September 13, 2013

Dear Public Education Commissioners:

Enclosed is the Final 2013 Charter School Application Final Recommendation and Evaluation for Columbus Community Charter applying for a state charter in Columbus, NM to open with grades 7 – 10 and eventually expand to grade 12 represented by founders, Jack Strong and Phillip Skinner. Please know that the process utilized this year by the Charter Schools Division (CSD) deviated from past years and was designed to reflect the Amended Charter School Act. We feel we created a very rigorous process. Three teams of highly successful and seasoned charter school leaders and business managers scored both the paper application and the capacity interview totaling 333 points for elementary applications and 342 points for high school applications.

Additionally, the CSD allotted itself 10% of the total points (33 & 34 for ES and HS respectively), available for dispersal called the “CSD Team Synthesis Score”. The rationale is that CSD staff has been involved with the people and the applications since the very beginning and

have a perspective that is different from the reviewers and the PEC.

So in addition to the application and capacity interview score, the “CSD Team Synthesis Score”, which is on the summary score sheet, includes our analysis of whether the applicants: 1) Presented a good idea for a school that is realistic; 2) Explained their idea thoroughly in written and verbal form; 3) Have requisite capacity to make the school a success; 4) Made a convincing demonstration of capacity and 5) Have demonstrated sufficient support for the school and whether it will be sustained after the founders move on.

We realize as well that the stated goals in the applications may be refined during the Contract and Performance Frameworks process that follows at the end of the Planning Year.

Thank you all for your hard work and dedication to ensuring that New Mexico’s Charter Schools represent the best of public school options for parents and students. We are making a difference!

Sincerely,

Tony Gerlicz

Director, Options for Parents: Charter Schools Division

**Recommendation**

Approve : with standard requirements to commence operations, (see below)

1. Obtain standing as an approved Board of Finance

2. Negotiate a contract with the Public Education Commission

3. Secure Appropriate Funding

4. Secure a facility that meets PSFA approval

5. Complete the planning-year checklist

Overall the application is complete and adequate; and during their Capacity Interview, the applicant(s) demonstrated the capacity to implement the education and governance/management plans as described in the application. The CSD sees this application as a researched-based and innovative model of engaging Navajo youth utilizing Navajo culture and language, which carries a higher probability of success than current models of educating Native American youth. The applicant(s) have the experience, knowledge, and competence to successfully open and operate a charter school, including having an experienced educator already selected as Principal and the beginnings of an exemplary Governing Council.

Approve with Additional Conditions:

Overall the application is complete and adequate; and during their Capacity Interview, the applicant(s) demonstrated the capacity to implement the education and governance/management plans as described in the application. Nothing was identified that would indicate the applicant(s) do not have the experience, knowledge, and competence to successfully open and operate a charter school; however, the conditions recommended below are necessary to correct minor concerns raised by the reviewers.

**ADDITIONAL PROPOSED CONDITIONS**

The Applicant will complete the following additional conditions beyond the standard ones, according to the timelines set forth therein:

N/A

Deny: X

Overall the application is either incomplete or inadequate; or during their Capacity Interview, the applicant(s) did not sufficiently demonstrate the experience, knowledge, and competence to successfully open and operate a charter school.

The Charter Schools Act, in paragraph 1 of Subsection L of Section 22-8B-6 NMSA 1978, states that a chartering authority may approve, approve with conditions or deny an application. A chartering authority may deny an application if:

1. the application is incomplete or inadequate;
2. the application does not propose to offer an educational program consistent with the requirements and purposes of the Charter Schools Act;
3. the proposed head administrator or other administrative or fiscal staff was involved with another charter school whose charter was denied or revoked for fiscal management or the proposed head administrator or other administrative or fiscal staff was discharged from a public school for fiscal mismanagement;
4. for a proposed state-chartered charter school, it does not request to have the governing body of the charter school designated as a board of finance or the governing body does not qualify as a board of finance; or
5. the application is otherwise contrary to the best interests of the charter school’s projected students, the local community or the school district in whose geographic boundaries the charter school applies to operate.

**OPTIONS FOR PARENTS – CHARTER SCHOOLS DIVISION**

By: Tony Gerlicz

Director of Options for Parents, or Designee

1. **Overall Score Sheet**

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| **Section** | **Points Received** | **Applicant School’s Possible Points** | **%** |
| Application |  |  |  |
| * School Mission | 2 | 6 |  |
| * Education Plan/Academic Framework | 47.4 | 90 |  |
| * Organizational Plan and Governance/Organizational Framework | 96.7 | 126 |  |
| * Business Plan/ Financial Framework | 18 | 48 |  |
| * Evidence of Support | 19.3 | 24 |  |
| * Required Appendices | 3 | 3 |  |
| Capacity Interview | 32.7 | 45 |  |
| **Sub Score** | 219.1 | 342 |  |
| CSD Team Synthesis Score - (CSD up to 33 pts available) | 12 |  |  |
| **Overall Score** | 231.1 | 342 | 67.6% |

1. **Explanation Regarding Score Sheet**

Legislation creating Charter Schools in New Mexico was initially passed in 1992, and was amended in 1999 and again in 2011.  The intent was to create independent public schools of choice that would enjoy, and be held accountable for increased autonomy.   Innovation, autonomy, choice and accountability are hallmarks of the charter movement.  In the new charter school application review process, the Charter Schools Division has done a complete analysis of all evaluation components and then analyzed how those components, and the proposed school in general, would contribute positively to the diverse public school educational landscape in New Mexico and the overarching charter schools movement.

The review teams considered three categories of each new charter school application: the Academic / Educational Plan, the Organizational Plan, and the Financial Plan.  The Paper Application consisted of 81 questions with some questions weighted more heavily than others, as reflected in the score sheets.  The Capacity Interview consisted of 14 pre-selected questions and one that was uniquely tailored to the school. Each question was weighted equally.  Subsequently, community input hearings took place in the community of the proposed school to ascertain the level of support that the applicant school has in the community.

The CSD then added its 10% ***CSD Team Synthesis Score***. The purpose of the ***CSD Team Synthesis Score*** is to ensure that the CSD bring its perspective to the analysis, in addition to the outside reviewers as explained above.

1. **Final Analysis**

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| **Application Section** | **Points Received** | **Applicant School’s Possible Points** |
| **Mission** | 2 | 6 |
| **Evidence/Statements Supporting Score in this Section:**  The mission statement incorporates most of the key elements and meets expectations. A strong mission should answer three questions: What does your school seek to accomplish; how will it accomplish that; and what is unique about your school. The mission statement answers the first and third questions, but it does not answer the second one. In addition, the last sentence in the mission is somewhat unclear in how it relates to supporting students. | | |

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| **Application Section** | **Points Received** | **Applicant School’s Possible Points** |
| **Education Plan/Academic Framework** | 7.4 | 90 |
| **Evidence/Statements Supporting Score in this Section:**  The application includes most of the key elements in the goals and a general rationale for its goals. The goals are not specific or measurable nor written in SMART format. The possible issues include: the incorporation of stakeholders does not account for mobility in the community, the assessment appears to be based on the apprentice model and it is unclear how the model will align to core content. The rationale for the goals states the deficiency of reading and math scores for the poor students, but it is not clear how the school’s goals will close this achievement gap.  The research and data portion provides clearly defined research to substantiate how the educational program will work. The educational program and curriculum and the scope and sequence are clear and reasonable. The curriculum development timeline, alignment timeline, and graduation requirements provide evidence of compliance with requirements. The description, which is a learner-centered model, includes developing a set of core values, STEM, dual language, integrated project-based learning, and other elements that do not cohere in the application. The description provides a timeline for development.  High school graduation requirements are clearly articulated and meet state requirements.  Differentiated instruction provides a clear description and specific examples. The instructional strategies and effectiveness areas provide clear explanations that support the school's program. The explanation is present, but there is concern that there is insufficient detail and a lack of strategy because much of the explanation said the teaching team “can” differentiate and students “can” complete a mini-project. The prompt asked how these and other programs "will" happen.  The compliance information required meets requirements in most cases. The ELL monitoring plan is clear and comprehensive. When this section asks for a plan or greater detail, however, the descriptions are limited. For example, there is a limited explanation as to the implementation of monitoring and delivery of 504 Plans. Contracting providers is an accepted practice, but its implementation requires a plan that discusses the practices and strategies the school will employ.  The use of assessments was incomplete because this section did not address Common Core, PARCC, or Student Based Assessments. Assessment information is confidential, so there is a concern for the description of sharing. How will the school include "peer review" while at the same time preserving student FERPA? The applicant did provide a school wide corrective action plan. The plan for reporting on progress was clear.  Overall, the ideas in this section presented are well articulated; however, like the comment made about the mission statement, the “how” of executing the very non-traditional curriculum and instruction presented needs more detail and explanation. | | |

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| **Application Section** | **Points Received** | **Applicant School’s Possible Points** |
| **Organizational Plan and Governance/Organizational Framework** | 96.7 | 126 |
| **Evidence/Statements Supporting Score in this Section:**  The applicants incorporate all key components of their governance structure and outline roles properly. Most of the membership appears to reflect the needs of the Board; membership will reflect the diverse experiences necessary to oversee all aspects of the school. In addition to a prospective member submitting a letter of interest, the plan should include an interview process to assure that this person will "fit" with the mission of the school and the needs of the Board. There is a statement that the Board will review the qualifications of candidates who write a letter of interest, and it is not always clear what skills the Board seeks. It is clear, however, that Board members will have a passion to serve the unique needs of the students of the school.  The qualifications for the selection of the Head Administrator align with the mission of the school, although it is unclear how much the Administrator will need to understand curriculum conveyed through the use of solar and adobe industries. The Board demonstrates its understanding of its function and provides a clear description of a plan to hire a head administrator. The application should include the evaluation process for the Head Administrator.  Job descriptions, staffing plan needs, and staff evaluation are clear, comprehensive, and reasonable. The organizational structure and staffing plan-alignment are clear and adequate. At the same time the school day/year and professional development were limited, and the school did not budget for substitutes. There is no calendar provided, just a general "overview" of the year round schedule. If aligned to Deming, the school could have included the Deming schedule in its additional attachments. The applicants state that they will "roughly align" with the Deming schedule, but it is not clear whether or not Deming has extended instructional hours as this application proposes.  The grievance process is clear, comprehensive, and cohesive; but, the employee/employer relationship and discipline process provide only a limited description of interventions and systems to create fair and equitable employment practices. The application provides a clear plan for community involvement and a clear, comprehensive, and cohesive plan to resolve complaints. The student discipline policy is clear, comprehensive, and cohesive as are the student recruitment, the lottery, and enrollment processes presented.  The conflict of interest policy is clear, but there is only a general explanation of the plan to execute the Open Meetings Act. For example, there is no mention of a quorum, the 24 hour posting rule (now 72 hours) for agendas and closed session procedures. There is no description for the role of the Governing Council president.  There is a limited description of how the proposed school plans to transport students to and from the school. There was a limited description on food service. The statement was made "96% of our students qualify for the Free and Reduced Lunch Program", but the application presented no hard facts to back this up. The budget that was presented did not include costs for either student transportation or food services.  The Public School Facilities Authority (PSFA) letter is enclosed and acceptable, yet the application fails to address the state mandate of being in a public building by 2015. Since the applicant provided the PSFA letter, the school provided significant efforts to identify appropriate facilities. It appears that there is adequate money budgeted in the operating fund to cover monthly rent. | | |

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| **Application Section** | **Points Received** | **Applicant School’s Possible Points** |
| **Business Plan/ Financial Framework** | 18 | 48 |
| **Evidence/Statements Supporting Score in this Section:**  The 910B5 worksheets included in the application contain some errors or incomplete information that may raise questions about the capacity of the school to fully understand the NM public school funding the budget. The budget narrative is limited. The strategies for budget control provide some evidence that the adjustments are realistic. The salary schedule only included licensed teaching staff.  The financial and internal control policies are clear and demonstrate capacity to perform. The explanation about financial personnel identifies the appropriate staff; however, the separation of duties for accounts payable and oversight of the payroll process could be better. The school provides inadequate financial oversight and school sustainability plans. For example, there is no mention of the role of the Finance Committee with regards to the financial oversight of the budget. | | |

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| **Application Section** | **Points Received** | **Applicant School’s Possible Points** |
| **Executive Summary, Evidence of Support, Required Appendices** | 19.3 | 24 |
| **Evidence/Statements Supporting Score in this Section:**  The outreach activities described in the application provide clear evidence that the proposed school has developed an outreach program/plan. The application provides sufficient data on interest in the school, but it cannot provide specific data as many of its potential students are Americans living in Mexico. The application did provide evidence of the founders' extensive community ties. The application lists many entities with which it wants to partner. There is clear evidence of the uniqueness of the program. | | |

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| **Section** | **Points Received** | **Applicant School’s Possible Points** |
| **Capacity Interview** | 32.7 | 45 |
| **Evidence/Statements Supporting Score in this Section:**  The Capacity Interview highlighted the plan that the founders had for the school in a much more compelling light than the paper application. It was clear to the review team that the founders have carefully analyzed the needs of the community, the plan to use the school as a catalyst for economic development for the community, and the capacity to employ the rammed earth and adobe construction skills of the proposed model of educational delivery. The review team thought the founders were realistic regarding the challenge in front of them and the understanding that they themselves are not educators but rather committed community citizens. They are realistic in the need to hire a qualified educator who can put together the model that the Columbus Community Charter School have put together and realistic in understanding the roles of the Founders, Governing Council, and Principal.  The Capacity Interview brought to light the needs of the community, located an hour from Deming and 10 miles from the US-Mexico border, much better than the application did.  In summary, the applicants are very reasonable in their approach to their proposed school and, accordingly, in their answers to the questions during the interview. The founders revealed a stronger capacity in the organizational, facilities, and community aspects of the interview. At the same time, their capacity to implement the innovative educational plan as well as the financial plan was less convincing. | | |

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| **CSD Synthesis** |
| **Evidence/Statements Supporting Score in this Section:**  The CSD recommends denial of the Columbus Community Charter School. The founders of the proposed School are commended for their indomitable dedication, passion, and commitment; This year’s reviewers recognize the need for a local charter MS/HS school in this community, as they have in years past.  This need was emphasized again this year by the impressive number of community members at the Community Input Hearing who revealed their strong support of the proposed school. Currently, students and families have to travel an hour each way to attend Deming middle and high school and as a result, this charter school is welcomed by the Columbus community. Testimony voiced at the Community Input Hearing and subsequent informal conversations in the PED confirm that this community has long wanted its own secondary school. This charter school application, though not written by educators, presents the opportunity to satisfy that desire of this community.  It was also clear that the administration of the school district of Deming does not favor the creation of the proposed charter school for a number of reasons. However, charter schools exist to serve the needs of the local communities and to offer parents a choice in where and how their children are educated. A charter school in the town of Columbus would offer parents and families the long desired option to educate their children closer to their homes, and the plan presented in Columbus Community Charter School addresses not only that need but also larger problems within the community, such as poverty, economic desolation, and a high immigrant population.  The Capacity Interview demonstrated that the founders had a good understanding of the challenge in front of them , including the critical role of the Governing Body, and have presented a variety of qualified people to represent this body, such as a former Columbus resident, now a lawyer in Deming. This is impressive considering the small community of Columbus.  However, recognizing the need for a local charter school and laying out an adequate plan for a successful school are two distinct pieces to this application. . For example, this year’s reviewers state: *“The goals are not specific or measurable nor written in SMART format. Possible issues include: the incorporation of stakeholders does not account for mobility in the community, the assessment appears to be based on the apprentice model, and it is unclear how the model will align to core content. The rationale for the goals states the deficiency of reading and math scores for the poor students, but it is not clear how the school’s goals will close this achievement gap.”* Similar language was used in 2012 and 2011 to describe the Goals section.. Similarly, the Assessment section in this year’s application echoed the deficiencies in years past.    The Governance section, however, was notable in its strength and showed significant improvement.  The Finance section of the 2013 application was still not completely up to level it should have been.For example, the reviewers this year state*: …”the separation of duties for accounts payable and oversight of the payroll process is inadequate. The school provides inadequate financial oversight and school sustainability plans. There is no mention of the role of the Finance Committee with regards to the financial oversight of the budget. It is not clear that the school fully understands external audits and the role of the Governing Board Treasurer.”* Similar comments were made by the reviewers in the previous two years.  All recognize the effort required to transform this idea into reality, including the CSD and the review team. Taking the reviewer’s scores and comments into consideration, and after the Community Input Hearings, the CSD’s overall analysis is that in order to ensure the success of the innovative and needed charter school being proposed, the founders’ capacity must be supported and enhanced by an experienced educational leader. Without an educational leader committed to this project, the probability of the school’s success is questionable.  We encourage the founders of the proposed school to return next year with a committed educational leader on board who could help address the most salient deficiencies found by the review team in the application and Capacity Interview. |