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STATE PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL COMMISSION
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APPLICATIONS COMMITTEE MEETING

DATE OF SUBMITTAL: April 4, 2025

DATE OF MEETING: April 10, 2025

TO: Cathy K. Ikeda, Chairperson
State Public Charter School Commission

FROM: Darlene Flores, Applications Specialist
State Public Charter School Commission

AGENDA ITEM: VI. Action on the Pre-K Only Charter School Application: Mana ‘Ulu Montessori Charter Lab School

I. DESCRIPTION

Action on Charter School Application for Proposed Pre-K Only Charter School, Mana ‘Ulu Montessori Charter Lab School (Mana ‘Ulu).

II. AUTHORITY

Charter School Applications: Pursuant to §302D-5(a), Hawaii Revised Statutes (HRS), “[a]uthorizers are responsible for executing the following essential powers and duties: . . . (1) Soliciting and evaluating charter applications; (2) Approving quality charter applications that meet identified educational needs and promote a diversity of educational choices; [and] (3) Declining to approve weak or inadequate charter applications[.]”

HRS §302D-39 Public early learning and preschool programs; administrative authority. (a) The commission shall have administrative authority over all state-funded early learning programs and private partnership-funded preschool programs in public charter schools except for special education and Title I-funded prekindergarten programs. ... (c) Subject to the availability of funding, the commission shall implement an application process for schools to establish an early learning program.

III. BACKGROUND

For the 2024 pre-k only charter school application cycle, the application was assessed by an evaluation team consisting of Dr. Ed H. Noh, Danny Vasconcellos, Jr., Pūhala Kamalamalama, Kamaha’o Kaai, Dr. Ann Abeshima, Dr. Caroline Soga, and Dr. Patricia Gooch. The evaluation team assessed the school’s purpose, academic, financial, and governance plans submitted in the application.

The evaluation team’s role in the applications process is to evaluate the application against the evaluation criteria in order to develop recommendations for approval or denial to the State Public Charter School Commission (Commission). In developing its recommendation, the evaluation team assessed the application and conducted an interview with applicant group members. The Evaluation Team does not consider the public hearing testimony in developing its recommendation or any comments that have been submitted by the Department of Education (DOE) in developing its recommendation.

Key components of the evaluation process are as follows:

- **Application Review:** Evaluators assess the applicant’s responses to the application questions, submitted attachments, and overall proposal, focusing on school purpose, academic, facility/financial, and governance plan.
- **Capacity Interview:** As required by Section 302D-13, HRS, the evaluation team conducted a capacity interview with Mana ‘Ulu on February 26, 2025. The applicant group members that attended the interview were: Casey Agena, Kristy Sakai, Scott Nishimoto, Andrea Blackwell, and Dana Ciacci.
- **Public Hearing:** Section 302D-13, HRS, requires the Commission to hold a public hearing to allow the public an opportunity to provide its input on each charter application. As such, the Commission held a public hearing on the application on February 27, 2025. The public hearing was held at the Commission office and via Zoom to enable the public to testify and receive a presentation from the applicant about their proposed charter school. Oral testimony¹ provided by one individuals and written testimony² submitted by 33 individuals/organizations were provided at this meeting.
- **Evaluation Team Recommendation Report:** This report was produced by the evaluation team summarizing their review of the application and clarification interview. There are four components of the recommendation report, each corresponding to the main sections of the Pre-K only charter application: school purpose, academic plan, facility/financial plan, and governance plan. Each section includes a rating, a summary of the submitted plan and analysis of evidence supporting Mana ‘Ulu’s capacity to execute their plan. This report was transmitted to the applicant on April 4, 2025, and attached as part of the submittal for the Applications Committee meeting on April 10, 2025.

¹ Public hearing video recording of the February 27, 2025 meeting:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1iG0oZnIC9QjWCioB9HEmlyDi6hWZi-Yd/view?usp=drive_link

² Written testimony of the February 27, 2025 meeting:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/12ml3Dv84tPgGr6cehHv9kfHa-4X-WO9X/view>

- **EOEL Comments Solicited:** Commission staff solicited comments from the Executive Office on Early Learning (EOEL). The Commission received comments from EOEL Director, Yuuko Arikawa-Cross. The feedback has been attached as **Exhibit 1** for your review.

IV. INFORMATION FOR CONSIDERATION

Summary of Section Ratings

Opening a successful, high-performing charter school depends on having a complete, coherent plan. It is not an endeavor for which strength in one area can compensate for material weakness in another. Therefore, in order to receive a recommendation for approval, the application must demonstrate evidence of capacity to implement the proposed plan, meet the criteria for all main sections of the application school purpose, academic plan, facility/financial plan, and governance plan and present an overall proposal that is likely to result in the successful opening of a *high-quality charter school*, as defined in the Application.

Evaluation Team Recommendation Report

In creating its Recommendation Report for Mana 'Ulu, the following was assessed:

- Mana Ulu's application was assessed against the evaluation criteria presented in the Pre-K-only Charter School Application; and
- Capacity interview

In their report, the evaluation team recommends that the Commission **deny** Mana Ulu's application, as they did not meet the standard of approval in all applicable areas of the application. The Evaluation Team Recommendation Report is attached in **Exhibit 2** of this submittal.

V. SCOPE OF COMMISSIONER REVIEW

To make a recommendation to the full Commission regarding the approval or denial the application, the Application states that the Applications Committee will consider the following:

- Application Sheet
- Application materials
- Capacity Interview
- Evaluation Team Recommendation Report
- Public hearing testimony
- Executive Office on Early Learning comments

Applicants were advised at the beginning of the application process that the Application should be a complete and accurate depiction of their proposed plans, and that **no new information will be accepted**. For the purposes of the application process, **new information means any information that substantially differs from what is provided in the application and is revisionary in nature. Applicants shall not provide any new information beyond the information provided to the Evaluation Team in the Application, and interviews because such new information would not have been completely evaluated by the Evaluation Team.**

Further, the Request for Proposals states that **the Commission shall not consider new information** that was not available to the Evaluation Team. As such, when conducting a review of the application, and during decision-making, Commissioners should not consider any new information submitted by the applicant.

VI. ITEMS FOR CONSIDERATION/DECISION MAKING STATEMENT:

The Application Committee should consider the recommendation by the evaluation team and deliberate whether to recommend approval or denial of the pre-k only charter application for Mana 'Ulu Montessori Charter Lab School to the full Commission.

Exhibit 1

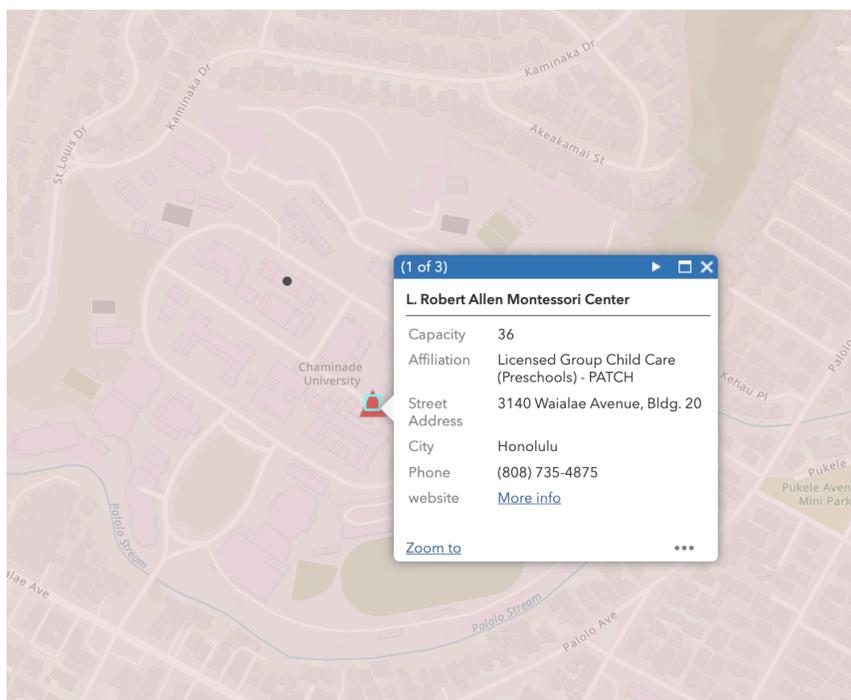
**Executive Office on Early Learning Comments
Mana 'Ulu Montessori Charter Lab School**

Mission: Mana ‘Ulu offers its students and families a high-quality, hands-on, holistic education in a safe, loving, and empowering environment that encourages choice and place-based mindfulness to prepare them for life, service, and the fulfillment of cosmic tasks. Guided by Montessori education philosophy and methodology, Mana ‘Ulu encourages the development of moral character, personal competencies, and a commitment to build a just and peaceful society. Mana ‘Ulu offers both the Chaminade and the broader Early Childhood Education communities in Hawaii a venue in the pursuit of research and innovation for a well-prepared workforce.

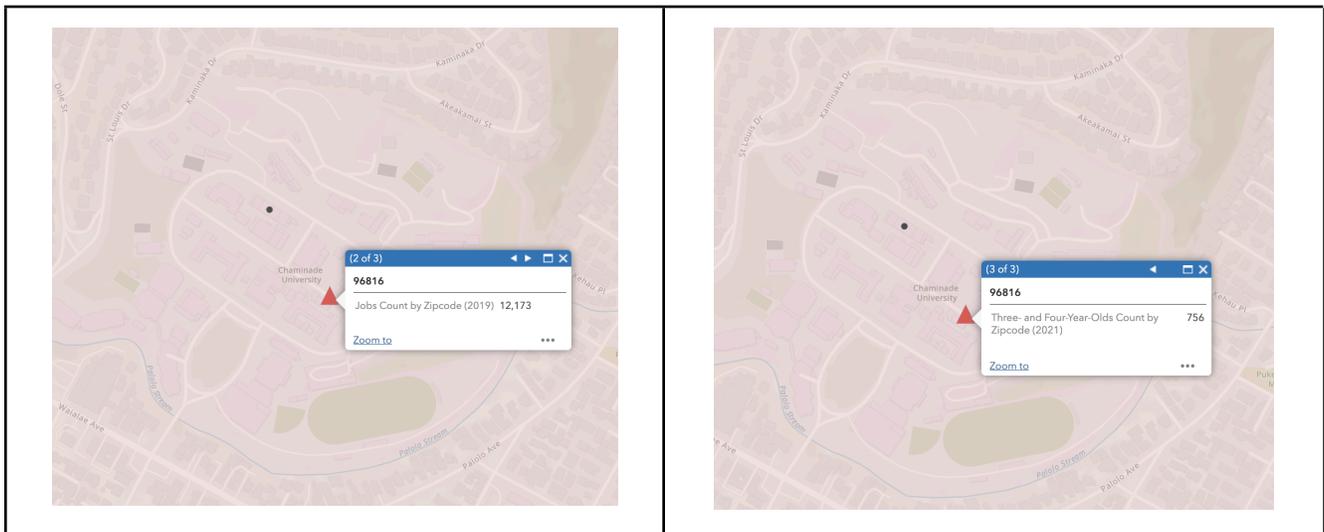
Mana ‘Ulu’s vision is: Inspired by the wisdom of kūpuna (elders), the natural beauty of Hawai‘i, and guided by the global themes of peace and community embedded in the Montessori philosophy, we envision a world where our graduates embody the spirit of aloha, embrace lifelong learning with a sense of wonder, and become compassionate leaders who malama (care for) our community.

The selected school model/focus areas were: Career and Technical Education, Montessori, Training/observation/practicum site for Chaminade University programs

The location of Mana ‘Ulu is in close proximity to the L. Robert Allen Montessori Center.



There are 12,173 jobs in the 86816 area and 756 3- and 4-year-olds.



Wonderings:

- How will Mana ‘Ulu differentiate itself from the existing center to support Chaminade University?
- Why didn’t Mana ‘Ulu select a ‘cultural focus’ for its school model/focus areas when this is what its vision states?
- How will the needs of students with Special Education Services be addressed?
- How will the site monitor student progress and site progress?
- What qualifications and experience do the school leaders have and how does their capacity impact their ability to fulfill a Charter School’s requirements?
 - Are the school leaders the same as the primary contact?
- What kind of support services will be provided for students (e.g., counseling, mental health, social-emotional learning)?
- How will the school approach discipline and behavior management?
- How will the school involve parents and the community in supporting student well-being?
- What is the student enrollment process, and are there any specific eligibility requirements?
- How will the school hold itself accountable to both the charter authorizer and the families it serves?
- What is the site capacity?
- What are their long-term goals for the school, and how do they plan to grow or expand in the coming years?
- How will they encourage parent involvement in school activities and decision-making?
- What communication channels are available for parents to stay informed about their child’s progress and school events?

Exhibit 2

**2024 Evaluation Team Recommendation Report
Mana 'Ulu Montessori Charter Lab School**



State Public Charter School Commission 2024 Recommendation Report

Charter Application for
Mana 'Ulu Montessori Charter Lab School

Evaluation Team

Ed H. Noh, Ed.D.

Danny Vasconcellos Jr., B.A., M.P.A

Pūhala Kamalamalama, M.Ed.

Kamaha'o Kaai

Ann Abeshima, Ed.D.

Caroline Soga, Ph.D.

Patricia Gooch, M.Ed.

Introduction

In 2012, the Hawai'i State Legislature passed Act 130, replacing the state's previous charter school law, Hawaii Revised Statutes (HRS) Chapter 302B, with our new law, codified as HRS Chapter 302D. Act 130 instituted a rigorous, transparent accountability system that at the same time honors the autonomy and local decision-making of Hawai'i's charter schools. The law created the State Public Charter School Commission (the Commission), assigned it statewide chartering jurisdiction and authority, and directed it to enter into State Public Charter School Contracts (Charter Contract) with every existing charter school and every newly approved charter school applicant.

The 2024 Request for Proposals and the resulting evaluation process are rigorous, thorough, transparent, and demanding. The process is meant to ensure that charter school operators possess the capacity to implement sound strategies, practices, and methodologies. Successful applicants will clearly demonstrate high levels of expertise in the areas of education, school finance, administration, and management as well as high expectations for excellence in professional standards and student achievement.

Process

To ensure a rigorous and objective process, the Commission has adopted standardized application and evaluation procedures aligned with national best practices for authorizing high-performing charter schools. This includes structured evaluation frameworks, evaluator training, and multi-member review teams to ensure consistency and integrity. The process is informed by guidance from national authorizing experts and lessons learned from previous application cycles.

For the 2024 application cycle, each application underwent a comprehensive review by both internal and external evaluators. The evaluation process consisted of the following key components:

Application Review. Evaluators assessed the applicant's responses to the application questions, submitted attachments, and overall proposal, focusing on school purpose, academic, facility/financial, and governance plan.

Capacity Interview. As required by HRS §302D-13(4), evaluators conducted an in-person interview (or virtual if necessary) with the applicant's governing board, proposed school director, and key personnel. This interview allowed for clarification of application responses and further assessment of the applicant's capacity to successfully implement the proposed charter school. The interview was recorded for Commissioner review.

Public Hearing. Applicants presented an overview of their application and vision to the Commission in a public forum, as required by HRS §302D-13(4). This was not an interview but an opportunity for the public to provide input on the application.

Department of Education (DOE) Comments. If applicable, the DOE may submit comments on any application for consideration.

Final Evaluation and Recommendation. Upon concluding this comprehensive evaluation, the team compiled a recommendation report, advising either approval or denial of the application based on the findings.

Report Contents

This Recommendation Report includes the following:

Proposal Overview

Basic information about the proposed school as presented in the application.

Recommendation

An overall judgment regarding whether the proposal meets the criteria for approval.

Evaluation Summary

Analysis of the proposal based on these primary areas of plan development and the capacity of the applicant team to execute the plan as presented:

School Purpose: Purpose overview, mission and vision, development process, governing board makeup, and relationship with nonprofit entity.

Academic Performance: Mission Aligned Initiative (MAI), student academic performance, system of assessment, and accountability systems.

Facility and Financial Performance: facility description, budget and staffing plan, per-opening funds, budgetary priorities, and fiscal management.

Governance: Governing board skills, contributions, systems of support, transition process, and monitoring of MAI.

Rating Characteristics

| | |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Meets the Standard | The response reflects a thorough understanding of key issues. It addresses the topic with specific and accurate information that shows thorough preparation; presents a clear, realistic picture of how the proposed school expects to operate; and inspires confidence in the applicant's capacity to carry out the plan effectively. |
| Does Not Meet the Standard | The response meets the criteria in some respects but has substantial gaps, lacks detail and/or requires additional information in one or more areas and does not reflect a thorough understanding of key issues. It does not provide enough accurate, specific information to show thorough preparation; fails to present a clear, realistic picture of how the school expects to operate; and does not inspire confidence in the applicant's capacity to carry out the plan effectively. |

Proposal Overview

Proposed School Name

Mana 'Ulu Montessori Charter Lab School

Mission and Vision

Mission: Mana 'Ulu Montessori Charter Lab School offers its students and families a high quality, hands-on, holistic education in a safe, loving, and empowering environment that encourages choice and place-based mindfulness to prepare them for life and service to others. Guided by Montessori philosophy and methodology, Mana 'Ulu Montessori Charter Lab School encourages the development of moral character, personal competencies, and a commitment to build a just and peaceful society. Mana 'Ulu offers both the Chaminade and the broader Early Childhood communities in Hawaii a venue in the pursuit of research and innovation for a well prepared workforce and community.

Vision: Inspired by the wisdom of kūpuna (elders) and the natural beauty of Hawai'i, Mana 'Ulu Montessori Charter Lab School envisions a world where our graduates embody the spirit of aloha, embrace lifelong learning with a sense of wonder, and become compassionate leaders who mālama (care for) our community.

Geographic Location

Farrington-Kaiser-Kalani, Kaimuki-McKinley-Roosevelt, Aiea-Moanalua-Radford, Leilehua-Mililani-Waialua, Campbell-Kapolei, Pearl City-Waipahu, Nanakuli-Waianae, Castle-Kahuku, Kailua-Kalaheo

Enrollment Projections

Pre-K Only

| Academic Year Plan | Number of Classrooms | Number of Students |
|--------------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| 2025 -2026 | 1 | 16 ¹ |

¹ Applicant presented multiple enrollment models for Year 1, including one with 20 charter-funded students and 16 private-pay students, and another with 16 charter-funded and 20 private-pay students.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mana ‘Ulu Montessori Charter Lab School

RECOMMENDATION

Deny

Summary Analysis

The evaluation team recommends denial of the Mana ‘Ulu Montessori Charter Lab School’s charter application, as the proposal does not meet the criteria for approval in two critical areas: Facility/Financial Plan and Governance.

The applicant presents a compelling mission to expand access to high-quality, tuition-free Montessori education through a partnership with Chaminade University. The program’s alignment with Montessori principles, NAEYC and AMS accreditation, and integration of place-based learning are noteworthy. The academic plan also outlines a holistic, mission-aligned approach to early learning. However, these strengths are significantly undermined by fundamental concerns around the school’s operational readiness and oversight capacity.

The Facility and Financial Plan lacks clarity and structure, particularly in how state resources will be used effectively. The proposed admissions process prioritizes private program continuity through Preschool Open Doors (POD), raising questions about whether the charter school will follow a legally compliant, non-discriminatory enrollment process.

The financial oversight structure lacks sufficient internal controls. Key responsibilities are concentrated under a .25 FTE Head of School, and the private program’s staff are expected to support charter operations without clear budget alignment or a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). This raises concerns about accountability, transparency, and compliance with public school fiscal standards.

The applicant presented multiple enrollment models for Year 1, including one with 20 charter-funded students and 16 private-pay students, and another with 16 charter-funded and 20 private-pay students. The facility, which has a maximum capacity of 36, may not fully enroll 20 charter students, which is the number tied to the state’s per-classroom funding model. Year 2 shows a model with 18 charter-funded students, still below the maximum funding threshold. These projections raise concerns about whether the school will fully maximize available public funds.

The Governance Plan does not establish adequate oversight mechanisms. The roles and responsibilities of the proposed governing board, the Head of School, and the private Montessori administrator are not clearly defined. In the capacity interview, it was stated that the privately funded administrator would support daily charter operations, yet this individual is not reflected in the charter school budget, and no formal agreements are in place to outline this shared role. Furthermore, there is no documented system of fiscal controls beyond general board review, and the governance structure does not provide a sufficient framework for ensuring financial and operational accountability.

While the applicant demonstrates a passion for early childhood education and a strong existing program, the lack of oversight in both governance and fiscal management presents significant risk. These deficiencies prevent the application from meeting the standard required for charter approval.

Based on these findings, the evaluation team recommends denial of the Mana ‘Ulu Montessori Charter Lab School application at this time.

Summary of Section Ratings

Opening and maintaining a successful, high-performing charter school depends on having a complete, coherent plan and identifying highly capable individuals to execute that plan. It is not an endeavor for which strengths in some areas can compensate for material weakness in others.

Therefore, in order to receive a recommendation for approval, the application must receive a “Meets the Standard” rating in all areas.

School Purpose Meets

Academic Performance Meets

Facility/Financial Does Not Meet

Governance Does Not Meet

SCHOOL PURPOSE

RATING

Mana 'Ulu Montessori Charter Lab School

Meets

Plan Summary

The Mana 'Ulu is designed to provide a community-driven, culturally responsive, and research-based Montessori education in Hawai'i, addressing critical gaps in early childhood education. This proposed charter lab school integrates Hawaiian values, sustainability practices, and early childhood workforce development into a high-quality, holistic learning environment that fosters independence, self-direction, and a deep connection to community and place.

By integrating Hawaiian values, language, and traditions into a Montessori curriculum, Mana 'Ulu fosters engagement, cultural identity, and academic growth, with guidance from the Office of Hawaiian Education. The Farm-to-ECE model promotes nutrition, sustainability, and environmental learning, aligning with Hawai'i's emphasis on food security.

The applicant is also committed to addressing the early childhood workforce shortage by serving as a teacher training site in partnership with Chaminade. This collaboration supports the Montessori Certificate Program, ensuring a pipeline of qualified, culturally responsive early childhood educators. By offering professional development opportunities and leveraging Chaminade's expertise, Mana 'Ulu hopes to contribute to the long-term improvement of early childhood education in Hawai'i.

Analysis

The applicant meets the criteria for approval in this section.

Strengths of School Purpose

Mana 'Ulu seeks to address the limited availability of Montessori education in Hawai'i by offering a tuition-free, public option for families who may not have access to private Montessori programs. The school's partnership with Chaminade provides a strong foundation for workforce development in early childhood education, supporting the training and certification of Montessori teachers while increasing the availability of qualified educators in the field. The applicant has an existing accredited program with NAEYC and AMS recognition, ensuring adherence to high-quality early learning standards.

The program's hands-on, holistic approach aligns with Montessori's emphasis on individualized learning, environmental stewardship, and place-based education. The inclusion of a Farm-to-ECE initiative supports sustainability practices while fostering cultural connections to Hawai'i's natural environment. Additionally, the school has demonstrated high demand, with a 200-student waitlist indicating strong community interest. The governing board is established as a community group, reflecting local investment and commitment to the success of the program. The school's multi-delivery model, allowing both charter and private programs to operate concurrently, maximizes resource utilization and expands access to early learning opportunities for a diverse student population.

Weaknesses of School Purpose

Despite these strengths, the application lacks clear documentation on structured community outreach efforts that informed the decision to establish the school. While discussions with parents and community members were referenced, there is no formal evidence of needs assessments, stakeholder meetings, or collected data demonstrating broad community input. The role of Hawaiian values and kupuna wisdom within the curriculum is not explicitly defined, beyond general statements about holistic learning and

environmental connections. More clarity is needed on how these cultural elements will be intentionally embedded into daily instructional practices.

Additionally, while the Montessori model is well-established, the application does not provide detailed information on how the mission and vision were developed, including who was involved and what feedback was considered in shaping the school's purpose. The governance structure also raises concerns, as the roles and responsibilities of key individuals, including those in leadership positions, require further clarification to ensure that the school's purpose can be effectively operationalized.

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

RATING

Mana 'Ulu Montessori Charter Lab School

Meets

Plan Summary

Mana 'Ulu's academic plan is centered around its Malama 'Āina (Caring for our Earth) initiative, which integrates environmental stewardship into a high-fidelity Montessori curriculum. This three-year rotating curriculum engages students through place-based learning with units focused on land and place, the solar system, world cultures, and Hawaiian community. Assessments include hands-on projects, classroom discussions, mapping exercises, and nature-based activities that align with Montessori principles.

The school is committed to authentic Montessori practices, ensuring a prepared environment, sensorial exploration, practical life activities, and culturally relevant learning experiences. It will seek NAEYC accreditation and AMS school membership to uphold rigorous early childhood education standards.

A comprehensive assessment approach will include Montessori-based evaluations, portfolio assessments, community-based projects, and parent-teacher conferences to track student progress. The school will also ensure teacher licensure compliance, ongoing professional development, and mentorship programs to maintain high instructional quality.

By serving as a lab school for early childhood education, partnering with Chaminade, and embedding culturally responsive teaching practices, Mana 'Ulu aims to cultivate lifelong learners and future environmental stewards while addressing Hawai'i's early childhood education needs.

Analysis

The applicant meets the criteria for approval in this section.

Strengths of the Academic Plan

Mana 'Ulu presents a comprehensive and well-structured academic plan that aligns with its mission and vision. The Malama 'Āina (Caring for Our Earth) initiative is embedded within a three-year rotating curriculum, integrating Montessori principles, Hawaiian cultural values, and hands-on learning experiences. This structure supports holistic development through individualized instruction, sensorial exploration, and environmental stewardship. The curriculum framework aligns with best practices in early childhood education, fostering cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development.

The school demonstrates strong assessment practices, incorporating Teaching Strategies Gold (TS Gold), CLASS, and ECERS-3, along with formative and summative Montessori-based assessments, portfolio documentation, student-led conferences, and community-based projects. This comprehensive assessment system ensures that student progress is measured through multiple indicators, informing instructional practices and supporting diverse learning needs. The governing board will play an active role in overseeing these assessments, ensuring alignment with high-quality public education standards.

Mana 'Ulu meets Hawai'i Teacher Standards Board (HTSB) licensure requirements, with its current educators holding Montessori credentials. The school has an existing "Grow Our Own Kumu" initiative, supporting new hires in obtaining Montessori certification through Chaminade's training program. As a lab school/teaching site for adult learners, teachers will engage in ongoing professional development, peer observations, and study groups to ensure continuous instructional improvement.

Weaknesses of Academic Plan

While the curriculum is thoughtfully designed, the specific integration of Hawaiian values, kupuna wisdom, and place-based learning is not fully articulated. The application describes a broad commitment to cultural relevance, but lacks clear instructional examples of how these values will be intentionally woven into daily learning experiences. This raises concerns about whether Hawaiian cultural practices will be an active part of instruction or simply a philosophical underpinning.

During the interview, curriculum details were not explicitly discussed, making it unclear how the academic framework aligns with state performance standards. While the school employs multiple assessment tools, the application does not clarify how assessment data will be systematically used to adjust instruction, implement interventions, and support students across different learning levels (e.g., English Learners, students with disabilities, at-risk students). Although Montessori practices emphasize individualized learning, the applicant did not address how they would leverage state-provided resources or outside support for at-risk students or students with special needs.

In the capacity interview, it was stated that the .25 FTE Head of School would manage and support charter school staff, raising concerns about the level of support, professional development, and accountability for teachers. A part-time administrative role may limit the ability to provide instructional leadership, oversee teacher evaluations effectively, address staff concerns, and ensure compliance with state and charter requirements. Additionally, a .25 FTE position may not be sufficient to lead professional development, oversee intervention programs, manage compliance reporting, or engage meaningfully with parents and the community. The potential strain on administrative capacity could impact the effectiveness of instructional oversight and the school's ability to adapt to student needs in real-time.

FACILITY/FINANCIAL PLAN

RATING

Mana 'Ulu Montessori Charter Lab School

Does Not Meet

Plan Summary

Mana 'Ulu will operate within an established private Montessori preschool, utilizing an existing facility designed for early childhood education. The site includes spacious classrooms, outdoor learning areas, and dedicated Montessori spaces. The facility is DHS-licensed for 36 children and holds AMS and NAEYC accreditations.

The school will follow a mixed delivery model, serving both charter and private students in the same space. Staffing will include two teachers (one lead, one assistant) employed by the private provider and two teachers (one lead, one EA) employed by the charter program. Families will have the option of extended care past 2 p.m. through the private provider for a monthly fee.

The facility-sharing model reduces start-up and operating costs, eliminating the need for new construction. Savings will be allocated to Montessori materials, teacher salaries, and program implementation. Pre-opening costs will be covered through fundraising, grants, and donations, with an annual giving campaign planned. The school will implement separate accounting, financial reporting, and a formal MOU to ensure compliance and transparency in financial management.

Analysis

The applicant does not meet the criteria for approval in this section.

Strengths of Facility/Financial Plan

Mana 'Ulu will work in partnership with Chaminade University's Montessori Laboratory School, a well-established and accredited private preschool that has served the community since 1982. This facility provides an authentic Montessori environment, including spacious classrooms, outdoor learning spaces, and dedicated areas for hands-on learning, which align with the proposed academic program's emphasis on Montessori pedagogy and Farm-to-ECE initiatives. Chaminade's support ensures access to additional resources, such as grant funding for Montessori programs, professional development for teachers, and a subleased space.

The financial plan prioritizes direct student services, with a significant portion of the budget allocated toward staffing and instructional materials. The school's fundraising plan includes multi-faceted strategies such as grants, community-based fundraising, and support from the Kamali'i Foundation, which will cover pre-opening costs and teacher development. The school also intends to collaborate with Chaminade's education department to access additional funding and professional learning opportunities.

The budget includes plans for high-quality staffing, professional development, and ongoing program evaluation, demonstrating a commitment to continuous improvement and maintaining high standards for Montessori education. The financial oversight plan involves collaborative budgeting between administrators of the charter and private programs, ensuring shared resources are allocated efficiently. Regular financial reporting is planned to maintain transparency and accountability to both the governing board and Chaminade.

Weakness of Facility/Financial Plan

Concerns exist regarding the enrollment process for charter students. In the capacity interview, during budget discussions, the applicant described a process in which all families would first apply for Preschool Open Doors (POD). Those who qualify for POD would remain on the private program's roster. This approach raises questions about how the school will ensure a non-discriminatory admissions process for the charter program, as required by law. The applicant must clarify how it will balance continuity for current families while maintaining fair and open access for new students under public charter school regulations.

Fiscal management oversight lacks sufficient checks and balances. The plan states that the proposed .25 FTE Head of School will handle all charter school fiscal oversight, while the private school funded staff for curriculum support will oversee the private school side, with monitoring from the governing board. However, no additional details are provided on how financial controls will be enforced beyond board review. Given the limited administrative capacity of a part-time school leader, concerns exist about financial oversight, payroll management, and overall fiscal accountability. A clearer delineation of financial responsibilities and internal safeguards is needed to prevent any lapses in financial accountability and ensure compliance with public charter school financial policies.

Different enrollment and funding models were presented throughout the application, creating uncertainty around the school's financial planning and use of state funds. In Year 1, the applicant proposed two different models: one with 20 charter-funded students and 16 privately paid students, and another with 16 charter-funded students and 20 privately paid students. In Year 2, the applicant identified their ideal model as 18 charter-funded students and 18 privately paid students. Given that the facility has a maximum capacity of 36 students, these variations raise concerns about whether the school will fully maximize the state funds allotted per classroom and ensure efficient use of public resources.

GOVERNANCE PLAN

RATING

Mana 'Ulu Montessori Charter Lab School

Does Not Meet

Plan Summary

Mana 'Ulu's governing board was assembled ensuring diversity of perspective, nonprofit governance expertise, and financial and academic oversight abilities. The governing board includes members with experience in early childhood education, nonprofit leadership, financial management, and program development.

The governing board collaborated to develop the school's mission, academic program, and governance structure, conducting research and ensuring regulatory compliance. It will implement proactive monitoring systems to track student progress, financial health, and organizational effectiveness, with regular reporting, classroom observations, and community feedback mechanisms. The governing board will also oversee the Montessori Mission Aligned Initiative (MAI) through annual evaluations, developmental data analysis, and engagement activities to maintain accountability and continuous improvement.

Analysis

The applicant does not meet the criteria for approval in this section.

Strengths of the Governance Plan

The Mana 'Ulu's governing board consists of members with diverse backgrounds in education, nonprofit leadership, and financial oversight. Many governing board members have a strong awareness of Montessori education and are committed to the school's mission. Their collective experience ensures that the board has the capacity to oversee the school's development, startup, and operation effectively.

The governing board demonstrates a proactive approach to school oversight, with systems in place to monitor performance in academics, finance, and operations. They plan to use data-driven decision-making, periodic curriculum reviews, classroom observations, community engagement, and annual program evaluations. The school will also rely on faculty support from Chaminade, shared professional development opportunities, and external partnerships to enhance oversight and continuous improvement.

The governing board is committed to a structured transition from a planning to an operational board, ensuring the school meets its mission, vision, and performance expectations. Plans include ongoing professional development for staff, structured school leader evaluations, and financial compliance measures. The governing board will conduct regular meetings to review school progress, analyze student developmental outcomes, and ensure compliance with charter contract goals and state regulations.

Weaknesses of Governance Plan

The organizational structure lacks a clear delineation of authority between the Mana 'Ulu governing board, the proposed Charter Head of School, and the private Montessori preschool administrator. The organizational chart currently places the private preschool under the Mana 'Ulu governing board's oversight, which raises concerns about the scope of governance and potential conflicts in decision-making between the two entities. Additionally, in the capacity interview, the applicant stated

that the privately funded administrator would also support daily operations for charter-funded staff and students. However, this individual is not allocated in the charter school budget, raising concerns about operational oversight, resource allocation, and accountability. Without an established MOU clearly outlining shared responsibilities, expectations, and funding arrangements, this overlap presents a significant governance risk. Furthermore, the roles and responsibilities of governing board members remain unclear, with no meeting agendas, minutes, or documentation provided to demonstrate how members contributed to the development of the application.

There is limited detail on how the governing board will monitor financial oversight and ensure fiscal accountability. While financial reporting is included as part of governance responsibilities, specific protocols for fiscal checks and balances beyond board review are not outlined. The .25 FTE Head of School is responsible for the oversight of the charter school's finances, which raises concerns regarding adequate administrative capacity to manage fiscal responsibilities. A clearer financial oversight structure is needed to prevent excessive concentration of fiscal authority under one individual.

Additionally, while the governance plan states systems of support will be in place to address indicators of distress in academics, finances, and organizational health, specific interventions and contingency plans are not clearly outlined.

Evaluator Biographies

Ed H. Noh, Ed.D.

Dr. Noh is the Executive Director of the Hawai'i State Public Charter School Commission, bringing over 30 years of experience in education. Prior to this role, he served as the Complex Area Superintendent for the Castle-Kahuku Complex Area, overseeing 16 schools with more than 7,400 students. Dr. Noh's leadership experience includes serving as the School Director of Ka'ōhao Public Charter School, where he achieved top-tier elementary school rankings, annual enrollment growth, and a balanced budget while introducing new classroom technologies.

Dr. Noh holds a Doctorate in Professional Educational Practice from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa and a Master's Degree in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies from the University of Washington. Dr. Noh's extensive background in educational leadership and his commitment to fostering innovation and excellence make him a valuable asset to Hawai'i's public charter school system.

Danny Vasconcellos Jr., B.A., M.P.A.

Danny Vasconcellos serves as the Finance & Operations Director for the Hawaii State Public Charter School Commission. An alumnus of 'Iolani School, he earned a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and a Master's Degree in Public Administration from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. His professional background includes six years with the State Office of the Auditor and experience with the Hawaii State Legislature. Prior to his current role, Danny contributed to the Commission as the Organizational Performance Specialist.

Pūhala Kamalamalama, M.Ed.

Pūhala Kamalamalama serves as an Early Learning Coach for the Hawai'i State Public Charter School Commission, bringing over 15 years of experience in early childhood education. She has held various roles at the Institute for Native Pacific Education and Culture (INPEACE), including Aide, Site Coordinator, Island Coordinator, and Mentor Coach. Pūhala earned her Associate's degree in Early Childhood Education from Hawai'i Community College, a Bachelor of Arts in Social Sciences with a focus on Early Childhood Education from the University of Hawai'i – West O'ahu, and a Master of Education in Curriculum and Instruction from Liberty University. She is also a Certified Infant, Toddler, and Preschooler CLASS Observer as well as a CDA PD Specialist and serves as a PACE Casual Lecturer at Hilo and Honolulu Community College, where she supports the growth of future early childhood educators.

Kamaha'o Kaai

Kamaha'o Kaai is an Early Learning Coach with the Hawai'i State Public Charter School Commission. From Nānākuli, Kamaha'o a mother of two, is passionate about perpetuating the Hawaiian language and sharing her knowledge from a native Hawaiian perspective. As a product of the Charter School movement, she is committed to giving back to the students and educators of Hawai'i through her role as an Early Learning Coach.

Ann Abeshima, Ed.D.

Dr. Ann Abeshima has over 25 years of experience in child and family development, early childhood education, and higher education instruction. She is an Associate Professor at Honolulu Community College, where she teaches early childhood education courses and mentors students. Her expertise includes direct care and education of young children, teacher coaching, family engagement, and leadership in early learning settings. She has held roles as a mentor coach, program director at Seagull Schools, and adjunct faculty at Chaminade University, contributing to program accreditation and quality improvement initiatives. Dr. Abeshima holds a Doctorate in Education from the University of Southern

California and a Master of Arts in Human Development from Pacific Oaks College, with a strong passion for advancing professionalism and leadership in early childhood education.

Caroline Soga, Ph.D.

Dr. Caroline Soga is an Associate Professor at Honolulu Community College with extensive experience in early childhood education, coaching, and program development. She previously served as a Pre-K Coach for the Hawai'i State Public Charter School Commission and an Early Childhood Education Coach at Parents and Children Together. With a doctorate in Educational Psychology from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa and a master's in Early Childhood Education from Loyola Marymount University, Dr. Soga has contributed to professional development initiatives, research publications, and program accreditation. Her passion lies in fostering high-quality early learning environments and supporting educators in implementing best practices.

Patricia Gooch, M.Ed

Patricia Gooch has dedicated her career to early childhood education as an instructor, program coordinator, and consultant. She retired as a Professor from the Early Childhood Education Department at Honolulu Community College, where she also coordinated the Alani Children's Center at Kapi'olani Community College. With a master's in Education and Montessori certification from the College of Notre Dame and a background in Business Administration from Michigan State University, she has taught at Chaminade University and provided training for early learning professionals. Currently, she serves as an Early Childhood Education consultant for the Hawai'i State Public Charter School Commission, supporting professional development efforts statewide.