

SCHOOL: CITIZENS OF THE WORLD-KANSAS CITY

YEAR: SY2021-2022

DATES: February 4, 2022

School Overview and History

Inspired by the vision of the Midtown Community School Initiative (MCSI) families, Citizens of the World Charter Schools (CWC Schools) connected with MCSI and, in November 2013 submitted a proposal to launch a school system in Midtown Kansas City. In February 2014, MCSI selected CWC Schools as their partner organization. Through partnering with the national not-for-profit network of diverse, academically rigorous, free public schools, MCSI found a partner aligned in purpose, values, and educational approach.

Citizens of the World Kansas City was approved to open by the Missouri State Board of Education on October 27, 2015. CWCKC opened its doors to Grades K-1 on its new Broadway campus in Midtown Kansas City in the fall of 2016. The mission of the school is to provide an excellent public education focused on developing and demonstrating understanding while building connections within a diverse community. It now currently serves 526 students in Grades PreK-8 in three locations. CWCKC is completing the first year of its second five-year contract. 40% of the student body is African American, 33% is white, and the rest a mix of Hispanic, and multi-racial. 30% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch, 3% are homeless, 13.5% receive special education services, and 2% are English language learners.

The school has provided the students in Kansas City with an intentionally diverse, project-based education and is committed to delivering the same programs over the next charter term. CWCKC will continue to be supported by Citizens of the World Schools, a national education partner organization, providing professional development, data analysis and strategic support. All management and education services are performed by the school, under the direction and oversight of the local board. The school remains committed to providing Kansas City students with a rigorous curriculum to set students up for success in high school and beyond.

Site Visit Process Overview

MCPSC conducts compliance site visits every year with CWCKC, as they hold a 5-year charter. The team consisted of Martha McGeehon, Deputy Director of Accountability for Missouri Charter Public School Commission, and Marisol Rodriguez, Founder of Insignia Partners. Insignia Partners has been contracted to serve as the Site Visit Coordinator for the Commission's site visits in 2022.

Tom Vansaghi, interim Executive Director, organized the focus groups and interviews. Due to COVID-19 and the Omicron surge in the winter of 2022, and a winter weather storm, the site visit protocol was modified and the site visit was conducted virtually. The site visit included interviews with the interim Executive Director, the Chief Academic Officer, the Deans of School, the Chief Operations Officer, all Director level staff (Director of Student Services & School Culture, Director of Special Education, Director of After School Care, Director of

Communication and Engagement) and focus groups with teachers, families, middle school students and the board. The site visit team observed the January 20th board meeting.

Observations were not intended to assess the academic quality of the school, or the actual performance of any group or individual, but were focused on all compliance issues as outlined in the Site Visit Protocol.

General Observations

CWCKC has created a wonderful diverse school filled with adults who truly care about their students and families. Families feel supported by the school and committed to the mission, often choosing CWCKC because of it. The new interim Executive Director and Chief Academic Officer have begun making critically necessary improvements to academic processes and procedures that, if implemented with fidelity should improve the school's current academic achievement.

However, the failing of the board to urgently address the leadership structure and open positions have led to decreased staff morale and a feeling that everyone is stretched too thin. The lack of solutions around the future facility continue to be an issue. The relationship with the national organization continues to be unclear to staff. Student retention is an issue, and staff retention may also be at the end of this school year.

While there is a sense of hope that the CAO will be able to change the direction the school is headed in, much is still unknown.

Findings

Criteria 1: Faithfulness to Charter

Areas of Strength

CWCKC continues to be faithful to their mission, which was consistently described by all parties and is still very relevant. Parents noted choosing citizens because of its mission a commitment to being intentionally diverse. No issues were found with the enrollment process and the school deploys a variety of recruitment strategies to ensure diversity.

Areas of Growth

CWCKC has a recruitment and retention issue. The school did not hit their projected enrollment target of 551, instead they reported having 522 students to the board at the time of the site visit. This is down from the 544 students they began the school year with. Additionally, data shows that CWCKC had a 69% retention rate of returning students in the fall of 2021 (the lowest in the Commission's portfolio).

Although a strategic plan is in place, along with strong tracking tools, there wasn't a clear, consistent articulation of what the goals were from all involved. Some described how the school keeps setting goals but then so many things change there isn't the time, priority, or capacity to support reaching those goals. There is a need to identify priority goals around academics and ensure meaningful data is being tracked around that. Additionally, with so many changes since the strategic plan was put into place, it may be helpful for the board to refresh and refocus the strategy.

Criteria 2: Students' Opportunities to Learn

Areas of Strength

The board is doing a good job at tracking academic performance, especially through their committee structure and the dashboard the interim ED has created. Board members on the academic performance committee could speak directly to the academic data, clearly illustrating their grasp of performance and their strong working relationship with the Chief Academic Officer.

Curriculum is aligned to learning standards (Everyday Math, Fountas and Pinnell, Expeditionary Learning, Lucy Caulkins, etc.) and assessments (NWEA, MAP) are in place to track progress. Academic interventionists are on staff at the elementary school and their time has been protected this year to ensure systematized interventions occur. An academic intervention system was articulated but implementation at the classroom teacher level appeared spotty. In addition to having two interventionists on staff, CWCKC also contracts with Read to Lead to support Tier 2 "bubble" students.

The school builds strong relationships with students and families and the site visit team did not hear any issues regarding family engagement.

Areas of Growth

All involved recognized and articulated how the school is not performing at the level they wish it to be and that they continue to fall short on academic goals especially with specific student subgroups.

It was obvious the new CAO is still working on systems to ensure stronger alignment between the implementation of curriculum and faster data analysis to identify gaps and deploy interventions (i.e., using exist tickets instead of waiting on NWEA data). While there are pockets of great teaching, many noted that although teachers are working really hard, they are still teaching at a basic level and have not been given the supports needed to dive more deeply or create lessons that are rigorous. It is unclear if the National organization could help with this issue. Teachers noted an RTI system but did not feel they had the support needed to use data to drive changes in instruction. The middle school specifically did not feel an intervention system was in place and noted having no interventionists on staff and felt the one special education teacher on staff is spread too thin.

All indications are that the school has created a safe and supportive environment, however students are not held to high academic expectations. Families expressed wanting their students to be pushed further. Teachers stated that the expectations for both students and staff are too low. One teacher noted "if you show up and are on time you are doing a good job". Students know there aren't really consequences for their actions. Behavioral intervention systems have not been implemented in a consistent manner and are still a "work in progress".

Criteria 3: Instructional Leadership

Areas of Strength

Generally, staff appear to have good working relationships with each other and their supervisors. There is a camaraderie, sense of hope, and true trust in the leadership of the school. The leadership fully acknowledged the areas of growth in this section and was forced to make difficult decisions on prioritization over the past year. This was due to both the behavior issues of students coming back to school from the pandemic and the overwhelming number of proverbial hats many staff members, but especially the CAO, were wearing. Leadership was able to articulate plans to address many of the areas of growth listed below next school year.

Areas of Growth

Professional development is not an area of strength for CWCKC. This is not unknown by leadership who admitted that PD has not been a strong focus this year. There is a desire to overhaul PD, but leadership did not have the capacity this year to do so. Teachers reported only having PD around project-based learning at the beginning of the school year. Leadership has a plan to focus on curriculum and prioritizing standards next year, however, at the time of the site visit PD remained lacking.

Staff at all levels is not held accountable and there is no apparent system for continuous improvement. Again, this is not due to a lack of knowledge of the issue, but instead a byproduct of misalignment in leadership duties and lack of capacity due to the current leadership structure. Teachers and staff expressed confidence in the CAO but noted that the system to support her isn't in place. Staff described being drastically under-resourced in human capital. From the leadership structure to SPED, there was a sense that CWCKC needs more physical bodies to achieve the goals they have set forth.

Although curriculum exists, there is not a coherent, comprehensive set aligned to the goals of the school. There is no science curriculum or necessary resources (i.e., beaker for experiments). No formal evaluation systems are in place. A formal evaluation system had been in place previously, but it was cumbersome and did not supply relevant information to support teachers. No formal onboarding process appeared to be in place and teachers described being "thrown into it" without any training on even simple operations like how to connect to the printer.

Criteria 4: Organizational Viability

Areas of Strength

CWCKC has strong financial oversight practices in place and the board has a strong grasp of the finances. The board is diverse and appears active and engaged in fulfilling their legal responsibilities. They do not appear to have any vacancies. The board continues its transition from a founding board to a governing board, thanks to the work of the interim ED. However, there were still some instances of the board meddling in operations (i.e. sending texts around arrival practices during our site visit) proving that some board members still need to understand their "lane".

The school is in compliance with the terms of its charter and all rules and regulations.

Areas of Growth

Staff and board are not aligned on decisions of leadership that may lead to issues with staff retention. This misalignment weakens the organization's chances of success. Issues surrounding the leadership model led to staff being pulled in too many directions with a lack of capacity to focus on the academic issues. The delay in hiring a full time Executive Director has caused undue and unnecessary stress on the leadership team. The staff expressed an "us versus them" mentality with the board as it was clear that trust has been broken between the two entities.

Although the board is strategic, engages in appropriate discussions, is tracking the strategic plan, and conducts a self-assessment, there was a clear misalignment on decisions of leadership. Board members abstained from an important board vote in the fall, which has dramatically impacted staff morale. The board's role is to make decisions and abstaining should not have been an option in this situation unless there was a conflict of interest unknown to this writer. The board is not acting with a sense of urgency around items in the strategic or renewal plans or the budget. The board has known for years that facility would be an issue and as of the time of the site visit still did not have a long-term solution or a solution for the upcoming school year.

Although financial management is the strength, CWCKC has not met its enrollment targets, is too reliant on philanthropy, and does not appear to have figured out a sustainable financial modelⁱ. The relationship with the national organization continues to be challenging with staff not understanding the role the national organization plays or what services/resources they are providing for the large fee they pay. Many questioned how the resources provided actually help their students and improve academic achievement.

ⁱ At the board meeting following the site visit, February 17, 2022, the board reported they were projecting a "critically low" fund balance and days cash on hand for the end of the fiscal year. This resulted in MCPSC issue a letter of concern to the CWCKC board of directors.