

Explore Academy - Rio Rancho

School Response to Application Analysis, Charter Schools Division (CSD) Final Recommendation, and Questions from the Public Education Commission and CSD

Pages 2-3: Summary of ratings and peer review overall comments

Pages 4-7: Concerns with evaluation and ratings of Parts C & D

Page 8: Response to conditions proposed by CSD

Page 9: Response to PEC/CSD questions provided by Chair Burt

Page 10: Details regarding elementary level

EXPLORE ACADEMY - RIO RANCHO

PART A	Instructions and Rubric			
PART B	Executive Summary			
PART C	Written Application	Meets	Approaches	Does Not Meet
	Education Plan / Academic Framework	16	2	0
	Organizational & Governance Plan / Framework	15	7	2
	Business Plan / Financial Framework	4	3	1
	Evidence of Support	1	2	0
	Capacity Interview	18	3	0
	TOTALS	54	17	3
Section #	Topic	Rating		
I	Education Plan / Academic Framework			
A1	Mission	Meets	<p>The founding team of the proposed Explore Academy - Rio Rancho has presented a well-written academic framework that begins with clear mission and vision statements. They have made a strong argument for the proposed school's K-12 academic uniqueness and innovation. It is their intent to adopt the already established and already in-use Explore Learning Model/Curriculum Framework that has proven its efficacy at Explore Academy – Albuquerque by earning recognition as a high performing school. The mission is: "... to 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 and career." The mission is accomplished through a theme-based seminar structure referred to as seminar "flavors". The curriculum is standards-based. The proposed school will open with K-2 and 6th grade levels. Descriptions and details of the curriculum framework presented in this application are heavily focused on the secondary level; relatively little discussion is focused on elementary level. More is needed. The narrative would be greatly enhanced with the addition of some examples of the classroom components such as exit exams that are created specifically to reflect the many different flavors through which the standards are taught. The application is weak in the narrative provided for implementation of the Bilingual Multicultural Education Act, Indian Education Act, Hispanic Education Act, and the Black Education Act with a rating of Approaches the Criteria. In addition, the review team identified questions about details presented in the calendar section of the application which is also rated as Approaches the Criteria. Overall, however, the Academic Framework section is strong and is rated as "Meets the Criteria".</p>	
A2	Vision Statement	Meets		
A3	Uniqueness and Innovation	Meets		
B	Mission Specific Goals	Meets		
C	Curriculum, Educational Program, Student Performance Standards	Meets		
D1	Bilingual Multicultural, Indian, Hispanic and Black Education Act	Approaches		
D2	Equity Plan	Meets		
E	Graduation Requirements	Meets		
F1	Teaching and Instructional Philosophy	Meets		
F2	Yearly Calendar and Daily Schedule	Approaches		
F3	How Instruction will be effective for the student population.	Meets		
G1a	Instructional Services and Supports for Students with IEPs	Meets		
G1b	Monitoring and Evaluation of Special Education Students	Meets		
G2	Required Curriculum and Instructional Supports for English Learners	Meets		
G2b	Monitoring and Evaluation of English Learners	Meets		
G3	Plan to adhere to ESSA and State Statutes Indian, Hispanic, Bilingual Multicultural, and Black Education Acts	Meets		
H1	Assessment Plan	Meets		
H2	Plan for Data Assessment Analysis	Meets		
H3	Plan for Student Progress/Achievement & Communication Plan	Meets		
II	Organizational & Governance Plan / Framework			
A1	Key Components of Governance Structure	Approaches	<p>The Organizational Framework narrative is well-written, comprehensive, addresses all subsections of Part C II. The Governing Board recruitment, training, oversight, community involvement in governance and student outreach are among the sub-sections of the Organizational Framework that are fully developed and have earned a "Meets the Criteria" rating. The proposed school intends to contract with Explore Learning Systems, LLC to provide a scope of services to support the school's board, leadership team, teachers, and other staff members. Some concerns emerge in the Organization Framework that are primarily driven by the relative inadequacy of documents provided as appendices. Some inconsistencies are also noted between the documents provided, the budget, and the Organizational Framework narrative.</p>	
A2	Governing Body Qualifications	Approaches		
A3	Selection of Governing Body Members	Meets		
B1	Governing Body Training Plan	Meets		
B2	Governing Body Self-Evaluation Plan	Meets		
C1	Governing Body Plan for Monitoring Outcomes	Meets		
C2	Plan for Hiring Head Administrator	Meets		
C3	Distinguished Roles & Responsibilities (from Head Admin)	Meets		
C4	Head Administrator Evaluation Plan	Meets		
D1	Organizational Chart	Approaches		
D2	Job Descriptions for Certified/Licensed Staff	Approaches		
D3	Staffing Needs and Plans	Meets		
D4	Professional Development Plan	Meets		
E	Employer/Employee Terms	Meets		
F1	Parental, Professional Educator, and Community Involvement in Governance Plan	Meets		
F2	Plan for Processing Concerns and Complaints	Meets		
G1	Outreach and Recruitment Plan	Meets		
G2	Lottery Admission Process	Meets		
H	Conflict of Interest Policy	Approaches		
I1	Essential Third Party Relationships	Does Not Meet		
I2	MOU or Formal Agreement Documentation	Does Not Meet		
J1	Transportation Plan	Approaches		
J2	Food Services Plan	Meets		
K1	Facilities Master Plan / Ed Spec Checklist approved by PFSA	Meets		
K2	Evidence of Researched Facilities/Properties	Approaches		

III	Business Plan / Financial Framework		
A	Projected Enrollment	Meets	<p>The Financial Framework section of the narrative addresses all of the subsections of Part C III. The narrative Meets the Criteria for four of the eight indicators and Approaches the Criteria for three of the eight indicators. One indicator is rated as Does Not Meet. The school size, budget narrative, budget adjustment, and governing board fiduciary oversight sections of the Financial Framework are strong and detailed. There are, however, a number of concerns and inconsistencies between the application narrative and the appendices that are noted in the 910B5, internal controls, and staffing responses. In particular, the Internal Controls in Attachment H only address purchasing and cash receipts. The charter narrative only addresses cash disbursements (both regular and payroll) and cash receipts. It does not address procedures to safeguard assets, segregate payroll, segregate cash and check disbursement duties, provide reliable financial information, promote operational efficiency, or ensure compliance with all applicable federal and state statutes, regulations and rules.</p>
B1	910B5 State Equalization Guarantee (SEG) Worksheet	Approaches	
B2	Proposed Five-Year Budget Plan Workbook	Approaches	
B3	Budget Narrative	Meets	
B4	Budget Adjustments	Meets	
C1	Internal Control Procedures	Does Not Meet	
C2	Staff for Financial Tasks	Approaches	
C3	Governing Body Legal & Fiscal Oversight	Meets	
IV	Evidence of Support		<p>The founding team members are current or former long-time residents of Rio Rancho. The team has reached out to the local community and leaders and plan to continue the outreach to nongovernmental organizations, community-based activists, Chamber of Commerce-based local businesses, city and county charter schools as well as county faith-based organizations. Although some outreach activity began as early as the year 2000, the majority has occurred from March through May 2022. The founding team demonstrates community support gained through a market research analysis conducted by a consulting firm. Resulting data is included in the narrative.</p>
A	Outreach Program	Approaches	
B	Evidence of Community Support	Meets	
C	Networking with Community	Approaches	
PART D	Capacity Interview		
School Specific	Curriculum Input	Meets	<p>Overall, the Applicant Team's responses fully demonstrated the capacity to open the proposed Explore Academy – Rio Rancho. Eighteen (18) of the responses to the twenty-one (21) questions earned a "Meets the Criteria" rating; three (3) responses earned an "Approaches the Criteria" rating. The members of the Applicant Team are highly experienced individuals who are fully capable of creating an exciting new school based on the Explore Academy Model. The Peer Review Team noted the excitement and enthusiasm expressed throughout the Capacity Interview process.</p>
	Model Specific to K-2 Students <i>The applicant team did not fully respond to all the components of the question. Specific examples of the K-2 experience from a child's point of view were not sufficiently provided. In addition, the applicant team did not address what it has learned about young children and their teachers in this model's environment.</i>	Approaches	
	Gifted Students	Meets	
	Schedule, lunch hour	Meets	
	Internal Control Procedures <i>The applicant team did not fully address the Internal Control concerns highlighted in the written application review of Part III, Item C.1. The applicant team did speak to the fact that this area is in need of further development. Monitoring of Internal Controls is one of the main functions of the Finance Committee.</i>	Approaches	
	MOU with Explore Learning <i>The applicant team's response did not clearly address or clarify the concerns of the Peer Review Team particularly with regards to the MOU (Attachment D) and the first year of operations. See Part III, Item C.2 of the written application review. The oral response brought up more questions than answers with regards to the written response.</i>	Approaches	
Education Plan	Mission	Meets	
	Contribution	Meets	
	Progress toward mission-specific goals	Meets	
Leadership & Governance	Selecting/Maintaining board members	Meets	
	Selecting head administrator	Meets	
	Transition period relationships	Meets	
	Incorporating peer review feedback	Meets	
	Policies and Procedures	Meets	
	Updating bylaws and policies	Meets	
Facility	Acquiring a facility that meets standards	Meets	
	Plan if cannot find adequate facility	Meets	
Finance	Implementation Year budget	Meets	
	Enrollment projections	Meets	
	Plan for possible enrollment shortfall	Meets	
Planning Year	Organizational plan	Meets	

EXPLORE ACADEMY - RIO RANCHO

I	Education Plan / Academic Framework	Rating	Applicant Team's Response
D1	Bilingual Multicultural, Indian, Hispanic and Black Education Act	Approaches	<p>While <i>more details could have been included</i> regarding the school's dedication to cultural relevancy, parent involvement, closing the achievement gap, increasing graduation rates, and including required discipline policies (specifically of the Black Education Act), this is covered in great detail in other parts of the application.</p> <p><i>The prompts for this section of this year's application do not include the one referenced by the Peer Review team.</i> In fact, "Provide a description of how the proposed school's curriculum will ensure equal education opportunities for students through cognitive and affective development of the students by: (d) discussing how the Equity Council will assist in the development and support of a culturally and linguistically relevant curriculum." is not listed in any prompts in this year's written application. However, similar prompts are included in C. Curriculum, Educational Program, Student Performance Standards, which were rated as Meets Standard.</p> <p>The applicant team contends that this should have been rated as Meets Standard.</p>
F2	Yearly Calendar and Daily Schedule	Approaches	<p><i>The application narrative explained that calendars were provided for elementary (which is K-2 for the first year) and secondary (which is only grade 6 for the first year).</i> We do not understand the feedback that states "There was an elementary calendar and a secondary calendar attached, but no distinction between a K-2 and a grade 6 calendar". Elementary and secondary <u>is</u> the distinction.</p> <p><i>The peer review team claimed that lunch was not included on the schedule.</i> However, the schedule for Friday for elementary grades does state that lunch is between 10 and 11 am. See page 41. For secondary schools, as indicated in the narrative, lunch is provided during periods 3, 4, and 5 and each student has a flex period for lunch during one of those periods.</p> <p><i>The peer review team commented that the calendar does not include school-wide assessments.</i> However, the application narrative acknowledged that specific instructional days would be allocated to assessments and explained that extra days are built into the last term of the year due to the amount of EOY testing. Additionally on pages 44-45, a general schedule of assessments by month were provided in a chart. Without exact dates, those were not on the actual school calendar but will be added once confirmed by PED.</p> <p><i>The peer review team was misinformed about ELTP requirements, claiming that Explore Academy - Rio Rancho did not add enough days to the calendar.</i> The PED has changed details of the Extended Learning Time Program (ELTP) in the past two years. While at one time, schools were required to add 10 days, beginning with the 2022-2023 school year they are allowed to to add 5 days plus the equivalent of 5 days in minutes. Explore Academy has elected to apply for the latter.</p> <p>The team neglected to describe the ELTP program in the application. This is the only reason that this can be rated as Approaches the Criteria.</p>
II	Organizational & Governance Plan / Framework		
A1	Key Components of Governance Structure	Approaches	<p><i>The statute referenced by the peer review team regarding appointment of a new member by the Secretary (which is NMSA §22-5-9) applies to traditional school districts whose members are elected by the public.</i> If the Secretary of a Charter School's board had someone to appoint, the board would do so within the time limit.</p> <p><i>There is no requirement to have the nepotism policy in the bylaws.</i> This is a policy that is adopted by the board. It is mentioned in the Staff Handbook as it applies to all employees in some manner.</p> <p>The business office representative to the audit committee will be the school business official for the school, not a support-level person.</p> <p>While NMSA §22-8-12.3. (D) does indicate that the "board shall appoint an audit committee that consists of two board members, one volunteer member who is a parent of a student attending that school district and one volunteer member who has experience in accounting or financial matters.", The reference to "preferably" is an acknowledgement that small charter schools often find it difficult to recruit volunteers willing to serve on the audit committee. Often those folks with financial experience are recruited to serve on the board. However, it is the goal to ensure that the volunteer has accounting or finance experience.</p> <p><i>If there is a requirement for term limits of committee members, please indicate the statute or regulation.</i></p> <p>The appointment of members to any committees is per the action of the Council, as stated in the by-laws (page 8). Therefore, the discipline and removal process is the same as the board members themselves, a majority vote by the Council.</p> <p>The applicant team contends that this should have been rated as Meets Standard.</p>

A2	Governing Body Qualifications	Approaches	<p>The founding team and the proposed board members disagree with the peer review team that <i>small business ownership does not indicate financial knowledge</i>. There are two small business owners on the proposed board and both have financial knowledge in order to successfully operate their businesses.</p> <p><i>The prompt referred to by the reviewers, "Select and oversee a qualified and highly effective school leader", was not in this section of the application.</i> Selecting and overseeing the head administrator are addressed in three other sections of the application following this section: C2 Plan for Hiring the Head Administrator, C3 Distinguished Roles & Responsibilities, and C4 Head Administrator Evaluation Plan, all of which were rated as "Meets Standard".</p> <p>Given that the board consists of two small business owners, two long-time educators with school administration experience, and an attorney, there is no doubt that they would ensure the success of the school if the founders were no longer involved. In fact, that is the goal and the responsibility of all charter school governing boards.</p> <p>The applicant team contends that this should have been rated as Meets Standard.</p>
D1	Organizational Chart	Approaches	<p>The chart at full enrollment, along with the staffing plan for each year, was intended to demonstrate the rollout.</p> <p>The K-5 Principal position was not described in the narrative, most likely due to the fact that the school will only have one Principal initially since the school will only have three grades. An additional principal will be added as the school population grows and there is a need for additional administration.</p> <p>The chart attempted to capture the working relationship between the Equity Council and the school, as well as the service providers and the school. The team would be happy to explain the roles in the org chart and any lack of clarity regarding the delegation of management duties.</p> <p>The applicant team contends that this should have been rated as Meets Standard.</p>
D2	Job Descriptions for Certified/Licensed Staff	Approaches	<p>The team agrees that this prompt earned Approaches the Criteria because the job description file uploaded was not the correct version, rather it is an early, very basic draft. This was a mistake. Additional details and alignment to the org chart would have been available if the correct file had been uploaded. This includes descriptions for all positions, proper titles, reporting lines and qualifications/licensure required.</p> <p>Please note that, though it may be best practice, <i>there is no legal requirement nor inclusion in the prompt to include number of work days per year and number of hours per workday in the job descriptions.</i> (Those will be included in Explore Academy contracts.)</p> <p>Also, the job description for the business manager does include several reporting requirements which covers PED quarterly reports, RFRs, BARS and much more. It specifically states "preparation of financial statements, including budget comparisons, preparation of financial documentation in preparation for the school's annual audit, presentation and discussion of financial information with the Governance Council, preparation of grant and contract financial reports, preparation of bank and general ledger account reconciliations, preparation of federal and state payroll tax reports.....". These categories encompass all reports referenced by the peer review team.</p>
H	Conflict of Interest Policy	Approaches	<p>The team agrees that this prompt earned Approaches the Criteria as the conflict-of-interest and nepotism policies were intended to be attached and uploaded as part of the ByLaws file but were not. The references in the narrative were due to the plan to provide those policies. The policies include timelines, required forms, and do contain a definition of immediate family member. Though it is too late to add those to the application, please note that these are to be submitted as part of the Implementation Year Checklist due to CSD in November, specifically 11-5.2.</p>
I1	<p>Essential Third Party Relationships</p> <p>If there is /are third party relationship(s) (partner organization, a contractor, foundation) that are essential to the existence of your charter school, governance, key instructional staff, or management functions, identify them (entity, person, contact information etc.).</p>	Does Not Meet	<p>The team does not believe that the relationship with Explore Learning Systems needed to be disclosed here. However, in the interest of full transparency, this response was provided in the event that the peer review team, CSD, or the PEC thought it should be included. The Explore Learning Systems (ELS) team will certainly be contracted to provide the professional development and materials associated with the Explore Learning Model and its systems for the initial years of operation as the school's mission indicates that it will implement the Explore Learning Model. However, should the charter school, with its own Head Administrator and Governing Board, decide to go in another direction in the future, it could sever that contract and seek an amendment to adopt another learning model (and school name).</p> <p>ELS also offers other backoffice services to the school at very competitive pricing and the school may elect to include those in a services contract with ELS via the RFQ/RFP process.</p> <p>This should have been "Not Applicable" as the ELS relationship with the school is that of a provider of education materials, professional development and other services.</p> <p>Please note that at the time of the application, the details regarding support from a foundation had not been confirmed. Information regarding the foundation and its officers are required to be submitted as part of the Implementation Year Checklist, due to CSD in November, specifically 11-15.1. Additionally, any lease (and assurances regarding maintenance), including those with a foundation, must be provided prior to school opening, as part of the PreOpening section of the Implementation Year Checklist, specifically P-O.4.</p>

I2	MOU or Formal Agreement Documentation If applicable, provide and attach as Appendix D, a proposed, signed, clear, formal agreement between the applicant and each third party relationship OR memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the applicant and each prospective third-party.	Does Not Meet	<p>As stated above, the school will determine whether to contract ELS for any services beyond the Explore Learning Model and the supporting materials and systems. ELS will be a contracted services provider. The founding team included the information as it was understood that another charter school who worked with an organization that provided support services (the NACA Inspired Network) was required by the PEC to include an MOU.</p> <p>Please note that at the time of the application, the details regarding support from a foundation had not been confirmed. Information regarding the foundation and its officers are required to be submitted as part of the Implementation Year Checklist, due to CSD in November, specifically 11-15.1. Additionally, the finalization of any MOU of this type is required as part of the charter contract process (after approval and implementation year) and should not be expected to be finalized at this stage. MOUs with any foundation associated with the school will be provided, as required, and attached to the charter contract.</p> <p>This should have been "Not Applicable" at the time of application submission.</p>
J1	Transportation Plan	Approaches	<p>The team believes that Herrera School Buses and Coaches, LLC is the only provider in the area but inadvertently did not list this contractor in the application.</p> <p><i>The peer review team had concerns that the cost of transportation will increase each year.</i> However, that is a reasonable projection due to adding more students and grade levels each year.</p> <p><i>The peer review team stated that "There is no estimated budget for transportation funds (Fund 13000) for years 2-5", but transportation funds were indeed included on the Revenues tab in the Five-Year Budget Workbook as \$135K for year 2, \$180K for year 3, \$225K for year 4, and \$270K for year 5.</i></p> <p>It seems unreasonable to rate this response as Approaches the Criteria for simply leaving out the name of Herrera. The school should be commended for offering transportation as most charter schools do not. Providing food and transportation are the two most important services to eliminate barriers to attending a charter school that many students face.</p>
K2	Evidence of Researched Facilities/Properties	Approaches	<p>The team looks forward to explaining the planned funding and lease payment matrix.</p> <p>The team did neglect to mention in the application that there are no public facilities available. It is well known that RRPS is not a supporter of charter schools and has refused to allow other charter schools to use or purchase facilities owned by the District.</p> <p><i>The scenarios for the facility are not as described by the peer review team.</i> In fact, the application states on page 156, "the founding team has established documented support from multiple potential investors for the purchase of a facility using bond financing and a non-profit foundation as the borrower." That non-profit foundation's sole purpose would be to support the school and provide a lease-to-purchase opportunity.</p> <p><i>This year's application prompt does not indicate that the response should address how a facility will meet the student population and transportation needs.</i> Like other prompts that were provided to the peer reviewers, this one was apparently removed when revisions were made to last year's application.</p> <p>The prompt requires that the team identify at least one facility. The team provided two.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The first, 6090 Zenith Court NE Rio Rancho (page 158 of the application), was approved by the PSFA and the letter of approval was provided in response to K1, earning a "Meets Standard". 2. The second, 601 Quantum Road Rio Rancho (page 159 of the application), states "Building availability flexible upon buyer need, <u>no later than</u> December 2023." [underline added]. <i>The peer review team stated "...the literature states it won't be available until December 2023. If the school intends to open on 7/1/2023, this site is not viable."</i> However, this is incorrect, this facility is indeed a viable option for July 2023, which is <u>before</u> December 2023. <p>The applicant team contends that this should have been rated as Meets Standard.</p>
III	Business Plan / Financial Framework		
B1	910B5 State Equalization Guarantee (SEG) Worksheet	Approaches	<p>The special education percentage on page 162 was clearly a typo. Please see page 50 which states "Explore Academy - Rio Rancho predicts it will enroll at least 15% special education students..." The budgeted percentages reflect the projections, given the annual increase in students with special needs in charter schools across the state, as well as an understanding of which grades are likely to have a higher percentage of students needing services. This explains the variations in the percentage and can be explained by the team.</p> <p>Though the founding team is aware that the charter school will use the District's TCI for the first year only, it is a reasonable estimate to use for all years.</p> <p><i>As for ancillary services, the peer review team wrote "It is concerning that the FTE for ancillary services is mostly less than 1FTE for the large number of budgeted special education students".</i> Nearly all state charter schools contract via CES or ACES for providers as the student populations are too small to warrant full-time staff. This is common. The important factor is that all required ancillary supports will be provided as identified on the IEPs. Until and unless the number of hours justifies hiring a fulltime employee and one can be found, the school will contract with CES, ACES, or individuals.</p> <p>The applicant team contends that this should have been rated as Meets Standard.</p>

B2	Proposed Five-Year Budget Plan Workbook	Approaches	<p><i>The review team's analysis regarding the budgeted amount for teacher salaries on the budget worksheet not agreeing with the narrative on page 162, and an alleged running discrepancy on the number of teachers in years 1 and 2 between the narrative and the budget, is incorrect.</i> In the state's budget form, kindergarten teachers are classified in a separate line item, under "Salaries Expense: Teachers-Early Childhood Ed" as opposed to "Salaries Expense: Teachers-Grades 1-12". The number of teachers for the first five years is accurate when counting both kindergarten and grades 1-12 teachers together and this count is what aligns with the budget narrative since it describes the school's entire teaching staff (grades K-12). When considering the kindergarten teacher salaries and combining those salaries with teachers in grades 1-12, the total salaries in the budget worksheet equal the salaries describes for all teachers in the budget narrative.</p> <p>Since the team did neglect to include the benefits for the data tech position and the head administrator, the response barely missed the Meet Standards rating and earned Approaches the Criteria. It is important to note that the major error identified, misalignment of FTE and salary, is not correct.</p>
C1	Internal Control Procedures	Does Not Meet	<p>The Internal Control procedures submitted with the application were very basic and the team intends to develop a robust set of board policies as a board. As you know, adopting various required policies and procedures is a requirement of the Implementation Year Checklist with three submissions: November 15, March 1, and May 15. If this school is approved, the proposed board members will complete training via the CSD, submit paperwork to request approval of the board of finance, and begin working on all checklist items as soon as possible. The Internal Control procedures are due with the March 1st submission and by that time, they will include best practices for segregation of duties, safeguarding assets, purchasing, cash receipts, and compliance with all federal and state requirements.</p> <p>The applicant team contends that this should have been rated at least as Approaches the Criteria at this point in the process.</p>
C2	Staff for Financial Tasks	Approaches	<p>The team has experience providing these services to another school and realize that the pricing is a great deal for the charter school. However, <i>it is unfair for the Peer Review Team to determine that the budgeted amount is inadequate.</i></p> <p>Since the team did not provide detailed qualifications and responsibilities for each of the positions listed, we can agree with the rating of Approaches the Criteria. Yet, we stand by our decision to include the School Business Official in these decisions and were in the process of hiring this person at the time of the application.</p>
IV	Evidence of Support		
A	Outreach Program	Approaches	<p>If Evidence of Support (B) earned a Meets Standard, it seems that this should have been rated the same. Either way, representation of the whole community was obvious at the Community Input Hearing which had standing room only and over a dozen citizens in-person in the overflow room down the hall, watching the proceedings online, and many others who joined the meeting remotely.</p>
C	Networking with Community	Approaches	<p>The team can agree that the strategic networking and relationships were not described in detail and concedes that the Approaches the Criteria rating is appropriate. The abundant support for the school as part of the community was evident at the Community Input Hearing.</p>
PART D	Capacity Interview		
School Specific	Model for K-2	Approaches	<p>It was not clear what exactly the peer review team meant by the question and we thought it was addressed in both the application and the interview. We noted that the team commented that <i>"relatively little discussion is focused on elementary level"</i> in the written application. However, elementary level is mentioned 34 times in 11 sections. Please see attached document that outlines the pages where elementary grade levels are discussed in the application, along with additional information about young children and their teachers.</p>
	Internal Controls	Approaches	<p>The team responded that the board will ultimately be responsible for monitoring the internal controls. We anticipate that the finance committee will be a "committee of the whole" which allows all board members to review the detailed financial reports with the School Business Official and Head Administrator and to ask questions at each monthly public board meeting. While we are aware that, by law, the Finance Committee may consist of two board members, the Head Administrator and the School Business Official who meet privately, we prefer to have all board members involved and operate in full transparency with the public. This practice seemed to confuse the peer review team as it is unusual but it is a best practice that promotes open and transparent governance.</p>
	MOU with Explore Learning	Approaches	<p>See comments for II Organizational I1 & I2 above.</p>

CSD RECOMMENDED APPROVAL WITH THE FOLLOWING CONDITIONS		
STANDARD CONDITIONS	APPLICANT TEAM'S RESPONSE	
1 Obtain standing as an approved Board of Finance	No objection	
2 Secure a facility that meets PSFA Approval	No objection	
3 Complete the planning-year checklist	No objection	
CONDITIONS PROPOSED BY CSD	APPLICANT TEAM'S RESPONSE	
The applicant must provide, by a date determined by the PEC, sufficient information regarding the school's foundation, Explore Learning Systems, LLC and the third-party relationships they both have with the school. Included in the information should be		
a) the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Foundation and Explore Academy Rio Rancho, which includes the responsibilities, activities, and costs associated with the agreement, and	This does not need to be a condition as it is a requirement of Contract Preparation that all MOUs with a foundation are attached to the contract between the school and the PEC. At the time of the application, the foundation had not been confirmed.	
b) the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Explore Academy Rio Rancho and Explore Learning Systems, LLC, which includes the responsibilities, activities, and costs associated with the agreement,	If so requested by the PEC, Explore Learning Systems, LLC will provide a copy of the services agreement between the school and the company if/when one exists.	
c) full disclosure of the legal status of Explore LLC, the names, employment contracts, and contact information of the individuals who sit on the board and who are employed by Explore LLC.	If so requested by the PEC, the team will provide any information regarding Explore Learning Systems, LLC which is public record. However, is this requested of all schools regarding the organizations and companies that provide support services?	
d) full disclosure of the foundation, with the names, employment contracts and contact information of the individuals who sit on the board and who are employed by the foundation.	This does not need to be a condition as the name of the foundation, officers, and contact information are due to CSD as part of the Implementation Year Checklist, specifically 11-15.1 due in November. Additionally, this is covered by section 1a above. The foundation does/will not have any employees nor any employment contracts.	
2 The applicant must provide additional detail regarding the school's finances, including		
a) the school's governing board-approved fiscal controls policies and procedures,	This does not need to be a condition as the internal control procedures are due to CSD as part of the Implementation Year Checklist, specifically 3-1.6 due in March.	
b) the names, titles and employment status of all staff contracted to provide financial services to the school and whether they hold employment with Explore Learning Systems, LLC and/or the foundation in addition to the school,	If so requested by the PEC, the team will provide a list of names, titles and employment status of staff contracted to provide financial services to the school as that is reported to STARS; whether they hold additional employment with Explore Learning Systems, LLC (ELS) or any other company is irrelevant. Please note that the foundation does/will not have any employees nor any employment contracts with staff who work for ELS or Explore Academy.	
c) the Finance committee membership names and contact information must be provided by a date determined by the PEC, and	This does not need to be a condition as evidence of the formation of the audit and finance committees, scheduled meetings, and list of committee membership is due to CSD as part of the Implementation Year Checklist, specifically 11-15.1 due in November.	
d) all finance committee meetings must include an agenda and minutes and be posted to the school's website.	Finance committee meetings held by the majority of state charter schools (with two board members, Head Administrator, and SBO) are not open to the public and agendas/minutes are not required. Having said that, Explore Academy - Rio Rancho's plan is for the finance committee to be a "committee of the whole". This means that the finance reports will be reviewed and discussed at the start of the monthly board meetings with all board members. As a result, the financial status of the school is discussed openly in public and is part of the agenda and minutes that are posted to the school's website.	
3 The governing body, once established, must provide an assurance that they alone will make the head administrator hiring decision, in accordance with the Charter Schools Act, including 22-8B-10 NMSA 1978 and 22-8B-4 (R) NMSA 1978.	This does not need to be a condition as a "written process and plan that details how the governing body will identify, recruit, and hire a prospective head administrator" is due to CSD as part of the Implementation Year Checklist, specifically 11-15.5 due in November. Explore Academy - Rio Rancho intends to have two board members on the interview committee and the recommendation of the committee will be brought to the board for approval.	

QUESTIONS FROM LETTER DATED JULY 22, 2022	APPLICANT TEAM'S RESPONSE
<p>1</p> <p>Page 126 states: In the event that the above projections are different from actual enrollment data, the school will adjust staffing in accordance with proportional need per position to ensure that the specific ratios of staff to student are maintained with adequate ranges to fulfill the school's staff needs in accordance with its mission and vision (teacher-to-student ratio, counselor-to-student ratio, special education director/teacher-to-student ratio, administrator-to-student ratio). How will the school adjust staffing? What did the network learn about student projections and managing a Reductions In Force with the Las Cruces school?</p>	<p>This comment on page 126 of the written application is addressed in great detail on pages 168-171 in response to the question that relates to that comment, Section III Financial B4: Provide a clear and meaningful description of what budget adjustments will be made to meet financial budget and cash-flow challenges, or to address the failure to receive any anticipated funding sources. The team is happy to clarify anything related to this if so desired by the PEC.</p> <p>As for student projections and the RIF at Explore Academy - Las Cruces school, decisions made by the Head Administrator and Governing Board of that school are completely independent of those to be made by Explore Academy - Rio Rancho's Head Administrator and Governing Board. Also, the situations are completely different. Explore Academy - Rio Rancho, if approved, will have a full year to promote the school and recruit students (unlike Explore Academy - Las Cruces who had three - four months).</p> <p>It should also be noted that Explore Academy - Rio Rancho's website has a link for families of students who might be interested in attending the school. Without any promotion at all, 225 individual students have submitted letters of interest as of 8/12/2022</p>
<p>2</p> <p>The school plans to bus students as described on p151. How have bus routes created equitable access to your other campuses, and how will you approach busing from this perspective for the RR school?</p>	<p>Bus routes will be created based on the addresses of the students who enroll. Stops are chosen based on safety, adequate space, and number of students in each area to be served.</p>
<p>3</p> <p>Will this school share staff with other Explore campuses and/or with the network? How does the contract work for such shared staff (e.g., K. Casedy is listed a principal/leadership support manager for the network...but is also the head administrator of the Las Cruces campus. Who employs her? JP114 describes the HA interview with both the founding team and governing council. How does the network ensure Head Administrator hiring decisions are made by each charter's board?</p>	<p>There is no plan to share employees with other schools. Explore Academy - Rio Rancho will decide who to contract for support and backoffice services via an RFP process.</p> <p>The hiring of the Head Administrator will be ultimately the Governing Board's decision. Founding team members will assist in the process of identifying qualified candidates and conducting interviews. The plan is for two board members to be on the interview committee and that the recommendation of the interview committee will be brought to the board for approval.</p>
<p>4</p> <p>On p141, it states that "The process and all steps in the [grievance] process will further be outlined on the school's website". Is this the same process utilized by the other schools in the network? Will the link to school's complaint form be on the school website or in the school's parent portal?</p>	<p>The grievance process will be described in the Staff and Student Handbooks. The Student Handbook will be posted on the school's website.</p>
<p>5</p> <p>How will the public get contact information on the school leadership and governing council? Existing schools within the network do not provide contact information on the website; the school's head admin, principals and board members' contact information is not included on the website, head administrators and principals are not identified.</p>	<p>The information regarding how to contact school leadership (and other staff members) will be contained in both the Staff and Student Handbooks. The Student Handbook, as well as a Staff Directory, will be posted on the school's website.</p> <p>As for contacting the Governing Board, there will be an email for the board. (Note: Though not related to this application, other Explore Academy schools do have a board member list that includes the email for reaching the board.)</p> <p>As for the general public, which includes vendors and sales people, the school general information email and office phone number will be prominently listed on the home page for contacting the school. (Note: Though not related to this application, other Explore Academy schools follow a similar practice.)</p>
<p>6</p> <p>The community input hearing heavily relied on information provided by, and support from, the existing Explore Academy school. Given that this school is based on a "proven model", what are problematic areas and/or lessons learned that will be addressed by the network for Explore Academy Rio Rancho?</p>	<p>Given that the academic model is used elsewhere, there are parallels to the framework that was presented for Explore Academy - Rio Rancho. Explore Learning Systems, LLC will provide support as necessary for the unique circumstances in Rio Rancho.</p>
<p>7</p> <p>Please provide additional information regarding the entity or foundation that may purchase facility for the proposed school.</p> <p>Who is that entity?</p> <p>Who is on the board of this foundation?</p> <p>What is the tax status of that entity?</p> <p>Where would the funding come from for an entity to purchase a facility?</p>	<p>It is the requirement of Contract Preparation that all MOUs with a foundation are attached to the contract between the school and the PEC. At the time of the application, the foundation had not been confirmed. However, though final arrangements have not been secured, the prospective entity is Explore Academy Foundation, the officers are Justin Balardo, Melanie Aygerakis, and Daniele Kneel. The tax status is a domestic non-profit corporation incorporated in the state of NM. The funding comes from investors who support high-quality, innovative education options for students and families.</p> <p>Please note, if approved, the projected closing date for the facility purchase is December 1, 2022 which allows ample time between now and then for securing funding.</p>
<p>8</p> <p>Explore Learning, LLC looks to be providing support for the proposed school. Please provide more information on this entity and the relationship.</p> <p>What services is that LLC providing?</p> <p>Who is on the board of that LLC?</p> <p>Is the entity a for-profit entity?</p> <p>How is the LLC involved in staffing/hiring at the school?</p> <p>How does the relationship comply with the law, particularly 22-8B-4. R. A charter school is a public school that may contract with a school district or other party for provision of financial management, food services, transportation, facilities, education-related services or other services. The governing body shall not contract with a for-profit entity for the management of the charter school?</p>	<p>While there are founding team members who work for Explore Learning Systems LLC (ELS), the work that they are doing on the application for Explore Academy - Rio Rancho is strictly volunteer. This work is driven by a passion to serve students and families who have requested that the Explore Learning Model be available locally to serve students from Bernalillo, Corrales, Rio Rancho, NW Albuquerque, and the surrounding areas. At this time, Explore Learning Systems, LLC is not providing services and is not being paid for any work on this charter application.</p> <p>Explore Learning Systems, LLC is a domestic limited liability corporation incorporated in the state of NM formed on 1/27/2021. Limited liability corporations do not have boards. The primary goal of Explore Learning Systems, LLC is to reduce the burden on the school leader so that he/she/they can focus their time and energy on student achievement and teacher/staff professional growth and development.</p> <p>If contracted to do so, Explore Learning Systems, LLC will support the hiring process via collection of applications and screening for minimum qualifications. However, all teacher/staff hiring decisions will be made by the Head Administrator and an interview committee of their choosing.</p> <p>The relationship between Explore Academy - Rio Rancho and Explore Learning Systems, LLC will be that of a contracted services provider. It is likely that training of teachers and developing of the curriculum will be a sole source purchase as the Explore Learning Model is not available via other vendors.</p> <p>Additional backoffice and other services, including support with assessment, compliance, diagnostic evaluations, finance (SBO), marketing, state reporting, etc are services typically contracted to third parties by charter schools. The Governing Board of Explore Academy - Rio Rancho will decide, via an RFP process, whether or not Explore Learning Systems, LLC will provide any or all of these services to the school.</p>

ELEMENTARY LEVEL ADDRESSED IN WRITTEN APPLICATION	
Page	Topic
4-7	K-12 model
7	Vision
9	Uniqueness
10-11	Goals
13	Elem student accountability
16-17	Rigor, scope and sequence, flavors
30-31	Assessments
31	Relevancy from early age
35-36	Creating flavors/seminars
40-45	Calendar + schedules
69	Assessments
70-76	Assessment strategy
77	Data analysis and triangulation, developmentally appropriate assessment
86	Communication with families re: data
What we have learned about young students	
	Importance of social emotional and academic development particularly with learners transitioning or beginning school after collective trauma of pandemic and interrupted schooling
	Students need safety, to be seen/heard, to build relationships with adults and peers, to have identity validated
	Foundational skills - structured literacy, speech sounds (masks), phonics, orthographic development (lots of typing/clicking vs. writing)
	Flourishing within environment of voice and choice, anecdotal and quantitative data, happy energy
What we have learned about teachers	
	Appreciation of creativity and freedom of thematic/student centered instruction vs. canned, scripted, top-down
	Have not been treated as professionals or masters of their craft; need adult SEL
	Lot of work - support, coaching, time for prep, professional development (job-embedded, ongoing)
	Paradigm shifts - how important collaboration is in highly interdependent school, it is teams not individuals working together to support students who are shared - we are better together
From a Child's Point of View	
	My parents helped me read the course catalog so I could pick my flavors. I picked STM C: Where the Wild Things Are (p. 8) and HUM B: Masterchef (p. 24).
	When we are eating breakfast, we talk about my frontloading - the animals and insects we observed in the backyard yesterday - a dog, a lizard and a bee.
	I take the best to school after breakfast. When I get to school, I decide to go out to recess to play. If it were colder I might choose to stay inside and read.
	I feel safe, I am excited to see my friends and my teachers.
	In the morning, I go to my Humanities class. We start in morning circle, where we greet each other by name, share about our lives and feelings, play a game, then go over today's learning.
	My teacher reads us a story and we stop to talk about what is happening in this story. Like a lot of our books, there is something to do with food! Later this week we will make tamales, just like in the story.
	After morning recess, we have choice centers and work on phonemic awareness, phonics, and do small group reading.
	Today's elective is Music, where we are learning songs from Encanto.
	After lunch and lunch recess I switch to my afternoon teacher for STEM, with more friends who had a different morning teacher!
	After our teacher asks us how we are and we do mindfulness, we have a our question of the day for science and math.
	We practice our numbers and addition through games, small group at the teacher table, and using our computers.
	At flex, I get extra help in reading from the Learning Specialist because I am still working on that.
	Afternoon recess is here before I know it!
	When we get back to class, I work on my STEM inquiry project, building a diorama for a "wild thing" I picked.
	We end the day with closing circle where we can appreciate each other, apologize, or share an aha.
	I take the bus home and can't wait to come back tomorrow.