

CSD REVIEW - RESPONSE



EXPLORE ACADEMY - LAS CRUCES

RESPONSES TO INDIVIDUAL APPLICATION SUBSECTIONS:

During the course of the capacity interview, the founding team clarified information for all areas in which the review team had questions or where there were misinterpretations or misunderstandings. **The founding team agrees with the recommendation of approval.**

EDUCATION PLAN / ACADEMIC FRAMEWORK

As noted in the recommendation: The peer review team determined that the responses by the school during the capacity interview adequately addressed the concerns in this section of the written application.

Parents, students, teachers, and the community will be involved in shaping the Explore Academy - Las Cruces culture and curriculum from early in the planning year through various initiatives, events, and training. This involvement will lead to a school shaped by all students, especially those who are often marginalized in educational settings. Students who are learning academic English are supported through targeted language instruction paired with differentiated grade-level content instruction to allow for high-level achievement. The school's graduation requirements and yearly calendar were shown to meet or exceed all NM requirements for graduation. The special education program evaluation relies on metrics taken at various intervals in order to analyze the program's efficacy such as enrollment and retention, achievement data, state and school compliance, Progress Toward Goals measurements, etc.

ORGANIZATIONAL PLAN AND GOVERNANCE / ORGANIZATIONAL FRAMEWORK

As noted in the recommendation: The peer review team determined that the responses by the school during the capacity interview adequately addressed the concerns in this section of the written application.

Governing board procedures and policies have been outlined in greater detail to include timelines and responsible parties for both vacancies and members with desired areas of expertise. The inaugural board will shape these and other policies, such as conflict of interest, and vote to approve them during their first official meeting. The staff job descriptions provided were tailored to Explore Academy and its unique model, so the staff handbook will provide much greater detail about specific duties, positions, procedures, salary, etc. The recruitment timeline allows for activities to begin this fall, a year before the school opens, and progresses through the school's launch, utilizing a variety of marketing strategies. The lottery process has been updated to reflect feedback.

BUSINESS PLAN / FINANCIAL FRAMEWORK

As noted in the recommendation: The peer review team determined that the responses by the school during the capacity interview adequately addressed the concerns in this section of the written application.

Clarification was provided during the capacity interview to specify and provide greater detail in the proposed school's financial policies and procedures, including its internal controls and oversight and management of procurement and accounts payable/receivable. Explanations as to where specific items were budgeted and the assumptions made in the budget narrative were provided to the review team during the capacity interview, all of which provided satisfactory fulfillment of the questions that arose from the review team's initial evaluation. The relationship between the school and its off-site contracted business manager was appropriately explained and clarified, with the required controls in place to ensure financial viability and responsibility of the school.

EVIDENCE OF SUPPORT

As noted in the recommendation: 100% of possible points were earned for evidence of support.

The founding team for Explore Academy - Las Cruces has received a tremendous level of support for the potential establishment of the school in the area. In addition to the letters submitted directly to the CSD, the team has submitted a petition (from after one of the three information nights held in the area) showing **32 interested families**. In addition, the **69 families** that submitted the petition online have been included during the community input window.

The team has held three information nights to provide parents with some insight into what Explore Academy - Las Cruces can bring to the area. **All three events filled (over capacity) the large meeting room** at the local Las Cruces library. The sum of these three meetings totaled over **120 families**. Based on this, the founding team proceeded in submitting the application as there has been **significant interest from the community**.

COMMUNITY INPUT

Based on the feedback received during the community input period, the founding team has found the Las Cruces community to be receptive to the establishment of a 6-12 school. The following reasons support this finding:

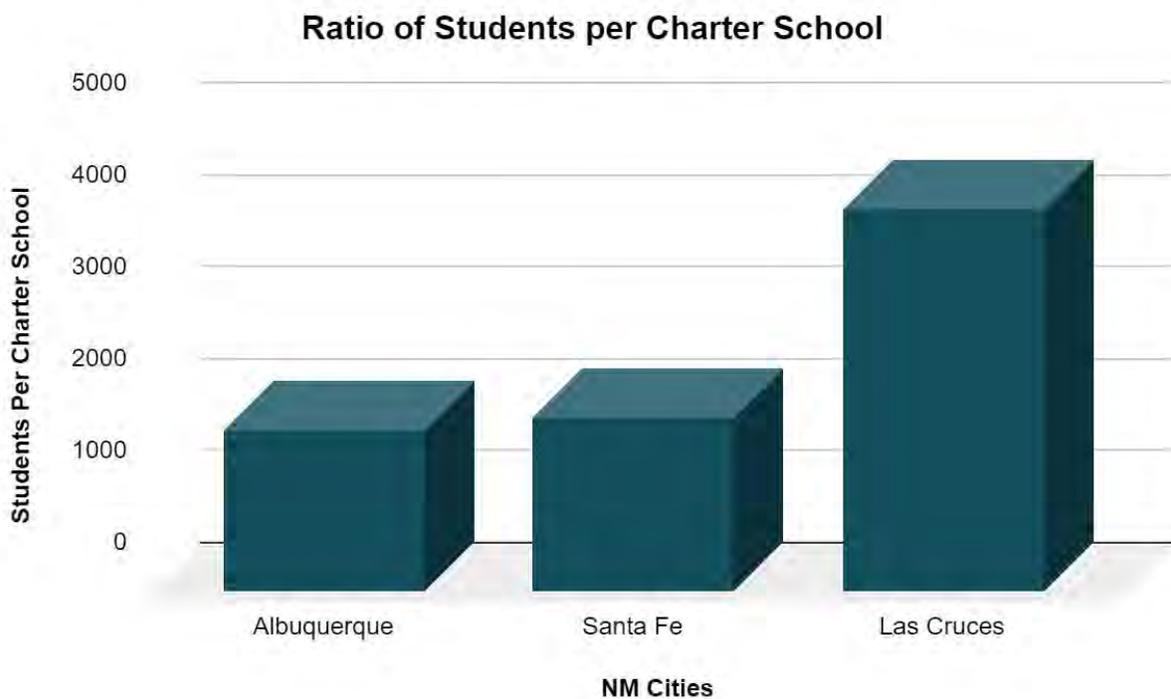
Postulate 1: Las Cruces CAN support additional charter schools

More than a year prior to the application phase, the founding team engaged **Bellwether Education Partners in determining the level of interest and viability of a Las Cruces-based Explore Academy campus**. This extensive study was funded by **Excellent Schools New Mexico**, and concluded with a comprehensive report which detailed the

extent to which the Las Cruces area would support a 6-12, 700-student campus (after six years of phase-in grade enrollment). The highly-experienced strategic planning team identified Las Cruces as the ideal community for the Explore Academy model.

Las Cruces exists as the second largest metropolitan area in New Mexico, and as such there is a viable population base for the expansion of charter opportunities for families. In examining the total student populations for Albuquerque, Las Cruces, and Santa Fe, there is a **clear** indication that the ratio of students per charter schools is much higher in Las Cruces as compared to the Albuquerque and Santa Fe. Santa Fe, which has a **half the student population** of Las Cruces, has more charter offerings for families.

The graphic below shows this ratio, which demonstrates that, based on the number of students within the Las Cruces Public Schools district, and the amount of charter offerings, **the area can accommodate additional charter offerings**. In fact, in comparison to the ratios for both Albuquerque (1,766 students per charter school, 1,766:1) and Santa Fe (1,903:1), Las Cruces has **more than double the ratio** of students per charter school at 4,175:1, demonstrating the large number of Las Cruces families that would benefit from increased educational choice.



Furthermore, there exists no options for parents who wish to pursue a college-readiness program beginning in middle school. The current charters in the area offer middle school programs with grade spans of K-8 and 6-8. As a result, there exists **no schools offering a 6-12 comprehensive program which promotes high school (and college readiness) beginning in 6th grade as would be seen in a school enrolling grades 6-12.**

Postulate 2: Las Cruces families prompted the initial investigation for the establishment of a second Explore Academy campus

In response to feedback during the community input phase, it is important that the founding team emphasize the initial interest provided by the local community in establishing an Explore Academy - Las Cruces campus. **Feedback from local school leaders, teachers, and parents over the last two years are what initially prompted members of the founding team to pursue this possible endeavor.** The goal of an Explore Academy - Las Cruces campus is to **provide an innovative program focused on the individual student in promoting choice and passion in pursuing a rigorous education.** The founding team seeks to empower its school leader and the future staff of the school in building an innovative and successful school model to adapt and serve students and families of the Las Cruces area.

Postulate 3: Las Cruces families are looking for options outside the traditional district pathways

This feedback has been provided repeatedly and was echoed in the community input hearing and within the written feedback submitted by parents. As a representative sample of the feedback received from families, there is an overarching sentiment that directly suggests that parents are interested in the best options for their students and not necessarily what is traditional:

In the accounts provided to the CSD, here are two parents' accounts:

“The first of these comments is that Las Cruces is a small town, the second is that it is a very traditional community. Las Cruces is the second largest city in the state. Local government would like to continue to act as though we are not a city, but we are, and we need the resources that a community of our size would normally have, **including increased educational opportunities.** Part of this idea of a "small town" is the traditionalism of which the commissioner spoke. While it is true that Las Cruces whose families have been here for generations have very strong feelings regarding the local high schools, **many of us do not have those connections or traditions.** Every year more and more people move to Las Cruces from out of state. These people, like myself, **do not have a familial loyalty to one school** or another, we simply want the ability to choose a school that meets our children's needs. Limiting choices does not benefit our community, nor does it benefit our children or the future of this world.”

“As I sat there listening to one particular commissioner speak about how loyal some families are to the high schools here. I couldn't help but disagree with what was being said. For myself being born and raised here in Las Cruces, **I do not care if my child chooses not to go to the same high school as I attended.** Having the right education and being able to learn the way that best benefits the child is what I care about most.”

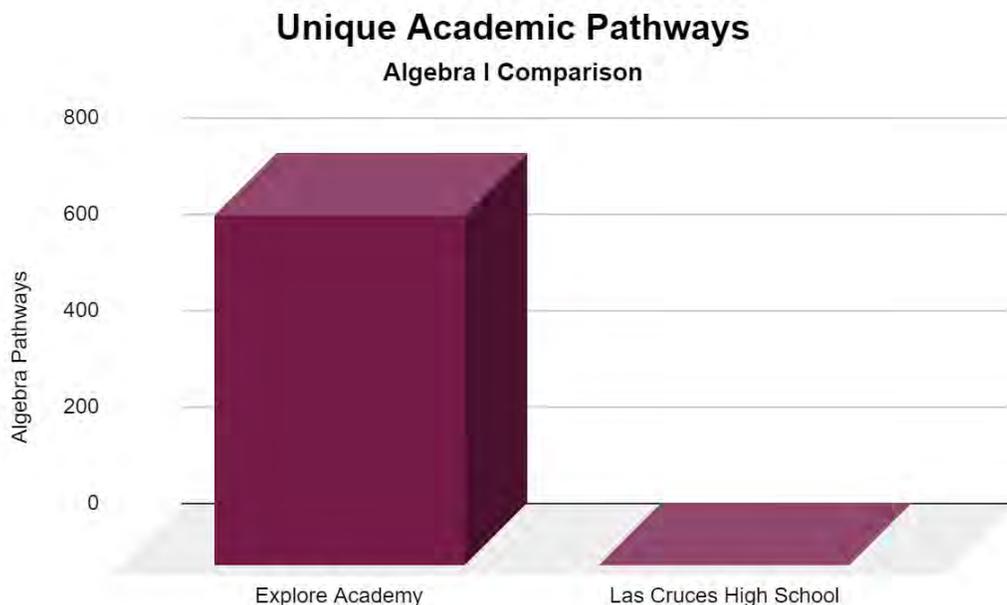
Postulate 4: Explore Academy - Las Cruces would provide a unique, non-traditional learning model currently unavailable in the area

While the school district does have four traditional high schools, and those high schools do offer a diversity of choice, most of that choice is limited in scope or offered to older students as they complete their core requirements. A significant portion of offerings consist of regular vs. Pre-AP vs. AP coursework, **which represents a false diversity as these electives are “chosen” through a student’s academic ability.** The district does provide the Early College High School, however, this does not provide an educational model different from what is seen traditionally. As such, the district schools still **operate within the traditional format with large class sizes, long semesters, and very little student autonomy.**

Explore Academy’s elective-based program allows for students to pursue their own unique pathways, an outcome which cannot be achieved with the traditional academic framework.

Consider an example: Algebra I. Currently, a sample local high school allows students **two pathways**: Algebra I or Algebra I - Honors.

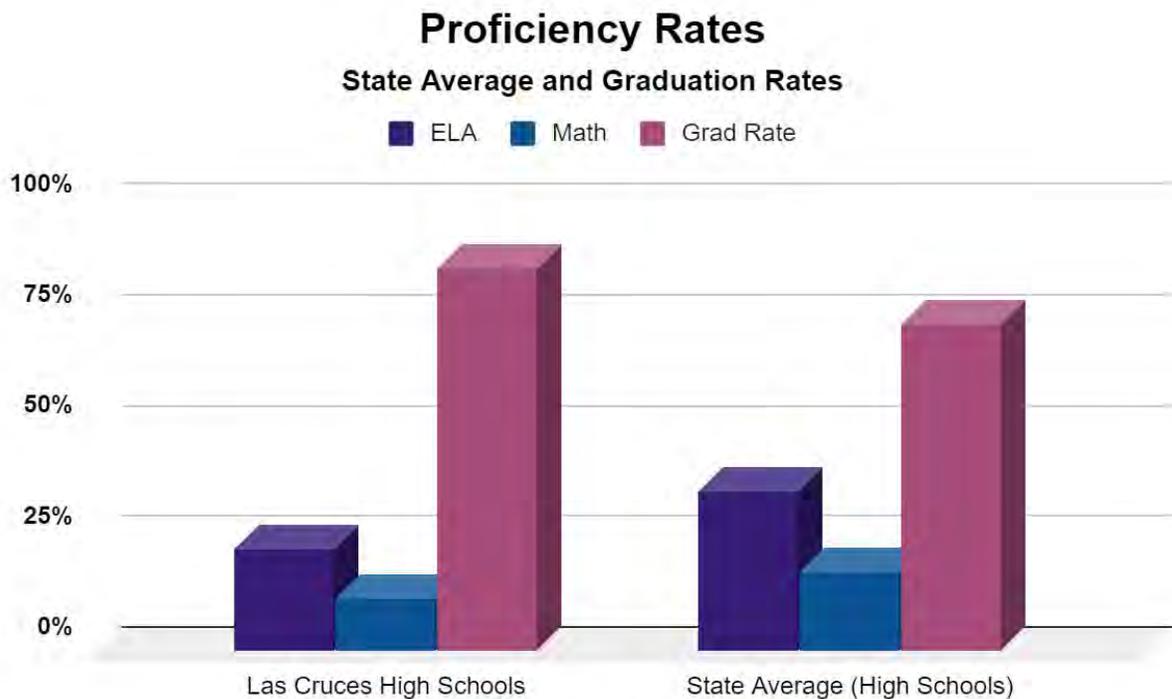
In contrast, consider the Explore Academy model, where **six seminars equals Algebra I credit, and there exist choice of three versions (flavors) for each of the six classes, resulting in 729 unique pathways.**



Postulate 5: Students in Las Cruces currently score well-below the state average in the areas of English and math

In response to feedback from the community input hearing, data analysis was performed which underscores a significant difference between the state averages in proficiency for the two major subject areas in comparison to the proficiency rates for high school students in the local community.

Las Cruces Public School district does have an exceptional graduation rate; however, when considering the data, **the difference between the district's graduation rate and its students proficiency rates is significant, showing a sizeable disparity.** LCPS graduates over 86% of its students (far above the state average), but yet has student proficiencies below 25% in both English and math (below the state average). As a result, it can be stated that **a significant sample of students graduate without the ability to demonstrate proficiency in English or mathematics on state-mandated tests.**



Upon further analysis, a trend is revealed which shows **declining proficiency rates for students from middle school to high school**. Explore Academy - Las Cruces seeks to improve student outcomes by demonstrating an increase in growth for students each year through the implementation of a comprehensive 6-12 educational model.

