



## New Mexico Public Education Commission

300 Don Gaspar Ave.  
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87501

August 17, 2018

Madame Chair and Commissioners,

The Founding Team of Solare Collegiate would like to thank the Public Education Commission for thoroughly reviewing our charter school application. Over the last 12 months, we have focused our energy on designing a school that meets the needs of the Southwest Mesa through deep community engagement and the application of local and national best practices employed by high-performing schools serving low-income students. This focus is reflected in the scoring of both our application and our capacity interview, as well as in the great show of support we have received from the community that we intend to serve. Organizations located in the Southwest Mesa and South Valley cumulatively wrote 27 letters of support for our school, while parents in these communities wrote an additional 17 letters of support. Each of these letters can be found in Attachments S and T of our charter application. Close to 60 supporters – spanning a range of community, business and personal affiliations – attended our Community Input Hearing, 197 individuals signed our online petition supporting our school, and an additional 30 supporters submitted written comment to the Public Education Commission.

### Innovation

During our Community Input Hearing, concern was expressed as to whether or not what we are proposing is innovative enough to fulfill the promise of charter schools. The Solare Collegiate mission may share the language of missions of other educational institutions, because our desired result is not innovative in the traditional sense-- preparing our students to excel in high school and college. However, the implementation of our mission is innovative, particularly in the 87121's Southwest Mesa, where 2017 graduation rates hovered around 65%<sup>1</sup>.

New Mexico Statutes Annotated Section 22-8B-3 defines one of the purposes of the Charter Schools Act is to enable individual schools to *“encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods that are based on reliable research and effective practices or have been replicated successfully in schools with diverse characteristics.”* Solare Collegiate is proposing to meet this regulatory purpose of combining a different approach with successful replication of effective practices in the following ways:

- **Middle School-Only Model-** Solare Collegiate is proposing as an extended middle school (see bullet point below for further information on our 5th grade start), and the middle school-only model (including the traditional grade levels of 6-8) is unique among charter schools in New Mexico. Of the 94 charter schools listed on the New Mexico Coalition of Charter Schools website, as well as the three charter schools opening in August 2018, only six schools across the state focus exclusively on middle school grades, four of which are in Albuquerque. Less than 4% of the state's charters are middle-school only models. More commonly, middle schools is enveloped in a K-8, 6-12, or K-12 model. The Solare Collegiate founding team deeply believes in the importance of middle school in shaping students' high school, college, and professional success, and believes in the importance of a school dedicated exclusively to the unique academic and developmental needs of middle school students. Students in southwest Albuquerque currently do not have easy access to a middle school-only charter school, as

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.aps.edu/news/aps-continues-to-make-gains-in-graduation-rates>



the closest option, South Valley Preparatory, recently moved to a new location each of the Rio Grande, approximately six miles away from our proposed community and do not offer student transportation. South Valley Prep was the highest performing middle school in the southwest quadrant. The other three middle school-only charter schools are located even further east of the Rio Grande. Currently, the six middle school-only models serve a total of 906 students- we are proposing to serve 416 students at full enrollment, increasing the number of seats at middle school-only models by 45%. Inherent to our school design is focusing exclusively on middle school, where the closing of academic gaps will enable our students to successfully attend the high schools of their choice. By closing academic gaps during the middle school years, we will be able to send our students to district high schools, as well as charter high schools, where they will be successful, because of their strong foundational skills developed at Solare Collegiate. Our team will focus on developing relationships with the schools in our community, as well as the schools in which our students express interest in attending, and support our students in their transition to high school.

- **5th Grade Start-** Solare Collegiate is proposed as an extended middle school, with a grades 5-8 model. The unique 5th grade start for middle school is used with great success at high poverty, high achieving charter schools across the country. In New Mexico, two schools utilize an extended middle school model, however both schools follow a semi-self-contained model. Solare Collegiate proposes to have teacher content specialization beginning in 5th grade, enabling our teachers to not only be experts in their content area, but also to be experts in supporting student needs each content area. Additionally, our school design includes all teachers receiving two 50 minute preparatory blocks per day, ensuring teachers have substantial time for intellectual preparation and personalized professional development. With the adoption of the highly rigorous NM STEM Ready content standards, and their daily 50 minute block of science class and a dedicated weekly science lab, Solare Collegiate 5th graders will be poised to gain high levels of content knowledge and experience in science. Similarly, our 5th grade students will benefit from a middle school model with 50 minutes of daily Social Studies instruction.
- **Teachers Transition Classes-** Solare Collegiate is proposing that our teachers transition across classrooms, as opposed to our students moving from classroom to classroom. This innovative element serves two purposes: first it transitions classroom ownership to the students, as opposed to the classroom being a teacher's space. We believe that students need to identify a space as their own, which provides a sense of comfort and security while at school. Second, teacher transitions reduce the number of minutes within a school day that students are transitioning in the hallways. Solare Collegiate students will have dedicated extended AM and PM breaks, as well as in-class movement breaks while the teachers are transitioning. Because our teachers have two preparatory periods each day, we are able to seamlessly transition teachers from room-to-room, while also ensuring each classroom has adult supervision at all times. Our school will include dedicated teacher office space outside of the classroom, fostering professionalism and collaboration between teachers working in a common office space. Our research of middle schools in New Mexico did not reveal any schools that utilized this innovative component.
- **Extended School Day and Year-** The Solare Collegiate school day and school year will be extended from that of other schools in the 87121-zip code. Our school year will be 183 days, compared to the 178 day calendar at APS. Students who wish to access school breakfast may begin arriving at 7:20am, with the regular school day beginning at 7:40am. The school day concludes at 4:15pm on Monday through Thursday, and at 2:00pm on Fridays. In the typical week, students at Solare Collegiate receive 465 minutes of daily instruction between 7:40am and 4:15pm, not including 50 minutes for breakfast and lunch. On Fridays, Solare Collegiate operates on an abbreviated schedule. During abbreviated days, our students receive 370 minutes of daily instruction, as well as 50 minutes for breakfast and lunch. After student dismissal on Fridays, teachers have two hours of weekly



professional development focused on instructional practice, student achievement, and data analysis. In total, students at Solare Collegiate receive 2230 minutes (37 hours, 10 minutes) of academic instruction in an average week. In contrast, middle schools in the 87121-zip code average approximately 1,995 minutes (31 hours, 15 minutes) receiving academic instruction each week. Solare Collegiate students will spend 247.8 more hours in school each year, equaling an additional 36.7 Albuquerque Public Schools days of academic instruction per year. Over four years at Solare Collegiate, students will receive an additional 147 days of school- nearly an entire extra year of instruction when compared to Albuquerque Public Schools. When compared to the state minimums outlined in NMSA 22-2-8.1 our schedule results in 46.7 more days per year than the minimum requirements.

- **Double Blocks of Literacy and Math for ALL Students**-- Solare Collegiate believes that our students need a strong literacy and mathematics foundations, in order for them to be successful in high school and college. For that reason, as part of our regular academic programming, all students will have double blocks of English/Language Arts and Mathematics each day. Our double blocks are not just more time in class, but intentionally divided into specific points of focus, including a traditional English/Language Arts block and a Textual Analysis block, which is framed around the skill of using textual evidence, as well as the instructional component for oral literacy skills, supporting our focus on student voice. For mathematics in 5th and 6th grades, one math block will focus on foundational mathematics skills, including mental math, with the second block focusing on conceptual skills. In 7th and 8th grades, the two math courses will be combined into a 100 minute block focusing on pre-algebra in 7th grade and algebra in 8th grade. These blocks are not intervention, special education, or English Language pull out supports: all students will benefit from the additional time dedicated to the core content. For students with special needs needing additional support or English learners, our special education and EL team will push-in to classrooms during core instructional time, as well as provide pull-out support during the FOCUS block, the independent reading block, or during our advisory times. Students who have not been identified with a special need but that need additional support overall or specific to an individual concept or subject area will be able to utilize our daily FOCUS block for individualized support and instruction. Similarly, our gifted students will receive specialized advisory time and support during our FOCUS block, as well as during the Advisory periods.

The Charter School Act describes an additional purpose for charter schools to be “to address the needs of all students, including those determined to be at risk.” Solare Collegiate addresses this regulatory purpose in the following way:

- **Daily FOCUS Block**-- The Solare Collegiate team recognizes that middle school is a point in a child’s academic career when they often decide their long-term academic path. While we prioritize highly rigorous academics, we also value providing our students with purposeful and predictable individualized support. Included within our regular school day is the FOCUS period. The purpose behind the FOCUS period is to prioritize student support - reteaching of concepts not grasped during regular class time, review of previously taught concepts, and extension of knowledge. Our daily FOCUS block will be 50 minutes, Monday through Thursday. During this time, all teachers will be charged with providing student support, ranging from small group tutoring or reteaching of a concept, exploratory extension for gifted or high achieving students, or structured work time for students who need a quiet space to work or read. This time will be utilized to provide our students with special needs (including gifted) and English language supports with the resources they need to be successful in the classroom, including reteaching, small group instruction, and homework support. However, our FOCUS block will also benefit our students who are not identified as special needs or English learners, providing teachers the time to give students additional support, for reteaching, practicing, or extending the lessons in the classroom. Student groupings will be fluid, to ensure that students have their most immediate needs met each day. The academic



performance data for upper elementary and middle school in the 87121 zip code suggests that the majority of our students will enter Solare Collegiate behind academically, and our FOCUS block will ensure that we have additional time to address the needs of all of our students.

The Charter School Act of New Mexico states that an additional purpose for charter schools is “to allow the development of different and innovative forms of measuring student learning and achievement.” The Solare Collegiate design fulfills this regulatory element in the following ways:

- **Oral Literacy-** Solare Collegiate will have a purposeful focus on the development of student voice. Across all content areas, student voice will be emphasized and encouraged during instruction. By that we mean a strong sense of self, described in further in the bullet below, as well as being comfortable speaking in a variety of situations. During instructional planning, our teachers will be encouraged to incorporate student voice into the daily lessons - through discussions, presentations, and partner-sharing. In fact, our teachers will be expected to spend no more than 30% of the class time doing “teacher talk,” such as direct instruction or teacher-led conversations. We believe that students should do the “intellectual heavy lifting” in every class, which includes struggling to find a solution or make a connection through academic conversation. Our instructional practice for oral literacy will be based in *Great Habits, Great Readers* Habits of Discussion.<sup>2</sup> Oral literacy skills will be taught explicitly in our Textual Analysis Class, in alignment with the New Mexico Common Core Speaking and Listening standards, and then applied in each of the academic courses. Speaking and listening skills will be assessed using a rubric aligned to the New Mexico Common Core Speaking and Listening standards, with the oral literacy skills purposefully aligned to the complimentary reading and writing skills focused upon in the two English courses. Additionally, it is our goal that students will run our weekly Community Circle, putting their oral literacy skills to practice. In our research of schools in New Mexico, we did not encounter any schools with an explicit focus on oral literacy and student voice.
- **Voice strengthens identity-** One of our core values is that voice strengthens identity, and that belief will be integrated into all Solare Collegiate classes and activities. Every six weeks, our identity theme focus will shift, beginning with self, school community, local community (Southwest Mesa, South Valley, West Side, etc.), New Mexico, United States or country of origin, and the world. Each theme will be used to frame the unit planning in each class. We believe that as students are approaching their English, Math, Science, and Social Studies coursework from the lens of their specific identities, they will have a clearer understanding of how each course contributes to the further development of their identity. As our students examine their identity from each of these lenses, they will become more confident in themselves, developing the figurative voice to couple with the physical voice Solare Collegiate will support students in developing. While there are several schools in the community that focus on student identity, most of these focus on the cultural identity of the students. Our focus on identity begins with the self and purposefully expands to many of the different identities a student holds. Additionally, we integrate our focus on oral literacy with voice and identity, creating a school community that fosters student autonomy.
- **Literacy Focus in Content Area Classes-** At Solare Collegiate, we believe that literacy is foundational; therefore, literacy is at the foundation of each of our core content classes. Our middle school students will receive 130 minutes of literacy-based instruction each day, with a traditional Language Arts course, a course focusing on textual analysis, and 30 minutes of accountable independent reading of self-selected texts. In addition, our

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<sup>2</sup> Bambrick-Santoyo, Paul. (2013). *Great Habits, Great Readers: A Practical Guide for K-4 Reading in the Light of Common Core*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.



Social Studies classes and our Monday through Thursday Science classes will be taught from a non-fiction literacy perspective. Our students will use the reading and writing skills studied in their textual analysis classes and apply them during their Social Studies and Science classes. Finally, we will include integrated literacy skills in math courses, ensuring our students not only are computing math but are able to articulate the steps taken to get to the solution, in written and oral form. Our intensive focus on literacy differs from the district and charter schools in the 87121-zip code, with intensive study of text and analytical writing skills being infused in all content area classes, putting the intellectual heavy lifting on the students, in a fashion that is similar to college level courses.

Another purpose for charter schools in New Mexico is “to encourage parental and community involvement in the public school system,” which has been demonstrated through the following element of our school design:

- **Heritage Spanish and New Mexico Culture Curriculum**-- As the founding team began its community outreach, it became clear that the community wanted a college preparatory option, which also recognized the uniqueness of the Southwest Mesa and the Atrisco Land Grant. Additionally, community members spoke to the importance of Spanish language programming being included in the school design. Through these conversations with community stakeholders, Solare Collegiate came to form an intended partnership with the Instituto Cervantes to develop an individualized Heritage Spanish program. With more than 50% of families in the 87121-zip code identifying Spanish as the primary language spoken at home, we believe it is important to include Spanish as a part of our academic programming. With that, the Heritage Spanish program will take into the consideration the unique needs of students with a range of Spanish language proficiency. Priorities for the Heritage Spanish program include developing reading and writing Spanish proficiency, in addition to speaking and listening proficiency. It is our goal that Solare Collegiate students will develop reading, writing, speaking, and listening proficiencies that will allow them to successfully take the DELE Spanish Diploma at levels A1, A2, and B1 for school children (ages 11-17).<sup>3</sup> The Instituto Cervantes is not currently working with any other schools in the 87121-zip code. Our unique focus on a balanced literacy of Spanish, while taking current levels of language proficiency into consideration for each student, ensures that we will meet the needs of each students personally. Each Friday, Solare Collegiate students will study New Mexican Culture, through a curriculum created collaboratively by Solare Collegiate and the National Hispanic Cultural Center. The weekly curriculum will focus on hands-on study of arts, culture, food, and traditions of New Mexico, with a particular emphasis on the Southwest Mesa community. A New Mexico Cultural studies program at the middle school level, spanning all four years, is a programmatic element that is completely unique to Solare Collegiate. While the New Mexico Culture enrichment is a self-contained enrichment, all content area classes will be designed with a focus on student voice and identity, pulling in components of New Mexico culture throughout the school day. In addition, our Advisory periods and Community Circle will integrate our New Mexico Culture program into the planning and design.

### Need

Our proposed community, the 87121 zip code, is in similar size to the City of Santa Fe, but families in our community have significantly fewer school options available to them in their own community. For middle school students, Santa Fe offers two traditional middle schools, five K-8 community schools, and four charter schools. In contrast, the 87121 zip code has two traditional middle schools, one K-8 community school, and two charter schools serving middle school students. Within those options, both RFK and La Academia de Esperanza are focused on “at risk” student populations

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<sup>3</sup> <https://exámenes.cervantes.es/es/dele/que-es>.



and offer a limited number of seats, each less than 60 in total for grades 6-8.<sup>4</sup> The closest college preparatory focused charter school, South Valley Academy, has a waitlist that is double the number of their enrollment cap, making the school inaccessible to the majority of students who wish to access a smaller, college preparatory option. The majority of middle school seats in the southwest quadrant are provided by South Valley Academy, in total of 283 seats in grades 6-8. Within the entire southwest quadrant of the city, only 545 seats were available for middle school students at five charter schools<sup>5</sup>. Based on the extensive waitlist at South Valley Academy, at least 500 middle school students in the southwest quadrant are seeking a college preparatory focused middle school but are unable to secure a seat. The highest performing charter school in the area during the 2017-2018 school year, South Valley Prep, recently relocated to a location across the Rio Grande, without provided transportation options for families. The approval of Solare Collegiate will help ensure that families in the Southwest Mesa have a college preparatory option in their own community. If approved, Solare Collegiate would be the only middle school-only charter option west of the Rio Grande. Demand for Solare Collegiate is further outlined in our charter application.

### **Community Outreach**

During our Community Input Hearing, the Commission asked our team how we intended to address expressed concern during the Community Input Hearing. The Solare Collegiate Founding Team reached out to every organization that expressed opposition or concern at the Community Input Hearing, as well as to all of those who submitted written concern to the PEC. At the time of this letter submission, Lead Founder, Rachael Sowards has met with two individuals who expressed concern, and is currently utilizing their feedback and advice, including recommendations for further connections in the community and resources to consider for school implementation. Chris Sturgis, who submitted written feedback, explained via email that “I wrote that email as a concern not as a strong opposition to the charter,” and we have a meeting set up to further discuss her concerns. We are also in communication with Ane Romero, Policy Director of Center for Civic Policy and Joaquin Sanchez, the Lead Organizer for Albuquerque Interfaith, and have scheduled a roundtable discussion with the organizations that expressed concern during our Community Input Hearing and in writing. In addition, the Solare Collegiate team has continued outreach to the Isleta Pueblo community, in order to ascertain community interest in our school.

### **Clarification and Assurances Regarding the Relationship Between Building Excellent Schools and Excellent Schools New Mexico**

The Founder of the proposed school, Solare Collegiate Charter School, applied for and received a competitive fellowship from Building Excellent Schools (BES). This Fellowship provided the Founder with skills and information beneficial to open a New Mexico charter school, as well as to learn best practices by spending significant time on site in other charter schools, both locally and nationally. Apart from the Fellowship the proposed school has not received any funding, directly or indirectly, from BES. The proposed school applied for a start-up grant from the New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED), as well as has secured private funding from Excellent Schools New Mexico (ESNM). Neither of these start up grants are contingent upon the purchase of any goods or services from either the NMPED or ESNM. Additionally:

- Solare does not expect to nor intend to purchase anything from either BES or ESNM.
- Solare does not nor intend to utilize any charter management services; either in state or out.

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<sup>4</sup> Based on 2017-2018 enrollment

<sup>5</sup> Based on 2017-2018 enrollment and including La Promesa Early Learning Center and El Camino Real Academy, in addition to the previously mentioned charter schools.



Solare Collegiate Charter School

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- Solare does not and will not be purchasing a pre-packaged curriculum from any source; BES, ESNM, or otherwise.
- All Solare board members are local to New Mexico. They do not report to and are not responsible to either BES or ESNM. Their only loyalty and legal obligation is to the best interests of the proposed school and the children it seeks to serve.

The Solare Collegiate Founding Team thanks the Public Education Commission for their thoughtful consideration of our charter application. If there are any questions, please reach out to our Lead Founder, Rachael Swards at 505.917.6442 or [rsewards@solarecollegiate.org](mailto:rsewards@solarecollegiate.org). We look forward to the PEC Meeting on August 24, 2018.

Warm Regards,

*Rachael Swards*

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