



STATE OF NEW MEXICO  
PUBLIC EDUCATION COMMISSION  
300 DON GASPAR  
SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO 87501-2786  
[www.ped.state.nm.us](http://www.ped.state.nm.us)

PATRICIA GIPSON, CHAIR  
PUBLIC EDUCATION COMMISSION

KURT STEINHAUS, Ed.D.  
SECRETARY OF EDUCATION (DESIGNATE)

OPTIONS FOR PARENTS AND FAMILIES DIVISION - CHARTER SCHOOLS  
Year: **2022**

Patricia Gipson, Chair  
District 7, Las Cruces

Melissa Armijo, Member  
District 1, Albuquerque

David L. Robbins, Member  
District 2, Albuquerque

Glenna Voigt, Member  
District 3, Albuquerque

Rebekka Burt, Member  
District 4, Los Alamos

Georgina Davis, Member  
District 5, Gallup, Farmington

Michael Chavez, Member  
District 6, Socorro

Michael Taylor, Member  
District 8, Roswell

KT Manis, Ph.D., Member  
District 9, Hobbs

Steven Carrillo, Member  
District 10, Espanola

**NOTICE OF INTENT TO SUBMIT CHARTER APPLICATION INSTRUCTIONS**

According to NMSA § 22-8B-6(B) the Notice of Intent to Submit a Charter Application (“NOI”) must be filed by the organizers of a proposed charter school to the Public Education Commission at the address below **AND** to the superintendent of the school district in which the charter school is proposed to be located. *Failure to notify may result in your application being rejected.*

The NOI must be submitted by 5:00 PM Mountain Time on **January 11, 2022** (which, in accordance with statute is the second Tuesday of January). Notices of Intent that are not received by the Public Education Commission **and** the superintendent of the local school district by the deadline may result in the application being rejected. When you send the NOI to the superintendent of the school district in which your charter is to be located, you are strongly encouraged to send it by certified mail return receipt requested, or request a signed receipt when you deliver the NOI. Contact the local district regarding electronic filing.

Notice to the Public Education Commission should be delivered by one of the following methods:

- Electronically to: [charter.schools@state.nm.us](mailto:charter.schools@state.nm.us)
- By mail or personal delivery: PUBLIC EDUCATION COMMISSION  
c/o New Mexico Public Education Department  
Attn: Options for Parents and Families/Charter Schools Division 300 Don Gaspar, Room 301  
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87501

The NOI is intended to provide the Public Education Commission with the primary point of contact among the charter developers, and preliminary information about the charter proposal, such as the school’s mission statement, the school’s focus, the representative student population in the intended location, enrollment projections, key innovation, etc. (not to exceed 5 pages).

1. General Information

- Name of Proposed School

Explore Academy - Rio Rancho
------------------------------

- Grade levels to be offered and enrollment projections

Grade Levels to be offered	Projected Total Enrollment
K-12	1300

- Primary Point of Contact

Name	Justin Baiardo		
Mailing Address	2720 Avenida Corazon		
City	Rio Rancho	State	NM
Phone	505-306-5283		
Email	baiardo@explore.academy		

2. Names, roles, and current employment of all persons on the applicant team, and qualifications of the team members to establish a high-quality charter school

Names	Role on Team	Qualifications: Education, Employment, and Experience
Justin Baiardo	Founder	Founder - Explore Academy ABQ and Explore Academy - Las Cruces; 18 years of teaching and administration experience; National Board certified
Elisha Varela	Founder	Masters - Curriculum and Instruction, Bilingual Education; over a decade of education experience; founding member of Explore Academy ABQ and Explore Academy - Las Cruces
Karen Woerner	Director of Compliance	Masters of Education; over 25 years experience as teacher, coach, and district administrator; familiar with NM statutes, regulations and compliance

3. Model of focus of the proposed school (e.g., performing arts, dual language, college prep, STEM, Montessori, IB):

The **choice theory model of education**, which underlies the philosophy of Explore Academy, is focused on turning each student into an active learner who will increasingly become responsible for his or her own education. Students are allowed to choose and personalize their own educational pathway from an exceptionally diverse set of course offerings. This creates a more empowered, more successful student population who are prepared for college, career, and life.

The Explore Academy philosophy uses electives to a level previously unseen in public education by incorporating the idea of a differentiated curriculum with a diversity of educational choices from which they can create individualized, custom educational pathways. In other words, all core content courses are required, however, course offerings are elective in nature.

The diversity of the school and its curriculum come in the manner in which these seminars are delivered. Rather than providing a single option (the traditional manner of teaching), the teachers at Explore Academy create different themes (“flavors”) which differentiate the way in which the seminar may be offered to students. It is from this diversity that students can choose the manner in which they are educated. Specific themes for the seminar flavors, and their prominent strategies, will be developed through the creativity of the school’s teachers and will be advertised to students so that they may choose the themes through which they learn each subject matter. As students move through their seminar requirements, they will come to create a unique and individualized education specific to their interests and passions.

The other key focus for Explore Academy is true **standards-based instruction and grading** at all grade levels. Students are held to specific requirements which align to state standards. However, rather than learning objectives through year-long courses, Explore Academy uses various term lengths, determined by grade level, to focus on fewer objectives. In the upper grades, seminars are each 22-days long. What was previously a semester or year-long class is now broken up into several smaller seminars which collectively cover the same academic standards. All assessments during a term are formative, leading to summative assessments that determine the students’ grades. Students are required to show proficiency in the standards in order to proceed.

4. Does the school expect to contract with another entity for either management, or substantial oversight or direction in the school’s operation?  Yes  No

If YES, describe the entity and the role it will have in the school’s operational plan.

The school will be operated by a local Head Administrator and a Governing Board and, therefore, the team has responded “No” to question 4.

However, in full transparency, Explore Academy – Rio Rancho will contract with Explore Learning Systems to guide, train, and oversee the implementation of the Explore Learning model and curriculum, similar to the purchasing of curriculum materials and professional development/training but with much more coaching, follow-up and support. Explore Learning Systems is also qualified and available to provide additional support to the school leader(s) beyond the founding and opening of the school, at the Governing Board’s discretion and per a services contract. This may include data management, data systems, human resources support, school business official and other financial consulting, organizational processes, compliance, and other support services (such as assessment, STARS reporting, etc.). The intent of offering these back office services to the greatest extent possible is to provide experts in various areas to serve as consultants to the school and allow the school leader to focus on day-to-day operations, school culture, staff development, and student achievement.

5. Does the applicant team or any members of the team currently operate any other schools?  Yes  No

6. Vision/Mission statement (2-3 sentences)

Explore Academy will provide all students, regardless of background, with a personalized educational experience through the power of student choice, allowing each student to create a personalized and engaging educational pathway in preparation for college.

7. Student population and geographical setting of the school

- Define the targeted geographical area of the proposed school from which you expect to draw a significant number of your students.

The target area for the site is within the boundaries of Rio Rancho Public Schools. The actual location of the school will depend on selection of a facility. Explore Academy will offer transportation from key bus stops and would like to have students from all areas of the city. It is likely that the school may also attract students from Bernalillo and westside Albuquerque.

- Describe the student population including key demographic data (academic performance, home languages, English Learners (ELs), and special education populations) in the location in which the school intends to locate.

The Rio Rancho Public Schools is presently composed of approximately 17,300 students and the graduation rate is 85%. Achievement data released by PED shows that the math proficiency across the district is 32% and ELA proficiency is 44%

Over 55% of students in the district are Hispanic, with smaller percentages of Caucasian (31%), Native American (4%), and Black (5%) reported. The average percentage of ELs (English learners) is 4%.

The percentage of students receiving special education services is about 15%.

Students classified as economically disadvantaged account for 41% of the total student population.

- Identify where these students are most likely being educated currently and why they are expected to choose the proposed charter school for their future educational needs.

Currently, most students in Rio Rancho attend the traditional district schools, which includes eleven elementary, four middle, two comprehensive high schools (over 2,000 students each), an alternative high school, and a cyber academy. There are two state charter schools located in Rio Rancho: Sandoval Academy of Bilingual Education (grades K-8) and The ASK Academy (grades 6-12).

Explore Academy's model provides a rigorous, individualized learning experience for all students, allowing students, especially those from underrepresented subgroups such as ELLs and students with disabilities, to receive a college-preparatory education in a small school setting that is focused on learning, student growth, and accountability.

8. Provide evidence that the applicant team has assessed community need for a school of the nature that will be proposed in the application (e.g., objective surveys or other measures of local demand for the proposed educational program).

The founding team has analyzed achievement and demographic data for Rio Rancho Public Schools to assess the need related to college preparedness and overall academic achievement. We have also

analyzed ELL, special education and economically disadvantaged / free and reduced lunch percentages in public schools and the college preparatory options for students in relation to their district schools. While many traditional schools focus on standards-based instruction, particularly at the elementary school, few if any are implementing true standards-based assessment and grading across all levels, K-12. There is a need for a rigorous, engaging, college preparatory education option, one that requires proficiency in standards before moving onto the next course, for students who would otherwise have no access to this type of education.

After speaking to educators in the area and receiving specific requests from families and the community, we are confident that the model will be successful for the students and provide them with a high quality education that is based on authentic learning through choice, engagement and rigor. Specific survey results and other measures of demand will be provided with the new charter application.

9. Identify significant innovative features that the school will implement in order to help it realize its vision/mission (e.g., non-traditional school year, longer school day, partner organizations, etc.).

- Low class size (average 14 students per class)
- Student choice
- Short terms that focus on specific academic standards via “flavors” (themes) which allow for very targeted instruction in a small set of skills and standards
- Standards-based instruction, assessment, and grading
- Focus on mastery of standards with minimum proficiency requirements
- Growth mind-set
- “Flex” periods built into all student schedules for intervention and support services
- “Majors”, focused areas of study for upperclassman to explore college-like majors

Explore Academy values individual attention, so class sizes are kept much lower than in public district counterparts (average of 14 students per class). The use of our majors, or focused areas of studies for upperclassmen, allows students to explore college-like majors, taught with college-level rigor, in order to better understand both the post-secondary educational system as well as their own personal interests and passions in various contents. This exposure to specialized content in various disciplines provides students with valuable growth and experience before ever entering college.

Furthermore, the organization of the school year into shorter terms allows for very targeted instruction of a small set of skills and standards, increasing both the teachers’ ability to teach effectively, the students’ ability to reach mastery in a manageable amount of standards, and the overall accountability of the educational system in which all students earn credit for a class, or seminar as they are called at Explore Academy, only when they are truly proficient in the content from the term.

10. Describe how the school will be more effective than the schools currently serving the targeted student population, and/or plans to improve student achievement and exceed the academic performance of existing public schools in the targeted service area and any data you have to support this assumption.

The central component of the Explore Academy model is the freedom for students to choose the manner in which they receive their education, thus shifting the focus from educating a large group in

one particular manner to identifying each student as an individual, and thus allowing for a personalization of one's education based on each individual's unique academic strengths, passions, and interests. The system allows for student choice within the charter environment's choice-based system. This is crucial for Explore Academy's efficacy with student achievement, engagement. In contrast to our model is the local school district model, where students are provided very little choice in how they complete their educational requirements.

With schools becoming increasingly large, and with classes increasing proportionally, the inflexibility of the traditional model for teaching and learning becomes vividly apparent when compared to more streamlined and efficient approaches found in other industries. Students from subgroups such as ELs and economically disadvantaged students need more support and individualization which is built into the Explore Academy model.

Explore Academy's core philosophy is based on the promotion of freedom for academic choice in how all students complete their required credits. Because Explore Academy utilizes shorter learning modules, there is a significant increase in the opportunities for students to self-select, compared to students who are locked into a semester or year-long course in the traditional model. Further, Explore Academy provides significant choice at each of the term junctions, allowing students to choose the "flavor" for the seminar they require as part of their larger graduation requirement. In this case, the element of compounded probability essentially creates a mathematically infinite number of pathways through which students can pursue their education, vastly surpassing what a traditional school can offer. It is this difference that sets the Explore Academy model apart.

*Please Note: Should your charter be awarded, the founding governing body could undergo a background check to determine if it qualifies to be a board of public finance in the state of New Mexico.*

Signature of founder(s):



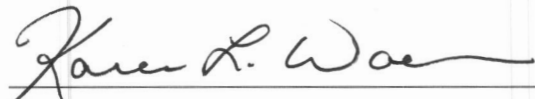
Justin Baiardo

Date: January 11, 2022



Elisha Varela

Date: January 11, 2022



Karen Woerner

Date: January 11, 2022