



State of New Jersey

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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February 3, 2020

Dr. Jason Skeeter
Board of Trustees
M.E.T.S. Charter School
211 Sherman Avenue
Jersey City, NJ 07307

Dear Dr. Skeeter:

M.E.T.S. Charter School (M.E.T.S) opened in 2011 and is currently in its ninth year of operation. Pursuant to *N.J.S.A. 18A:36A-17* and *N.J.A.C. 6A:11-2.4*, M.E.T.S. was placed on probation on May 23, 2019, for failing to operate in compliance with its charter, state statutes and regulations. M.E.T.S. submitted the requisite remedial plan on June 10, 2019, and subsequently met with the New Jersey Department of Education (Department) representatives on June 28, 2019. On October 15, 2019, M.E.T.S. submitted its Renewal Application, and has been evaluated by the Department on M.E.T.S.' organizational, academic and fiscal compliance. In accordance with *N.J.S.A. 18A:36A-17* and *N.J.A.C. 6A:11-2.3(b)*, the Department completed a comprehensive review of the school, including but not limited to, implementation of the remedial plan, the Renewal Application, annual reports, student performance on statewide assessments, on-site visits, interviews with school officials, public comments and fiscal impact on the sending districts in order to make a renewal decision.

A primary goal of the Department is to ensure that all New Jersey charter schools are offering students a high-quality education. Charter schools must demonstrate strong academic performance and are held accountable for student outcomes. No charter school is automatically granted a renewal of its charter. Rather, a charter school must demonstrate both a high level of achievement and the capacity to continue to cultivate student learning in order to have its charter renewed. After a comprehensive review, I have determined that M.E.T.S. is not operating in compliance with its charter and has failed to provide strong educational programs, sustained organizational stability and financial strength. Therefore, in accordance with *N.J.S.A. 18A:36A-17*, *N.J.A.C. 6A:11-2.3* and *N.J.A.C. 6A:11-2.4(b)*, I am not renewing the charter for M.E.T.S. A Renewal Summary Report, which contains findings gathered from the comprehensive review, is forthcoming.

The Performance Framework allows the Department to evaluate charter schools based on multiple data points including absolute, comparative and growth measures. M.E.T.S.' academic performance has decreased year over year through the charter term. According to M.E.T.S.' 2018-2019 Annual Report, "Inconsistencies in modifications to the curriculum, lack of sufficient support for student interventions, and the absence of data-driven high-quality, rigorous instruction has produced low achievement results." The low achievement results described in the annual report are reflected in the summative Tier Rank and percentage of points achieved illustrated in the following chart:

Year	Summative Earned		6 th -8 th		9 th -12	
2018	Tier 2	50.3%	Tier 3	22.9%	Tier 2	57.7%
2017	Tier 2	56.3%	Tier 3	25.6%	Tier 1	71.9%
2016	Tier 2	43.3%	Tier 3	21.8%	Tier 2	55.7%
2015	Tier 2	61.0%	Tier 2	51.0%	Tier 1	68.2%

Additionally, as indicated in the statewide performance results in the 2017-2018 school year, 29.2% of students schoolwide achieved proficiency in English Language Arts (ELA) and 45% of students achieved proficiency in Mathematics (math) on statewide assessments. The Department also evaluated measures of growth for the school using the Student Growth Percentile (SGP). Based on the statewide assessment results from 2017, M.E.T.S.' median SGP in ELA was 38% and 36% in math, both failing to meet the standard as required by Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) accountability. As indicated in the chart below, M.E.T.S.' SGP falls below the local districts of Newark and Jersey City, as well as the State, with the exception of 8th grade SGP in ELA. Review of M.E.T.S.' 2017-2018 statewide assessment results further indicates that the school underperforms each local district of Newark and Jersey City, in each grade level, with the exception of ELA 10 as compared to Newark Public Schools.

Grade	Newark PS				Jersey City PS				M.E.T.S.			
	ELA	Math	SGP ELA	SGP Math	ELA	Math	SGP ELA	SGP Math	ELA	Math	SGP ELA	SGP Math
6 th	34%	23%	50.5	52	47%	33%	54	56	27%	*	20.5	36.5
7 th	39%	25%	49	44	56%	34%	53	52	31%	19%	26	36.5
8 th	37%	22%	48	-	50%	14%	48	-	27%	16%	56.5	-
9 th	34%	26%			37%	29%			27%	12%		
Algebra I												
10 th Geometry	32%	*			42%	23%			33%	*		
11 th Algebra II	35%	13%			56%	35%			32%	*		
12 th	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The 2017-2018 Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT) Reading and Writing assessments indicate that 31% of M.E.T.S. students scored at or above benchmark compared to the Jersey City local district average of 39% and the state average of 72%. Likewise, 2017-2018

SAT Math assessments indicate 13% of M.E.T.S. students scored at or above the benchmark compared to the Jersey City's local district average of 30% and the state average of 54%.

Preliminary 2018-2019 New Jersey Student Learning Assessments data indicate inconsistencies year over year in both ELA and Math as demonstrated in the following chart:

Assessment	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019
ELA 6	24%	27%	23%
ELA 7	17%	31%	37%
ELA 8	23%	27%	35%
ELA 9	28%	27%	16%
ELA 10	37%	32%	20%
ELA 11	26%	32%	N/A
MAT 6	10%	7%	19%
MAT 7	12%	19%	29%
MAT 8	0%	16%	22%
Algebra I	15%	12%	9.8%
Geometry	1.7%	2%	4.5%
Algebra II	5.6%	5%	0%

On January 9, 2020, the Department representatives completed an on-site review. The Department observed a low level of instruction in most classrooms, disengaged and disruptive students in each classroom, limited checks for understanding, and minimal participation in critical thought, despite the mission to develop students for success in college and career readiness in an innovative and creative learning environment. There were a few observed classrooms at the Jersey City campus at the high school levels seemingly providing higher quality instruction, however, this was not equally evident in the Newark campus nor across all grade levels. Middle school students were observed opting out of learning, engaging in low level knowledge acquisition when attempting to be engaged, and presented low level disturbances. In the high school grades, with the exception of the abovementioned classes, there were significant behavior management issues, multiple instances of disruptive, off task and unsafe student behaviors, many of which were not addressed. Students were often observed opting out of learning, and at times were disrespectful. In these observed classrooms, interactions between teachers and students appeared indifferent with limited teacher redirection or attempts at reengagement. These observations were consistent with the Department's on-site observations from October 10, 2019, December 11, 2019 and December 12, 2019.

Providing students with a high-quality education is not only a priority for the Department, it is also an integral component of M.E.T.S.' mission and vision. Despite being in its ninth year of operation, M.E.T.S. failed to make reasonable improvements to its performance, as indicated in the remedial plan. M.E.T.S.' failure to meet its mission, as observed during the Department's on-site visits strongly suggests it is unable to provide students with a consistent, high-quality education. According to M.E.T.S. Charter School's Renewal Application the mission for the school is as follows:

M.E.T.S. Charter School is an Early College Preparatory School that utilizes research-based instructional practice to achieve student proficiency in mathematics, engineering, technology, and science. Our school is committed to providing high quality education focused on college and career readiness while fostering an equitable, innovative, and creative learning environment. We offer dual enrollment programs with local colleges and certificates in career and technical education. Our school promotes postsecondary success by prioritizing admission to a four-year college or university for each member of our graduating class.

Notably, this iteration of the mission differs from that of the mission version approved February 28, 2017, in response to the November 29, 2016 amendment. Absent from this version of the mission is the statement “*We prepare all students to take college level courses and graduate from high school within four years with up to 60 college credits and/or an associates degree,*” instead the mission now reads “*We offer dual enrollment programs with local colleges and certificates in career and technical education.*” Despite the change to the mission statement, M.E.T.S. is failing to provide high-quality education focused on college and career readiness in an equitable, innovative and creative learning environment.

Equally problematic is the number of students who are not afforded the opportunity for a high-quality education due to suspensions. Based on M.E.T.S.’ annual reports, in 2016-2017 there were 31 unique out-of-school suspensions reported; this number increases significantly in 2017-2018, to 240 out-of-school suspensions with 3 expulsions, while in 2018-2019 there were 359 out-of-school suspensions with 1 expulsion. A portion of the mission for M.E.T.S. references an equitable, innovative and creative learning environment, however, of the 359 suspensions reported from the 2018-2019 school year, 309 are specific to the Newark campus with 50 from the Jersey City campus. This further reiterates the Department’s concern with M.E.T.S.’ ability to implement their mission and the commitment to the school’s charter. When interviewed stakeholders were asked to describe the number and type of suspensions at the January 9, 2020, on-site visit, they were unable to provide the number, but agreed to provide the count via email which, to date, the Department has not received. The Department does not have confidence that the remedial plan has adequately addressed or provided evidence of a systemic reset of the culture and climate of the school. While the Department recognizes a change in the safety and security issues resulting from a firearm in the building, a melee involving a group of parents, siblings and students outside of the school, numerous reports of fighting and gang violence within the school identified during the 2018-2019 school year, the Department does not have confidence based on the number of suspensions, expulsions and on-site observations that the changes are significant enough to ensure the security and safety of the students, staff and community.

In addition to these struggles, M.E.T.S. has consistently suffered from organizational instability. The Department acknowledges that the current school lead has made several administrative new hires; however, these changes have yet to mitigate four years of instability. Further, M.E.T.S. fails to maintain a well-functioning organizational structure that leads to continuous improvement. Over the course of the charter term, M.E.T.S. has had a significant turnover in all facets of staff and board composition. Annual reports submitted throughout the charter term indicate that the school has had three different lead administrators,

four different board presidents, and multiple changes in school principals. This is in addition to the frequent instructional staff turnover and the requisite use of substitute teachers. Based on the comprehensive review, the Department has determined that M.E.T.S.' Board of Trustees (Board), presents major concern in their ability to govern the school effectively.

M.E.T.S. has not developed systems for proactively addressing areas such as effective communication with all stakeholders and the annual completion of performance evaluations. The Board's inability to speak to the school's financial health despite having knowledge of over expenditures and impulse expenses, according to stakeholders interviewed, further demonstrates the Board's ability to implement protocols to ensure the financial stability of the school. Coupling this with frequent turnover creates opportunity for organizational and financial mismanagement and substandard school operations.

The Department placed M.E.T.S. on probation, in part, because it was fostering a culture of low expectations. During the Department's on-site visits to the school on March 25, 2019, October 10, 2019, December 11, 2019 and December 12, 2019, as well as an unannounced visit on January 9, 2020, in addition to on-site visits made during the remainder of the charter term, there continued to be few observed instances of high expectations in classrooms. Most observed instruction was focused on the acquisition of factual knowledge and rote memorization rather than on the application of knowledge to investigate open-ended problems. Many observed classrooms were characterized by disruptive behavior, such as students talking over the teacher, using cell phones during class, use of profanity with no teacher intervention or redirection and frequently leaving the classroom. Observed interactions between students and school staff also demonstrated a lack of mutual respect, despite attempts by the new administration to improve classroom management and student behavior. The remedial plan submitted by M.E.T.S. addressing deficiencies identified in the probation included actions in the areas of school leadership, instruction, curriculum, assessment and intervention systems, effective use of data, family and community engagement, school climate and culture, and staffing practices. The Department determined that M.E.T.S. has failed to make adequate progress to the implementation of the remedial plan in accordance with *N.J.S.A. 18A:36A-17* and *N.J.A.C. 6A:11-2.4*, further supporting a non-renewal determination.

Lastly, the Department relies on the fiscal section of the Performance Framework to assess financial viability based on measures of near-term financial solvency and stability, longer term financial sustainability and fiscal-related compliance. There are serious concerns regarding M.E.T.S.' future financial stability. As described in the Renewal Summary Report, frequent staffing issues, coupled with M.E.T.S.' failure to meet enrollment targets, has negatively impacted its finances and fixing these issues would only add to the decline. A review of M.E.T.S.' current and historic financial information indicates a declining trend. As noted in the July 2017 probation letter, M.E.T.S. failed to meet enrollment projections in the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 school years, resulting in lower than expected fund balances. For fiscal year 2019, M.E.T.S. did not meet the standard for unrestricted days cash ratio, enrollment variance and three-year cumulative cash flow. For fiscal year 2020, the enrollment struggle continues as actual enrollment did not meet maximum, projected or budgeted enrollment in the renewal application. As of the October 15, 2019 enrollment count, there were 34 unverified students and an average daily enrollment (ADE)

of 673, versus maximum enrollment of 960, projected budget of 820 and renewal budget of 739. Enrollment concerns were also reported in the fiscal year 2019 Comprehensive Annual Financial Report (CAFR). Although the Independent Auditor's Report expressed an unqualified opinion on the financial statements, a material weakness in internal controls over state aid resulted in a qualified opinion over financial reporting and compliance due to enrollment procedures and documentation.

In addition to enrollment difficulties, increased expenditures in facility and staffing also impacted M.E.T.S.' declining fund balance. The budgeted fund balance for current year fiscal year 2020 is \$220,755, whereas the audited fund balance for fiscal year 2019 and fiscal year 2018 was \$1.2 million and \$1.5 million, respectively. While the original charter projected enrollment at 500 students, the enrollment projected for the next charter term is decreased by 200, which suggests a lack of demand and will result in less funding. In addition, the frequent staff turnover has led to many non-salaried positions. Hiring a complete roster of full-time employees in the future would increase pension and benefits costs and would have a corresponding negative effect on M.E.T.S.' tenuous finances.

As a consequence of non-renewal, M.E.T.S. is hereby directed to cease operations, effective June 30, 2020. Pursuant to *N.J.A.C. 6A:11-2.4(c)*, the Board shall, within 48 hours of receipt of this notification, provide in writing to the Commissioner a complete list of the names and addresses of all students and staff currently enrolled and working in the school and notify in writing all administrators, staff, parents, guardians, students and vendors that the charter has not been renewed. Within 10 business days of receipt of this notification, or by the 13th of February 2020, the Board must appoint an independent trustee whose appointment is subject to Commissioner approval. If the Board does not appoint an independent trustee within this requisite deadline, the Commissioner will appoint one for the Board. The independent trustee will assume primary financial responsibility for M.E.T.S. upon appointment.

Furthermore, M.E.T.S. is directed to limit the expenditure of funds and the occurrence of debt to only those expenditures and debts that are reasonable and necessary for the ongoing day-to-day operation of the charter school. These expenditures are limited to salaries, benefits, utilities, rent, insurance and existing accounts payable. The expenditures must be already authorized in the budget approved by the Board. Pursuant to *N.J.A.C. 6A:23A-22.4(e)*, please be advised that the distribution of assets upon revocation must be consistent with applicable provisions of your bylaws, and that all assets of the charter school, after satisfaction of all outstanding claims by creditors, will be distributed equitably among the participating districts of residence.

M.E.T.S. is an entity incorporated pursuant to the laws of the state. M.E.T.S. is required to submit requisite filings to ensure the enrollment of employees in the Teachers' Pension and Annuity Fund, the Public Employees Retirement System, where applicable, and the Social Security Fund for the 2019-2020 school year. All required filings must be submitted. This action to not renew M.E.T.S.' charter to serve public school students of Jersey City and Newark does not absolve the entity's rights and obligations of incorporation as set forth in Title 15, and other applicable New Jersey State Statutes.

Dr. Jason Skeeter

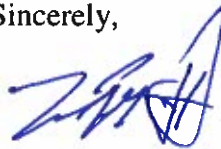
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It is paramount that the interests of students, parents, staff and the districts of residence are protected during this process, and that the process is carried out expeditiously and in accordance with state statutes and regulations. In that regard, it is expected that M.E.T.S. will work with the Hudson and Essex Executive County Superintendents, Districts and Department staff to effectuate a smooth transition for M.E.T.S.' students. Pursuant to *N.J.A.C. 6A:11-2.4(c)2.ii*, the District will, in cooperation with the Department and the school, establish dates and times for parents and guardians to enroll students in another school for school year 2020-2021, and M.E.T.S. must make all reasonable efforts to ensure that students enrolled at this time take action to enroll in another school in their district of residence for school year 2020-2021. To this end, Hudson County Office of Education and Essex County Office of Education staff will be contacting M.E.T.S.' administrators shortly to assist in assessing the credit acquisition of M.E.T.S.' students. The Department will provide additional direction and technical assistance regarding the specific tasks to be completed and the procedures and timeline to be followed during the dissolution process.

The decision to close a school is one of the hardest decisions made, and not one taken lightly. Please be advised that this decision may be appealed to the Superior Court, Appellate Division, pursuant to *P.L. 2008, c. 36*. Should you have any questions, you may contact Julie Bunt, director, Office of Charter and Renaissance Schools at (609) 376-9083.

Sincerely,



Lamont O. Repollet, Ed.D.
Commissioner

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