



## Statement of Explanation for the Appeal

### Power Center Academy (PCA) Elementary School

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Requesting to Increase Capacity from 658 to 810 Students

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Power Center Academy Elementary Hickory Hill (PCA Elementary) is appealing the decision of the Shelby County School Board to deny an amendment request to increase our enrollment capacity from 658 to 810 students in grades K-5. We have taken several factors into account when deciding to move forward with an appeal, including the importance of parental choice; school demand in the community; the detrimental impact of reduced capacity on our students, families, and community; and lack of district-level procedures for charter schools to request amendments prior to the district and school board adopting new policies for the 2019-20 school year. We have also made significant operational and structural changes within PCA Elementary for the 2019-20 school year to address academic performance concerns, which we believe will alleviate any future academic concerns within the school.

### School and Community Context

PCA Elementary is a public charter school managed by Gestalt Community Schools, a system of five K-12 college-preparatory charter schools in targeted Memphis, TN communities serving over 2,300 students in five schools. Gestalt's **vision** is building better communities through education. To this end, Gestalt targets low-income communities that have failing schools, then catalyzes grassroots leadership to revitalize the neighborhood, launches new schools providing educational choice to parents, and partners with providers to tackle out-of-school challenges that hinder students from succeeding. PCA Elementary opened in 2015 in Hickory Hill in south Memphis, which is predominantly minority (82.2% African-American and 9.8% Hispanic) and has alarming poverty and educational outcomes, according to recent US Census figures:

- 50.1% of children under 18 live below the poverty level (compared to 21.7% nationally)
- The median household income is \$18,697—less than half the median income for the state (\$42,219) and nation (\$53,889)
- 68.5% of children under 18 live in households receiving public assistance (Supplemental Security Income or Food Stamps/Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program)
- 36.5% of residents did not graduate high school (compared to 14.4% nationally)
- Only 9.9% of households own their home (compared to 63.9% nationally)

PCA Elementary is one of the key components of a large community development project—Eden Square Town Center and Mendenhall Mall—led by Gestalt and several partners, including Power Center Community Development Corporation, New Direction Christian Church, FEMA, and Habitat for Humanity. The project is redeveloping 43 acres of property in Hickory Hill that was once home to a blighted, crime-ridden abandoned apartment complex. In Phase I, we built a permanent home for PCA Middle, along with the PAC Center. For Phase II, Habitat is building affordable housing for PCA families and low-income seniors adjacent to PCA Middle. Habitat has built 10 homes and will complete 23 additional homes. In Phase III, we

are transforming the abandoned Mendenhall Mall property in Hickory Hill. In July 2019, we completed construction of a new school facility for PCA Elementary to address enrollment demands and renovations of PCA High, including the addition of a new 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Academy. Our partners and tenants will add several social service agencies, a financial institution, a health and wellness center, and retailers on the property to serve students and families.

**Parental Choice**

The Hickory Hill community in Memphis is one of the fastest growing neighborhoods, which has created a strong demand for new schools and parental choice. To address this growing demand, we expanded our schools to include an elementary, middle, and high serving the children and families of Hickory Hill. PCA Elementary opened in 2015 in response to requests from parents for an elementary school in the community and building on the success of PCA Middle and High, which opened in 2008 and 2011, respectively. Parents had seen the impact of the middle and high school and wanted to see the same opportunities for younger children in the community. Since the opening of PCA Elementary, we’ve had a high volume of parents choosing to enroll their students at PCA Elementary. In our first year, the wait list was at 200+, and we now maintain a wait list ranging between 60-100 elementary students each year. According to our 2018-19 climate survey, parents are selecting our schools for the following reasons: Academics and Instruction: 32%; Safety and Culture: 38%; Geographic Location: 21%; and Other: 9%.

We would like to continue to honor parental choice Hickory Hill by making more quality seats available for children in the community. Our amendment request is in line with school demand, capacity at our newly constructed school, and available seats to be filled in Hickory Hill. In addition to parental choice, there is a growing population of siblings at all three of our PCA Hickory Hill schools. In PCA Elementary, 28% or 221 of the students have siblings in either PCA Middle or PCA High. The campus for PCA Elementary and High is in a large former shopping plaza, and PCA Middle is located in close proximity of the elementary and high school. All three schools work in close collaboration to create an academic pipeline for students and support a strong family and community engaged culture that results in consistent demand for our schools. The location of all three schools has also been a tremendous convenience for our families. With the reduction of enrollment that we will be forced to make if the amendment denial stands (removing 132 students), these families could be displaced, resulting in potential barriers for families and impacting the enrollment of all three schools.

**Demand and Capacity**

Each year, we have seen an increase of demand to attend our elementary school. Since its opening in the 2015-16 school year, we have seen the following student enrollment growth:

School Year	Grades Served	Enrollment
2015-2016	K-1	215
2016-2017	K-2	384
2017-2018	K-3	525
2018-2019	K-4	636
2019-2020	K-5	790

As the demand of the school has increased, we also invested in a new school building to handle the growth. This new facility has allowed us to expand to 790 students for the 2019-20 school year and provides an engaging learning environment for our scholars. We would like to continue to honor and support the growing demand of families in Hickory Hill by amending our charter to a maximum of 810 students in grades K-5 moving forward. In addition to the growing demand, there is also still capacity in Hickory Hill to accommodate more students. According to Shelby County Schools recent neighborhood capacity report, Hickory Hill has the capacity of 14,936 seats with current enrollment projections at 13,485 seats. The current enrollment includes our enrollment of 790 students. Therefore, there are still 1,451 available seats.

### School District Procedures

In July 2019, Shelby County Schools adopted a new, stricter policy to manage the growth of charter schools in the district. This new policy includes stricter measures for the opening of new schools, as well as a newly enacted charter amendment procedure for existing charter schools who have exceeded or would like to increase enrollment capacity. Prior to July 2019, the amendment procedure for increasing enrollment was unclear, despite prior efforts by Gestalt to seek clarity on how to address increased school demand and enrollment beyond the charter agreement. In a recent article published in the *Commercial Appeal*, Shelby County Schools’ Chief of Strategy and Performance Management, Brad Leon, acknowledged that the process was unclear in the past and that the district did not pay attention to individual school enrollment levels. Unfortunately, before the July 2019 policy went into effect and before the district enacted a new charter amendment procedure, PCA Elementary had already moved forward with the opening of a new school in August 2019 to meet enrollment demands and had met increased enrollment projections for the 2019-20 school year. The charter amendment denial will mean that we have to reduce enrollment by 132 students for the 2020-21 school year, displacing 132 families who chose for their children to attend PCA Elementary. We believe the removal of students for the next school year is not in the best interests of the students, families, or community. We also believe the lack of a school district policy for charter amendments and/or enforcement of an amendment policy prior to July 2019 should be taken into consideration regarding our appeal.

### Academic Restructuring

In 2018-2019, PCA Elementary completed year two of TN Ready assessment for grades 3-4. Our performance saw a tremendous decline (see chart). The decline was due to change in leadership, extremely novice staff, and misalignment of curriculum, which we are addressing moving forward.

On Track and Mastery	2017-2018	2018-2019
RLA	19.8%	7.7%
Math	20.8%	16.1%

As a result of this data, we have made significant staffing and operational changes, including:

- Increased staffing to include more instructional coaches, special educators, and ESL teachers.
- Changed the leadership team to focus on adding more instructional leaders.
- Improved balance of novice and veteran teachers to 1:2 ratio.
- Adopted proven curriculum and assessments better aligned to TN standards.
- Increased hours of professional development for school leaders and teachers.

We are closely monitoring our students’ academic progress and are seeing all indicators of making academic gains. Our recent TN Ready interim assessments are showing the following proficiency results if TN Ready was taken mid-year:

#### November 2019 TN Ready Practice Assessment Results

- 41% of students in grades 3-5 are proficient in mathematics.
- 38% of students in grades 3-5 are proficient in reading and language arts.

PCA Elementary is still early in its development, and we feel that in the upcoming year we will see academic gains for our students based on our ongoing assessments and student data tracking. Currently, we are making double-digit gains compared to last school year. As a result, we believe the overall 3-year composite for our school will show PCA Elementary making a positive academic impact on our scholars.