

New Mexico Public Education Commission



2023 New Charter School Application Kit

Part B

Executive Summary

Charter Schools Division
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Instructions

The executive summary should be no more than two to three pages long and should address, in a narrative form, the following points:

- The proposed school’s name and a description of the charter school's projected students, including key demographic data (academic performance, home languages, special populations), based on the local community or the school district in the whose geographic boundaries where the charter school applies to operate
- Where the charter school's projected students are most likely being educated currently and why they are expected to choose the proposed charter school for their future educational needs
- Evidence that there is a community need for the proposed charter school a school of this nature in the area local community or the school district in whose geographic boundaries the charter school applies to operate. Note: NMSA 1978 § 22-8B-6(L)(5) provides, “[a] chartering authority may approve, approve with conditions, or deny an application. A chartering authority may deny an application if...the application is otherwise contrary to the best interests of the charter school’s projected students, the local community, or the school district in whose geographic boundaries the charter school applies to operate.” Evidence of community need is required. Specific data and evidence is required in the application itself. Therefore, specific statistical information does not need to be provided here.
- The key innovative and unique programmatic features the school will implement to accomplish its mission (non-traditional school year, longer school day, partner organizations, curriculum and assessment, etc.)
- How the proposed school will improve student achievement and exceed the academic performance of the existing public schools in the local community or the school district in whose geographic boundaries the charter school applies to operate. Provide a brief summary of any data that supports this assumption.
- The founders or applicant team of the proposed school, their background, expertise, and what drives them to engage in this endeavor.
- If different from the list provided above, the proposed governing board and their vision of charter school governance, and how the proposed school will benefit the community.

Applicant Response

Name of Proposed Charter School
Explore Academy - Santa Fe

New Charter Application Executive Summary
<p>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 their 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 because they are prepared for college, career, and life.</p> <p>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</p>

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.

Explore Academy’s model provides a rigorous, individualized learning experience for all students, that allows students, especially those from underrepresented subgroups, such as ELLs and students with disabilities, receive a college-preparatory education in a small school setting that is focused on learning, student growth, and accountability. This learning model is unique and different from anything presently offered in Santa Fe.

The request to offer the Explore Academy learning model to students in Santa Fe was initiated by two educators who live in the city and want to have this option available for the children of their friends and families. These educators are key members of the founding team.

The founding team has analyzed achievement and demographic data for Santa Fe 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.

The founding team members 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.

The significant innovative features include:

- 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 content areas. This exposure to specialized content in various disciplines provides students with valuable growth and experience before ever entering college.

Students at all grade levels are allowed to select “flavors” (or themes) through which they master the standards. Placement is determined by a combination of proficiency level and age, with elementary classes labeled A-L and secondary classes labeled 100+.

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 proficient in the content.

The central component of the Explore Academy model is the freedom for students to choose the way 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.