



September 16, 2020

WOODLAND SEEKS COURT REVIEW OF CHARTER SCHOOL RENEWAL

Statement of Dr. Carla Little, Board of Education President, and Dr. Lori Casey, Superintendent

Dear Woodland Community,

We are sending this letter to inform you that the Woodland School District 50 Board of Education filed a lawsuit on September 16, 2020, seeking review and reversal of the decision of the Illinois State Board of Education ("ISBE") to permit the continued operation of Prairie Crossing Charter School.

This is not Woodland's first legal challenge to the renewal of the charter school. Prairie Crossing is a "state-authorized" school, allowed to operate over the objection of our district since 1999. This is a complicated relationship with numerous reasons for objection. The main concerns outlined in this lawsuit challenge Prairie Crossing's failure to meet its state requirement and obligation to educate at-risk students, and the diversion of public dollars to a school that does not provide services and opportunities for low-income families and underrepresented students.

To provide a bit of background, in 2014, Woodland District 50 filed a lawsuit challenging the decision of the State Charter School Commission to renew Prairie Crossing charter school through 2019. Woodland argued that Prairie Crossing failed to meet its legislative assignment in the School Code to place a "special emphasis" on educating at-risk students, based upon its unjustifiably low enrollment of this group of students. Woodland objected that Prairie Crossing's discriminatory practices, including its refusal to provide transportation from low-income neighborhoods, harms the students and taxpayers of Woodland District 50. Pursuant to Illinois law, Woodland will lose \$5.3 million dollars of State education funding this year to underwrite the charter school. In total, that amounts to a loss of \$54.5 million to date - directly impacting services and programs for Woodland students.

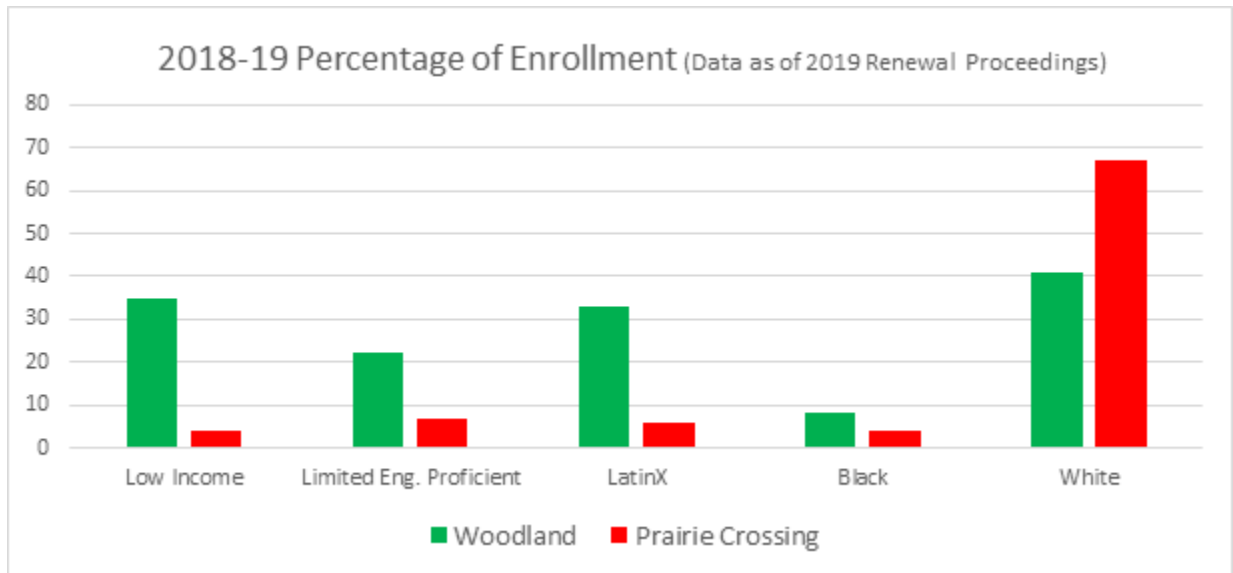
Timeline:

- Woodland filed a lawsuit in 2014 challenging the decision of the State Charter School Commission to renew the charter through 2019.
- In March 2015, the Circuit Court ruled in Woodland's favor and ordered the charter school closed based upon its failures.
- The Appellate Court determined that Woodland could not directly challenge the Commission's renewal decision, but never ruled on the merits of the case.
- The Appellate Court decision allowed for the charter school to continue operating, and provided guidance that Woodland could bring its grievance to ISBE, which holds ultimate oversight authority over all charter schools.

Five years later in 2019, Prairie Crossing sought another renewal (through 2024) of its charter. Woodland again objected, noting the charter school's astonishing refusal to provide accessible transportation to at-risk students, despite a decade-old admonishment from ISBE. Without a commitment to meaningful outreach and accessibility, the charter school's at-risk enrollment numbers remain inexcusably low. After 20 years of



operation, Prairie Crossing still does not enroll a representative population of at-risk students from Woodland, let alone a population indicative of the school placing a “special emphasis” on at-risk students. The following chart compares enrollment data from both schools.



Despite Woodland's objection, the Commission authorized a renewal of Prairie Crossing through 2024 with a rewarding increase in enrollment. In May 2019, Woodland filed a complaint with ISBE seeking a reversal of the Commission's decision. Woodland's [complaint materials are available here](#). In June 2020, ISBE rejected Woodland's complaint.

To further illustrate the financial burden that Prairie Crossing places on the Woodland District 50 community, the State of Illinois [recognizes](#) that Woodland's local revenues are adequate to meet ONLY 81% of the educational needs of our students. Under the State's evidence-based funding model, the State of Illinois is supposed to bridge the adequacy gap through the distribution of State education funds with an added focus on special populations such as English learners, low-income and special education students that require additional resources. Woodland's special population enrollment is overwhelmingly higher than Prairie Crossing in both student count and percent of student body. However, State funding does not delineate the student population specific to Woodland and blindly diverts dollars intended for Woodland District 50 students to the charter school. The Woodland Board of Education strongly objects to the fact that the money intended for these special populations does not follow the child.

By approving the renewal of the charter school through 2024, the State Board of Education authorizes 56% of Woodland's State funds to flow directly to the charter school, leaving precious few dollars to educate Woodland students, including the at-risk students the charter school leaves behind. That is not fair to the students and we believe taxpayers of Woodland District 50 should be aware of this concern.

The Woodland District 50 Board of Education does not oppose the existence of charter schools. This problem of funding inequities, along with non-compliance to the legislation related to state charter school laws is unique



to Prairie Crossing as a state-authorized charter school and its direct impact on Woodland students. We object to a charter school that does not place a special emphasis upon the very students charter schools were designed to educate, while at the same time stripping Woodland of essential education funding. Equity and inclusion are hallmarks of Woodland's values. Woodland stands for the elimination of discriminating practices and the establishment of a welcoming educational environment for all students. It is our privilege to educate the students of Woodland District 50. We are very proud of the diversity that paints this district. We seek justice when equity is not being served.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dr. Carla Little". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Dr. Carla Little, President
Woodland District 50 Board of Education

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dr. Lori Casey". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Dr. Lori Casey, Superintendent
Woodland District 50