

September 10, 2015

Carolyn Shearman, Chair  
NM Public Education Commission  
RE: SAHQ Academy Charter Application

Commissioner Shearman,

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the evaluation and to comment on the process in general. This is our second year to submit an application but my fourth year in participating in the charter training and development. I have a great deal of respect for the PEC and the responsibility they shoulder to ensure quality, fiscally responsible education in New Mexico.

I began this journey with Senator Boitano in 2011 and there has been a new cast of CSD employees, processes, interpretation of rules and points of emphasis each year since then. Each leadership group has had their own sense of history with New Mexico charter schools and experiences that provided a lens through which they viewed the process. There have been many fine people involved over the years, but to be honest, the turnover has created a moving target for applicants.

As we prepared for this year's submission, we took great care in "hearing" your concerns as they were communicated last year. We also took the time to look over applications that were scored very high and that the PEC seemed to support whole-heartedly. We studied other "A" rated blended schools that operate in New Mexico and looked at their goals as defined by their contracts.

The application and its rubric were the same both years so it would be reasonable to expect that the areas in which we scored high would not need to be adjusted. It would also be reasonable to expect that changes made to address your concerns, adjusted by studying other top rated schools, would have scored better. Unfortunately, we scored lower in every area except for budget, and that only improved slightly after a great deal of work was done by a highly regarded financial manager, Michael Vigil. Last year the CSD recommended that we be approved with conditions and this year it was recommended that we be denied.

This year's evaluation did not provide us with specific scores for each question as was done last year, but rather gave a composite score for the entire section. For instance, last year we received "exceeds" in differentiated instruction, ELL differentiation and ELL monitoring. This year the scores were combined for the entire section and we received a "does not meet" as defined by the commentary and composite score.

Last year, we received "meets" or "exceeds" in Instructional strategies, scope and sequence, effectiveness and all SPED related questions. This year, we were highly criticized in the narrative and scored substantially lower. In any other environment, if your question was marked correct, you would have no reason to change it.

With regards to the curriculum, we did not change the answers but instead, provided a great deal more detail. Last year, we were going to put the curriculum out to bid. Through our research we found that all the "A" rated New Mexico blended schools were using the Edgenuity curriculum. Our other choices

were companies run by K12 and a few owned by Pearson. After evaluating the benefits of this product, we decided that Edgenuity would best meet our needs and therefore, were able to provide a complete scope and sequence for ALL required New Mexico courses. This went far beyond what we had available to us last year.

The Edgenuity curriculum is state aligned and complete. We need no other curriculum to meet New Mexico standards for graduation. Three other "A" rated blended schools use this as their primary or only core and elective curriculum. Unlike traditional schools, mastery based delivery insures that each student is consuming all of the material. All students must complete each lesson, start to finish, at a level that is commensurate to their ability. There is no opportunity for any portion of the course to be skipped or left incomplete. It is befuddling to me as to why this is inadequate.

One of the innovative things that SAHQ Academy does is to take the "required" coursework and add layers of support and substance. In order to do this effectively, we have to individualize it and make it relevant to the students that walk through our door. The beauty of a small charter school is that the entire curriculum is not "ready-made" but can pivot and shift according the individuals it's meant to serve. Out of respect for the talents and experience of the teachers and the uniqueness of each individual that we will educate, the next level of curriculum will be developed by them, with a time table defined within the application. A similar time table was used last year by an approved school that did not have one page of curriculum written. They scored a 95% and were approved. A blog post by your own Mr. Carr highlights a teachers' creative process at the beginning of the school year and perhaps he can provide some insight.

Even though the goals set forth last year were scored as "meets", the PEC had several concerns and questions with regards to our choices. We reviewed them and again studied other schools to get a sense of what might be deemed appropriate. We found that Taos Academy had their contract posted online and other approved charter schools goals were available for comparison. Our goals were similarly stated as Taos Academy, however, theirs separated math and language into separate goals. Taos Academy's approved Goal #1 reads.

*100% of TA students in grades 5-12 will make at least a GLE(grade level equivalency) gain in reading of 1 year as measured by the NWEA reading assessment.*

Our #1 goal included all three areas of Maps testing in one goal but stated that there would be demonstrated progress. Expecting one year of growth for one year of schooling is reasonable, but we felt as though individual growth was a better indicator recognizing that all students are not created equal. One year for one year for my son who is D level special ed is unreasonable but personal growth is non-negotiable. He is 21 and reads at a third grade level. One year for one year for a genius is unreasonable as well.

We also included a course map that insured that miniscule improvements that did not result in on time graduation would not be acceptable. Each student has a course map, unique to them, that keeps them on pace to graduate on time. For students that are behind, this would require that they cover and pass more than one year's worth of work to stay on pace. Their test scores should reflect this work.

Many comments were made with regards to the connectivity between our goals and our academic plan. I know this is more difficult to see from the outside looking in, but I'd like to provide you with a graphic that might help. It is included as an additional attachment and our "Page 5". Here is a summary.

GOAL 1: FOUNDATIONAL (Building Capacity)

**Relationships = Improved test scores**

The connection between personal relationships, accountability and performance is key to SAHQ Academy's academic plan. Daily goals, pacing and monitoring keep student's focused and builds the foundation for deeper learning. They "own" the basics. Consistent expectations and solid relationships drive the student's on a daily basis resulting in improved test scores.

GOAL 2: APPLIED (Demonstrated Capacity)

**Making knowledge relevant = wanting to go to college and start a career = Entrance exams**

Taking the knowledge gained from coursework and applying it to projects that interest them personally gives students the sense that their work has relevance. The skills they learn in class can impact their future and provide for a satisfying career. Setting a minimum score for this is unreasonable. Very intelligent kids can score poorly and just getting kids that struggle to take the test is a victory. *It should not be considered a measure of a student's intelligence.* The focus is not so much on the test score, but the energy needed to commit yourself to go to the college of your choice, continue your education, build capacity, and ultimately enjoy a successful career.

GOAL 3: EXPERIENTIAL (Monetize Capacity)

**Take skills learned, develop business plans, implement them = Make money**

We are not simply putting together a potluck and inviting families to attend. Developing a graduate portfolio, internships, event planning and implementation are serious business. If you have ever participated in developing a business plan, producing budgets, coordinating facilities, recruiting volunteers, obtaining permits, marketing, project management, payment portals, managing payroll, social networking, keeping statistics and cataloging results, producing event summaries or evaluation reports, then you know how much a student can learn from this type of activity.

Response to Evaluation, SAHQ Academy

As I have mentioned a few times before, we researched other successful schools to enhance our 2014 application and align with concepts that the PEC seemed to approve of. An example of this is the DEAP School that received a 95% score last year. Their SMART goals included:

*DEAP will plan and implement at least 4 cultural events ... that engage parents/families/ the larger community*

Measured by: “% of DEAP student’s parents/families will participate in two or more events”

*All DEAP students will have at least one adult at school to support their focus on living a healthy and well balanced life*

Measured by: “% of DEAP students will demonstrate progress in short cycle assessments”

Although the evaluation and capacity hearing environment was very negative and somewhat demeaning, we proudly stand by our application. We have a solid plan, an exceptional team and a bright future. We hope that the State is excited to partner with us in creating a dynamic, innovative and successful school.

Most respectfully,

*Charlotte Rode*

SAHQ Academy Founder