

MEMORANDUM

TO: BOARD MEMBERS / Dr. Malinda Cobb, Interim Superintendent

FROM: Kim Fletcher Bowden, Policy and Legal Compliance Officer

RE: RECOMMENDATION ON SUBMITTED START-UP CHARTER PETITION:
AA STEAM & Entrepreneurship Academy

DATE: April 25, 2025

The Richmond County Board of Education received a Start-Up Charter School Petition on or about February 1, 2025. The petition is from the proposed *AA STEAM & Entrepreneurship Academy* (“*AA STEAM*”). The Petition proposes for the school to open for the 2026-2027 school year, serving grades 4 through 8, increasing to grades 4 through 12 within five years, growing from a proposed 375 students to 675 over that time period.

Petition Summary: The stated mission of the school is: “to prepare students for life by combining academic excellence, personal growth and practical skills. Through engaging instruction rooted in music, movement, and motivation, we foster creativity, confidence, and a sense of belonging. Our students will graduate with the critical thinking, entrepreneurial mindset, and lifelong learning habits needed to excel and make a positive impact in their communities.”

The stated vision statement of the proposed school is “We envision AA STEAM & Entrepreneurship Academy as a leader in education, where students master academics while developing resilience, leadership, and an entrepreneurial spirit. By engaging families, nurturing diverse talents and setting high expectations, we empower students to take ownership of their futures and create meaningful change in their lives and communities.”

The petition was submitted by Dr. Anton Anthony, a former employee of the Richmond County School System, who was a human resources talent manager with the Dekalb County School District, and who now serves as Superintendent of Schools for the Hancock County School District.

DUTY OF LOCAL BOARD TO REVIEW

According to pertinent portions of O.C.G.A. § 20-2-2064(d), the duty of the Local Board to review a submitted charter petition is as follows:

(d) A local board shall approve a petition that complies with the rules, regulations, policies, and procedures promulgated in accordance with [Code Section 20-2-2063](#) and the provisions of this title and is in the public interest.¹ If a local board denies a petition, it must within 60 days specifically state the reasons

¹ Note: The Board may also decide that the Charter Petition is not in the public interest.

for the denial, list all deficiencies with respect to [Code Section 20-2-2063](#), and provide a written statement of the denial to the charter petitioner and the state board.

State Board Rule 160-4-9-.05, Charter Schools Petition Process provides additional guidance for review of charter petitions:

“[W]ithin the ninety (90) days a local district has to review a charter petition, the district shall provide a written statement to petitioner indicating which of the following four groups the petitioner is in and, if appropriate, what they must do if they wish to revise and resubmit their petition:

- (i) **Rejection Group**: These applications are flawed in some way that is irreparable and will be rejected for the current school year’s Petition Review Cycle;
- (ii) **Revision Group**: During the district’s initial internal review and panel interview with the applicant, these applicants demonstrate minimum quality and compliance or less, and would require substantial and material revisions before their petition could be recommended by the district for approval by the local board of education;
- (iii) **Clarification Group**: During the district’s initial internal review and panel interview with the applicant, these applicants demonstrate moderate quality and compliance or better, but require clarification and supplemental information to be submitted before their petition could be recommended by the district for approval by the local board of education;
- (iv) **Approval Group**: During the district’s initial internal review and panel interview with the applicant, these applicants demonstrate near-perfect quality and compliance. For these applicants, the district will make a recommendation to the local board of education for approval of the petition without any further action on the part of the applicant.

PROCEDURE FOR REVIEW:

In order to assist the Board in making an informed and objective decision regarding whether to approve or deny the petition, the following procedures were utilized:

Members of Mr. Marcus Allen, Interim Deputy Superintendent
Mr. Bobby Smith, Chief Financial Officer
Dr. Melissa Shepard, Chief Human Resources Officer
Ms. Kinesha Ponder, Director of Teaching and Learning
Mr. Glenn Todd, Director of Operations, Facilities & Maintenance
Dr. Larina Thomas, Director, Special Education
Mr. Tracy Wright, Senior Coordinator, Special Education
Ms. Aletha Snowberger, Assistant Superintendent, Middle Schools
Dr. Shontier Barnes, Assistant Superintendent for Elementary Administrative Services I
Dr. Andrea Roberts, Assistant Superintendent for Elementary Administrative Services II
Mr. Brian Hadden, School Options Program Specialist

Mr. Nathan Benedict, Director of CTAE
Dr. Chaundra Creekmur, 4-12 Science/STEM Curriculum Coordinator
Mr. Lynwood Holmes, World Language and Fine Arts Coordinator
Mr. Charlie Tudor, III, Advanced Studies Coordinator
Dr. Titania Singh, Equity and Title IX Coordinator
Dr. Emily Driggers, Principal, A.R. Johnson Health Science & Engineering Magnet School
Ms. Kim Fletcher Bowden, Policy and Legal Compliance Officer

Note: The Charter Review Committee members were chosen with the goal of assembling a diverse group of administrators, with varied areas of expertise and viewpoints (with a focus on academic instruction, STEAM-related opportunities and school choice), who could provide specialized knowledge and input regarding the proposed charter school petition.

All Committee members received information regarding the charter petition and an invite for review on February 27, 2025. Committee members were provided the Petition as well as an evaluation rubric to help facilitate review of the charter petition's strengths and weaknesses. Charter Review Committee Members were requested to personally review the petition using the Charter School Petition Evaluation Guide Rubric before the scheduled Committee meeting on February 27, 2025.

The Charter Review Committee convened in person (with an option via Teams meetings) on February 27, 2025, in order to provide feedback utilizing the chosen evaluation rubric and to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the charter petition. The Committee reviewed the results of each member's individual review of the petition for the purpose of determining whether the proposed charter school is in the public interest, and ultimately, whether the charter petition should be recommended for approval or denial. Part of the mission of the meeting was to discuss and encapsulate findings in order to provide feedback to Board members in advance of any vote.

Ms. Fletcher Bowden took notes of Committee members' comments and compiled a summary of the findings of the Committee, which is, in part, the basis of this memorandum.

On March 11, 2025, members of the Committee met with and interviewed the charter petitioner, Dr. Anton Anthony. The Petitioner had an opportunity to express the vision and mission of the proposed start-up charter school, as well as other information he wished to provide. The Petitioner brought with him the following individuals: Ms. Angela Moore, Mr. Thurston Williams, (both former employees of RCSS), and Ms. Dinah Cobb, a retired educator.

The Committee asked the Petitioner a number of prepared questions, which covered the following topics:

- Legal Requirements of Charter School Authorization (e.g., whether the school is in the public interest and reflects and meets the needs of the community; whether the school offers innovation that RCSS is not currently providing?)
- Academics and Educational Plan

- Finance and Budget
- Governance
- Operations and Facilities
- Human Resources and Operations

By way of information, AA STEAM petitioned the Board for a start-up charter school during the last petition review cycle, in spring of 2024. The Board voted to deny the petition and explained its reasons for denial in that letter to Petitioner dated June 21, 2024. During the interview, Dr. Anthony provided information to the Committee in response to the reasons for the prior denial and showcasing the changes made in the petition and the proposed school model in order to attempt to address the Board's concerns. In essence, the petitioner addresses concerns regarding Community Need and Innovation, Academic Rigor and Curriculum Implementation, Fiscal Soundness, Governance and Leadership, Parent and Community Engagement, Reasons "Why Approval is in the District's Best Interest." In addition, the Petitioner provided a chart he prepared which compares AA STEAM's offerings compared to those offered at A.R. Johnson, RCTCM, Belair Middle, Cyber Academy and the Marion E. Barnes Career Center.

The Committee members were able to ask follow-up questions and seek clarification and additional information from the petitioner. The petitioner was informed that he was welcome to send one email containing any additional information he wished to provide on or before midnight of Friday, March 14, 2025.

After the interview, the Committee discussed the additional information, reviewed the qualifications and requirements for charter schools, and began to formulate its findings and recommendations to the Board. The Committee desired additional information in order to provide a complete and thorough review of the petition.

The Committee developed a list of additional information, and Mr. Hadden sent the petitioner an email on March 12, which requested the following information.

- Description or Specific Plan of Alignment of Entrepreneurial Pathway with the Georgia Standards for Grades 4th through 8th in all core content areas (e.g., ELA, Math, Social Studies and Science)
- Description or documentation of how STEAM will be implemented via the use of the GoVenture platform (e.g., hands-on labs, simulations or activities provided, resources/materials)
- Letters or Documentation of Financial Support (e.g., grants, private foundation, philanthropic, corporate or individual support) for the proposed school [Note: Examples

would be documentation of funding from organizations and entities listed in the Petition under Fiscal Feasibility and Control, Item #3.]

- Description or Documentation for Reason that “Red Flag” Tab is missing from the proposed budget, as well as any proposed solutions for identifying and resolving “red flag” or potential problematic budget areas
- Any additional information Petitioner wishes to provide in addition to what has already been provided to the Review Committee

The email requested that any additional information be provided in one email message to Mr. Brian Hadden at haddebr@boe.richmond.k12.ga.us. During the interview, a deadline of midnight, Friday, March 14, 2025, was established; however, because the Review Committee has requested additional information, *this deadline was extended to midnight of Friday, March 21, 2025.*

Dr. Anthony did provide the information requested, as well as much more information he wished to share with the Committee.

The Committee did review the information provided by petitioner, with particular focus on the information requested. The Committee met several times after the information and receipt of this additional information to thoroughly review the information and to formulate proposed findings and recommendations.

The ultimate goal of this Memorandum is to provide the Board with that information and recommendations sufficient for making an informed decision on whether to approve or deny the petition. If denied, the Local Board must provide a written response within 60 days of the denial containing the specific reasons for the denial, and the Committee believed that these written findings may assist with that process as well, if needed.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATION TO THE BOARD:

After thoroughly reviewing the above referenced proposed charter school petition, and comparing the contents of the petition to the statutory requirements in O.C.G.A. § 20-2-2063 and corresponding Rules of the Georgia Department of Education, as well as federal requirements for charter schools, the Committee recommends that the Local Board of Education vote to deny the petition² of AA STEAM & Entrepreneurship Academy for the within and following reasons:

- ❖ ***Overall, and perhaps most importantly, the petition does not demonstrate that the charter school would reflect and meet the needs of the community, or that it is in the public interest, as required by O.C.G.A. § 20-2-2064.***

The Petition for the start-up charter school does not offer any new innovation or academic rigor that is not already currently offered within the Richmond County School System.

When asked to describe “how the charter school will increase student achievement through academic and organization innovation,” the petition states as follows and summarizes the main components to the proposed innovations:

AA STEAM & Entrepreneurship Academy will elevate student achievement by blending academic rigor, personalized learning, and innovation. Through our foundational pillars--Family Engagement, Engagement through Music, Movement, Motivation, and Entrepreneurial Mindset--we will create an environment where every student thrives.

Our academic innovation integrates STEAM and entrepreneurship, immersing students in hands-on problem-solving through STEAMpreneurship incubators, where they design, prototype and launch business ventures. Personalized instruction, with class sizes capped at 25 students, insures tailored support, while platforms like i-Ready and GoVenture Entrepreneur track progress and build real-world skills.

Engagement is at the heart of our instructional innovation. Every teacher will be trained to incorporate music, movement and motivation into their lessons, ensuring no student is overlooked. Research shows the brain must be re-engaged every three minutes to maximize learning. Through call-backs, active participation, and dynamic transitions, we make learning memorable and impactful for all students—not just in pockets of classrooms but across the entire school. This approach ensures that every student feels seen and supported.

A Parent Engagement Program fosters accountability, requiring families to contribute 30 volunteer hours annually. Strategic community partnerships provide real-world mentorship and context for learning, connecting students to opportunities beyond the classroom.

By embedding these innovations into daily learning, AA STEAM will bridge achievement gaps, retain students in public education, and prepare them for success in an innovation-driven world.

² Please note that the provisions of OCGA 20-2-2064(b) allow the Petitioner to resubmit the petition at a later date: “A denial of a petition by a local board shall not preclude the submission to the local board of a revised petition that addresses deficiencies cited in the denial.”

Together, these strategies ensure every student has the tools and opportunities to achieve excellence.”

As to the goals for Academic Achievement, the petitioner proposes the following goals and objectives for AA STEAM:

- *Exceed state GMAS averages in Math and Reading/ELA by at least 5% within the first three years. (Achieve an annual increase of 7% in students scoring Proficient or higher on the GMAS in Math and Reading/ELA by implementing data-driven instructional strategies and targeted interventions. iReady Growth in Reading and Math.*
- *At least 60% of students will meet or exceed their targeted annual growth on iReady diagnostic assessments in both Reading and Math by the end of each school year. (Use monthly i-Ready assessments to set growth benchmarks, monitor student progress, and differentiate instruction effectively.) Evidence: Entrepreneurial Skills Development.*

There was not sufficient information provided by the petition to support that these goals are either increased academic achievement above and beyond what Richmond County Schools are currently offering, or a clear statement of how the proposed innovations would help achieve these goals.

The petitioner plans to utilize waivers and flexibility from laws, rules and regulation to increase student achievement, as follows:

- *Experiential platforms like GoVenture Entrepreneur and the Stock Market Game*
- *Inclusion of augmented reality robotics, interdisciplinary STEAM projects*
- *Instructional pacing, with personalized learning plans*
- *Assessment methods incorporating digital portfolios, project presentations and performance-based evaluations*
- *Targeted professional development for educators, using music, movement and motivation*
- *Strategic partnerships with local businesses and community organizations*

As to the main pillars described, as well as the innovations proposed by AA STEAM, these concepts are either being utilized by the School System or could be utilized if appropriate.

GoVenture and Stock Market Game:

The petitioner proposed the GoVenture platform as the school’s curriculum. In his materials, he stated that AA STEAM would utilized “Gamified Learning” which “utilizes the GoVenture curriculum to create a gamified, hands-on learning experience for students.” The Committee raised concerns about this and felt that while GoVenture could be used as a learning platform for certain business and entrepreneur concepts, that it was not appropriate as the curriculum for all Georgia Standards of Excellence.

After the interview, the Committee requested that petitioner provide “Description or Specific Plan of Alignment of Entrepreneurial Pathway with the Georgia Standards for Grades 4th through 8th in all core content areas (e.g., ELA, Math, Social Studies and Science).” In response, the petitioner did provide a document entitled “Alignment of AA STEAM & Entrepreneurship Academy Curriculum with Georgia Standards (Grades 4-8).” The petitioner added that the curriculum

“embeds entrepreneurship principles within core academic instruction. Using GoVenture’s interactive platform, students will gain practical skills in financial literacy, economics, engineering, and business development while mastering Georgia Standards for grades 4-8. This comprehensive approach ensures students meet academic benchmarks while preparing for real-world success.”

The petitioner also provided the following written response:

Clarification on GoVenture as a Curriculum

I appreciate the Committee’s inquiry into how GoVenture will be used in our school. To clarify, GoVenture is a full entrepreneurship curriculum, not just a tool. I encourage the Committee to review the official website ([GoVenture Curriculum](#)) to see the full scope of instructional materials, including textbooks, lesson plans, and digital simulations.

A curriculum is defined as the structured content used to teach standards, and GoVenture provides an entrepreneurship-focused curriculum that aligns with Georgia’s STEAM and business education objectives. In our petition, we have included a textbook sample that outlines the full scope of instruction students will receive. I recognize that our discussion during the interview may not have fully conveyed this, and I appreciate the opportunity to clarify.

*Additionally, I have attached the GoVenture Curriculum Planning Guide, which provides a clear framework **for how we will use it as a full curriculum, not just a supplemental tool.** We will map out how it will be used to teach standards, aligning with state requirements while ensuring that students engage in hands-on, real-world learning. [Emphasis added]*

The Committee reviewed the information carefully and concluded that while platforms such as GoVenture and/or Stock Market may be an appropriate platform to support instruction of certain standards, the platforms could not be considered a curriculum appropriate for teaching all areas of the Georgia Standards. Petitioner stated that the school plans for the platform to be used as the “full curriculum.” While GoVenture might be appropriate for the entrepreneur project-based learning, the platform would not lend itself to the bulk of instruction required to master standards for Grades 4-8 in all core content areas. The petitioner did not fully address how these standards would be met.

For example, specifically focused on the science standards and instruction, the Committee felt that the petitioner had not provided sufficient evidence to support their use of this product (GoVenture) as a means of effective teaching and learning. The Committee eschewed the idea of relying on the notion of each grade level focusing on ONE standard as there are multiple standards per grade level (as prescribed by GaDOE) which all culminate to prepare our students for graduation and life beyond the classroom.

For instance, 4th and 5th grade science standards provide instruction in three categories (earth & space, life, and physical science). This explanation only focuses on one standard per grade level. The information as presented by petitioner will not carry the students through the entire year; the information was more applicable to one unit (units can typically last a maximum of two months in a given science course).

While the standards in grades 6th-8th are specific (6th- earth & space, 7th- life, 8th - physical science), this proposal persists to omit key concepts required for student achievement and success. There are six 6th grade standards, five 7th grade standards, and five 8th grade standards. They have also omitted the opportunity for advanced/gifted students to participate in the High school physical science course that is designed specifically for 8th grade. This course allows students the opportunity to achieve a science high school credit.

GoVenture is a computer-based platform, and while today's middle and high school learners are certainly adept at using technology, it is not innovative (and arguably not effective) to have a computer-based platform such as GoVenture serve as the primary mode of instruction in the standards; more direct instruction would be required, and certainly desired. This was not adequately addressed in the petition.

Entrepreneurship Offerings:

The petitioner leans heavily on instruction centered around entrepreneurship and "STEAMpreneurship." While this concept is likely engaging to learners, it is a concept offered by RCSS as well.

The RCSS took part in a study with the Carl Vinson Institute in order to inform our CTAE pathways and processes. One of the results of the study (and plans of the School System) is to merge the human services pathways (barbering, cosmetology, nails) with the entrepreneurship pathway.

In addition, in every CTAE course offered by RCSS, "soft skills" needed for the business (and entrepreneurship) setting are taught to students. Students are also informed in every class of the benefits of entrepreneurship.

While petitioner described GoVenture as the main curriculum used to teach entrepreneurship, there is no description of whether or how he plans to follow the Georgia CTAE Entrepreneurship pathway as a choice for students.

STEAM Instruction: The Petitioner has proposed instructional programs and curricula already in place within the Richmond County School System, available to all children and occurring at all grade levels. Therefore, the Petition does not demonstrate that the charter school would reflect and meet the needs of the community or that it is in the public interest.

The Committee had concerns in that the proposal is somewhat vague in how it will provide maximum exposure to STEAM in conjunction with core academic subjects. There are no science laboratory opportunities nor opportunities for infusion of the ARTS (visual or performance). While there is discussion of creating business prototypes, it still appears that students will be working on computers to the majority of the school day. There is also a lack of opportunities for student to engage in STEAM in relation to working with community partners (internships, apprenticeships, field trips, in-class field trips, virtual field trips, etc.)

Furthermore, the Petition does not meet a unique need for Richmond County students, as robust and enriching STEAM programs and initiatives are already offered by way of the following:

A.R. Johnson Health Science and Engineering Magnet School (“A.R. Johnson”) serves grades 6-12, which offers all of its available slots to Richmond County residents. It is consistently ranked among the best schools in the State and County. For nearly 40 years, A.R. Johnson has been the premier school choice option for students with special interests in health science, engineering, and other STEM related fields. Beginning in the 6th grade, students are exposed to the fundamentals of engineering, computer science, and healthcare to lay the foundation for the course pathway they choose to pursue in high school. Not only do A.R. Johnson students learn 21st century knowledge and soft skills training, many students graduate equipped with industry-standard credentials and certifications that they can carry directly into college and the workforce. A.R. Johnson also offers Art, Chorus and Orchestra as part of its fine arts curriculum.

Richmond County Technical Career Magnet School (“RCTCM”) provides technical and career programs, serving students in grades 6-12. RCTCM’s campus is very unique from all other schools in the School System because it shares the same campus as Augusta Technical College.

RCTCM’s focus is early college and career ready opportunities. The majority of RCTCM’s senior students and several of high school students, participate in Dual Enrollment (a state funded program for eligible students in Georgia). In addition to Dual Enrollment, upperclassmen participate in Work-Based Learning, giving them multiple options: earning an associate’s degree/certificate/diploma prior to completing high school; graduating early; or starting a lifelong career. It is RCTCM’s goal to create an intense employment pipeline to meet the needs of the community as well as the nation’s workforce.

Specialized Programs at RCTCM include: Computer Networking, Culinary Arts, Electronics, Energy Systems, Audio/Video Technology & Film, Art, Spanish, Web Design, Chorus, Orchestra, Drama, and Waste Water Management (after school program). RCTCM also partners with the Cyber Academy of Excellence, Marion Barnes Career Center, and Reaching Potential Through Manufacturing (RPM), described below. RCTCM offers CTAE Entrepreneurship, including courses such as Introduction to Business and Technology and Skills for Adolescents. RCTCM also offers Visual Arts and Chorus as fine arts courses available to students.

The Marion E. Barnes Career Center’s (MEBCC) mission is to “train students with skills that will empower them to obtain gainful employment through real world experiences and community partnerships.” The Barnes Career Center hub provides unique career pathway offerings to high school students throughout the entire System in areas such as: carpentry, plumbing, HVAC, welding and personal aesthetic-based careers. In addition, the School System has recently participated in a Carl Vinson Institute Study regarding career-based pathways, and the offerings at MEBCC will continue to be aligned with viable and robust vocational opportunities in the region. One of the cornerstones of MEBCC is building community partnerships. While petitioner proposes to do this in his petition, the School System has been conducting this work and building these partnerships for many years.

The Cyber Academy of Excellence is open to students attending RCSS traditional and magnet high schools who wish to pursue Cybersecurity Training as well as seek Industry Certification. The students are provided transportation to the Cyber Academy of Excellence at the Richmond County Technical Magnet School. Cyber Academy of Excellence students have the opportunity to prepare for the CompTIA Security+ Certification while earning college credits and following the guidelines of a dual enrollment student; there are three tracks of study available at Augusta Technical College:

1. Associate Degree in Cybersecurity (Associate Degree)
2. Cisco Certified Network Associate (CCNA) Security (Technical Certificate of Credit)
3. A+ and Microsoft Client Certificate (Technical Certificate of Credit)

The program delivers a technically-focused, security-related curriculum explicitly designed to address the fast-growing careers in cybersecurity and computer science. The interdisciplinary nature of the program allows potential students to develop deep technological skills and an understanding of the business, managerial, and administrative elements of cybersecurity. By the end of the program, students have an in-depth awareness of networking and coding principles.

Belair Elementary School and Belair Middle School The Belair schools have had a number of STEM certified educators who participated in Cohort One through a partnership with Augusta University. These teachers are at the core of Belair's STE(A)M "Grand Challenge and are dedicated to providing an educational experience in an interdisciplinary and applied approach. For example, the school features a solar farm comprised of over one thousand solar panels, providing exposure to renewable energy technologies and sustainability. Belair has active community partners, including Jefferson Electric, Home Depot, John Deere, and National Security Academy. Note: Due to rapid growth in Belair's attendance zone, as of the 2024-2025, the school was divided into an elementary and middle school; however, its integration of STEAM principles has continued. In addition to STEM programs, fine arts offerings at Belair include chorus, band and orchestra.

Reaching Potential Through Manufacturing (RPM): The RPM program is a partnership between the Richmond County School System and Textron Specialized Vehicles (E-Z-GO). RPM is a special and specialized program which serves as an actual manufacturing operation for Textron Specialized Vehicles. This program is designed to help students gain extra motivation to finish twelve years of school and enjoy better lives. By providing students with classroom instruction, on-the-job training, key work/life skills, mentoring, and employment opportunities, the RPM program helps them stay in school, graduate, and go on to become successful, productive members of the workforce.

Additional School System STEAM Initiatives: The School System supports many other STEAM initiatives and programs.

On a District Level, some STEAM educational experiences offered are: STEAM Initiative Kickoff, National STEM/STEAM Day Showcase, Math Competition, All County Art Show, Storm Drain Mural Project.

At the elementary level, STEAM experiences include: First LEGO, 4th and 5th grade District Science and Engineering Fair, 4th and 5th grade State Science and Engineering Fair, Girls Who

Code (Belair), SEED STEM Festival (408) Learn and Grow Gardens, the Outdoor Classroom (K), and Cyber Academy Camp. In addition, Deer Chase Elementary is involved with the pilot program of Chosen to Lead, the State's first Arts-Infused STEAM program.

At the secondary level, offerings include: STEM Fest, First Tech Competition 6-8, First Robotic Competition 9-12, Regional Science and Engineering Fair, State Science and Engineering Fair, Cyber Patriots, Science Olympiad, Girls Who Code, Fine Arts Camp, SEED STEM, Tech Net, John Deere: Project Lead the Way, Cyber Academy Camp, STEM Like a Girl, Drones, SKILLS USA, TSA, HOSA, East GA Skills Challenge, Skilled Trades Summer Camp.

Professional Learning: The School System provides robust professional learning to support these STEAM initiatives, such as: RCSS academic coaches facilitate professional learning with STEAM coaches, needs assessment, target professional learning, encouraging STEM endorsement, encouraging NexGen Technology Training and Computer Science Certification, as well as supporting state conference opportunities.

RCSS Community Partnerships: The Richmond County School System has cultivated and continues to nurture vital community partnerships for the STEAM program and beyond: Manus Bio, Georgia Power, Jefferson Energy, Savannah River Nuclear Solutions, John Deere, Standard Aero, Savannah River Site, Phinizy Swamp, Augusta Technical College, Solvay Specialty Polymers, Augusta Regional Airport, Augusta University, Jessye Norman School of the Arts, United States NAVY, Georgia Tech University, Georgia Cyber Center, Arts NOW, Augusta Utilities Department, University of Georgia, Morris Museum of Art, Georgia College & State University, Greater Augusta Arts Council, Fort Eisenhower, and Augusta Canal Authority.

In addition, to support the "A" in STEAM, it is well established that RCSS offers a plethora of fine arts opportunities within all of its programs and schools. All of our schools provide some type of fine arts programming which includes orchestra, drama, chorus, band and visual arts.

As the above information demonstrates, the Richmond County School System offers significant STEAM and STEM programming, with an eye toward work and career success; therefore, the information presented in the AA STEAM petition does not offer anything unique or innovative to Richmond County students.

❖ ***The Petition does not meet GaDOE or federal requirements regarding the demonstration of innovation. O.C.G.A. §20-2-2061 requires a charter school to "increase student achievement through academic and organizational innovation."***

The Committee noted that while the petitioner is certainly passionate about this endeavor and petitioner's described curriculum has the *potential* for innovation, no particular innovation or flexibility was described or demonstrated in the Petition. The Petition did not describe clearly how the integrated curriculum would be implemented or provide a clear illustration of how the curriculum would raise student achievement.

Stated focuses of the proposed educational model include:

- Family Engagement
- Engagement through Music, Movement, Motivation

- Entrepreneurial Mindset
- Personalized instruction
- Small class sizes (capped at 25 students)
- Parent Engagement Program
- Strategic community partnerships
- Gender-Based Classes
- Arts and Creativity Integration
- Work-Based Learning

While these methods may be recognized, research-based and effective programs, the implementation of these programs or philosophies as stated in the Petition did not demonstrate innovative uses of these programs. In fact, many schools in the System are already utilizing these programs, and the petition did not offer any innovative applications of these programs that would necessitate charter school status. The Petition did not describe in detail how these programs would be applied in the school in an innovative way; many seemed to still be in the planning stages.

Furthermore, in describing the goals for academic achievement, the goals for GMAS and i-Ready benchmarks do not clearly exceed current performance expectations or demonstrate a transformative instructional approach.

The entire curriculum plan and feasibility of the school model itself seems to depend heavily on the necessity of business partners, both for curriculum needs (*e.g.*, potential careers for students and specialty instructors) as well as partners as donors. **While the petition did contain letters for use in soliciting partners, at the time of the interview, no specific business partners had been secured.** The Petitioner indicated that the potential partners were waiting to see if he had been approved as an authorized charter school.

This is of specific concern, as many areas of STEAM, and even entrepreneurship, are highly specialized and require special certification or endorsements, and even with flexibility of certification, do still require individuals with particular expertise. It is unclear how the budget as presented and no established business partners will be able to fulfill the role of specialized and innovative instruction.

❖ *The Petition does not meet GaDOE or federal requirements regarding the demonstration of being fiscally sound. As such, the Petition does not meet GaDOE or federal requirements regarding the demonstration of the ability to maintain and sustain a high-quality charter school operation for the length of the charter term.*

Concerns Regarding Sustainability and Fiscal Soundness of Petition: The Committee had concerns regarding the fiscal soundness of the potential charter school. The Committee had concerns that the information regarding funding and budgets was not sufficient or complete to allow the school to operate successfully over the term of the charter.

For example, the only current funds readily available to AA STEAM (if approved) would be the State allocation of QBE funds per pupil. The method by which the QBE amount is unclear, and the worksheet providing more detail on the amount is not visible.

The petition states that the school will open for the 2026-2027 school year with an enrollment of 375 students, growing over five years to 675 students. This enrollment number seems unrealistic for a new charter school.

While the petitioner mentioned future application for grants, none have been applied for or secured to date.

Upon review of the proposed budget, the Committee had concerns regarding whether the provided expenditures for staffing and human resources were realistic, particularly based on the necessary personnel listed in the petition. For example:

- The number of teachers budgeted does not match the number of teachers proposed. Additionally, the proposed number is incorrect (too low) based on student/teacher ratio proposed and additional students projected each year.
- For years 3 to 5, there are not enough teachers in the budget based on the student/teacher ratio. For example, in Year 5, the school would need 27 teachers but only budgeted for 21.
- The Guidance Counselor salary is low at \$50,000. It is not specified whether this position would be part-time?
- Only 1 food service staff is budgeted for school of 375-675 students.
- Inconsistent salary amounts are contained within the budget. For example, the salary for the Chief Financial Officer is \$85,000 in the budget, but in the cover sheet, the amount is \$120,000 in one area and \$75,000 in another.

There are budgetary concerns relative to Petitioner's projected operational costs as well.

- The petitioner's budgetary estimates for facilities and operations are significantly lower than what would be required:
- The software and computer platforms identified by petitioner are costly (*e.g.*, iReady, GoVenture, Edgenuity). The budget line item of \$50,000 does not appear to be sufficient.
- Petitioner's plan has a heavy reliance on technology for the implementation of the curriculum. Petitioner has only budgeted \$25,500 for computers. That amounts to \$68 per student for computers. That would not be enough to supply each student with a computer.

- Proposed facilities costs are low for year 1 (\$328,000) and do not allow for capital repairs (e.g., HVAC replacement). If petitioner plans to receive funding in the amount of 2,386,852 for a brick and mortar building, is the school planning to use the funding?
- Legal fees are low at only \$5,000
- Food service expenses are low at only \$5,000 (375 students x \$3.00/day x 190 days = \$213,750/year)
- There are inadequate to offer transportation for years 2 through 5, as stated in the petition. No expenses are budgeted for this.
- There is no budget for textbooks, instructional equipment, library and/or media center.
- \$0 is budgeted for payroll services; however, the petition states, “Payroll processing will be managed through a secure platform, with dual verification for any changes.” They do have a CFO budgeted who will manage the payroll but they have not budgeted for any type of payroll management system.
- \$0 is budgeted for banking fees.
- \$0 is budgeted for liability and property insurance.
- \$0 is budgeted for technology support. With such a reliance on technology for the curriculum, technology support will likely be vital to continued success.
- \$0 is budgeted for pest control.
- \$0 is budgeted for waste disposal.

The petition indicates a heavy reliance on programs such as iReady, GoVenture and Edgenuity to be the basis of instruction and/or data tracking. These products can be quite expensive, and, coupled with technology and technology refresh costs, the budget does not seem to provide adequate coverage for these types of items.

Another concern for budgeting is the higher costs associated with STEAM education, such as technology, professional learning and hand-on activity supplies. These items were not accounted for adequately.

Concerns Regarding Community Support: The plan leans heavily on the necessity of business partners, both for curriculum needs (e.g., potential careers for students) as well as partners as donors. While the petition did contain sample letters for use in soliciting partners, at the time of the interview, these letters had not been sent to the potential partners, and *no* specific business partners had been secured.

When asked about secured sources of funding as part of the post-interview follow-up questions, Petitioner responded as follows, indicating the funds that are available.

Financial Support Documentation

As previously discussed in our meeting, we have not secured external funding at this time; however, our startup financial plan includes the following:

- *The founder, I (Dr. Anton Anthony), am personally contributing \$40,000 from my savings to fund initial startup costs.*
- *Additional funding will be pursued aggressively upon approval, including CSP grants, private foundation grants, corporate sponsorships, and philanthropic donations.*
- *As a superintendent with extensive financial planning experience, I have been preparing for this initiative for over 10 years and have also allocated book sale proceeds from his two published books to support the school's launch.*
- *Many charter schools start without external funding, relying on founder investments and per-pupil funding upon enrollment.*

To maintain financial transparency and compliance, speculative grants or donations have not been included in the budget. However, once funds are secured, all bank statements and supporting documentation will be provided as required.

While the Committee certainly appreciates the dedication and passion shown by Dr. Anthony, the Committee did not see evidence of fiscal soundness designed to build a strong financial infrastructure to maintain the five-year charter term, or beyond.

❖ ***The Petition does not meet GaDOE or federal requirements regarding the demonstration of being sustainable. As such, the Petition does not meet GaDOE or federal requirements regarding the demonstration of the ability to maintain and sustain a high-quality charter school operation for the length of the charter term.***

As to the Governance components of the petition, concerns were raised by the Committee.

For example, while Bylaws of the Governing Board were provided with the petitioner's materials, it is unclear whether they have been finalized and agreed upon. Several individuals who accompanied Dr. Anthony at the interview do not appear in the list of governing board members. While additional support is of course welcome, it is not altogether clear who exactly would serve on the Board.

In addition, several individuals chosen for the Governing Board, while possessing impressive resumes, were stated to be college friends, whom the petitioner stated "committed to his vision ten years ago."

It is also important to note that during the interview, Dr. Anthony mentioned several times to the Committee that he plans to run for the position of State Superintendent of Schools at the next available election. He even asked the committee members for their votes. He is currently

the Superintendent of Hancock County Schools, and while this position undoubtedly has provided invaluable experience to him, the Committee did have concerns about Dr. Anthony's ability to pursue these other endeavors all while successfully launching a start-up charter school.

Dr. Anthony's passion for students, particularly the underserved, is undeniable, and his energy is admirable. During the interview with the Committee, he referred to himself as "the Black Ron Clark" and expressed his desire for the school to become a reality and a success.

At this time and with the information presented in the petition and during the interview, the Committee determined that the petition does not support a sustainable and efficiently run business operation required of a school.

❖ **CONCLUSION:**

Based on the within and foregoing reasons, it is the recommendation of the Charter Review Committee that the proposed petition by ***AA STEAM & Entrepreneurship Academy*** be denied, as it does not meet the federal and state requirements of a charter school petition and is not in the public interest, as it provides no innovative or flexible learning model not already being provided to students in some manner or model by the Richmond County School System. The financial and governance components of the petition do not meet requirements for a fiscally sound and sustainable model of education with the ability to maintain and sustain a high-quality charter school operation for the length of the charter term.