



## WESTERN GATEWAY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

May 8, 2019

### **To the OKCPS School Board and Members of the Community:**

I am writing to update you on Western Gateway Elementary School's (WGES) proposal to establish a two-way dual-immersion school in South Oklahoma City. While the Oklahoma City Public School (OKCPS) Board has yet to approve the proposal, the thorough visioning and review process carried out over the past four years has demonstrated the community's steadfast support for a new dual immersion elementary school.

### **The Vision for Dual Immersion**

The effort began in June 2015 with the formation of a fourteen member Dual Immersion Steering Committee which was co-chaired by then OKCPS Board Vice Chair Phil Horning and included OKCPS Board Member Gloria Torres, OKCPS Board Member Laura Massenet, Latino Community Development Agency Executive Director Dr. Raul Font, Senator Michael Brooks-Jimenez, OKC City Ward 4 Councilman Pete White, along with other civic leaders, including additional representatives of the Latino community. Over nine months, the Dual Immersion Steering Committee researched best practices and worked to shape a proposal for a new dual immersion elementary school. Work of the committee included meeting with bilingual education experts and dual immersion administrators, touring a two-way dual immersion school in Tulsa, identifying best practices for curriculum and school form, and researching population trends and school boundary options in South Oklahoma City.

On February 1, 2016, the Dual Immersion Steering Committee unanimously adopted a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that stated:

"A dual immersion school will serve new and existing neighborhoods, promote bilingualism, create cross-cultural connections, enhance learning outcomes, and provide limited relief to overcrowding. The school district should create a Dual Immersion Elementary....".

The Steering Committee specifically recommended that the dual immersion school be established by OKCPS as a charter school, that it should be located at the SW corner of SW 15<sup>th</sup> and Douglas Avenue, and that it should feature bilingual enrollment and a neighborhood boundary that captured both Wheeler District and twenty blocks of the existing Jones-Grove neighborhood between Douglas and Blackwelder, an area that houses hundreds of elementary students:

“It is hoped that the combination of an opt-out neighborhood boundary, along with a weighted 50/50 target enrollment between Spanish-dominant and English-dominant students, will provide a student population that is representative of the socioeconomic and cultural diversity found within the attendance area and the OKCPS district. “

In this way, the Steering Committee created a plan for a school that serves as a special institution in the community, to bring people together for their shared goal of educating their children.

### **Partnering with OKCPS**

Following the completion of the Steering Committee process in February 2016, the effort progressed towards implementation. In the spring of 2016, representatives of the Dual Immersion Steering Committee met with then Supt. Rob Neu. Supt. Neu expressed his support for the proposal and a desire to move forward, but resigned from office before any formal agreement was complete.

A few months later the proposal was presented to Supt. Aurora Lora. Supt. Lora was well acquainted with, and supportive of the two-way dual immersion model. She requested that the proposal be augmented to include a parallel traditional curriculum track to accommodate students whose bilingual language capabilities were not suited to the dual immersion curriculum. The proposal was amended as requested and allows the school to serve all students, independent of language capability or background.

Representatives of OKCPS also played a vital role in reviewing and approving plans for a public-private partnership with the City of Oklahoma City that would provide funding for school facilities. Lynne Hardin, OKCPS Board Chair, and OKCPS Board Member Justin Ellis represented the district in identifying OKCPS priorities. The resulting Western Gateway Project Plan proposed establishment of a tax-increment financing district to assist in the development of street and utility infrastructure, public improvements, a new school building for the proposed dual immersion charter elementary, and up to \$40 million of additional funding for OKCPS to direct towards construction of a new middle or high school. The plan was unanimously approved by a multijurisdictional review committee, garnering formal support from OKCPS Chair Hardin, OKCPS Board Member Justin Ellis and Mary Melon, President of the Foundation for Oklahoma City Public Schools. Following unanimous approval

by the review committee, the Project Plan was forwarded to the Oklahoma City Council, where it was unanimously approved.

### **OKCPS Staff Recommendation for Approval**

After over three years of collaboration with community members, civic stakeholders and OKCPS officials, and multiple levels of public review generating unanimous support, Western Gateway Elementary School was formally incorporated with a board that includes LCDA Executive Director Dr. Raul Font and Former OKC Ward 4 Councilman Pete White. WGES began formal charter application process in September 2018. Over the following seven months representatives of Western Gateway Elementary School worked with OKCPS staff to complete each step of the process, including:

- September 2018: Submittal of required Letter of Intent to apply
- October 2018: Met with Supt. McDaniel and other key staff members
- January 2019: Submittal of formal application
- February 2019: Met with OKCPS Board Charter Committee
- March 2019: Met with OKCPS Staff Capacity Interview Committee
- April 2019: Presented to OKCPS Board

Following our April 8<sup>th</sup> presentation to the OKCPS Board, we were informed by OKCPS Staff that we had received a Staff Recommendation for Approval and the board would vote on our proposal at the next meeting on May 13<sup>th</sup>. For WGES, the OKCPS Staff Recommendation for Approval represented another significant milestone validating the Steering Committee's belief that a two-way dual immersion school was good for everyone, including the Oklahoma City Public School District.

### **Delay and Nonresponse**

Following the Staff Recommendation for Approval supporters of Western Gateway Elementary School anticipated a positive outcome with the OKCPS Board set to vote on May 13<sup>th</sup>. However, in ensuing weeks OKCPS staff became nonresponsive to our requests for a copy of the Staff Recommendation for Approval. Then, on April 25<sup>th</sup>, OKCPS General Counsel Jessica Sherrill notified WGES representatives that the OKCPS Board would not take action on May 13<sup>th</sup>, but instead the application process would be restarted with board consideration to take place no earlier than July 2019.

This delay was not in keeping with OKCPS staff's previous commitments and stated timeline. We are concerned that this reversal of course is not related to the merits of the two-way dual immersion school or the interests of the students it will serve, but instead is related to our refusal to comply with demands made by OKCPS Chair Paula Lewis. Before the formal application process for the Western Gateway Elementary School began Paula Lewis made an unsolicited call to WGES board member Blair Humphreys. During the call, Lewis made clear that she would not be agreeable to the WGES proposal for a new dual immersion elementary school unless

Blair's father Kirk Humphreys, a member of the John Rex Board, complied with her demand for him to support the immediate adoption of the OKCPS non-discrimination policy at John Rex. Chair Lewis emphasized that in her view, it was not okay to move forward with the dual immersion school unless she received the changes she wanted at John Rex – that the two were attached. Mr. Humphreys declined to comply with her demand, viewing the requests as an unethical offer to exchange his vote for something of value to a family member's project, and instead chose to support the non-discrimination policy recommended by the John Rex Board Policy Committee chaired by Carrie Jacobs.

### **Reestablishing Good Faith and a Fair Process**

Today WGES representatives delivered three requests to OKCPS in an effort to reestablish good faith and a fair process for consideration of the WGES proposal. The first was a letter to Ms. Sherrill requesting that OKCPS honor their commitment by proceeding with consideration of our charter application on May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2019. In addition, we took the necessary measure of submitting an open records request to make public the OKCPS Staff Recommendation for Approval. Finally, we submitted a letter requesting that OKCPS advise Chair Paula Lewis to retain all records, including emails and text messages, related to our application in an effort to verify that her actions are in keeping with her duties as an elected official.

### **Our Commitment to Bilingual Education**

While we are disappointed in OKCPS's proposed delay, we remain committed to the creation of a two-way dual immersion elementary school in South Oklahoma City. Over the past four years, the proposal has received steadfast support from district and city elected officials, Latino civic leaders, OKCPS superintendents and staff members, public education advocates, business leaders, and, perhaps most importantly, the families from the Jones-Grove and Wheeler District neighborhoods that the school will serve.

We are confident that the community will continue to support our effort to establish a dual-immersion school and look forward to welcoming Western Gateway Elementary School's first students in Fall 2020!

Sincerely,



Blair Humphreys  
Chair, Western Gateway Elementary School, Inc.