



KRISTEN STOLPA
Chief Authorizing Officer

1201 Main St, Suite 300, Columbia, SC 29201

8/5/2020

Ms. Bridgett Fowler, Board Chair
Mr. Joseph Greenberg, Principal
3710 Palmetto Pointe Boulevard
Myrtle Beach, SC 29588

Re: Heightened Monitoring of Academic Performance

Dear Ms. Fowler and Mr. Greenberg:

The Charter Institute at Erskine College (“Charter Institute”) is the charter school sponsor of your school, Coastal Leadership Academy (the “School”). In this role, the Charter Institute has a responsibility for regularly monitoring the performance and legal and fiscal compliance of the School. This specifically includes conducting oversight activities, notifying a school of perceived problems, and taking appropriate corrective actions in response to identified deficiencies (S.C. Code Ann. § 59-40-55(A)).

The Charter Institute recognizes that all schools in South Carolina (public, private, and homeschool) are working now to deal with COVID-19 issues and planning for the upcoming year. The Charter Institute team understands the stresses that this unforeseen reality is placing on your school as well. And although the academic information presented on the SC State Report Cards have been suspended for the current school year, and state assessments have been waived, the statutory responsibilities of the Charter Institute under the S.C. Charter Schools Act require that we continue to monitor and assess the performance of portfolio schools. Please know that despite current circumstances, the Charter Institute will continue to provide a high level of support for the School and all other schools in the portfolio.

The Charter Institute team works in alignment with our review procedures to assess and monitor key areas of school performance, programming, and operations. As the Charter Institute aggregates these cross-unit and longitudinal findings, it is sometimes the case that, in combination, the results yield concern for the overall trajectory or sustainability of the School. Upon review of the educational programming and academic outcomes of the School available during the 2019-2020 school year, the Charter Institute identified several connected areas of concern. The Charter Institute believes it is important to memorialize these identified concerns and work collaboratively to heighten our programmatic monitoring of the School as we look ahead to the 2020-2021 school year. These concerns have included:

- A misalignment between the School’s charter and School communications on the mastery-based component of the educational model. The charter espouses a project-based learning model wherein standards mastery is an outcome rather than an approach to instruction (pgs. 1, 8-10). Communications with and from the School in January 2020 indicate a stated intent to implement the practice of mastery-based learning as a driving assessment standard. This is not reflected in the charter as the purpose or practice of assessing, which is designed in the charter to monitor student progress rather than ascertain mastery (pgs. 44, 57, 58, 59, 60, 62, 63, 65, 80, 81, 98). Formal incorporation of this approach would require an amendment and approval by the Charter Institute.

- A noncompliant approach to implementation of the South Carolina Uniform Grading Scale. The School’s charter notes adherence to this state system of grading and credit accrual (pgs. 73, 75-77). Instances of failure to adhere to this scaling emerged through parent complaints to the Department of Education in January 2020.
- A lack of transparency in the tenets, structures, and systems that comprise the educational program of the School. Communications from the School in February 2020 indicated that the School had veered away from key components of the charter and the board-approved handbook was being used as a tool to seek recommitment to the foundations of the charter. It was unclear whether the information communicated aligned to the charter itself, and whether ancillary items such as the School’s Student Code of Conduct, Enrollment Policies or Procedures, and even Employee practices were affected.
- Analysis that reveals a disconnect between student grading and demonstrated mastery of South Carolina standards as measured by the End of Course (EOC) examinations. Nearly 2/3 of students over the past two years earned the grade of a D or F on the EOC test, with more than 40% receiving an F. This level of performance falls near the bottom third of all high schools in the State and falls below 91% of the neighboring Horry high schools. The School’s course grades, however, as assigned and documented by the School, indicate that less than 1 in 5 students received a D or F in School coursework, and a majority earned A or B grades. This disparity in the School’s formative approach to monitoring and assessing student performance suggests potential breakdowns in curricular implementation, in testing and grading, in determining standards mastery, in data analysis, and of most concern, in demonstrating adequate student progress.
- Analysis that reveals a disconnect between program completion and student readiness for postsecondary activity. The most recently reported graduation rate of 90% earned CLA the rating of Excellent on the SC School Report Card and placed the School in the top quartile of all high schools in South Carolina on this completion measure. The overall Report Card rating for the school was Average. However, the percentage of diploma earners who demonstrated readiness for college or entry into the military or labor force rested at 62% (with only 1/3 of students being college ready). This level of performance falls below Horry Schools and rests in the bottom quartile of performance of more than 230 high schools statewide. This level of performance also falls below goals established in the charter that commit to post-completion success rates at 90% (pg. 25) and fail to demonstrate effectiveness of the School’s mission to ‘improve academic achievement.’

We understand that natural interruptions to programming and operations can result from transitions in leadership, and believe that in isolation, some of these aforementioned incidents may not rise to a level of noncompliance that warrants escalation by the Charter Institute. In combination, however, the Charter Institute fears that the lack of demonstrated improvement towards a faithful implementation of the approved charter program and goals jeopardizes the long-term success of the School.

To better ensure and support the continued progress of the School, the Charter Institute would like to implement procedures for **Heightened Monitoring** during the 2020-2021 school year. This approach to oversight for the upcoming year is independent of any formal procedures for identified situations of noncompliance or breach. Instead, this term is reflective of communication protocols and supports that will be established between Charter Institute staff and School staff. These include, but are not limited to:

- Review of the educational program as implemented against the tenets of the charter;
- Review of active board policies and board-adopted documents such as the Student Handbook;
- Review of the school’s budget and expenditures to assess alignment between resource allocation and student achievement goals.
- Oversight of the administration of formative testing in the Fall, Winter, and Spring;

- Analysis and reporting of student outcomes in the areas of student performance, student engagement, and student composition;
- Analysis of school performance against state standards, over time, and against the resident district;
- Analysis and reporting on test administration practices and test participation rates;
- Review of methods and systems for using student performance data;
- Review and monitoring of professional development plans to assess alignment between staff training and student achievement goals;
- Required regular check-ins between the Charter Institute Accountability Team and School personnel to review findings and progress;
- Increased on-site presence at the School by Charter Institute team members;
- Increased attendance by the Charter Institute at School board meetings;
- Required reporting of updates on progress to the School and Charter Institute Boards.

Please note that the information collected through our heightened monitoring procedures may inform future action taken by the Charter Institute and will become part of the existing body of evidence that is used in the decision-making process for renewal. Your charter is set to expire on June 30, 2023. This means that you will engage in the renewal process in Fall 2022. As stated earlier, it is important to reinforce that the absence of the SC State Report Cards against your nearing term for charter renewal increases the urgency and importance of this work in the coming year.

The Charter Institute will work with the School administration to develop the timeline and benchmarks for the above activities. The Charter Institute would like express encouragement in a recent statement by Mr. Greenberg that he understands the School has “miles to go but is beginning to move the needle.” It is because of that distance from state and Charter Institute expectations that we believe implementing a system of heightened monitoring between staffs will concurrently create the support and active oversight that is necessary to advance the School.

As a next step, we are requesting your availability in order to coordinate a meeting for our groups to discuss and develop the components, timeline, and implementation benchmarks of the heightened monitoring plan. If you could share dates and windows of time that you are available to connect in August, we will work on our end to accommodate scheduling and set the meeting.

The Charter Institute is available at any time to answer questions about these concerns or plans for school monitoring. Thank you in advance for your cooperation and leadership in this matter. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at authorizationchief@erskinecharters.org or call 803-722-3841.

Sincerely,



Kristen Stolpa
Chief Authorizing Officer, Charter Institute at Erskine

CC: Cameron Runyan, Chief Executive Officer, Charter Institute at Erskine
Vamshi Rudrapati, Director, Charter Institute at Erskine