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Executive Director

**1731 SOUTH BROADWAY
ST. LOUIS, MO 63104
314.231.2337**

liftforlifeacademy.org
info@liftforlifeacademy.org

*Lift For Life Academy is a
501(c)(3) organization.*



Charter sponsored by



May 20, 2016

Robbyn Wahby, Executive Director
Missouri Charter Public School Commission (MCPSC)
PO Box 78497
St. Louis, MO 63178

Dear Robbyn:

On behalf of Lift for Life Academy (LFLA) and its Board of Directors, please accept this *Letter of Intent* that the MCPSC become the Academy's sponsor in accordance with state law. Since LFLA is already an existing charter *local education agency* (LEA), we are proceeding from the view that a change in sponsorship will mean that LFLA's application will fall under *Renewal* status for the both the MCPSC and Missouri State Board of Education. We anticipate that a change in sponsorship to MCPSC will become effective for the 2017-18 academic year.

Lift for Life Academy is located at 1731 South Broadway, St. Louis, MO 63104. The school is not geographically bound, but open to all St. Louis students residing within the city's limits. Approximately 90% of LFLA's students are free and reduced lunch eligible, while over 95% of the LFLA's students are African American.

LFLA currently operates a middle school with an enrollment of approximately 250 students and a high school with approximately 325 students. In addition, LFLA is working towards a k-5 elementary school expansion. The target date for the new elementary school is the 2017-2018 school year. Our plan is to begin the elementary school with kindergarten and first grade students. A grade level would then be added each subsequent year. We are also planning on implementing a pre-k program as part of the initial elementary expansion.

Our goal is to transform educational opportunity in the city of St. Louis by creating a high-performing k-12 charter school program. There is no other charter LEA in the city of St. Louis that is offering what LFLA intends: providing St. Louis families a place where their student can begin their education in the early elementary years and carry it forward through high school at a singular campus.

Lift For Life Academy is a challenging learning community where all students are empowered to maximize their full potential as students and citizens.



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Attached with this *Letter of Intent* to the MCPSC is LFLA's *Prospectus*. As a charter LEA with 16 years of experience, we were able to provide substantial detail as to the academy's educational and operational program. We look forward to MCPSC's review of the *Prospectus* and any feedback you can provide.

Sincerely,

Scott Dolan, Board President
President of the Board

Sincerely,

Marshall Cohen,
Executive Director

Lift For Life Academy is a challenging learning community where all students are empowered to maximize their full potential as students and citizens.

Mission, History and Target Population

The Academy’s mission statement is as follows: *Lift For Life Academy will be a challenging and supportive learning community where all students are valued and empowered to maximize their full potential as students, citizens, and productive members of society.*

When Lift for Life Academy (LFLA), the first independent charter school in the City of St. Louis, opened in 2000, it was the “school of last resort” for some students. Many of the school’s first students came from struggling traditional public schools and entered LFLA well below grade level in literacy, math, and science. By bringing these students together into a uniquely supportive culture, LFLA sought to create a transformative environment that could empower students to not just “get by” in school, but flourish and maximize their potential. Today, LFLA continues to serve underserved students and families who want a better and safer school.

Lift for Life Academy began as a 6-8 middle school. It was founded to keep students engaged in school during the critical early adolescent years. The school represented an academic and social intervention for “at-risk” students. Upon graduating middle school, the goal was to place students in successful magnet and charter high schools around the city. Unfortunately, many of our former students returned to a struggling public school system in the city and quality charter high school options were limited. It distressed Academy leaders to see former LFLA students struggle in their new high schools. This was the driving factor in the Academy’s decision to expand to a high school beginning with a ninth grade in 2008. LFLA High School graduated its first class of seniors in 2012. Most importantly, the high school worked to keep the academic momentum gained during middle school moving positively. As a result, LFLA High School earned 81% of the Annual Performance Points (APR) in 2014 and 85.4% in 2015¹.

The bold decision to expand LFLA from a 6-8 middle school to include a 9-12 high school has yielded positive results for students, families, and the organization. Unfortunately, LFLA’s middle school continues to confront an overwhelming number of students who are significantly below grade level. Upwards of 75% of incoming sixth graders each year are three grade levels or more behind on the NWEA assessment in math and reading. This has a significant impact on both classroom learning and school culture. As part of this renewal *Prospectus*, LFLA is seeking a k-5 elementary expansion to further transform the educational opportunity provided. The k-5 elementary expansion would also include a pre-k program to expose students to learning even earlier. An elementary expansion represents the surest way for LFLA to develop its own cohorts of academically prepared students, while at the same time holding the organization more fairly accountable for the academic performance of all students over time. It will also make the

¹ Missouri Comprehensive Data System (MCDS). *MSIP 5 School Level Accountability Report*.
<http://mcds.dese.mo.gov/guided inquiry/Pages/Accountability.aspx>

organization more sustainable as k-12 charter school models expand and competition for students increases.

In terms of its target population, LFLA will continue to have a middle school enrollment of approximately 250 students and a high school enrollment of approximately 330 students. Beginning plans for the elementary expansion project enrollment at approximately 240 students. The goal for each school is to keep class sizes in the core content area between 18-22 students. We expect that all LFLA schools will continue to serve some of St. Louis' most underserved families in terms of educational opportunity. In past years, approximately 90% of LFLA's students qualified for the free and reduced lunch program and over 95% were African American. Based on LFLA enrollment data that was cross-referenced with a St. Louis Schools Needs Assessment, approximately 33% of LFLA's students are from zip codes that ranked in the top five in terms of service gap (demand for a quality school seat compared to access). Over 50% of students were from zip codes that ranked in the top ten in terms of the service gap².

School Design (Curriculum, Assessment, and Culture)

The Academy's design can be divided into three primary parts: curriculum, assessment, and culture. At LFLA, teachers write the majority of the curriculum and align it to the state's standards. The Academy is currently engaged in a significant curriculum revision based on the adoption of the new Missouri Learning Standards. There is also a heavy emphasis on higher order thinking skills that promote greater depth of knowledge among students³. Teachers and administrators collaborate to determine the essential and enduring learner outcomes for each content area and each course. The curriculum development process reflects the research principles of Understanding by Design⁴ and Professional Learning Communities⁵. As a result, all planning follows the following sequence:



The second aspect of the Academy's design model is assessment. At LFLA, assessment keeps the mission and beliefs of the school in focus. The Academy has participated in state mandated MAP and EOC testing as required by law since its inception. The Academy has also designed its own assessments and used the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) assessments in reading and math to benchmark and track student performance. We utilize test results to identify schoolwide learning priorities. Assessment provides us the means to measure and evaluate the

²St. Louis Schools Needs Assessment (2014). <https://www.stlouis-mo.gov/government/departments/mayor/initiatives/education/education-documents.cfm>

³ Webb, Norman. "Depth of Knowledge."

⁴ Wiggins, Grand and McTighe, Jay (2005). "Understanding by Design."

⁵ DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour (2008). "Professional Learning Communities at Work."

effectiveness of our curriculum and teaching methods. In the last three years, state test results along with post-secondary placement, attendance, and college and career readiness measures have contributed to Annual Performance Report scores for LFLA that have been on par or outperformed school districts with similar student populations in the St. Louis area (Figure 1). In addition, the Academy’s End-of-Course Exam results demonstrate that with time we provide a high-quality educational option for city residents and we are working to overcome the economic and racial achievement gap associated with urban education (Figure 2).

Percent of Annual Performance Report points earned, 2013-2015⁶

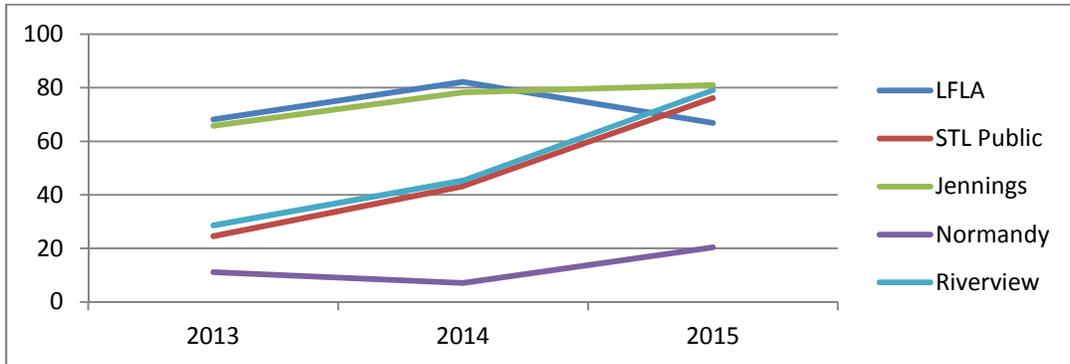


Figure 2—2015 Proficiency Rate Comparison (LFLA to St. Louis Public and Statewide Averages for the Black and Free and Reduced Lunch Subgroups⁷)

	LFLA High School (Proficient & Advanced Percentage)	St. Louis Public Schools (Proficient and Advanced)	Statewide Average for Free & Reduced Lunch (Proficient/Advanced)	Statewide Average for Black/African American Students (Proficient/Advanced)
Algebra I	71.4%	46.7%	61.8 %	31%
English II	55.6%	50.9%	73%	53.4%
Biology	55.4%	46.2%	74.8%	48.2%
Government	48.5%	38.8%	63.4%	39.4%

Lastly, a strong school culture is essential to our Academy’s design model. We believe that a school’s culture must work to engage students in classroom learning and meet their needs as individuals. We utilize strategies from *Teach Like a Champion* (TLAC) as the foundation for our staff’s professional development. Although it may look slightly different in elementary, middle and high school classrooms, TLAC works to establish strong teacher leadership and voice in every classroom. When TLAC is combined with various interventions it reflects the Academy’s

⁶ Publically available data through the Missouri Comprehensive Data System.

<http://mcds.dese.mo.gov/Pages/default.aspx>

⁷ Data obtain through DESE’s *Missouri Comprehensive Data System*. Please note that data is not available through MCDS that combines the Free and Reduced Lunch and Black/African American subgroups.

three pillars of *Educate, Empower, and Uplift*. These interventions include academic (special classes, free tutoring, etc.) and social interventions (free glasses and dentistry, access to family counseling, etc.) that are often provided through our own social work/counseling department along with various community partnerships.

School Life

Whether in middle or high school, a LFLA education means servicing the needs of a wide-range of learners. As stated previously, we are keenly aware of the achievement gap that impacts urban education. Our goal is to provide challenging classroom experiences that lift students up academically, but also provide a range of experiences that broaden students' understanding and connection to the world. The following programs describes some of the offerings LFLA has been able to provide students: advanced college coursework for students through St. Louis University's 1818 program; free driver's education; a four-year fashion design program; Teen Library Council for middle & high school students; *Picture the Future* photography club in partnership with Washington University; Campus Y middle school leadership program; and *Book Battle* and *Garden* clubs. Also important to engaging students in school life are various athletic opportunities that include some of the following: middle & high school track for girls and boys; middle & high school basketball for girls and boys; football; middle & high school wrestling; high school girls volleyball; middle & high school cheerleading; and baseball.

Academic, Operational, and Financial Outcomes

Lift for Life Academy believes that goal setting is essential to ensuring school accountability and continuous improvement. Academic, operational, and financial outcomes are embedded in the Academy's annual performance plan. As part of board oversight in making sure that performance plan goals are met, the board is broken into various subcommittees. Subcommittee meetings are comprised of board members, community volunteers, administrators, and may even include teacher participation. In order to monitor progress towards performance plan goals, committee chairs and school administrators provide regular updates to the board and generate monthly dashboard reports. Below are some of the Academy's performance goal outcomes:

- For the past three years, LFLA has met the state's public school district benchmark score for either full or provisional accreditation as part of MSIP 5.
- Each graduating class at LFLA has outpaced the state average for placing graduates in both two and four-year colleges and universities.
- From 2013-2015, over 20% of graduating seniors have earned college credits through dual enrollment &/or advanced coursework through St. Louis University's 1818 program.
- For the past three years, the Academy has achieved more revenue than expenses.
- For the past five years, the Academy has operated with a cash reserve in excess of the state's 3% minimum requirement.

- Fundraising and grant work have led LFLA to spend on average more than \$800 per student that what the state's foundation formula provides.

School Innovation

The Academy's most important innovation is providing students and families a school and campus where students can attend continuously for grades 6-12 and eventually pre-k-12. As stated previously, this represents a transformative approach to providing educational opportunity in the City of St. Louis. In the future, we envision graduating students who have been a part of LFLA since their early years of elementary school, even pre-school. We have found that our current model works to build trust with families and helps the school better serve the students' needs. By adding an elementary, the bond between school and families will become only stronger.

Governance and Leadership

One of the strengths of Lift for Life Academy has been its stable leadership in the areas of board governance and school leadership. At the board level, the Academy benefits from having members with a variety of business, non-profit and educational experiences. The school also has an administrative leadership team with extensive urban educational experience.

Board Members

Scott Dolan, Board President, Managing Director at US Bank. **Tami Fernandez, Vice-president**, Healthcare experiences at MO Baptist Hospital & Magellan. **Gina Wischmeyer, Secretary**, Former Assistant Director at the College School. **Laura Baker**, Designer, fashion program founder and Washington University adjunct professor. **Jeff Bensky**, Health and wellness at St. Louis University. Senior executive at Price Waterhouse. **Brian Liberman**, Vice-president of commercial lending at Central Bank. **Mary Jo Liberstein, Ph.D.**, Retired assistant superintendent of the Clayton School District. **Sandy Boxerman**, Attorney/co-founder of Capes, Sokol, Goodman & Sarachan, P.C. **Jack Burke, Ph.D.**, Retired sociology Professor at Harris-Stowe State University. **Debbie Champion Snyder**, Attorney/co-founder of Rynearson, Suess, Schnurbusch & Champion. **Kate Hatfield**, Healthcare consultant at Hatfield Consulting, LLC.

Academy Leadership Team

Marshall Cohen. Executive Director. Founder & 25+ years of educational/non-profit experience.
Dr. Katrice Noble. Deputy Director. 18 years of educational experience in St. Louis City.
David LeMay. High School Principal. 12 years of educational experience in St. Louis City.
Jeff Edwards. Middle School Principal. 8 years of educational experience in St. Louis and NC.