Group. There will also be students in Tier 3: Intensive: Individual Interventions; which provides high intensity-long term support. CSSA will make modifications to the RtI practices and add a fourth tier at the top of the pyramid. Tier four is called “Problem-based Learning – Targeted Group Engagement.” These sessions will include higher order thinking skills and the integration of the curriculum with English language arts infused in social studies projects, applied mathematics in engineering projects, applied science in technology projects, and performing/visual arts projects. Students work in mixed groups that combine students with mixed learning capabilities to solve problems. Students will engage in problem-solving and decision-making through the problem-based learning projects they are assigned or choose. Students, teachers, and administrators will see the CSSA RtI Tier System as a model for continuous performance improvement and the advancement of student learning and achievement. Each tier supports the student’s ability to reach the apex of academic achievement.

**What is your discipline policy, and does it address specifically the needs of African American males, in a way that is corrective, without building a case, followed by expulsion?**

CSSA’s Discipline Policy is embedded in the school’s culture. The CSSA School Culture focuses on creating an environment at this socially, emotionally, educationally and physically safe and fair. No child is singled out because of his or her race and/or gender for punitive action based on negative stereotyping. Special care is given to ensure that every child, especially African American males, understands his/her importance to the school’s success. At CSSA, Students are respected and in turn they are required to demonstrate respect in their words and actions toward their peers and adults in the school. Everyone is important and has a role to play in the development of and maintenance of a great school culture. CSSA’s School Culture establishes an atmosphere of academic and behavioral excellence. CSSA cultivates the habits that characterize a successful school and civil society.

Teachers and staff are trained in the “Love and Logic Philosophy” that teaches students to make better decisions based on consequences. This character education component focuses on the character virtues/core values that support students becoming leaders and contributors in a global economy. The virtues include: responsibility, perseverance, respect, kindness, truth, citizenship, courage, self-discipline, fairness and true friendship. Students and all stakeholders are encouraged to model these virtues in everything they think, say, and do. These virtues promote a school culture that encourages students to exhibit the very best academic and social behaviors possible to establish the CSSA Vision. Emphasizing affirmation over reproach, the *Code of Conduct* explicitly describes various means by which CSSA continually recognizes and rewards appropriate conduct, including those recognition and reward incentives/programs described above. It also describes, in detail, the consequences for inappropriate behavior. In response to misbehavior, teachers will use a four strikes procedure, culminating with an office referral and a call to the student's parent. Exclusionary timeouts will be used to remove students from the instructional setting when they are repeatedly detracting within the learning environment.

Every effort is made to constantly instruct and correct those actions and attitudes, which are dialectically in tension with CSSA’s Mission, Vision, goals and objectives. Although character education is an integral part of the CSSA curriculum, there are instances when a student needs reinforcement above and beyond the course and the class goals. Students with four or more referrals to the Re-Focus Room will be referred to Character Education Detention to discuss with the Dean how they can realign their behaviors with CSSA’s Code of Conduct.

Insubordinate, physically dangerous, or illegal conduct (including, but not limited to stealing, fighting, bullying (physical, emotional or cyber), bringing a weapon to school, using threatening language and/or gestures, using foul language, academic improprieties, lying, sexually inappropriate behaviors, etc. will not be tolerated at CSSA and will be swiftly dealt with in a fair and just manner. Such conduct will result in the student being sent to the Dean of Students, who will automatically contact the parent(s). In cases of illegal or physically dangerous conduct, an automatic suspension will be the result. Some incidents will cause the convening of a Student Jury to review the case and render a suggestion for the consequences. Students, who engage in any type of misbehavior, whether minor or severe, will be required to make amends and/or restore the situation. Restitution may involve an apology; community or School service; or fixing, or replacing damaged items. For example, a student who has marked on a desk or CSSA’s walls may be required to clean walls and desks for a week. Likewise, if a student teases or calls another child names, he or she may be required to make ten compliments per day for a week and do three good deeds for the week. By holding students accountable and applying rules in a consistent manner, CSSA will teach them a powerful two-fold lesson: that their words and actions matter, and that their words and deeds--intentional and unintentional--have consequences. All issues will be dealt with immediately and fairly to ensure that the school’s environment is cordial and safe for all students.

At CSSA, we view all children as capable learners, who can contribute to the world as thinkers and leaders. The school’s mascot, the lion, will be used to help students understand their capacity to be positive leaders in class and in society. The character education program helps all children, this includes African American boys, to identify the challenges they face and develop strategies to successfully overcome and move beyond them. Each student participates in the ‘My Life in Focus Curriculum’ that is a life-planning program that incorporates an awareness of choices and consequences. The CSSA behavior management system is based on a large and varied body of research. One of the systems that will be utilized is CHAMPs, a program developed by Randall Sprick, Mickey Garrison, and Lisa Howard. It was derived from literature that delineates the best practices in classroom management. This system insists that everyone utilize language that is affirming and not punitive. At CSSA, we spend more time focusing our attention and energy on acknowledging responsible behavior than on responding to misbehavior. This helps students to see themselves as having some ‘good’ attributes and not always being defined as ‘bad’. At CSSA, students who require additional interventions because of misbehavior may be given Character Education Detention where time is spent talking about and modeling appropriate behavior. Students who have a series of incidents could be given in-house suspension, where they can keep up with their lessons and remain up to date with classroom instruction and receive the support they need.

Expulsion is a very last resort that would come at the end of dozens of opportunities to demonstrate improvement. The Dean of Students will monitor the demographics of the students receiving detentions, suspensions and expulsions to ensure that CSSA is mindful of how these disciplinary interventions are utilized. Indications that certain races and genders are over represented in these numbers will be addressed and monitored on a continuous basis to ensure that African American males are not unduly over-represented in these numbers.

**What is your track record for academic proficiency and retention of students from the community that you will be serving?**

Members of the Design Team have worked with students who reside in the communities we will be serving with great success. One member of the Team had two of her children and four of her grandchildren enrolled in the program. The youngest grandchild came to us with no English language capabilities. She was put into a science and math intensive program for six week and at the end of that time, her teachers were amazed at the level of mastery she displayed in math and science. Her English language skills also improved tremendously. The students with whom we have worked are either in college at places like Harvard University on a full-ride scholarship or they have graduated from college and are working. We have worked with students in educational environments that were 45% Latino, 45% African American and 10% Asian. The Latino and African American students thrived. Eighty-five percent (85%) of our elementary school students are admitted to great high school that are either selective enrollment, suburban or charter. The students’ high school GPAs are above 3.2, the average ACT score is above the national norm, and 100% of the students graduate from high school. Ninety-eight percent (98%) go to college and 2% go into the military or post-secondary programs. We have had tremendous success working with students who reside in this community or share the same cultural heritage.

**How [will you make sure that] does the racial make up of your staff represent the racial make up of the population of students that you will be serving?**

CSSA will utilize all of the electronic, paper and social media that provide educational employment search resources to advertise for teaching and staff positions. CSSA will spend additional resources to connect with Latino and African American educators and their communities. CSSA will also reach out to educators in our circle of acquaintances who know of educators and other capable individuals to fill the positions. CSSA is aware of the need to have a diverse staff that mirrors the ethnic heritage of its student population. CSSA will also ensure that every instructor and staff person receives cultural competence training during the professional development workshops.

**What is your reason for wanting a school in this neighborhood?**

CSSA wants to open a school that will serve students in the Chicago Lawn Community and the Ashburn Community because these are communities that have a number of schools that are over-crowded and performing poorly. We have a number of friends who reside in these communities and have had tremendous success with their children in advancing their academic attainment and transforming their educational outcomes. These students have experienced incredible academic success. We would like to help more students in these neighborhoods achieve academic, social and ethical success. When we looked at the options available to students who live in these neighborhoods, there is only one school that received a high score from the Great Schools Advisory, which is a national agency that rates schools from one to ten (ten is the highest score). Few of the existing schools earned a five, most earned threes and fours. CSSA is partnering with the Greater Southwest Development Corporation. This Corporation brought together dozens of residents, community organizations and businesses to develop a strategic plan to improve this neighborhood and end its downward spiral. The eighth strategy focuses on education. The priorities in GSDC’s education plan are to build and strengthen parent associations, provide a community space in the school, end school overcrowding, establish and achieve educational goals and increase opportunities for pre-school education programs. The community is interested in the quality of educational opportunities for the students that reside there. CSSA will work with the students in these communities to improve the educational outcomes of the students and improve the quality of life for their families thus working as a partner to actualize its eight point strategic plan designed to transform the community. CSSA has modified the slogan “It takes a village to raise a child” to include one word that is essential to the transformation of any community. CSSA slogan is “It takes a ‘healthy’ village to raise a ‘healthy’ child.” CSSA considers itself a part of the healthy village.

***Final question to be asked in the last 5 minutes:***

**We have one minute left, if there is one thing that you need to make sure we know at the end of the interview, what is it?**

The Curtis-Sharif STEM Academy (CSSA) asked the question, ‘what does it mean to be truly educated?’ CSSA has developed a school with a S.T.E.M. (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) curriculum that is integrated with the Arts, Character Education and the Humanities. We utilize an internally proven educational model to advance student learning. We believe that students must be able to think critically and problem solve. They must appreciate their culture and be exposed to the humanities and world languages. This must be balanced with high ethical standards and compassion for their fellow human beings. We have chosen the Chicago Lawn Community and the Ashburn Community because we desire to work in partnership with the residents, community organizations and businesses to improve the educational outcomes of families who entrust their children’s futures to public education. CSSA will prepare students for leadership and 21st Century careers. The curriculum begins preparing students in pre-school with the intellectual, social, ethical and college-readiness skills they need to be contributors in a global economy. CSSA will offer parent education, community engagement and space for community meetings. CSSA will provide students with an outstanding education, while also empowering parents to be life-long learners. We at CSSA are passionate about education and have a success record and desire to bring our expertise to Chicago Lawn and Ashburn.