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**Charter Schools Division  
Analysis and Recommendation  
New School Application  
Explore Academy Santa Fe  
July 17, 2023**

Karen Woerner, Meghan McGraw, Alissa Leon, Justin Baiardo, and Elisha Baiardo have applied<sup>1</sup> to open a new charter school, Explore Academy Santa Fe, within the boundaries of Santa Fe Public Schools to serve grades K-12.

Based on the analysis set forth below, which includes the peer review team's evaluation of the new charter application and capacity interview, as well as a brief summary of the community input hearing and written community input received, the Charter Schools Division (CSD) recommends that the application be:

**Approved** – The application is complete and adequate; and during their Capacity Interview, the applicant(s) demonstrated a clear capacity to implement the academic, organizational, and financial management plans as described in the application. Nothing was identified that would indicate the applicant(s) do not have the experience, knowledge, and competence to successfully open and operate a charter school.

**Approved with conditions** – The application is complete and adequate; and during their Capacity Interview, the applicant(s) demonstrated a general capacity to implement the academic, organizational, and financial management plans as described in the application. However, the CSD has identified some specific concerns that would need to be addressed during the planning year. The CSD has listed the noted concerns and conditions to address the concerns below. If the PEC determines that there are any additional conditions that need to be

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<sup>1</sup> The Notice of Intent was submitted by Karen Woerner, with the applicant team including Justin Bairdo, Elisha Bairdo, Alissa "Leesa" Leon, and Meghan McGraw.

addressed, those should be noted during the public hearing and all approved conditions negotiated in the final contract.

**Denied** – The application is either incomplete or inadequate; or during their capacity interview, the applicant(s) did not sufficiently demonstrate the experience, knowledge, and competence to successfully open and operate a charter school in New Mexico.

The Charter Schools Act, in NMSA 22-8B-6 M states that a chartering authority may deny an application if:

- (1) the application is incomplete or inadequate;
- (2) the application does not propose to offer an educational program consistent with the requirements and purposes of the Charter Schools Act;
- (3) the proposed head administrator or other administrative or fiscal staff was involved with another charter school whose charter was denied or revoked for fiscal management or the proposed head administrator or other administrative or fiscal staff was discharged from a public school for fiscal mismanagement;
- (4) for a proposed state-chartered charter school, it does not request to have the governing body of the charter school designated as a board of finance or the governing body does not qualify as a board of finance; or
- (5) 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.

### **CSD Analysis and Recommendation**

The Charter Schools Division acknowledges that the Explore-Santa Fe application has strengths, particularly in the academic section which replicates the model of an existing charter school in Albuquerque. However, the organization and financial sections of the application suggest this application is inadequate and the team is not yet prepared to open a high-quality charter school. Overall, the peer review team found more sections either approached the criteria or did not meet the criteria, than those that met. During both the application review process and the capacity interview, the application team failed to demonstrate the capacity to implement the organizational and governance plan (organizational framework) and the business plan (financial framework).

In the organizational section of the application, out of twenty-five (25) indicators, there were six (6) that scored as “does not meet criteria” and fifteen (15) indicators that were scored as “approaches criteria,” leaving only four (4) indicators that met the criteria. In the financial section, out of eight (8) indicators, three (3) did not meet the criteria, three (3) approached, and only two (2) items met the criteria. While a perfect score in all sections is not required for recommendation, **most** of the indicators should **meet the criteria** in order to be considered a strong applicant for a new charter school.

Schools that have been approved in previous years had application reviews and capacity interviews where the vast majority of indicators met the criteria in all major categories, and had very few, if any, “approaches” or “does not meet” criteria ratings. In fact, in the past five (5) years, the PEC has not approved any schools with more than three (3) indicators in total that did not meet criteria (application and capacity interview combined). Below are concerns noted by CSD.

Roles and Capacity of the local team: Raised by the review team and in public comment is the role of the contract provider: Explore Learning Systems, LLC (ELS), founded in Albuquerque and [operating schools](#) in New Mexico, Arizona, Michigan and Nevada. As founders of the school, ELS intends to serve as contractors to a board that is not yet solidified and a head administrator that is not yet identified. During the community input hearing, a lack of readiness and capacity of the local team to implement the charter without the support of ELS was evident yet founding school leaders stated that “the relationship could be severed with ELS at any time”. The application, on p.84 states that the governing board is “in the formative stages.” It is unclear how the school could exist without a relationship with ELS. Throughout the organizational section it is clear that ELS would have influence over the initial hiring (p.100), and potentially the ongoing evaluation, of a head administrator as well as the hiring of other staff.

A staff member from ELS attended all four (4) of the CSD training sessions leading up to the application submission; ELS also played a large role in the capacity interview; this contrasts with the input hearing where two local team members took lead while ELS took a back seat most of the time.

The Capacity Interview with Explore-Santa Fe took place on June 28, 2023, with the Peer Review team members (a few CSD staff listened in). Questions included those asked of both charter school applicants, and a few tailored to this application. Founding team members in attendance are listed in the chart below. Several additional ELS staff were also on the call, chiming in to ensure more thorough responses.

Community Relationships and Engagement: The review team noted, and it was acknowledged during the input hearing, that the founders had not adequately engaged the community during the application development phase to ensure the school would meet local need. Thus, the application does not demonstrate meaningful input and participation from key stakeholders in Santa Fe.

Anticipated students: The applicants provide a chart on p. 42 of the anticipated student population relative to the Santa Fe Public School District. The school intends to serve twice the percentage of Caucasians (30 vs 15%) and significantly less Hispanic students (55 vs 80%), similarly to both operating Explore schools (in Albuquerque and Las Cruces). This, combined with the plans to not provide a Bilingual language program, although the Santa Fe student populations comprises a significant EL population, raises a concern about whether the school is in the best interest of students in Santa Fe and able to address populations in the Yazzie/Martinez lawsuit.

Enrollment Subgroup Percentages - SY2022-23 120D								
Name	Asian	Black	Hispanic	Native Am.	White	SPED	EL	Econ. Disadv.
Albuquerque District	2.76	3.42	66.38	6.47	20.75	22.75	19.96	41.24
Explore Academy	3.59	3.94	45.14	1.93	44.96	13.67	3.94	12.71
Las Cruces District	1.07	2.36	78.52	0.83	16.89	16.65	15.70	46.39
Explore Academy LC	1.14	3.43	60.57	1.14	33.71	16	10.86	40.57

Standards-based instruction, grading and choice: The application makes claims about what the district offers and how it operates that are unfounded. Input from the Superintendent of Santa Fe Public Schools clarifies choice and how Santa Fe is already offering standards-based instruction and grading, although no schools in Santa Fe offer the schedule and flavors in the way Explore proposes.

School Size and Explore’s track record: The PEC raised the question during the input hearing about successful replication of this model. Experience from the Explore Las Cruces opening suggests, as noted by the review team, that the founders may have over projected the number of students with 318 in the first year. In Las Cruces, estimates fell short, with 84 students in the first year, when the projection was 240. Because the Las Cruces school and Rio Rancho schools are so new, we lack significant data to confirm the successful replication of the Albuquerque school is possible when the LLC is the founder, but not the staff, at the school.

Facilities, Financing and Fiscal Management: The review team rated the school as “does not meet” in the Facilities section K(2) noting that the charter school could not issue bonds; however, both the Albuquerque and Las Cruces schools’ foundations have issued bonds, according the [FY22 Audit](#), in Albuquerque totaling over \$14 million for the Gulton and Masthead facility and in Las Cruces, over \$11 million. Both the operating schools had audit findings of noncompliance, material weaknesses and demonstrate a need for stronger internal controls.

Further, that the applicants failed to provide sufficient information to meet the budget plan and raised concerns for peer reviewers about submitting a balanced budget. CSD and the peer reviewers are aware that Explore Academy Santa Fe’s budget does not contain a \$2.4M deficit. The peer review team’s rating was because the operational revenues and expenditures did not balance in the budget spreadsheet submitted. CSD also understands that the school intends to move expenditures to federal and other funds as necessary and as they become available. If additional revenues become available, funds appear adequate to cover projected expenditures. It would not be appropriate for CSD to change the peer team’s rating as one founder requested.

**Peer Review Evaluation**

Peer Review Team Consensus Ratings	Meets the Criteria	Approaches the Criteria	Does Not Meet the Criteria
Application Indicators	19	26	10
Capacity Interview Questions	9	10	2

<b>Application Indicators</b>	<b>Rating</b>
Mission	Meets
Vision Statement	Meets
Uniqueness and Innovation	Approaches
Mission Specific Goals	Meets
Curriculum, Educational Program, Student Performance Standards	Meets
Bilingual Multicultural Education, Indian Education, Hispanic Education and Black Education	Meets
Equity Plan	Approaches
Graduation Requirements	Approaches
Instruction Philosophy	Meets
Yearly Calendar and Daily Schedule	Approaches
Schedule Narrative	Meets
Special Education: Students with IEPs	Meets
Special Education: Progress Monitoring	Meets
English Learners: Curriculum & Instruction	Meets
English Learners: Progress Monitoring	Approaches
ESSA and Special Population Needs	Meets
Assessment Plan	Approaches
Assessment Data Analysis	Meets
Achievement Communication Plan	Meets
Governance Structure	Approaches
Governing Board Qualifications	Approaches
Governing Board Recruitment	Approaches
Annual Board Training Plan	Approaches
Annual Board Self-Evaluation	Meets
Board Oversight Monitoring Plan	Approaches
Hiring Head Administrator	Approaches
Leadership Roles & Responsibilities	Approaches
Annual Head Evaluation	Meets
Org Chart & Narrative	Does Not Meet
Job Descriptions	Approaches
Staffing Plan	Approaches
Professional Development Plan	Approaches
Conditions of Employment	Does Not Meet
Meaningful Community Involvement in Governance	Approaches
Complaint Process	Meets
Student Outreach & Recruitment	Approaches
Lottery Process	Meets
Conflict of Interest Policy	Approaches
Third Party Relationship	Does Not Meet
If Third Party Relationship, then Appendix D	Does Not Meet
Transportation	Approaches

Food Services	<b>Approaches</b>
Appendix E Facilities Master Plan	<b>Does Not Meet</b>
Evidence of Researched Facility	<b>Does Not Meet</b>
Projected Enrollment	<b>Meets</b>
Appendix F Completed 910B5	<b>Meets</b>
Appendix G 5-year Budget Plan	<b>Does Not Meet</b>
Budget Narrative	<b>Does Not Meet</b>
Budget Adjustments	<b>Approaches</b>
Internal Control Procedures	<b>Approaches</b>
Appropriate Financial Staff	<b>Approaches</b>
Governing Board Fiduciary Oversight	<b>Does Not Meet</b>
Outreach Activities	<b>Approaches</b>
Community Support	<b>Approaches</b>
Community Relationships	<b>Does Not Meet</b>

<b>Capacity Interview Questions</b>	<b>Rating</b>
How will the mission, as described in the application, enhance, and transform the proposed community?	<b>Approaches</b>
What is the most important contribution your proposed school will bring to the community in which you propose to operate?	<b>Approaches</b>
What does mission success look like?	<b>Meets</b>
Describe how the board will provide oversight of your proposed school.	<b>Meets</b>
There are a lot of roles and responsibilities which a district provides to traditional schools. Who will fill those roles at your proposed school?	<b>Meets</b>
How will the proposed school ensure that policies and procedures are not only compliant, but also well implemented, current, and effective?	<b>Approaches</b>
What will be the responsibilities of the board in reporting to their authorizer?	<b>Meets</b>
How does a charter school board ensure the long-term sustainability of the school?	<b>Meets</b>
Describe the students whose needs your school will serve	<b>Meets</b>
What opportunities will your school offer to the community that are not currently available?	<b>Meets</b>
Describe your vision for engaging students and their families to fully participate in your proposed school	<b>Meets</b>
Describe your plan for attracting and keeping high-quality teachers. What is your contingency plan if you can't find the teachers you need to fill all positions?	<b>Approaches</b>
How are you going to open your proposed school without federal start-up funds?	<b>Approaches</b>
Describe how you will make enrollment projections to establish and submit your first budget to PED? How will you ensure these enrollment projections are reasonable and align closely to your actual 40-day count?	<b>Meets</b>

Suppose your actual enrollment on the first day is 50% below your pre-opening projection. What are your next steps?	<b>Approaches</b>
Please justify that there is only one Special Education Teacher for the projected 54 Special Education students in Year 1.	<b>Does Not Meet</b>
The budget shows that year over year you are overextended by 2.4 million dollars over 5 years. Explain how you will correct this. Explain how you will adjust even further if you do not meet enrollment projections	<b>Approaches</b>
How will your policies be culturally responsive?	<b>Approaches</b>
Explain how you're going to fund your permanent building without the ability to bond.	<b>Approaches</b>
Explain how Explore Learning Services is not a charter management organization.	<b>Does Not Meet</b>
What is the compelling interest from the community for this school? Share with us additional quantitative data on top of what's in your application.	<b>Approaches</b>

**Summary of Community Input Hearing and Support/Opposition**

Explore-Santa Fe’s Community Input Hearing took place online and at the Public Education Department’s Mabry Hall on Monday, July 10, 2023. Sixty-three (63) people were in attendance, not including CSD staff and PEC; thirty-three (33) in person and thirty (30) were online. Five (5) people signed up to speak; four (4) spoke in favor; one (1) spoke in opposition. Using the QR Code, eight (8) individuals indicated support. Using the Google form, fifty (50) indicated support, and two (2) expressed opposition to the application. CSD noted some duplication in respondents across those channels of input. Notably missing were families and students who would plan to attend the school. Those in favor spoke of choice, love of the model, and suggested it would be beneficial to Santa Fe<sup>2</sup>.

The Superintendent of Santa Fe Public Schools submitted a letter opposing the school to be read into the record. Concerns raised by the Superintendent and others in opposition include taking funding away from the district, duplication in programming, and concern that the school does not address needs identified in the Yazzie/Martinez lawsuit. We received one letter from the Los Alamos National Laboratory Foundation in opposition, noting there was no clear advantage of having the school in Santa Fe and a concern for how the school would support economically disadvantaged students.

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<sup>2</sup> The transcripts from the hearing were not published at the time this report was due.

Below are the founders/school leaders in attendance at the four (4) CSD training sessions, the Capacity Interview, and the Hearing.

	1	2	3	4	Capacity Interview	Input Hearing
Justin Biairdo	FALSE	FALSE	FALSE	FALSE	TRUE	TRUE
Elisha Biairdo	FALSE	FALSE	FALSE	FALSE	TRUE	TRUE
Alissa Leon	FALSE	FALSE	FALSE	FALSE	TRUE	FALSE
Karen Woerner	TRUE	TRUE	TRUE	TRUE	TRUE	TRUE
Meghan McGraw	FALSE	FALSE	TRUE	TRUE	TRUE	TRUE
Karen Pastiche	FALSE	FALSE	FALSE	FALSE	TRUE	TRUE
Katie Rarick	FALSE	FALSE	FALSE	FALSE	TRUE	TRUE



July 10, 2023

*Options for Parents & Families | Charter Schools Division  
New Mexico Public Education Department  
300 Don Gaspar Ave. | Santa Fe, NM 87501*



Dear Commissioners,

Santa Fe Public Schools stands in strong opposition to approval of the charter applicant, Explore Academy–Santa Fe, which will replicate programming already available in the district, further school funding inequities and have a potential dire impact on our existing public schools.

The Yazzie/Martinez lawsuit challenged the state’s failure to sufficiently fund programs and services for low-income, Native American and English language learner students and students with disabilities. As such, the district’s opposition is grounded in a need to protect the resources and funding provided for these students by the state in response to Yazzie/Martinez.

Approval of the charter application and diverting resources to a replicated program could undermine our efforts to provide necessary resources and improvements to our existing schools and students.

Introducing a charter school with programming similar to what the district already offers could result in a duplication of resources. Specifically, standards-based and project-based learning are offered throughout the district and at all grade levels. Duplicating this programming may lead to inefficiencies and the diversion of funds that could otherwise be used to enhance existing programs and support students.

A new charter school could impact the enrollment and resources of existing schools in the district. School enrollment in our schools is already impacted by a declining school-age population and numerous charter and private schools. Adding another such school will exacerbate the situation, potentially affecting the quality and diversity of educational opportunities in the district.

By approving the Explore Academy–Santa Fe charter school, the New Mexico Public Education Commission may not meet the intention of the Charter Schools Act regarding implementation of different and innovative teaching methods, creation of new, innovative and more flexible ways of educating children within the public school system and not being contrary to the best interests of the local community or the school district in whose geographic boundaries the charter school applies to operate.

The decision to approve or reject any new charter school application should consider various factors, including the potential impact on existing public schools and the overall educational landscape in the district. It is ultimately up to the governing body responsible for approving charter applications to weigh these considerations and make a decision that best serves the needs of the community while ensuring compliance with legal obligations, including Yazzie/Martinez.

In conclusion, instead of introducing a new charter school, it may be more beneficial to focus on collaboration and innovation within the existing schools in the community, both public and private. By working together, educators and administrators can share best practices, resources and ideas to improve programming and address the changing needs of students.

We stand in opposition to the applicant.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'H Chavez', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Hillario "Larry" Chavez  
Superintendent of Schools



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July 13, 2023

NM Public Education Commission

NM Public Education Department

[Charter.schools@nm.ped.gov](mailto:Charter.schools@nm.ped.gov)

Dear Commission and Department:

This letter is to express concern about a new charter school application for Santa Fe. The Explore Academy is a charter school network with various schools throughout the country. The schools in Las Vegas, NV and Las Cruces, NM have not shown good results, especially for economically disadvantaged students.

Until these concerns can be addressed, I would recommend that you deny their application. In addition, Santa Fe already has multiple high school options for parents and students through the Santa Fe Public Schools and charters. There is not a clear advantage to having this school in Santa Fe.

Sincerely,

Jenny Parks

President and CEO

\*This was submitted via google form\*

Hilario Chavez; I am **opposed** to Explore Academy's charter application. (Submitted via google form as well)

Santa Fe Public Schools (SFPS) stands in full opposition to the Explore Academy–Santa Fe charter school application. It is a prototype application that lacks knowledge of SFPS, particularly regarding SFPS' implementation of standards-based learning and grading, and raises serious concerns in areas specific to student diversity and inequities.

By approving the application, the New Mexico Public Education Commission may not meet the intention of the Charter Schools Act regarding implementation of different and innovative teaching methods, creation of new, innovative and more flexible ways of educating children within the public school system and not being contrary to the best interests of the local community or the school district in whose geographic boundaries the charter school applies to operate.

The Explore Academy–Santa Fe application summary states that few are implementing true standards-based assessment and grading at all levels, even though SFPS is doing exactly that, implying that SFPS is not implementing “true” standard-based assessment and grading.

SFPS is engaged in innovative and transformational work to ensure that students receive equitable, grade-level, differentiated instruction that meets them where they are. This work has garnered the attention of the White House and U.S. Department of Education, particularly in the use of federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) dollars to effect change.

In the 2022-23 school year, 13 SFPS schools implemented standards-based instruction and in 2023-24, 11 more will fully launch this initiative, with a remaining three coming on board in 2024-25. The first 13 schools–Amy Biehl Community School, Atalaya Elementary School, Carlos Gilbert Elementary School, Chaparral Elementary School, Early College Opportunities (ECO) High School, E.J. Martinez Elementary School, El Camino Real Academy, Milagro Middle School, Nina Otero Community School, Ortiz Middle School, Salazar Elementary School, Tesuque Elementary School and Wood Gormley Elementary School–are significant in that they cross the academic spectrum, from elementary to high school, and represent Santa Fe's diversity.

Overall, SFPS' investment in standards-based learning is in excess of \$4 million. This significant investment goes much further than Explore Academy's model.

SFPS' plan includes phasing in innovative standards-based learning and grading in schools while addressing students' social-emotional needs, forging community partnerships for high-quality after-school programs and focusing on student absenteeism and reengagement. SFPS' philosophy, grounded in the needs of the community, is that students should be measured by what they know, not judged on how many assignments they complete.

Students need rich after-school programming from community groups so that teachers can focus on piquing students' curiosity to learn. And they need to be in school each day. Additionally, to provide high-quality instruction and find joy in learning, SFPS works to meet students' emotional, mental and physical well-being, which provides the basis for teaching and learning.

SFPS is using professional learning communities (PLCs) to build a teacher-to-teacher shared understanding of instruction and achieve better learning results in the district and each school. School-site teacher PLCs meet weekly for collaboration and to enhance teaching practices. In addition, district wide virtual PLCs are held, with teachers in secondary schools meeting virtually each week and middle and elementary teachers meeting monthly.

Early release days have been implemented for all schools so that teachers can collaborate and plan during weekly PLCs and deeply explore the learning standards regarding what students must know and be able to do. The district wide virtual PLCs bring it all together, allowing teachers to go beyond their school site discussions and address learning by school level or content area. The focus is on learning, a collaborative culture and results.

In addition to the teacher PLCs, five PLC networks for principals, each consisting of five to seven principals, meet monthly at school sites to review standards-based learning. Principal PLC networks are opportunities for principals to collaborate, celebrate and share best practices to improve teaching and learning. Through the networks, principals can better identify what high-quality instruction looks like. At each principal PLC network meeting, principals conduct classroom visits with teachers, focusing on instructional improvement in an area that the hosting principal wants their colleagues to see. Time is included for them to dialogue and share new ideas.

SFPS is focused on knowing where a student is academically at any point in time and providing immediate feedback. SFPS furthers its ability to do this, however, through a substantial investment in technology in the classroom and digital learning coaches who help educators integrate technology resources into daily lessons.

SFPS has a number of other concerns regarding Explore Academy's application.

The following quote from Justin Baiardo, Explore Academy's model founder, academic program director and data analysis manager, from the video Introduction to Explore Academy, is at odds with the general recognition that equity is at the heart of standards-based learning and grading. He said, "With our challenging curriculum, any student can be successful no matter what their needs. We have had a track record with exceptional results with students with special needs, gifted students and general students. The one thing that we feel like sets students who are successful apart from students who are not is that they pay attention to feedback and they really do want to improve themselves. We have had students who refuse to improve on their work. Hey, here's what you did wrong, let's fix this. Students that don't commit themselves to that will not succeed at Explore Academy. A student that looks at their mistakes, reflects on it, works with the teacher, gets help when they need help and really drives themselves to improve, those students are the ones that are going to be successful."

Mr. Baiardo's statement seems to discount the impact of poverty on learning by viewing proficiency from the narrow perspective of whether a student commits to being successful.

As noted by David Holden, CEO of the American Alliance for Innovative Systems, a consultant on SFPS' standards-based learning implementation, "There are students with means who have greater resources and tend to get higher grades based on 'studenting' behaviors. Students of poverty, etc. don't know how to play the game of school. They lose in that game."

Another concern is that Explore Academy--Santa Fe's application states the need in Santa Fe for a rigorous, engaging, college preparatory education option that requires proficiency in the standards before moving into the next course. SFPS is that option, preparing students for college and careers through its novel College and Career Technical Education (CCTE) initiative, which is preparing students for both college and career. Through CCTE, SFPS is improving learning and teaching and introducing more real-world application, problem solving and project-based learning into academics and more academic content into career technical education.

As noted in a September 2021 presentation to the SFPS Board of Education, SFPS offers multiple pathways to explore industry and two-year and four-year colleges:

Ortiz Middle School offers two opportunities--Junior Biomedical Program and Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship Program. At Ortiz, 175 students are in the pathways, which is 33% of the school's enrollment.

Capital High School offers Business, Computer Technology and Medical pathways, with 673 students or 43% of students enrolled.

Early College Opportunities High School offers Auto Body, Auto Tech, Computer Tech, Construction, Design & Architecture, Greenhouse and Welding pathways, with 199 students or 94% of students enrolled.

Santa Fe High School offers Engineering, Computer Science and Culinary Arts pathways, with 604 students or 35% of students enrolled.

SFPS pathways are aligned to more than 25 certificate and degree programs at our four postsecondary institution partners (Eastern New Mexico University, Institute of American Indian Arts, San Juan College and Santa Fe Community College), current CCTE offerings prepare students for more than 52 separate industry-recognized

certifications and SFPS is working with more than 31 local business partners for work study, job shadowing, mentorship and internship opportunities.

This year, SFPS and the city of Santa Fe have forged an innovative work-based learning partnership, unique in the state, that will pay student interns \$14 an hour for the next two years with \$797,600 in American Rescue Plan act funds for youth workforce development. The city is the only one in New Mexico to utilize these funds in partnership with public schools.

In addition, Mandela International Magnet School, the only equal access public International Baccalaureate (IB) school in Santa Fe, fully embraces the tenets and mission of the IB to develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect. Mandela serves students in grades 7-10 with the Middle Years Programme (MYP) and grades 11-12 with the Diploma Programme (DP).

Its diverse student population receives a rigorous education that emphasizes international engagement and cultural competency as part of its mission to empower learners to become compassionate and principled decision-makers and responsible world citizens. Mandela provides the skills and tools so students can become agents of positive change.

A third, troubling concern is that Explore Academy--Santa Fe will not initially offer bilingual multicultural programs, despite its plan to draw students from Santa Fe's mid-city and southside areas, which are ethnically diverse, and serve 55 Hispanic students, 50 economically disadvantaged students and 20 English learners.

The Yazzie/Martinez lawsuit challenged the state's failure to sufficiently fund programs and services for low-income, Native American and English language learner students and students with disabilities. We cannot regress in this area. The district's opposition to Explore Academy--Santa Fe is grounded in this need and to protect the resources and funding provided for these students by the state in response to Yazzie/Martinez.

SFPS is receiving \$2.295 million in 2023-24 State Bilingual Multicultural Education funds (Operational) for the following bilingual and multicultural school programs: El Camino Real Academy Dual Language K-8; Cesar Chavez Elementary Dual Language K-5; Kearny Elementary Dual Language 6, Heritage K-5; Salazar Elementary Dual Language K-6; Sweeney Elementary Dual Language K-5; Ramirez Thomas Elementary Heritage K-2; Ortiz Middle School Dual Language 6-8; Milagro Middle School Heritage 7-8; Santa Fe High School Heritage 9-12; and Capital High School Heritage 9-12.

This funding is critical to closing learning and opportunity gaps. Should Explore Academy--Santa Fe become a reality, it could draw away students who need these programs but will not get them, thus furthering inequities.

There are also weaknesses in Explore Academy--Santa Fe's alignment with the state's Indian and Hispanic education acts given the following from Explore Academy--Santa Fe's application: "The Indian Education Act has requirements that are not expected to apply to Explore Academy - Santa Fe.... The Hispanic Education Act and the Black Education Act describe what the Public Education Department must implement, but the acts do not outline any specific requirements for districts/schools..." Instead, Explore Academy--Santa Fe will utilize its diversity council and professional development to meet the needs of these diverse students. This does not go far enough to meet students' individual bilingual and multicultural needs and certainly does not meet legislative intent.

SFPS is also troubled by the statement on page 114 of the application, which speaks to Explore Academy–Santa Fe’s commitment to the community, as follows: “As a concept for Explore Academy - Santa Fe, we believe the plan is realistic, but we also recognize the school and community may face challenges that impact the plan, the school’s mission and the overall ability to recruit and retain students as well as teachers. We are prepared to develop alternative five-year plans that adapt and accommodate the changing environment in Santa Fe. An annual evaluation of the staffing plan and outcomes, in collaboration with our budget planning, we will assess staffing needs, ensuring that we have the staffing needed to fulfill our mission.”

At the very least, any school approved to operate in Santa Fe must ensure its commitment and long-term viability from the start.

SFPS takes exception to the Explore Academy–Santa Fe application’s statement that “the Explore Learning Model allows teachers to do something that is often overlooked and hard to accomplish in traditional schools; it allows them to teach, and to do so authentically and creatively.” SFPS’ teachers teach both authentically and creatively. In fact, in 2022, Tara Hughes, a PreK inclusion teacher for four-year-olds at Nye Early Childhood Center, was named the Teacher of the Year due to her outstanding efforts to support and coach colleagues on positive behavior supports, evidence-based strategies and social-emotional curriculums. She is the first early childhood educator in New Mexico to achieve this honor.

In 2020, Ms. Hughes was featured in an Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center documentary series by the University of South Carolina on how the fields of early education and early childhood special education could successfully support preschoolers and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic through the use of technology.

Michelle Armijo, a third grade teacher at Piñon Elementary School, received a Golden Apple for Excellence in Teaching Awards by the Golden Apple Foundation of New Mexico in 2023 for learning as much as she can about her students so she can address their needs and celebrate their successes. "If I can create a ramp, everyone can participate," she said. One parent said that Ms. Armijo knows every one of her students "like the back of her hand." Overall, parents have been impressed by her morning social/emotional/community-building circle where every student can share something about how they are feeling. The list goes on and on of SFPS teachers who strive every day to bring authenticity and creativity to their classrooms. The Explore Academy–Santa Fe application states that one of its three primary pathways for a school facility is “utilization of an existing school with E-Occupancy status.” SFPS does not have an available facility to accommodate the school. The Explore Academy–Santa Fe application states that “there are no third-party relationships that are required to operate the school” while continuing in the same paragraph to state, “However, in full transparency, Explore Learning Systems (ELS) may provide extensive guidance, training, implementation, and support (both operational and instructional) of the Explore Learning Model curriculum for elementary and secondary levels. ELS is a contracted services provider and is willing to provide instrumental support for the school in performing services that help alleviate administrative burden from the school leadership team.” Inherent in this is a true conflict of interest. It would appear, from a thorough reading of the application, that Explore Academy–Santa Fe cannot stand alone and must rely on the support of Explore Learning Systems, a company that Justin Baiardo is affiliated with. Finally, SFPS takes issue with the following statement from the Explore Academy–Santa Fe application: “Furthermore, with schools



becoming increasingly large, and with the increase of class-size, the inflexibility of a traditional educational model creates a disadvantage for students who are in need of more support and individualization in their learning.” SFPS schools are not, in fact, becoming increasingly large, nor, as shown above, are they inflexible. In 2015, SFPS started the year with over 13,000 students. The 2022-23 year ended with 11,054 students. Enrollment at Capital High School, on the southside, dropped from 1,439 in 2021-22 to 1,369 in 2022-23. Santa Fe High School, in the mid-city area, saw less of a decline in enrollment, going from 1,550 in 2021-22 to 1,536 in 2022-23. Make no mistake: The impact on SFPS over the next six years, as Explore Academy–Santa Fe completes its phase in and reaches 1,200 students, will be immense. SFPS staffing, class sizes and programming will all be impacted at a time of a declining school-age population and competition from numerous charter and private schools, potentially affecting the quality and diversity of educational opportunities in the district. A critical question is whether or not charter schools are truly improving inequities or simply furthering them. Explore Academy–Santa Fe’s application touts a class size of 15:1. To be clear, SFPS has no stipulations regarding class size. Generally, district classes are no lower than 17 students, with classes like Algebra I maxing out at 22 students. Some classes are intentionally small, especially those serving special education students. A student’s IEP drives class size for direct education classes. Due to this, there are some instances in which SFPS classes have a size of one student. The decision to approve or reject any new charter school application should consider various factors, including the potential impact on existing public schools and the overall educational landscape in the district. It is ultimately up to the governing body responsible for approving charter applications to weigh these considerations and make a decision that best serves the needs of the community while ensuring compliance with legal obligations, including Yazzie/Martinez.

In conclusion, instead of introducing a new charter school, it may be more beneficial to focus on collaboration and innovation within the existing schools in the community, both public and private. By working together, educators and administrators can share best practices, resources and ideas to improve programming and address the changing needs of students.

We stand in opposition to the approval of the application submitted by Explore Academy–Santa Fe.

\*8 responses from the QR Code that support the school\*

Name	Please indicate whether you support or oppose Explore Academy Santa Fe's application to open a new public charter school.	Please tell the Public Education Commission why you support or oppose Explore Academy's charter application.
Bev Covert	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	I love this model and wish that this or something similar had been available for my own children. With the struggles that students are having to stay in school, this gives them the opportunity to have an opinion on how they learn. Not every student learns the same. The small classroom sizes are a huge benefit, for both students and teachers. Teachers are creative, this allows for creativity.
Dolores Archuleta	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	As a native of Santa Fe, born and raised, I believe Explore Academy would greatly benefit the community, and is in much need of a school model such as this!
Zayra Sanchez	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	I want to support this to provide an alternative learning institution for kids, I think having a more tailored/smaller classes is a great approach for kids.
Melissa Hernandez	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	I believe that parents and students should have options when deciding which school/district/charter meets their needs. Allowing Explore Academy to open in Santa Fe will benefit students and offer more opportunities for students selecting their college or career pathway.
Justin Gonzales	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	I support Explore Academy's charter application because I feel that having another option of education for students and parents is beneficial in the long run for the community of Santa Fe.
Hillary McPartlon	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	It is important for the children in Santa Fe to have access to a standards based K-12 alternative to the traditional public schools. Explore provides students with a choice and flexibility in their education.
Kristina Moser-Gonzales	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	I support Explore Academy's Charter application because parents need more options when it comes to educating their children. Our current schools are unable to meet the individual and unique learning style of all our youth.
Jennifer Henry	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	
Barbara Forsberg	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	I am in support of Explore Academy Santa Fe because it creates an alternative K through 12 option in the Santa Fe school community.
Kaci Atherton	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	
Katherine	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	With a track record of above average scores they meet a public need for alternative education in many socio/economically diverse communities.
Emma darnell	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	I believe in the program and in the need for improved education in Santa Fe and New Mexico
Kathryn Kretz	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	Santa Fe is in need of quality schools and I feel that this will add value to the community.
Stevens	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	I think their mission statement says it all with allowing the students the opportunity to create their own individualized path for their learning experience. I think everyone learns differently and certain subjects are more intriguing to some individuals and this may allow for some students to really explore the subject they enjoy.
Laura Adams	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	Explore Academy has change the course of my four children's education, as well as my career in education. I feel that the children and families in Santa Fe deserve the same opportunities that Explore Academy has provided for my family and children.
Jennifer Vargas	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	Explore Academy is a creative, innovative, choice-based school where children thrive. The model of the Explore school caters to the whole child while allowing students to grow individually.
Heather Hilton	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	My grandson, has recently come to live with me, I definitely feel like this would be the right fit for our family's needs an excellent resource for our community. .
Sally McGraw	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	The school would provide an affordable alternative to public school. The school has a high quality model of teaching that provides students with choice and more control of their education. It has a proven track record and would provide exciting teaching opportunities in Santa Fe.
Luanna Romero	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	I support the Explore Academy Charter application because I have seen success in students using the model. My children are thriving being apart of Explore, when they were struggling before.
Karin Moulton	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	Because students in Santa Fe deserve a rigorous education that is flexible and choice-based!
Susan Hallen	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	My experience with Explore Academy academy is that they are able to pull together an incredible team and program to help students and their families. I have heard many families talk about how much they love Explore Academy and how much it is done for their child. As a teacher, I have felt supported and encouraged by not only local administration but also from those who manage and direct all Explore Academy campuses. I feel that opening a campus and Santa Fe will be of great benefit to
Patrick Short	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	More higher quality education option are needed in the Santa Fe area.
Melissa Vredenburg	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	Explore Academy is a great school and addresses the needs of all kids. They are welcoming and all inclusive. Their model focuses on the whole child and is amazing.
Leah Acton	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	Explore Academy offers students a chance to have choice in their education while teaching to the standards,
Jan	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	
Michael	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	We need schools to support our growing community.
Kristina	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	A public school with options for different modalities of teaching/ learning is needed in Santa Fe
Jourdan Van Culin	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	New Mexico needs more quality K-12 options to best our youth!!
Lisa Bebo	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	It's important to have more options for public school choice
Brayan Salinas	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	I support the expansion of learning opportunities in New Mexico.
Lindsay Irwin	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	
Lisa Hughes	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	Explore Academy has a unique philosophy and approach to education that makes students excited for learning. The approach with choice and voice in education values students as people and values their abilities to show learning and knowledge in unique ways. Personally, my own children have been fortunate to be a part of Explore Academy and their educational journey has been so positive, motivating, and builds so much confidence. They love school and the choice that Explore Academy offers. I am in support of the application for Explore Academy to have a school in Santa Fe.
Alicia Garcia	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	Working with Explore Academy Charter in Albuquerque has been a great experience! To bring this experience to others to enjoy would be great!
Natalie Kelley	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	Great educational opportunity for the community!
Cortney Nichols	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	Explore is an amazing place that truly celebrates the unique qualities of each child. Students are encouraged to learn and explore in ways that are most meaningful to them. Student choice gives them the ability to take responsibility and accountability for their own learning and fosters their ability to see how academics are relevant to everyday life. They suddenly see a point to school, to learning, and get excited about it. The students love coming to school.
Dolores	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	The community would benefit from the school because it would provide good and affordable education in the proximity.
Michelle Carrejo	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	I am currently an educator at Explore and it's such an amazing model! The choice and flavor-based seminar brings back to joy to teaching and learning. The small class size is also beneficial for student success.

Name	Please indicate whether you support or oppose Explore Academy Santa Fe's application to open a new public charter school.	Please tell the Public Education Commission why you support or oppose Explore Academy's charter application.
Nancy	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	Our school's classrooms are too crowded
Pamela Avila	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	Supporting the opening of Explore Academy charter school in Santa Fe can significantly benefit the local community and provide students with alternative educational opportunities. Parents can choose a school that matches their child's needs and learning style, promoting the value of educational choice. Explore Academy uses innovative teaching methods and programs focused on specific themes like STEM, arts, or language immersion based on student preferences, interests, talents, and career aspirations. This approach can improve academic outcomes and address achievement gaps by providing all Santa Fe communities with quality education.
Karyl Ann Armbruster	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	Because SF as well as many other school districts does not seem to diverge from the current manner of teaching that is not producing the results Explore schools in NM (and other states) are achieving, I believe that an Explore in SF might inspire needed changes.
Spencer Highsmith	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	
Valerie Highsmith	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	I am in full support of having an Explore Academy in Sanfa Fe. This would provide students that are struggling in a traditional public school to have an affordable opportunity to receive a first-rate education in a smaller charter school setting. This would enable parents to have more in-put and participation in achieving their child's educational goals. By opening an Explore Academy in Santa Fe, this would also provide additional teaching jobs in the community. Explore Academy is a small school but is a significant asset in building children's academic study and learning habits, which in turn will help ensure successes in their future.
Alicia Jones	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	I feel that there need to be more education options in Santa Fe.
Mary Lees	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	I believe this will benefit the students and the community of Santa Fe.
Paul Romero	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	Great reputation, good teachers/staff, small classes
Stephanie Gallegos	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	As a former student who graduated from Explore Academy's Albuquerque location in 2021, I found the experience very satisfactory. I was able to thrive in the teaching style and small class sizes, and the teachers were very adaptable and educated regarding online learning, which was very important once the pandemic was declared in the U.S. and classes couldn't meet in person anymore. The flexible schedules and wonderfully specific educational theming was an experience I hope many children are able to get in the coming years, which is why I support the expansion of this wonderful school to other school districts around the state of New Mexico.
Donna Veatch	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	I totally support any project undertaken by Karen Woerner!
Laura Smith	I am opposed to Explore Academy's charter application.	We do not need yet another charter school in our district to divert funds away from neighborhood schools. The reason this argument is "overused," in Commissioner Carrillo's opinion, is because it is absolutely, undeniably true. Charter schools may have a place in the broader educational context, but only when they are truly unique and cannot exist within the traditional public school system-- like New Mexico School for the Arts. The premise of this school is not unique in the slightest-- I assure you, tailoring subjects and lessons to student interests to make learning more engaging is happening in every school in town. This is not a new idea, it's just good teaching. Please do not funnel more funds out of our schools and into private hands; this only exacerbates existing inequities and gentrification.
Katherine Moore	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	Explore Academy has proven that its unique model works for students. Student of Santa Fe deserve this opportunity!
Kelci Pike	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	I believe charter schools offer students and parents more choice and individualized education which empowers students and leads to improved educational outcomes.
Jennifer Novicki	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	Explore's model is important for empowering students with choice! Every child should have that opportunity.

**QR Code Responses**

Name	Please indicate whether you support or oppose Explore Academy Santa Fe's application to open a new charter school.	OPTIONAL: Why do you support or oppose Explore Academy's charter application?
Kim Van Gilder	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	It's educational mission is supportive of students with different needs. They have proven results in other schools around the country.
Dave Hill	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	I have seen the results of their teaching methods and think it would be good for students in Santa Fe.
Bev Covert	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	Smaller class sizes, student choice
Vickie Calzada	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	Santa Fe is in need of more educational options for children and the Explore Academy model is an amazing modern-day opportunity.
Amanda Shaner	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	I have had the opportunity to work with many of these fantastic educators, and I know they have the education, experience, and compassion to know exactly what students need, and to provide it very successfully! I enthusiastically endorsed their efforts to open Explore Academy!
Jean Johnson	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	
Savannah Morris	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	I support this charter school because I have worked with the administration before, my son was a student of theirs. Once they left the previous school we had many issues with stem, honor society, and it made my son's last year very difficult. I know if Mrs. Daugherty was still with that school she would have support him. These teachers that are working on this new school have such a passion for kids and stem!! I have another son (12) and we are looking for options. I would never go back to
Johanna	I am in support of Explore Academy's charter application.	I support Explore Academy's charter school because New Mexico needs these better school in its community. VPA is focusing on all students of the state. They are looking for teachers that are educated and professional educators that will support and educate all ethical types of students in NM. They have a substantial curriculum foundation that they are anticipating on using. Supporting the educators with professional development and full support all year. I believe that students, parents, and educators are looking for more options that support their needs that is personal for everyone's need.