



Michigan Senate Education Committee
September 20, 2011
Testimony of Timothy H. Wood, PhD

Good afternoon Chairman Pavlov and members of the committee. I am honored to be here today to share my experiences as a state-wide authorizer of charter schools working to recruit high performing out of state operators to apply for a Michigan charter. I understand you are considering bills that will influence the future of the charter sector, and I commend you for dedicating yourselves to improving Michigan's education system. Today, I will provide a brief background on GVSU authorizing and the rationale and results of our national charter school applicant recruitment effort.

Background on GVSU

I started my career in education thirty-three years ago and have served Michigan students as a traditional public school teacher, coach, principal, and superintendent. In 2009, I accepted Grand Valley State University President Thomas Haas's invitation to lead GVSU's Charter Schools Office. GVSU authorizes 44 charter school buildings across the state. 19 of these schools are located in Greater Detroit while the rest are scattered in other mostly urban areas including Grand Rapids, Muskegon, and Battle Creek. GVSU charter schools enrolled approximately 20,200 K-12 students last year. Just over 62% of these students qualified for free or reduced priced lunch and 60% were identified as minority. Relative to the state averages, GVSU charter schools serve a greater number of minority and poor students; despite this, GVSU charter school students perform nearly at or above state averages on the state standardized tests. In some instances, GVSU charter schools far out perform state averages; in fact, the Washington Post's top ranked Michigan high school, Black River Public School, is a GVSU authorized



school. Additionally, GVSU contractually requires and pays for all GVSU charter school students in grades 2-8 to take the NWEA MAP test which measures fall to spring growth in math, reading, and language usage. GVSU charter school students score at nearly the 70th percentile nationally on the fall to spring NWEA growth measure.

Background on the project

When I began my tenure as a charter school authorizer, I quickly realized that the highest performing portfolio of charter schools serving the students in regions of greatest need would develop from two factors:

1. Holding schools accountable for their performances.
2. Closing low performing schools.
3. Ensuring the strongest charter school applicants were applying to operate in Michigan.

Fortunately, GVSU's commitment to accountability included the closure and transfer of 13 charter schools in 14 years, so the accountability system was in place. Furthermore, all GVSU's charter contracts included 4 performance standards that contractually require schools to be adding value to their communities.

Strong applicants for charter schools in Michigan are few. While some of our applicants are truly outstanding national models for charter school operation, by and large, our applicant pools did not and do not contain multiple high performing applicants. Significantly, our applicant pools were nearly absent of any applicants from out of state. GVSU and Michigan is fortunate to work with a few high-performing operators; namely, National Heritage Academies, Cornerstone Schools, the Foundation for Behavioral Research, New Urban Learning, and K12inc.



To improve our applicant pool we partnered with MAPSA and State Superintendent Flanagan to recruit select, high performing operators to apply to open a charter school in Michigan.

Recruiting National Charter Applicants

GVSU and MAPSA have contacted 62 operators we identified as high performing. In the interest of your time, I will summarize the conversations we had with BASIS, KIPP, Lighthouse Academies, Rocketship, and SABIS all of which operate high performing schools in multiple states. Through these conversations, it became readily apparent that Michigan's principle barriers to entry in the charter sector are within state statute. The 3 most common reasons to not open a charter school in Michigan are as follows:

1. Charters are capped; Despite Michigan's "smart cap" the simple existence of a cap on charters was perceived as being anti-charter. These potential applicants are focused on student achievement and don't desire to enter states that are not charter friendly.
2. Single site restriction; All the potential applicants we spoke to have established growth plans that call for the development of multiple school sites, and all of the applicants identified multiple boards as problematic for governance.
3. Access to facilities; Accessing facilities outside of the public market and property tax exemption was key to initial start-up and sustainability.

While each organization had slightly different priorities when considering a new region, these three variables were commonly understood to be the strongest barriers to entering Michigan.

I should note that the 5 charter school operators above are all actively recruited by other states vying for their services. The students of Michigan deserve the choice the charter sector provides, and it's our responsibility to ensure that choice is quality.



GVSU and the Michigan Council of Charter School Authorizers addressed a concern shared by all the applicants early in the project with the launch of Mi-School.net. Of great concern to all applicants was selecting "high need" school sites. To better inform site selection, GVSU developed a free website available at www.Mi-School.net to provide public access to neighborhood level population data and education data, among other variables like teen pregnancy and vacant housing, in a Google Maps like interface. The site enables applicants and authorizers to identify specific neighborhoods that may be well served by greater choice.

Closing

In closing, GVSU is committed to improving learning in Michigan. We will continue to build our applicant pool by encouraging high performing applicants to apply for a Michigan charter school and develop ways to better inform application development through tools like Mi-School.net. Thank you for inviting me to share my conversations with recent applicants. I will be happy to answer any of your questions.

Lighthouse Academies®

September 8, 2011

Honorable Philip Pavlov
Chairman
Senate Education Committee

Dear Senator Pavlov and Members of the Senate Education Committee,

Lighthouse Academies is a national nonprofit charter management organization founded in November 2003. Our mission is to prepare all of our students for college using a researched based arts-infused education program.

Our first school, Bronx Lighthouse Charter School, opened in September 2004 with 128 students. Today the Lighthouse network includes 19 schools in four states and the District of Columbia that enroll over 5,300 students with more than 2,500 students on waiting lists. We serve a predominantly low-income, minority population. 88% of our students are African American or Hispanic/Latino, and 82% of our students participate in the free/reduced lunch program.

Since our inception, Lighthouse Academies has been supported by generous grants from the *Doris and Donald Fisher Fund*, *New Schools Venture Fund (NSVF)* and the *Walton Family Foundation*. We are a national partner with *Teach For America*. Through this partnership Lighthouse recruits experienced TFA alum to serve as teachers and school leaders.

We are very interested in opening a public school academy in Detroit, Michigan in 2013, where we believe there continues to be a great need to provide high quality public school choice that prepares students for a career that is economically and professionally rewarding.

We recognize that current economic conditions present many challenges at all levels of government. In response to this, we offer two suggestions that we think would help expand public school choice in Michigan without adding new costs. First, public school academies should receive the same funding as other public schools who serve the same students in the same communities. This is a matter of equity and equal opportunity. Second, facilities remain the greatest financial challenge for public school academies. Allowing public school academies access to a state funded low interest loan fund would not only provide needed capital for renovations to vacant district facilities in high need areas but would also revitalize neighborhoods. It would preserve a facility that in many areas is a cornerstone of the community, attract more public school academies and potentially businesses to high need areas' as well as create much needed jobs within the neighborhoods of Detroit. Loans would be repaid during the first term of the charter. Additional safeguards to address defaults and other contingencies may also be built into the program.

Thank you for considering our suggestions.

Sincerely,



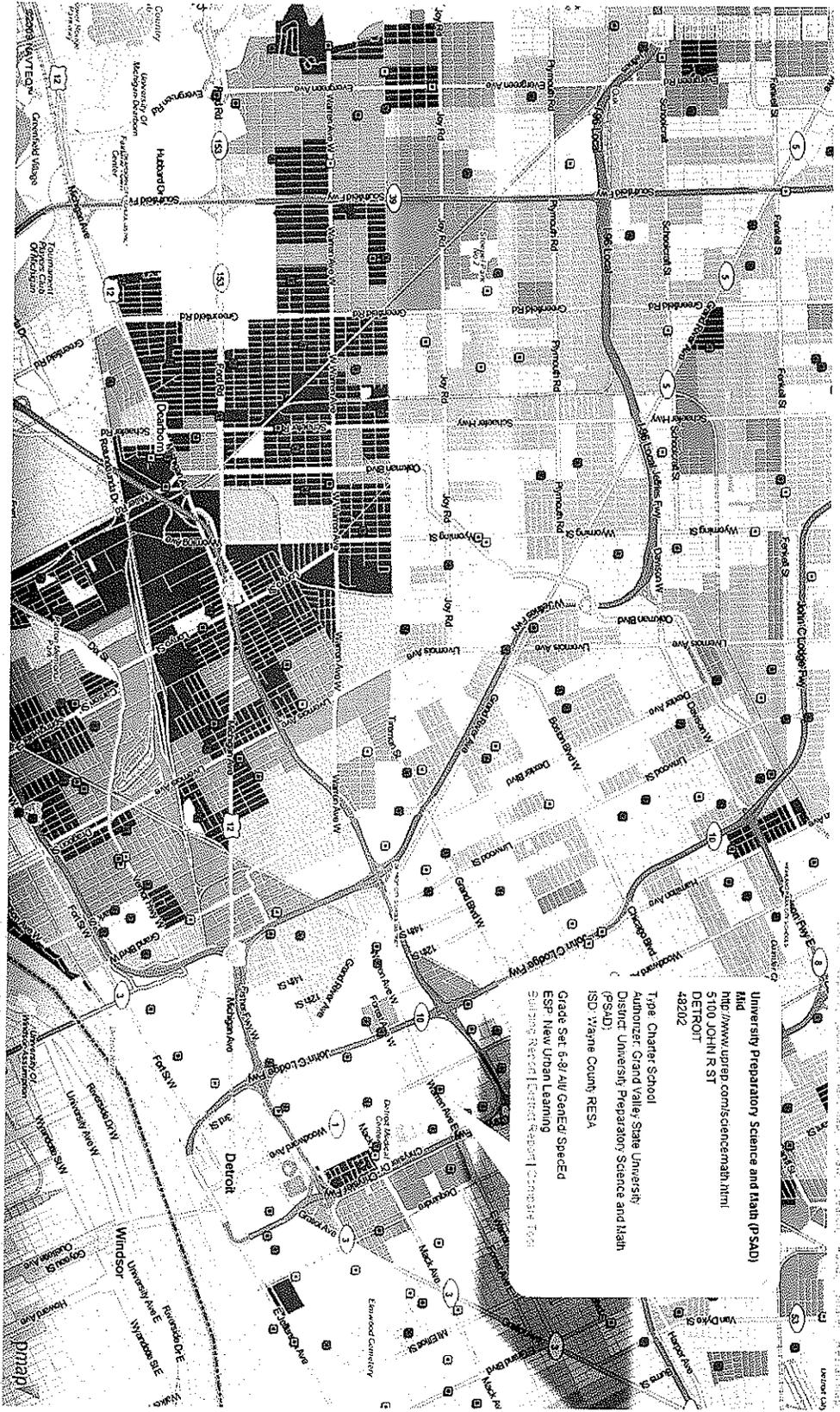
Mike Ronan
Founder, President and CEO

We prepare our students for college through a rigorous arts-infused program.

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www.lighthouse-academies.org

Sample Screen Shot of www.mi-school.net Detroit School Age Population Density



University Preparator Science and Math (PSAD)
 Mid
<http://www.uprep.com/science/math.html>
 5100 JOHN R ST
 DETROIT
 48202

Type: Charter School
 Authorizer: Grand Valley State University
 District: University Preparator Science and Math (PSAD)
 ISD: Wayne County RESA
 Grade Set: 6-8/ All GenEd/ Special Ed
 ESP: New Urban Learning
 School Network: District Charter Schools

School Type

- Charter Schools
- Traditional Schools
- Private Schools
- Charter Educational Facilities
- Filter by Performance

Shaded by: Block Group

Percent of population under 18 years old

- 0.00
- 0.01 - 19.99
- 20.00 - 25.68
- 25.69 - 29.99
- 30.00 - 34.99
- 35.00 plus

Source: U.S. Census Bureau
 Year: 2010