

Princeton Charter School

Frequently Asked Questions PCS Access & Equity Plan Application

1. What is the Princeton Charter School Access & Equity Plan?

Princeton Charter School (PCS) is seeking to amend its charter to implement an Access & Equity Plan.

First, we want to change our admission structure so that Kindergarten is the point of entrance for most of our students. Right now, PCS has a staggered admission structure in which about half of our students enter in Kindergarten, the other half in third grade and 2 more in fourth grade. Our goal is to bring as many of our students in at Kindergarten as possible so they can benefit from the consistency of curriculum that comes with a K-8 grade education at PCS. In particular, we believe the earlier we can begin to serve economically disadvantaged students, the sooner we can address the achievement gap that all too often accompanies socioeconomic disparity.

Second, PCS chose to apply for a change to our charter now in light of an anticipated 10% spike in public school enrollment in Princeton resulting from the recent development of several high-density residential housing projects. PCS can help meet that need by serving additional students, and serving more economically disadvantaged families, at substantially lower cost in one of New Jersey's highest-performing public schools.

2. What is PCS asking for in its Access & Equity Plan application to the NJDOE?

PCS has applied to the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) to serve 76 more students, to be phased in over two years. A new Kindergarten and grade 1 class would be added the first year. Two seats in grades 3 through 8 would also be added to increase the number of seats available for economically disadvantaged students and their older siblings. The initial phase would add 54 new students in the first year.

In the second year, PCS would add a second grade 2 class, reaching the total of 76 students. By phasing in the expansion over two years, we would better manage the transition and reduce the number of years PCS experiences a large influx of students at grade 3, which is the case under the current enrollment model.

PCS also seeks NJDOE's authorization to use a weighted lottery system that doubles the chances of children from economically disadvantaged families' chances of getting a seat in PCS. Coupled with the doubling of the number of Kindergarten seats available, PCS expects to make the school more accessible to these families.

3. Why is PCS asking for a weighted lottery system and how does it work?

Integral to PCS's mission is the goal of providing a diverse student population with a high quality education and by doing so, helping to "bridge" the gap in student achievement for some the community's most vulnerable children. PCS has made substantial efforts over time to offer a school choice to all parents in Princeton – but recognizes that we can educate a more socioeconomically diverse student population using a weighted lottery system.

Under the new weighted lottery system, any family who can provide evidence of at least one of the following criteria would have their children receive two lottery entries rather than one:

- a. The child lives in Princeton public housing.
- b. The child lives in Princeton Section 8 housing.
- c. The child or guardian qualifies for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits.
- d. The child already qualifies for a free or reduced price lunch in his or her current public school.

4. How does the PCS lottery system work?

If a public charter school receives more students than it has spots available, it is required by law to hold a lottery to determine which students will have the opportunity to attend. Many public charter schools, including PCS, have waitlists and may admit more students from the waitlist as spots become available. Once a child secures a seat at PCS, younger siblings in the lottery are allowed to enroll at PCS in the process specified on the PCS website. This sibling policy is intended to make life easier for families with more than one school-age child and is especially attractive to families in which both parents work. If a weighted lottery were approved, the sibling policy will help to amplify the effect of the weighted lottery and more quickly increase PCS's socioeconomic diversity

5. What is the process in New Jersey for implementing a weighted lottery and adding sections?

Charter school amendment applications are filed with the New Jersey Commissioner of Education by December 1st of each year. By law the sending school district (Princeton in this case) must be notified at the same time that the application is filed, and comments may be submitted for 60 days after filing. The decision is usually made by the Commissioner of Education in late February or early March of the following year and goes into effect immediately.

PCS properly and timely noticed its November 28 public meeting to consider a charter amendment, notified the district the following day of its decision, and invited an immediate meeting to discuss its application.

Parents and community members may wonder why PCS did not discuss the possibility of expansion earlier with the district earlier. The answer is simple and straightforward: Princeton Charter School was following the standard protocol in its application. In addition, PPS has rebuffed all efforts by the PCS Board in recent years to engage in constructive, ongoing discussions concerning our respective roles in providing public education in Princeton. Despite annual offers by PCS's board members to meet privately or in public session with PPS board members to discuss PCS and its role in the community, and in particular ways in which we might share services, expenses and expertise, PPS's board has declined those requests.

PCS looks forward to substantive and collegial discussions with Princeton Public Schools on this matter and others.

6. How are charter schools funded?

Charter schools are public schools. Like all public schools, charter schools are tuition-free and funded through state and local taxes. Unlike traditional districts like Princeton Public Schools (PPS) that receive an annual tax increase of 2% or more each year without any public vote to raise taxes, PCS's funding level has been frozen for the last eight years. It is worth noting that PPS received a waiver from the NJ Department of Education for an additional tax increase, paid for by the citizens of Princeton, allowing an increase in revenue from the local tax levy of 2.98% for this year (from PPS Budget Hearing on April 26, 2016, p. 19).

Charter schools are funded on a per-pupil basis based on a district's level of spending on the operations of its public schools, and were supposed to receive 90% of the amount spent per pupil by the sending school district, exclusive of debt service on district facilities. However, charters typically receive far less (typically 60-70%) than what districts spend per pupil because of complexities of the funding formula. And unlike traditional districts like PPS, charter schools do not have the ability to raise taxes or issue bonds to pay for facilities or facility upgrades; PCS facilities expenses are paid out of the \$15,339 in operating funds PCS receives per pupil and donations by parents and the community.

7. What does it cost to educate a student at PCS compared to a student at a PPS school?

For 20 years, PCS has educated Princeton public school students for less than what PPS can, and without imposing any tax increases.

For the 2015-2016 school year, Princeton Charter School received \$4.9 million, or \$14,232 per pupil, from the local property tax levy, which is passed through the \$90.1 million PPS (PPS) budget. PCS also receives additional funding from the state for special education, security aid, adjustment aid, and other miscellaneous grants totaling \$463,797.

These combined revenues raise PCS's average cost to educate a student to \$15,564 – the same amount it has received for the past eight years.

The average cost to educate a student at a traditional PPS school is \$23,803.¹

Some have claimed comparing PCS to PPS is unfair and have tried to slice and dice the PPS budget to show PCS and PPS spend the same amount. These analyses are faulty, and not those of PPS officials. PCS will respond to those analyses in due course.

But even relative to its peer school districts, PPS remains the most costly of the top five performing districts in New Jersey in recent rankings in which PPS was ranked number 1. A simple analysis of per pupil spending (based on dividing total spending, not including debt burden, by total enrollment as reported by each for 2016-17) shows that PPS taxes and spends at a significantly higher amount than the other top districts, which are of similar size, educate similar students, and achieve similar outcomes:

Princeton:	\$21,341
West Windsor:	\$19,470
Montgomery:	\$18,645
Millburn:	\$18,341
Chatham:	\$15,871

8. What percentage of public school students attend PCS and what percentage does PCS represent in the total annual budget of Princeton Public Schools?

PCS educates **8.9%** of the public school children in Princeton while receiving **5.4%** of the total school budget.

Based on the latest available Comprehensive Annual Financial Report (CAFR) prepared by PPS for 2014-2015, there were 3,563 students attending PPS schools. Enrollment at PCS was 348, totaling 3,945 public school students in Princeton. PCS educates **8.9%** of the public school students in Princeton. PPS

¹ *This per pupil cost average is calculated by subtracting the charter school portion of the tax levy and the transportation aid appropriated to PCS from the State in 2016-2017 school year (approx. \$4.952M) from the total PPS budget (\$90.861M - \$4.952M = \$85.909M) divided by the total number of district students (3,597) = \$23,803. Source: Princeton Public Schools 2016-2017 Budget Presentation*

listed PCS as **5.4%** of its total school budget including debt service and grants in its 2014-2015 CAFR (p. 21).

9. What are the costs associated with transportation for Princeton Charter School?

PCS's proposal will have no impact on district transportation costs.

The district is required to provide busing for all public school students in the same manner as those enrolled at Princeton Charter School. PPS receives transportation aid from the State (\$845,567 in 2015-2016) and retains 10% of its per pupil cost to pay for PCS transportation costs. Currently, PCS shares 8 buses with PPS. Each bus seats 54, for 432 total seats, more than the total number of 424 students PCS would serve if its application is approved by NJDOE. No additional buses or routes will be needed to serve any of the new students who would be enrolled at PCS. In any event, even if the new students attended PPS schools, PPS would be responsible for their transportation costs.

10. Do charter schools take money from school districts?

This is one of the most commonly used arguments by charter school opponents – and the answer is NO.

The funds raised through state and local taxes are dedicated to children, not to the district. In other words, the money follows the public school student whether he/she attends a traditional public school or a charter public school. Many charter schools, including PCS, educate students for less than what the district can, despite not receiving any funding for facilities.

11. How do students at PCS perform?

Princeton Charter School received national recognition as a “Blue Ribbon School” and is classified as a “Tier One” charter school by the NJDOE, its highest recognition of excellence. Typically, 85-90% of PCS graduates go on to attend and excel at Princeton High School.

To allow for an apples to apples comparison of schools that have different student populations, the State of New Jersey's School Performance Report (NJSPR) uses a student growth percentile (SGP) methodology to measure student growth year over year in a way that accounts for ‘starting gate’ inequalities. By comparing a student's achievement outcomes to a group of students that had similar achievement in the prior year(s), it is possible to measure how much growth a student demonstrated relative to students with a similar test score history or academic peer group. These are the official measures used by the State to compare school performance, and are not skewed or dissembled as were the data presented at PPS's December 13, 2016 board meeting.

By these official, apples to apples measures, PCS outperforms 99% of all public schools statewide, and 100% of its peer (similar) schools in Math Growth.

Likewise, PCS outperforms 89% of all schools statewide, and 94% of its similar peer schools, in Language Arts Growth, as reflected in the charts on the following pages.

Because some have questioned whether these measures allow for apples to apples comparison and have attempted to weight and otherwise skew the State’s analyses, it is helpful to understand how student growth is measured and compared against other schools.

The State’s methodology begins by grouping students together based on test scores in the prior year(s) with students across the state. In this way, many academic peer groups are formed. Then, in the next year, a student’s test score is compared to those scores of their academic peer group. The SGP score is a percentile rank that demonstrates what percentage of the academic peer group a student performed higher than. To arrive at a measure of schoolwide growth, all student growth scores in either Language Arts or Math are ranked from highest to lowest. The median growth score is determined to then represent the schoolwide growth in either Language Arts or Math.

To allow for comparison with schools of similar grade configurations and demographic characteristics, the State also establishes peer schools. Each school that receives a performance report with valid student outcome data will be grouped with approximately 30 other similar schools into a peer school comparison group. Peer schools are schools that have similar grade configurations and are educating (or held accountable for) students with similar demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. This peer methodology incorporates reliable and available data that helps to describe the students in the school as well as other factors such as the grade span of the school. These factors indicators include:

- Percent of students that are economically disadvantaged, i.e., free or reduced price lunch eligible (%)
- Percent of students that are limited English proficient (%)
- Percent of students that are in special education (%)
- Grade span of the school (elementary, middle, high).

Princeton Charter School				
	School Wide	Peer Percentile	Statewide Percentile	Statewide Target
Language Arts	64	94	89	35
Math	77	100	99	35

John Witherspoon School

	School Wide	Peer Percentile	Statewide Percentile	Statewide Target
Language Arts	42	17	28	35
Math	49	26	52	35

Community Park

	School Wide	Peer Percentile	Statewide Percentile	Statewide Target
Language Arts	48	44	40	35
Math	42	14	26	35

Littlebrook

	School Wide	Peer Percentile	Statewide Percentile	Statewide Target
Language Arts	59	47	73	35
Math	64	47	83	35

Johnson Park

	School Wide	Peer Percentile	Statewide Percentile	Statewide Target
Language Arts	68	100	93	35
Math	63	81	82	35

Riverside

	School Wide	Peer Percentile	Statewide Percentile	Statewide Target
Language Arts	52	47	53	35
Math	55	44	60	35

*** Latest available report; complete NJSPR results and interpretive guides can be found at <https://homeroom5.doe.state.nj.us/pr/>.*

12. How is PCS held accountable by the New Jersey Department of Education?

Unlike a traditional school district, a public charter school must prove its success to NJDOE annually or it can be closed, and it must apply to renew its charter every five years. The NJDOE has been rigorous and has not hesitated to close charter schools that underperform the district in which they are located. The PCS charter was renewed for five years in 2016, without any objections lodged by PPS.

PCS, like all charter schools, must submit its annual budget and is audited each year, with Comprehensive Annual Financial Reports (CAFR) sent to the NJDOE. NJDOE requires that charter schools outperform the districts they serve, and evaluates charter operations using a performance framework to ensure the soundness of the educational program, the performance of students on standardized tests, and the school's fiscal stewardship. The NJDOE's Performance Framework ensures a rigorous and objective review ensuring taxpayer dollars are well spent.

13. How are PCS building and facilities costs funded?

Funds for building maintenance, capital expenditures, and construction costs are funded through PCS's operating budget and supplemented by parent fundraising efforts. No new tax levy will be raised.

14. How would PCS fund the new space?

Should the Access & Equity Plan be approved, PCS would look to extend and connect the existing K-4 and 5-8 buildings. PCS would pay the debt service on a loan for the construction from its operating budget. Parent fundraising is expected to help defray some of the costs of the additional space and furnishings for the additional space, but is not necessary to fund the renovations. Construction will be publicly bid and performed by the lowest bidder, with workers being paid prevailing wages for public works contracts.

15. What will the new space provide?

To enhance its existing K-8 education model, the new space is intended to bring all students from K-8 under one roof in a better-connected facility. PCS intends to construct three additional classrooms, a cafeteria, a flex classroom, and additional space that will be dedicated to small group instruction and special education services, and to renovate existing spaces for more efficient use.

The work will be designed in a sustainable manner. As part of this work, PCS hopes to deploy solar panels on its buildings to supply a significant portion of its daily energy supply and thereby reduce both energy costs and its carbon footprint.

16. What is the governance structure for a charter school?

The board of trustees is a formally structured, regulated, public entity charged with governing the school. PCS board members are public officials subject to the same state ethics laws as PPS board members. The board is responsible for ensuring that PCS stays true to the mission set forth in its charter, for maintaining the school's fiscal integrity, and for complying with all fiduciary and regulatory requirements.

PCS's nine-member board is made up of committed community members from a variety of professions and backgrounds who volunteer their time to supervise and direct the operation of PCS. Board members are elected to three-year terms by PCS families and may serve a maximum of three terms. Most PCS board members have children attending PPS schools presently, in the past, or expect to do so in the future. PCS bylaws allow the Board to directly appoint up to 4 members of the board.

Ultimately, PCS is held accountable for its performance by NJDOE. The Department ensures that PCS maintains fiscal soundness and meets predetermined benchmarks for student performance. NJDOE has the authority to close any public charter school that fails to comply with the law or meet the rigorous standards set forth in the Performance Framework, and has not hesitated to do so.

17. What laws and regulations apply to charter schools?

New Jersey's public charter schools must follow virtually all the same laws and regulations as traditional public schools. Teachers are certified and can acquire tenure protections. PCS students are required to take NJASK and PARCC state tests. PCS must and does serve all special education students enrolled via the lottery.

18. Where and to whom should parents write letters in support of the Access & Equity Plan?

Letters (not emails) should be sent before January 31 to:

- Hon. Kimberley Harrington, Acting Commissioner of Education
New Jersey Department of Education
100 Riverview Plaza
P.O. Box 500
Trenton, NJ 08625
- Katherine Czehut, Director, Office of Charter and Renaissance Schools
New Jersey Department of Education
100 Riverview Plaza
P.O. Box 500
Trenton, NJ 08625