# CHARTER SCHOOL APPLICATION

Prospectus

for

Phillis Wheatley Charter School

## *I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY*

*In no more than two pages, provide a brief summary of your school. Include a discussion of the proposed school's mission, key design elements of the educational program, other unique characteristics of the program (if any), and a discussion of the founding group's capacity to effectively oversee and govern the proposed school.*

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*"Imagination! Who can sing thy force? Or who describe the swiftness of thy course?"*

The above quote from Phillis Wheatley, the first African-American woman to publish poetry, is as relevant today as it was the day she wrote it. Ms. Wheatley's imagery of imagination as a forceful, swift-moving entity has carried American citizens of all backgrounds through times good and times bad, times uplifting and times sorrowful. It is reflected in the visions of Americans across the generations as we fought for independence, petitioned for equality, landed on the moon, and created the Internet. The belief in our country that we can do anything is woven into the fabric of who we are. It is our cultural DNA.

With this belief in mind, the idea of charter schools has taken hold across our nation. The idea of the Phillis Wheatley Charter School is born out of this very belief, that imagination is the first step toward greatness. The goal and mission of the Phillis Wheatley Charter School is to instill in children the importance of the mind and what it can accomplish when it is disciplined, purposeful, and imaginative.

In many areas of American society, we have become indolent in thought, character, and behavior. Our news media promotes sound bites as opposed to fully quoted ideas. Argumentation is no longer about supporting ideas with facts; it is more who can yell the loudest and behave the most obtusely. We have allowed ourselves to falter and embrace mediocrity over excellence. This trend is not just cultural. It has presented itself even in academe. In a recent issue of *The New York Times*, an article discussed the mediocre performance of American students on the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) compared with other students around the globe (http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/07/education/07education.html). While some critics of the report feel that the comparisons are unfair, due to the lack of access poor children in other nations have to these exams in comparison to poor children in the U.S. (http://nasspblogs.org/principaldifference/2010/12/pisa_its_poverty_not_stupid_1.html) the report still clearly shows that many American students are not academically strong. Whether poverty or some other cause, it is still an issue we must address.

How would the Phillis Wheatley Charter School attempt to address this concern? As stated above, the most important aspect of the school's mission is imagination and the ability of the mind to discipline itself to achieve excellence. With this belief as a foundation, the school embraces forward thinking. This entails moving away from old structures and old ideas about teaching and learning. We want to embrace new structures, both physical and procedural in how we educate children. What would this entail? For starters, we would incorporate a longer school day. Currently, secondary students spend six hours and forty minutes in school. We would increase this to a full seven hours, with the offer of enrichment hours and after school hours should parents and faculty be willing to expand.

American students spend the least amount of time in the classroom when compared to students in comparable nations. Rather than have a nine period day of forty minutes per period, we would offer students two hours twice a week of instruction in the main content areas, i.e., English, mathematics, science, and social studies. They would receive language and physical

education for one hour twice a week. And a full day dedicated to art, music, and any other elective activities of their choice.

The ultimate goal is to provide time and space to think and converse deeply about subjects studied in the classroom. Students need to make connections between content areas; the program would dedicate two days a week to the study of English and history with clear interdisciplinary themes. The same would be done for science and mathematics. Languages, physical education, health, and the arts would round out the curriculum and provide a balance between the intuitive and the analytical for students.

A small, boutique type of learning environment is desired. We would have no more than 100 to 120 students per grade level. This will give teachers a manageable class load with time for interdisciplinary planning and teaming either by grade level or content area. At full capacity – six grade levels with 100 to 120 students per level – we would need about eight teachers per grade level. We would also have a parent coordinator, similar to schools in New York City where parent coordinators have bridged the gap that can sometimes exist between communities and schools. Lastly, we would have a small administrative team – a principal, an assistant principal, and a budget director.

The Huntington/Babylon area is resplendent with small and large businesses. We hope to establish a school to work program that will allow students opportunities for internships and real-world experience. It is important for students to apply new learning in an apprenticeship format.

## *II. STUDENT POPULATION*

### *A. Student Enrollment*

*In the table provided, enter enrollment projections for the school, by year, for the first five years of operation.*

| Grades | Projected Enrollment Table | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 2012-2013 | 2013-2014 | 2014-2015 | 2015-2016 | 2017-2018 |
| 7th | 120 | 120 | 120 | 120 | 120 |
| 8th | 0 | 120 | 120 | 120 | 120 |
| 9th | 0 | 0 | 120 | 120 | 120 |
| 10th | 0 | 0 | 0 | 120 | 120 |
| 11th | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 120 |
| 12th | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Ungraded | | | | | |
| Totals | 120 | 240 | 360 | 480 | 600 |

### *B. Target Populations*

*Using statistics as well as descriptive language, please describe the plan for the recruitment and enrollment of students. Explain how the school will be publicized and marketed throughout the community to a broad cross-section of families and prospective students and indicate the strategies the proposed charter school will use to reach families that are traditionally less informed about educational choice options.*

The Phillis Wheatley Charter School hopes to attract students in the Huntington/Babylon area who are not well-served by their current school district or who attend a school district that may become financially unstable and be unable to continue operations. Currently, we have two school districts in our vicinity that are in one or both of these situations. They are the Wyandanch Union Free School District and the Elwood Union Free School District. Elwood recently explored the idea of consolidation at a public meeting. Although their students do well on NYS examinations (In 2008-2009, more than 90% of students scored at or above a level three on the ELA and mathematics state assessments), they are facing a budgetary crisis that may ultimately impact services to students. Wyandanch has consistently dealt with underperformance on NYS examinations. Their 2007-2008 report card shows that less than fifty percent of their middle school population scored at or above level three on the ELA and less than sixty percent scored at or above level three on the mathematics assessment. This data is prior to the lowered cut scores that New York State implemented in 2010, which has also impacted their performance negatively.

The goal of the Phillis Wheatley Charter School is not to disrupt or compete with these school districts as they try to find viable solutions to their crises. Rather, it is to be a solution or alternative for some parents, who may be unable to secure an academically vibrant and well-rounded education for their children within these environments. We hope to access community groups like the Mother's Club of Wheatley Heights and The Concerned Father's Association, as well as local print and online news outlets such as Dix Hills Patch and the Half Hollow Hills Library Newsletter. Using these community organizations and publications, we hope to host public meetings and presentations outlining the goals of the school. It is worthy to point out that the community organizations mentioned have their own outreach to families who may not have direct access and "are traditionally less informed about educational choice options." Through our conversations here, specifically, we hope to access families who may not be as well-informed about their educational options. Lastly, we would like to form a relationship with Wyandanch Head Start. Although these are families of much younger children than we expect to serve, establishing the relationship early will help us maintain an active presence in the community.

### *C. Target Populations*

*More specifically, please describe the population of students with disabilities, students who are English language learners, and students from households that are eligible for the federal free- and reduced-priced lunch program in the school district where you intend to operate the proposed charter school. Explain how your school will attract, serve, and retain such students in numbers that are comparable to or greater than the existing school district. Specifically discuss how these students will be identified, how the school will develop plans for their education, how the school's curriculum and approach to instruction will be designed or adapted to serve those students, and how their progress will be monitored.*

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Elwood and Wyandanch school districts are disparate in terms of their performance for students who are economically disadvantaged. According to the report cards listed on NY Start, over 70% of Elwood's economically disadvantaged students performed at level three or above on the NYS ELA and mathematics examinations. In Wyandanch, less than half of all economically disadvantaged students performed at or above level three. In Wyandanch, as students increased in grade level, their performance decreased.

The other sub-groups listed however, students with disabilities and English language learners, show struggles in both school districts. In Elwood, students with disabilities in grades six and eight struggled with state examinations. In grade six only 28% of them scored at or above a level three in English and 33% scored at or above a level three in mathematics. Grade seven shows a significant increase with 62% in ELA and 77% in mathematics. But in grade eight, performance drops somewhat with a 35% rate in ELA and a 59% rate in mathematics.

In Wyandanch, the performance rate for students with disabilities is even worse. Grade six students scored an abysmal 4% at level three for ELA and 17% at level three in mathematics. Grade seven was not much better, with 13% in ELA and 27% in mathematics. Grade eight students dropped again to 4% in ELA, though they rose somewhat in mathematics at 35%.

English language learners also did not fare well in either district. In Elwood, grade six ELLs scored 14% at level three for ELA and 29% in mathematics. Grade seven did not have enough students to provide data. Grade eight had 0% of ELLs score at or above a level three in ELA, though many did well in mathematics at 67% at or above a level three.

In Wyandanch, ELLs scored below 35% in all grade levels in both English and mathematics. In grade eight specifically, 0% of ELLs scored at level three or above on the ELA.

Clearly, there is room for growth for these student populations. We hope to service these students in ways that are just not feasible in a larger school district. Students who are learning English as a second language especially need support, because they have the extra disadvantage of having a communication barrier. We would like to model our program on the Dual Language framework, providing classrooms where students are taught both in their native and second language. The Phillis Wheatley Charter School promotes multi-lingual proficiency and hopes to encourage both English proficient and LEP students to enroll in dual language courses.

We believe that students who are economically disadvantaged need more time for study in the school environment. For myriad reasons, they may not get these supports at home. The structure of our school day, which is very different from the traditional secondary model, will allow us to provide these students with intense, application driven learning environments. In addition, the small class sizes will also provide them with the individual attention they need from their teachers in order to succeed. Most importantly, we plan to hire teachers who are experienced and excel at their content area.

Students with disabilities may not be serviced well in Elwood or Wyandanch. However, our other neighboring school district, Half Hollow Hills, attracts parents of disabled students from across the country. Half Hollow Hills has an excellent program for disabled students, and we would not be able to compete with what they offer. We would, however, work closely with them to provide support services for any students with disabilities who would choose our school over the programs they currently provide.

The last aspect of this category, progress monitoring, would apply to all students. EVI-(Educational Vistas Incorporated) is a private company that scores and tracks student performance on both state and local assessments. They provide ongoing feedback and up to date, online data reports for teachers to access for assessment-driven instruction. This model of monitoring would apply to all students, and not just those in the subgroups listed above. We hope to establish a relationship with them or with an organization that provides a similar service.

## *III. SCHOOL DESIGN*

***Applicant Instructions****: Describe why the proposed school design and the founding group are likely to accomplish the following eligibility criteria (a-i) listed below. Applicants must address each criterion specifically and separately. If your school design or plan draws on existing school models, you may choose to present historical evidence that your design, or at least components thereof, have led to similar outcomes in existing schools. If your school design or plan does not have a precedent, you may choose to present a clear rationale for the design and any research or other supporting information that leads you to believe the plan or model will fulfill the following eligibility criteria and outcomes:*

a. *Increase student achievement and decrease student achievement gaps in reading/language arts and mathematics;*
b. *Increase high school graduation rates and focus on serving at-risk high school student populations (including re-enrolled drop-outs and those below grade level);*
c. *Focus on academic achievement of middle school student populations and preparation for transition to high school (if applicable);*
d. *Utilize a variety of high-quality assessments to measure understanding and critical application of concepts;*
e. *Increase implementation of local instructional improvement systems to assess and inform instructional practice, decision-making, and effectiveness;*
f. *Partner with low-performing, local public schools to share best practices;*
g. *Demonstrate the ability to overcome start-up challenges to open a successful school through management and leadership techniques;*
h. *Demonstrate the support of the school district of location and the intent to establish an ongoing relationship with such district; and*
i. *Provide access to viable education alternatives to students in regions where there are a lack of alternatives.*

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### A. Increase student achievement and decrease student achievement gaps in reading/language arts and mathematics;

As stated above, our neighboring school district, Half Hollow Hills, has a model program for servicing students with disabilities. Half Hollow also is well known for their work closing their achievement gap. As one of the most diverse school districts in Long Island, they took leadership on this issue and developed a series of approaches to address it. Our approach would be modeled after theirs. It consists of three primary areas – proper staff development, early identification and extra-curricular support for minority students who show academic promise, and outreach to parents of pre-school age children. We would organize an Achievement Gap Committee that would contain members from administration, teaching staff, and parents and community members. The committee would monitor these three sub-groups to ensure accountability.

### B. Increase high school graduation rates and focus on serving at-risk high school student populations (including re-enrolled drop-outs and those below grade level);

Students who fall into these groups often do so, because they did not get the foundation they needed in elementary and middle school. They enter high school years below grade level, making it almost impossible to catch up. This is one of the reasons why we want our secondary

school to begin at grade seven instead of grade nine. Enrolling these students two years earlier gives them a chance to self-correct and catch up without the pressure of the permanent transcript that incoming ninth graders have.

Another reason the at-risk population drops out is demands in the home. Many students have younger siblings, family obligations, and financial stressors that prevent them from attending school on a consistent basis. This however, is really a twentieth century problem that most public schools have not readjusted to address. By offering online courses, such as those supported by *Blackboard Learn K-12,* our school can find cost-effective ways to service students who are unable to have seat time within the traditional school time frame. *Click here for info: http://www.blackboard.com/resources/videos/embed/Conversations_K12_Clients.html*

**C. Focus on academic achievement of middle school student populations and preparation for transition to high school (if applicable);**

As stated in the second bullet, this is primarily why we chose to begin at grade seven instead of grade nine. The transition from middle school to high school is often a wake-up call for many middle school students. They are high performing in middle school, and yet when they get to high school, their academic averages fall, sometimes by twenty to thirty points. The level of work is more intense and they have not developed the mental discipline or critical thinking skills needed to be successful. We feel the earlier they start, the better they will perform. We also feel that the design of our program, loosely modeled after the International Baccalaureate program, promotes inquiry and discipline, qualities that successful high school students possess.

**D. Utilize a variety of high-quality assessments to measure understanding and critical application of concepts;**

We believe curriculum, assessment, and instruction are most valuable for teachers and students when they have a part in shaping it. With professional development, we hope to train our teachers in methods for creating effective assessments. Educators like Charlotte Danielson, Heidi Hayes Jacobs, and Robert Marzano all have written extensively on the subject and have developed excellent frameworks to help guide teachers through this process. We expect to use their work, as well as support from organizations like BOCES and Teacher's College to develop our protocols for curriculum and assessment.

***E. Increase implementation of local instructional improvement systems to assess and inform instructional practice, decision-making, and effectiveness;***

As stated in the target populations section of this application, we want to incorporate electronic systems to help us track student performance data. We would like to contract with EVI (or a similar company) to house our student data from the moment they enter. This system in cohesion with daily planning time for teachers, which is built into our time frame model, will allow us to identify early on any problems students are having with specific content areas.

***F. Partner with low-performing, local public schools to share best practices;***

We hope to work closely with the Wyandanch School District (low-performing) and Half Hollow Hills (high-performing). Should Elwood remain open and operating, we will also work with them as they have been able to show consistent high performance on state assessments. HHH is

beneficial for their knowledge on working with students with disabilities. Wyandanch is critical to helping us reach out to parents or students who do not have access to information on educational choices. We also hope to share with them, some of our approaches that we believe are cost-effective and will be helpful to them.

**G. Demonstrate the ability to overcome start-up challenges to open a successful school through management and leadership techniques;**

We would need to make sure we uphold the following critical aspects of leadership:

- Have a clear and defined plan of action
- Develop a leadership board that is representative of the skill sets we would need to address challenges (education law, community services, academic/educator background, real estate, private business/school to work partnerships)
- Have a mentor, preferably someone who has been through the process before.
- Connect with other successful charter school leaders.

**H. Demonstrate the support of the school district of location and the intent to establish an ongoing relationship with such district; and**

This is an ongoing conversation. Currently all of our surrounding school districts are dealing with budgetary concerns and are not open even to discussion about a possible charter school in their area. We would like to take the next few months to continue to explore the possibilities of a relationship with our neighboring districts. As the next few months unfold, and the State Education Department along with our political leaders reveal their budgetary plans for education, we will be able to better determine the likelihood of an ongoing relationship with our surrounding districts. We are submitting this application with the hopes that, should we find local support, we will already be on the path to developing our school.

**I. Provide access to viable education alternatives to students in regions where there are a lack of alternatives.**

Suffolk County does not have a plethora of charter schools. In fact, the website where this application was accessed showed only two other charter school applications for Suffolk County (not including this one) for the 2012 school year. Though we intend to provide an alternative for students in the immediate area, we are certainly open to including students in districts not immediately adjacent to our own.