

Letter of Intent: Classical Charter School

I. Applicant information

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Educator and resident of the community in which the founding group proposes to establish a charter school. Previously upgraded a junior/senior high school.

The founding group is composed of individuals concerned regarding current weak outcomes of public education: U.S. ranking on international tests, the nation's report card (NAEP), and especially locally where nearly 60 percent of district students in grades 3-8 placed in levels 1 and 2 on the 2010-11 ELA state tests—meaning students failed to meet NY learning standards. The founding group looks to the rigor and excellence associated with Direct Instruction, Core Knowledge, and classical education to overcome learning deficits for at-risk children. Founding member skills and experience represent a broad spectrum needed to govern a charter school: intelligence; teaching experience; leadership; vision; communication; financial acumen; creative thinking; organization of groups for involvement; community knowledge; information regarding what good education should entail; along with advocacy for disabled children. The following are founding group members. All are slated to become members of the board of trustees except Deann Nelson, who will become Head of School/Director:

Scott Davis: BS, Business Administration; Receiving Dept. Supervisor, Penn Traffic Corporation; training and staff development for employees; quality control; communicating and accomplishing progressive corporate goals in a union and nonunion environment.

Patsy Lydell: Business Manager, Jamestown Radiologists; healthcare management; supervises 25 employees; purchasing; public relations; teaches classes on U.S. Constitution.

The Rev. Melvin McGinnis: Minister, Kiantone Congregational Church; civic orator and community leader; advocate for good schools and effective government.

Patricia Micciché: Public school art teacher; author, illustrator, Fullbright representative to Japan.

Deann Nelson: School psychologist; guidance counselor; Jr/Sr HS health teacher; Career Education Specialist; adjunct professor, Canisius College, SUNY at Fredonia; own/operate tutoring center for children with learning problems; nurse anesthetist

Rebecca Rosen: Small business owner; advocate for handicapped children in developing IEPs that address the learning needs of disabled children, and that are compliant with the law.

Haven Gillispie: Currently is not on the founding group. She will become a member of the board as the parent representative when CCS receives a charter.

II. Proposed Charter School information

Classical Charter School (CCS) will be located in Jamestown, a disadvantaged community of 32,000 situated 80 miles south of Buffalo. CCS's mission statement is: Providing the foundation for academic excellence. CCS, with its return to the principles of classical education—principles supported by cognitive science and put into practice in “No Excuses” schools—plans to provide an antidote to criticisms of weak public education, especially for Jamestown's many at-risk

children: 1) teach children basic skills to *mastery* level; 2) teach shared civic values; and 3) place stress upon intellectual goals through a coherent, cumulative, common core academic curriculum, starting in the earliest grades. Classical learning is building a foundation of cultural knowledge and time-honored traditions shared by English-speaking peoples. CCS's purpose of education is to create productive citizens for a free society, taught by teachers who explicitly value academic work, academic knowledge, and citizenship. Starting with kindergarten, “schooling” is the beginning of “citizenship,” the mutual vision of society citizens share.

Jamestown's superintendent is on record stating that the district needs better teaching strategies, better curricula, better supervision, better engagement with parents. All three middle schools are on the state education department's list for needing improvement. Seventy-eight percent (78%) of grade 8 children at one middle school failed the ELA test (2009-10). High failure rates also were noted at the other middle schools. Unquestionably, there was a negative impact when these students entered high school in grade 9. Rigorous research informs that if children exit grade 1 as poor readers, nearly **9 out of 10** will be poor readers in grade 4. Moreover, if children exit grade 3 as poor readers, **74** percent will continue to be poor readers in high school. Poor readers in grade 3 no doubt were poor readers in kindergarten and grades 1 and 2. Tragically, they did not master critical reading and other basic skills in the very beginning grades.

The above research paints a bleak picture for at-risk children who do not master basic skills in the beginning grades. Learning in the content areas becomes a serious challenge for these students. At-risk students who fall into the “deficit hole” are affected through the grades to high school and beyond. At the middle school level, only the most intense remedial effort will help *some* children overcome severe learning deficits. Problematical for students with severe deficits is overcoming learned helplessness, the area related to learned attributions (e.g., self-efficacy and effort), which frequently is concomitant with learning deficits. Academic deficits can be prevented; educators already have the knowledge they need in order to prevent such human casualties, many which become lifelong. Learning for children who are *not* at risk, especially if they are high performers, also is affected if there are large numbers of at-risk children in a school. Since they do not have problems learning, their needs for challenge and acceleration in learning are not addressed, and they remain underachieving.

Opening as a K-3 school (see chart below), 20 children per grade, CCS will add an additional grade each year until it is a K-6 structure. A decision then will be made to add a second section, starting with kindergarten, or to add the next grade. Classical Charter School will offer district parents an educational choice for their children. School choice has become a civil rights issue for parents in at-risk districts where schools are under-performing. ***There are no charter schools in Jamestown, nor in Chautauqua County.***

With its emphasis upon mastery of basic skills in reading, mathematics, writing, spelling, language, and cursive writing, CCS will provide the foundation for successful achievement for at-risk children as they advance through middle school and high school. The structure of the school will be scientific, based upon the demand: Show us the data. Data collection is performed daily using Precision Teaching and one-minute samplings to ensure that children become fluent in skills. Accuracy alone is insufficient. Curriculum-based measurements (CBM) are an integral part of Direct Instruction curricula, the chosen program to teach basic skills. CBMs also ensure accuracy and fluency. The school will be child-referenced, meaning that all instruction will address children in terms of their instructional and learning needs.

Proposed grade levels and number of students to be enrolled

Grades	Ages	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018
K	4,5	20	20	20	20	40? Gr7?
1	5,6	20	20	20	20	20
2	6,7	20	20	20	20	20
3	7,8	20	20	20	20	20
4	8, 9, 10		20	20	20	20
5	9, 10, 11			20	20	20
6	10, 11, 12				20	20
Total		80	100	120	140	160

Direct Instruction (DI) is powerful, and it is scientifically validated. It is used all over the world because it provides systematic, sequential instruction so that children *master* basic skills. Its principles of instruction and accountability are based on science. Teachers *know* where children are in their learning. There is no falling through the cracks. As noted above, teachers use frequent data collection through continual diagnostic teaching; daily curriculum-based measurements; Precision Teaching for developing fluency, where learning rates are plotted on standard celeration charts; and frequent formative assessments to ensure that children are making progress in the curriculum. Children are provided with sufficient practice and review so they become *fluent* and *retain* what they learn. The major difference between higher and lower performers is the rate at which they learn the material, not the way they formulate inferences. Contrary to myth, low performers do not learn in a different manner from high performers.

DI is based upon two separate analyses for teaching basic skills effectively: the logical analysis and an empirical analysis—constructions from logic and science. The logical analysis provides the constraints for the curriculum designer in developing the instructional program. The empirical analysis obtains information from field tests on children in classrooms *before* publication to answer the questions: Is the program effective? Are the sequences or activities as effective as necessary? Which discriminations require more practice? Astonishingly, most curricula in the public domain have *not* been field tested prior to publication.

For cognitive learning to occur, inductive learning, the process for learning all facts about the world must take place—that is, going from concrete instances to formulating a general rule. Knowledge is essential to vocabulary development and reading comprehension, which are key building blocks of achievement. Critical research informs, however, that skill differences among children at the time they enter school are bigger, more important, and more intractable than ever imagined. By age three, there is a 30 million word gap between at-risk children and children whose parents actively provided enriching language and other experiences. Importantly, past experiences of children influence which *new* experiences they choose. **Core Knowledge**, also a key component of CCS's instructional curriculum, deliberately focuses upon the gradual acquisition of broad knowledge. This is crucial for at-risk children; it enables them to develop the wide vocabulary necessary for successful advancement through the grades and graduation from high school. College becomes a reality, as does work in high-tech industries.

What proof do we have that DI is effective? Effect size, a statistical method, provides powerful evidence. Numerous studies were performed using DI as the experimental approach. In 2009, John Hattie published his ground-breaking work, *Visible Learning*, in which he synthesized over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement; results were reported in effect sizes. Crucially, effect size **0.40** was the hinge: at this level and above, *all* students learned; below the hinge effect size, however, only *few* or *some* students learned. The message is clear: large effect sizes *cause* large improvements in students' achievement; thus, implement those measures at 0.40 and above that make the greatest difference to teaching and learning. Direct Instruction (ES = 0.59) incorporates other teaching strategies with high effect sizes: quality of teaching (ES = 0.77); providing feedback (ES = 0.72); mastery learning (ES = 0.57); providing challenging goals (ES = 0.56); frequent effects of testing (ES = 0.46). When individual DI curricula are examined, we find very high effect sizes, demonstrating power and effectiveness: reading (ES = 0.69); math (ES = 1.11), spelling (ES = 1.33), language (ES = 0.49). These are *huge* effect sizes. They give credence and validity to using Direct Instruction curricula with at-risk children, lower performers, *and* high performers. To put DI effect sizes into perspective, consider the contrast between DI reading effect size of **0.69** and the much used whole language reading, euphemistically now called “balanced” reading, with an effect size of **0.06**, far below the hinge. The choice seems clear!

Basic skills are applied, put to use, and reinforced in Core Knowledge content subjects. Through American and world history and geography, classic literature, art, and music—the liberal arts subjects—children obtain “intellectual capital,” a term used by E.D. Hirsch, Jr. of Core Knowledge Foundation. Add to this science, taught through **Nebel's *Building Foundations of Scientific Understanding***, and children garner further thinking/vocabulary skills: guiding children toward a high standard of scientific literacy; broad knowledge covering the basics of the natural sciences; organized frameworks of knowledge to aid critical thinking and evaluating information; and developing scientific mental skills for acquiring new information.

Rich content is essential for vocabulary development, knowledge attainment, and to awaken us to our humanity as individuals and as citizens in a society. It is a truism that learning begets learning. Thinking skills *only* develop in children when they have well-developed knowledge in civics, the arts, and the humanities. Direct Instruction's powerful teaching strategies will be utilized with Core Knowledge content. ***Core Virtues***, a literature-based program, also will be taught. It has as its goal the “cultivation of character through the promotion of basic moral, civic, and intellectual virtues.” In other words, the focus is upon right conduct.

Jamestown is a disadvantaged community with many at-risk children. Sixty-two percent are on free and reduced-price lunch. White children comprise 75 percent of district children, while African-American children make up 11 percent and Hispanic children 12 percent. Disabled children comprise 13.8 percent of the school population, while Limited English Proficient children represent four percent. Graduation rate for 2009-10 was 73 percent. Median household income is \$31,000 compared to \$54,659 for all NYS. Jamestown median housing value is a low \$64,542; NYS is \$306,000. Because of low rental housing costs, Jamestown is a mecca for welfare recipients.

III. Enrollment and retention of students

Nearly all education “reform” efforts focus upon big topics such as vouchers, restructuring, annual testing, standards of learning, and inclusion. All are doomed to fail, however, *unless*

instruction improves and it is included as a major component of the reform effort. Instruction fuels learning for regular and special education, ELL, and low-income children. Educators have been notorious for not adhering to a scientific approach to instruction, which is an integral part of DI. To be avoided at all costs are factors outside the domain of instruction that detract, and over which educators have no control—poverty, neuropsychology, and psychological processes—dead ends that lead away from instruction.

The use of empirical data permits teachers to know if instruction is successful. Instruction and assessment are integrally united, providing diagnostic assessment of individual children within each learning lesson. Any deficiencies that are observed in children require that the problem is addressed *directly*; it is an *instructional* problem. Labels such as “dyslexic,” “slow learner,” “autistic,” “attention deficit,” “dysfunctional family,” “English as a second language,” to name but a few that pervade education, are irrelevant; they stand in the way of proper instruction. Frequent data regarding instruction become crucial evidence needed for upgrading a child, a school, and a school district.

Classical Charter School sees its primary responsibility as teaching *all* children what knowledge has the most value, and how to use that knowledge. If a school does not make a deliberate attempt to provide a curriculum with “meat,” it will be the popular culture, advertising, and electronic media that will shape the minds and behavior of children and youth. Results of this were seen in London and Philadelphia summer 2011. CCS will provide educational choice for families who are interested in high achievement, and a structured environment for their children. At-risk children will have opportunity to obtain an education of excellence. Direct Instruction's effective, evidence-based instructional programs have stood the test of time; they are supported by extensive scientific research, including Project Follow Through, the largest educational study ever performed in our country. Parents who value education for their children will be interested in, and supportive of, the education program and environment that CCS will provide. That will allow CCS to be successful and grow.

IV. Public outreach and community support

Community meetings were held at the local library. Comments were solicited. Memos and flyers announcing meetings were sent to: preschools; Chautauqua County Department of Social Services; Chautauqua Opportunities; Joint Neighborhood Project; and daycare providers. CCS's press releases appeared in *The Post-Journal* and *Jamestown Gazette*, and were heard on Media One Radio. Announcements appeared in *Southern Tier Penny Saver*. The Rev. Mel McGinnis spoke extensively about upcoming community presentations on Media One talk radio show. CCS has a Facebook page and purchased advertisement on Facebook for a 7-day period. Meetings were held with a key leader in the Hispanic community, who also is co-chair of the community diversity committee, and with a key service provider to the Hispanic community. Jamestown has become a mecca for Hispanic people because housing costs are very low in comparison to many other communities. The Rev. Mel McGinnis also met with Jamestown's superintendent of schools, Mr. Daniel Kathman. He relayed the group's concerns over high failure rates on state mandated tests. There is community interest in a charter school. Community meetings will continue in the fall.

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