



WAKE COUNTY

BOARD OF EDUCATION

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September 15, 2021

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NC Department of Public Instruction
Office of Charter Schools
Mr. Dave Machado, Director
6301 Mail Service Center
Raleigh, N.C. 27699-6301

Dear Mr. Machado and Advisory Board Members:

The Wake County Public School System appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback on the charter school application for Nalanda Academy in western Wake County. We oppose the approval of this charter school on the following grounds:

1. First and foremost, it is unclear what true need this school would meet.

The application states that it will meet just one of the Six Legislative Purposes of a Charter School, improving student learning, by doing the following:

- “Implement a well-rounded curriculum that combines academic excellence and character building to nurture the future generation of children with a mindset of contributing back to the society;
- “Incorporate concepts from mindfulness meditation, and yoga in the curriculum, and teaching methods to foster well-being through a healthy lifestyle and to inculcate value-based character building;
- “Provide a platform for learning opportunities for at-risk or gifted students with personalized intervention programs that consist of enhanced learning techniques derived from ancient Asian cultures.”

To the first point, every Wake County Public School System school already offers a well-rounded curriculum and emphasizes character education on a daily basis.

Nalanda submits that it will focus on STEM instruction, but STEM skills and concepts already are taught in all of our schools across all grade levels and are a major part of our curriculum.

The school states that it will use the Science of Reading as the basis of its language arts program. WCPSS elementary literacy curriculum aligns to the Science of Reading and includes phonics instruction, foundational literacy skills, and language comprehension. Our evidence-based curriculum focuses on phonemic awareness, phonics, and text reading – all components needed for a student to become a skilled reader.

Our schools also use Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) to teach English Language Learners, just as Nalanda claims it will do.

To Nalanda's second point regarding mindfulness practices, Wake County Public School System schools already prioritize meeting the physical, social and emotional needs of students through a variety of means.

Students in grades preK-5 get daily recess as well as regular P.E. classes to support their physical well-being. To help students stay fresh and focused, it is common practice for teachers to offer "brain break" activities throughout the day, which can involve music, movement and, yes, meditation and mindfulness practices. School counselors pay regular visits to classrooms to give students the tools to deal with a host of issues, from managing stress to diffusing conflict. And all of our schools focus on building students of strong character through a variety of means. Our schools implement protocols and practices through the nationally recognized Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program. PBIS gives teachers the tools to define, teach, and support appropriate student behaviors in classroom and non-classroom settings, with a focus on desired behaviors. Our schools, as a matter of district policy, also emphasize and support these eight essential character traits: Courage, Good Judgment, Integrity, Kindness, Perseverance, Respect, Responsibility and Self-discipline.

To the last point regarding meeting the needs of at-risk and gifted students, again, services for these students are offered in every school. Those services include but are in no way limited to:

- Individualized Education Plans for all students who require them;
- Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), for which our teachers and administrators have been trained extensively, helps identify and meet the needs of all students, both academic and behavioral;
- Assistance for students experiencing homelessness through the McKinney-Vento Act;
- A robust system for identifying Academically and Intellectually Gifted students and nurturing their talents, including through regular enrichment sessions and the Single Subject Acceleration program.

Given those and other programs and practices, it is hard to see what services Nalanda would offer that Wake County Public School System students don't already receive.

2. The charter application also cites capped schools in this part of the county and asserts that its opening would alleviate costs associated with transporting students to overflow schools.

It is unlikely that a school of this size would take away the need for some of our schools in this fast-growing part of the county to have enrollment caps. We would also point to the fact that, as the application notes, five schools in the school's proposed target area do not have enrollment caps, indicating there is adequate school capacity in this area.

Our board has stated that capping is a temporary way to manage student population growth in certain areas.

Our capital improvement plan, funded in large part by voter-approved bonds, will address growth needs in the long term. For example, a new elementary school will open next year in Apex, and a combination middle and high school is scheduled to open in Morrisville in August 2025.

3. Finally, we are always concerned about the potential of charter schools to result in resegregation of Wake County Public School System schools by disproportionately marketing to and enrolling students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. We

understand that Nalanda's application states it will target 20% of its population to come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, 20% English Language Learners and 10% students with disabilities.

However, we are skeptical as to how realistic those targets are, particularly given the school's intent not to participate in the National School Lunch Program, as well as its rather nebulous stated plan for providing transportation.


At the very least, we would ask that board members scrutinize this component of the plan closely and, if the charter is approved, provide the appropriate oversight to ensure the school fulfills its promises of diversity.

In closing, based on Nalanda's application, we fail to see how this school would benefit the students of Wake County; moreover it very well could cause the district harm.

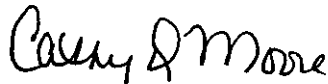
We respectfully ask that you deny this application.

Thank you for your service to the students and families in North Carolina. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you need additional information.

Respectfully,



Keith A. Sutton
Chair
Wake County Board of Education



Cathy Q. Moore
WCPSS Superintendent