



Columbia
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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April 6, 2026

Members of the State Board of Education,

We the undersigned submit this letter as an official objection to the application of Frontier Schools to open a charter school in Boone County. The application lacks a demonstrated need in our region, offers misleading claims, relies on erroneous assumptions, and fails to adhere to governing statutes.

Most detrimental to our community, the law which allows for the expansion of charter schools into Boone County (and Boone County alone) was impermissibly passed by the State without local notice and without local voice. The law is unlawful, unconstitutional, and should be struck down by the Court.

Our objections to Frontier's second application are substantially similar to those to their original application. Despite guidance from DESE, Frontier failed to capitalize on the opportunity to submit a revised application demonstrating any more attention to statutory requirements or any greater support from our local community.

Unconstitutional

The State of Missouri cannot target a single county for the expansion of charter schools without a reason. It does not matter if the county is the geographical area represented by the legislative sponsor of the bill or the preferred expansion location of a handful of elected representatives. And, if the State does try to pass a law targeting only one group of its residents, the State cannot ignore its obligations under the Missouri Constitution to provide notice to that same group of residents prior to passage of the new law.

The State of Missouri ignored each of these principles when it passed and approved Senate Bill 727 – expressly **to target Boone County (and Boone County alone)** for the expansion of where charter schools can open. The State decided to target Boone County for charter expansion without explanation, justification, or rational basis. The State refused to provide Boone County residents with required notice and refused to allow local voices to be heard. The State's decision to target Boone County for the expansion of charter schools violates state law and the Missouri Constitution.

No Demonstrated Need

Columbia Public Schools—along with every other public district in Boone County—is and has always been an accredited district. In the most recent evaluation by the State, CPS ranks in the top 15% of all public-school districts in the state, performing above the State average for MAP and ACT in every content area. To allow the unnecessary encroachment of a duplicate school district knowingly harms the successful students of Columbia Public Schools, with the Frontier charter school projecting to take almost \$3,000,000 in public dollars away from our local district in the first year of operation and more than \$10,000,000 by year five.

Frontier claims a charter is needed in Columbia to address the achievement gap in student subgroups, but the application fails to identify a single mitigating action that is not currently being employed by CPS. Further, Frontier specifically states “projected enrollment will not target or mirror any single subgroup”, so its proposed charter does not seek to address the achievement gap at all. Frontier points out that some students at CPS do not achieve on the same level as their peers. They do not outline how they will make any difference in these outcomes, especially since their target audience is “primarily students who reside in the district and surrounding areas.”

Instead, Frontier plans to offer students a “neighborhood-accessible option across multiple zip codes” on a first-come, first-served basis or, if there are more applicants than spots, with a lottery. This does nothing to reach an underserved demographic of subgroup students.

Leadership of the Missouri Charter Association and Saint Louis University confirmed this reality, telling CPS that the intended audience for a Frontier charter school would be students who are currently enrolled in private schools. Frontier does not plan to serve a high-risk population; it intends to use millions in public dollars to open a selective privately-run school for families who are currently paying private tuition.

Misleading Claims and Erroneous Assumptions

Frontier claims it is “committed to meeting the educational needs of students across the full range of abilities” including students who require special services. State data shows otherwise.

According to DESE data from all available years, the average percentage enrollment of students receiving special education services across all Frontier’s existing schools was 6.13% while the average for CPS was double that percentage at 12.5%. Similarly, over the last 4 years of testing, Frontier KC administered state assessments to special education students in only two of seven disability categories. By comparison, CPS administered state assessments to special education students in all seven categories. Additionally, Frontier has never administered a single MAP-A assessment in any of its years of operation. In other words, Frontier has an established track record of serving fewer special education students than CPS, both in volume and in scope.

Frontier also points to “capacity pressure” in support of charter expansion, claiming Columbia needs more elementary schools. Frontier is either unaware or ignoring the fact that CPS opened two elementary school additions in 2024 and 2025 and is opening a new elementary school in 2026. These capacity expansions were funded by voters with bonds totaling more than \$60 million after detailed demographic studies were completed. In fact, a demographic report from Woolpert in January of 2026 projects generally flat k-5 enrollment through 2035-36 based on birth rate data and cohort survival ratios.

Frontier claims in its application that its STEM-based charter school is designed to “complement rather than duplicate existing educational offerings.” This is puzzling, considering CPS has both a STEM-based lottery elementary school and a STEM-focused lottery middle school available to any student in the district’s attendance area (with transportation provided). A “duplication” is exactly what an additional public STEM lottery school would be.

Frontier’s focus on capacity also ignores the reality of the effect charters have had on other public districts. Since charters have come into St. Louis, their local public district has seen a 30% drop in enrollment and has a current building utilization rate of 52.4%. Saint Louis taxpayers are funding multiple duplicate systems and paying for buildings that are half empty. Across the state in Kansas City, the same issue has developed. Charter schools combine with the local school district to offer a total of 33,500 public school seats, about 6,000 more seats than are needed for the 27,000 students residing in Kansas City. With unfettered charter expansion creating more seats than students, taxpayers are funding duplicative school options at a time when the state legislature is reducing school funding and precious public dollars need to be spent as efficiently as possible.

Expanding school capacity in a local community should be based on a detailed review of community needs, not on the corporate interests of a charter management company.

No Local Voice

The only way to truly gauge support for a charter is at the ballot box. Boone County taxpayers deserve a local voice in deciding if we want our local money to be diverted from our existing local public school districts.

The lack of local voice is echoed in Saint Louis University’s sponsorship process and Frontier’s new application. State law requires charter applicants to notify the local school board within five days of submitting an application to a sponsor for approval. Here, for the second time, Frontier failed to notify CPS as required when it first submitted its application to SLU. Instead, CPS was copied on SLU’s notification to DESE that it had approved Frontier’s application. This is a violation of state law and prevented any opportunity for local voices to be heard as part of the sponsorship approval process.

SLU’s submission procedures require a prospective charter to document evidence of interest from families the charter intends to serve. There has been no public engagement to determine support in Columbia for Frontier’s publicly-funded charter. Where the application asks for evidence of family interest in the charter school, Frontier cites a national trend in

charter schools applying for federal funding. This is not local interest. This is charter school operators taking advantage of money that is available from the federal government.

The lack of local public engagement is reflected in the application's lack of local leadership, with the application seeking to open a school that will be entirely managed and overseen from out-of-town. The proposed governing board (which is the same as its existing board) includes only one member with a Columbia address. Notably, there are multiple board members with addresses outside the state of Missouri, which is a violation of state law. Frontier plans to use corporate administrators in Kansas City to operate a school in Columbia, and SLU plans to oversee that operation from St. Louis. The children of our community deserve a hands-on, physically present commitment from their school administrators and we find the proposed structure thin and unrealistic.

The lack of local knowledge is also reflected in Frontier's financial projections. Public school districts in Boone County are facing a changing local revenue model for the first time since voters approved a senior property tax freeze. It is unknown what effect this will have on revenue, as the percentage of households that have opted in are not linked to their assessed valuations. In 2025, the first year the freeze was applied, collections were down by 1% and a portion of revenue will remain flat in future years, leading to an increasing gap between previous revenue projections and the amount collected. There is no evidence that Frontier's budget even attempts to account for this complicated revenue structure.


Frontier demonstrates an inconsistent and haphazard approach to its proposed budget. Projected Prop C revenue jumped from \$282,508 in year one in the November '25 application to \$366,744 in the March '26 application. Neither of these numbers matched DESE projections, which estimate Prop C revenue per pupil at CPS for 26-27 to be \$1,465. Projected out for the 144 students Frontier claims it will serve in its first year, this would equal \$210,960. In other words, Frontier's budget line item for Prop C revenue is off by more than 50%. The state revenue assumptions in Frontier's proposed budget also appear inflated. The basic formula projection for 144 students (Frontier's expected enrollment) is nearly \$1.9M, which is more than \$13,000 per student. Even with weighting factors applied, this exceeds the \$6,900 per student DESE has paid for the 2025-26 fiscal year by more than 40%. Prior to spending millions in taxpayer dollars, any entity wishing to open an LEA should have to demonstrate a thorough understanding of the local revenue structure and a budget with accurate assumptions.

Application Should Be Denied

We implore the State Board members to vote against the approval of this charter. Frontier is not invested in the success of Columbia's students, as demonstrated by their lack of preparation, the absence of a feasibility study or public engagement, and their stated intent to take millions of dollars from the local public district to open a school for students currently attending private school. We respectfully ask that you consider our 150-year history of deep community partnership and outstanding commitment to the well-being and academic success of every student and deny this charter application.

Sincerely,

The Columbia Board of Education



John Lyman, President



Paul Harper, Vice
President



Suzette Waters, Member



Jeanne Snodgrass, Member



April Ferrao, Member



Alvin Cobbins, Member



Erica Dickson, Member