



STATE OF NEW MEXICO  
PUBLIC EDUCATION DEPARTMENT  
300 DON GASPAR  
SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO 87501-2786  
Telephone (505) 827-5800  
[www.ped.state.nm.us](http://www.ped.state.nm.us)

KARA BOBROFF  
INTERIM SECRETARY OF EDUCATION

MICHELLE LUJAN GRISHAM  
GOVERNOR

August 8, 2019

Dear Public Education Commissioners:

Enclosed is the 2019 Charter School Application Final Analysis and Recommendation for **Polaris Charter School** applying for a state charter in **Los Alamos, NM** and within the boundaries of Las Cruces Public Schools to serve **grades 6 – 8** and represented by founders, **Elizabeth Martineau, Bill Hargraves, Scott B. Johnson, Branden Wilman-Kozimor, and Amy Bartlett-Gaunt.**

This Final Analysis and Recommendation includes a summary of the evidence and rationale gathered from the peer review team's analyses of the written application and the capacity interview. It also includes a brief summary of the participation at the community input hearing and letters (in support or in opposition) received. Appendix A contains all of the correspondence received regarding the school, from the Community Input Hearing date until the submission deadline three days later.

The staff recommendation, based on the peer review team's evaluation, is for denial of the application. However, this is only a recommendation and the Public Education Commission will make the decision on the approval, approval with conditions, or denial at the hearing which will take place during the PEC meeting on August 22, 2019.

Thank you all for your hard work and dedication to ensure that New Mexico's Charter Schools represent the best of alternative and innovative, high quality options for parents and students.

Sincerely,

Alan Brauer  
Director of Options for Parents

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## I. Recommendation

☐ **APPROVE**

Overall 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.

☐ **APPROVE WITH CONDITIONS**

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

**PROPOSED CONDITIONS**

None

FOR ALL APPROVALS: The Applicant will negotiate a contract with the Public Education Commission pursuant to 22-8B-9.1:

1. Obtain standing as an approved Board of Finance
2. Secure a facility that meets PSFA Approval
3. Complete the planning-year checklist

☒ **DENY**

Overall 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.

The Charter Schools Act, in paragraph 1 of Subsection L of Section 22-8B-6 NMSA 1978, states that a chartering authority may approve, approve with conditions or deny an application. 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.

## II. Overall Score Sheet

Section	Points Received	Applicant School's Possible Points	Percent
Application	271	315	86
• Education Plan / Academic Framework	92	100	92
• Organizational Plan & Governance/Organizational Framework	125	147	85
• Business Plan / Financial Framework	30	44	68.2
• Evidence of Support	24	24	100
Capacity Interview	98	116	84.5
<b>Overall Score</b>	<b>369</b>	<b>431</b>	<b>85.61%</b>

**SCHOOL NAME: Polaris Charter School**

Section #		Total Possible Points	Response Provided	Score
<b>I</b>	<b>ACADEMIC FRAMEWORK</b>			
A	Mission	16	16	Meets
B	Mission Specific Indicators	12	12	Meets
C1	Bilingual Multicultural, Indian Education, and Hispanic Education	12	12	Meets
D	Curriculum/Ed Program/Student Standards	12	6	Approaches
E1	Graduation Requirements	Four		NA
F1	Ed Philosophy/Instructional Methods	4	4	Meets
F2	Yearly/Daily Calendar	4	4	Meets
F3	Programs impact for population	4	2	Approaches
G1 a	SPED Identification	4	4	Meets
G1 b	SPED Progress	4	4	Meets
G2 a	ELL Identification	4	4	Meets
G2 b	ELL Progress	4	4	Meets
G3	Plan to address the needs of students as outlined in the Indian Education Act, Hispanic Education Act, and the Bilingual Multicultural Education Act	4	4	Meets
H1	Assessment Plan	6	6	Meets
H2	Assessment Data	4	4	Meets
H3	Assessment Communications	6	6	Meets
<b>II</b>	<b>ORGANIZATIONAL FRAMEWORK</b>			
A1	Governing Board Outline	8	8	Meets
A2	Board Qualifications & Profiles	4	4	Meets
A3	New Member Process	8	8	Meets
B1	Board Training	4	2	Approaches
B2	Board Evaluation	8	4	Approaches
C1	Board Oversight	12	12	Meets
C2	Hiring Head Admin	12	12	Meets
C3	Principal Job Description (Appendix B)	4	0	Falls
C4	Principal Evaluation	8	8	Meets
D1	Org Chart & Relationship	8	8	Meets
D2	Staff Job Descriptions (Appendix C)	4	2	Approaches
D3	Staffing Plan	8	0	Falls
D4	PD/Novice Membership	8	8	Meets
E	Employment Terms	4	4	Meets
F1	PTA	4	4	Meets
F2	Grievance Process: Families	8	8	Meets
G1	Recruitment Plan	4	4	Meets
G2	Lottery	4	4	Meets
H	Conflict of Interest	4	4	Meets
I1	3rd Party Relationships	8	8	Meets
I2	3rd Party Contracts (Appendix D)	4	4	Meets
J	Waivers	3	3	Meets
K1	Transportation	Four		NA
K2	Food Service	Four		NA
L1	PSFA Checklist (Appendix E)	4	4	Meets
L2	Facility Identification	4	2	Approaches

<b>III</b>	<b>FINANCIAL FRAMEWORK</b>			
A	School Size	4	4	Meets
B1	SEG Worksheets (Appendix F in Excel)	8	8	Meets
B2	5 Year Budget (Appendix G in Excel)	12	0	Falls
B3	Budget Narrative	4	4	Meets
B4	Budget Adjustments	4	2	Approaches
C1	Financial Oversight (Appendix H)	4	4	Meets
C2	Financial Staff	4	4	Meets
C3	Governance Finance	4	4	Meets
<b>IV</b>	<b>EVIDENCE OF SUPPORT</b>			
A	Outreach Activities	4	4	Meets
B	Community Support	8	8	Meets
C	Networking Relationships	4	4	Meets
D	Innovation	8	8	Meets
	<b>PART C RATING</b>	<b>315</b>	<b>271</b>	<b>86.03%</b>
	<b>CAPACITY INTERVIEW</b>			
1	Mission	4	4	Meets
2	Innovation	4	4	Meets
3	Mission Implementation	4	4	Meets
4	Leadership & Governance (GB selection & success of school)	4	4	Meets
5	Leadership & Governance (HA selection & success of school)	4	4	Meets
6	Leadership & Governance (GB and school evaluations & success)	4	2	Approaches
7	Leadership & Governance (Relationship of founders, GB, and admin & success)	4	4	Meets
8	Leadership & Governance (bylaws, implementation, & success)	4	2	Approaches
9	Leadership & Governance (establish, implement, change policies and procedures)	4	4	Meets
10	Facility (plan for facility and educational occupancy; responsible party)	4	2	Approaches
11	Facility (next step plan if building does not get PSFA approval)	4	4	Meets
12	Finance (planning year budget without federal start-up funds)	4	4	Meets
13	Finance (enrollment projections)	4	4	Meets
14	Finance (plan if actual enrollment is below projections)	4	4	Meets
15	Planning Year (organizational steps during planning year)	4	4	Meets
	<b>School Specific Questions</b>			
16	mastery based assessment aligned to the state standards	4	2	Approaches
17	addressing the three new acts (Bilingual Multicultural, Hispanic, and Native American)	4	2	Approaches
18	attendance and truancy policies	4	4	Meets
19	over/under identification of EL as Special Education	4	2	Approaches
20	communication between general education and ELL teachers	4	4	Meets
21	plan for unexpected vacancy for the Head Administrator position	4	4	Meets
22	Head Administrator roles and responsibilities	4	2	Approaches
23	potential teacher vacancies mid-year	4	2	Approaches
24	grievances regarding head administrator	4	4	Meets
25	salary schedule	4	4	Meets
26	special education grievances	4	2	Approaches
27	staffing concerns	4	4	Meets
28	audit and finance committees	4	4	Meets
29	legal oversight and guidance	4	4	Meets
		<b>431</b>	<b>369</b>	<b>85.61%</b>

### **III. Explanation Regarding Use of the Score Sheet**

In the Recommendation and Final Analysis, the CSD has considered the overall score on the written application evaluation and the ratings on responses during the Capacity Interview, feedback from the Community Input Hearing, and letters of support or opposition. Those components are summarized on the following pages.

The written application evaluations and capacity interview scoring were provided by an external team of four peer reviewers:

- A licensed NM School Administrator
- A licensed NM Teacher
- A licensed NM School Business Official
- A Team Leader with administration experience

Also please note two additional considerations:

- First, the community input hearing is not scored but is referenced in this Recommendation and Final Analysis to summarize and to document any pertinent information offered. The transcripts provide further details.
- Second, if the applicant school did not answer any prompt (question) because that prompt did not apply to the applicant school (e.g., the applicant school will be an elementary school and so did not provide responses to graduation-related prompts), then the CSD adjusted the total possible points in the application section where the non-applicable item(s) is found, as well as in the final score. For this reason, you may see varying total possible points from application to application.

## IV. Final Analysis

Application Section	Points Received	Applicant School's Possible Points
<b>EDUCATION PLAN/ACADEMIC FRAMEWORK</b>	92	100
<b>Evidence/Statements Supporting Score in this Section:</b>  <p>The applicant scored “Meets Criteria” in 13 indicators and “Approaches the Criteria” in two (2) indicators.</p> <p>According to the peer reviewers, with respect to the application, the areas that did not meet the criteria were found to be inadequate for the reasons described:</p> <p><b>D. Curriculum, Educational Program, Student Performance Standards.</b></p> <p>The applicant appears to be approaching the criteria of including a reasonable (as based on the professional judgment of experienced educators) timeline and plan for the development of the entire proposed curriculum. While most of the areas are met, Mastery is still subjective, so how do they align mastery of activities to CCSS and grade level standards?</p> <p><b>F3. Programs impact for population</b></p> <p>Attendance and truancy trends appear to have not been properly addressed. Also, the Applicant appears to have approached the criteria of explaining how the yearly calendar and daily schedule have been designed to meet students’ needs.</p> <p><b><u>Overall, in this section of the application, 92% of the possible points were earned for Education Plan/Academic Framework.</u></b></p>		

Application Section	Points Received	Applicant School's Possible Points
<b>ORGANIZATIONAL PLAN AND GOVERNANCE / ORGANIZATIONAL FRAMEWORK</b>	125	147
<b>Evidence/Statements Supporting Score in this Section:</b>  <p>The applicant scored “Meets Criteria” in 18 indicators, “Approaches the Criteria” in three (3) indicators, and “Falls Far Below the Criteria” in two (2) indicators. (The applicant did not receive bonus points for this section as the school does not intend to offer food or transportation services.)</p>		



According to the peer reviewers, with respect to the application, the areas that did not meet the criteria were found to be inadequate for the reasons described:

**B1. Board Training**

The applicant appears to be approaching the criteria. How the board will track and ensure members attend required trainings was not explained. Also, the actual costs for training and reimbursements was not provided.

**B2. Board Evaluation**

The Applicant appears to have approached the criteria to describe how the identified plan will focus on and support continuous improvement. While there is mention of improvement throughout the discussion, the fact that a Self-Evaluation Plan is not in place makes it difficult to find how it can be effectively utilized.

**C3. Principal Job Description (Falls Far Below)**

In all three cases above, the response simply recites statute and rule.

- The Applicant Fails to meet the criteria to identify the process the governing body will use for annually conveying and delineating the roles and responsibilities of the head administrator.
- The Applicant Fails to meet the criteria to include specific actions the governing body will take to ensure the head administrator understands the obligations of the charter contract and the requirements of all elements of the plan contained in this application.
- While the Applicant provided an attachment in Appendix B, the Applicant Fails to meet the criteria. The head administrator job description is not comprehensive and cohesive in terms of all the administrative functions of the job.

**D2. Staff Job Descriptions**

The Applicant appears not to have met the criteria to describe why the identified roles are key to the operation and success of the proposed school. The head administrator job description is not comprehensive and cohesive in terms of all the administrative functions of the job. The key functions necessary for the proposed operations of the school are not identified and discussed.

**D3. Staffing Plan (Falls Far Below)**

The Applicant Fails to meet the criteria due to the following-

- Retirement - ERB Employer Contributions are 14.2 % for FY20 and beyond, not 13.9%.
- What are the numbers listed for Life Insurance and Long Term Disability?
- The plan is to train new hires between two - four months prior to the start of school - Employees will expect to be paid for these months. Will these training days/months be included in their salaries/contracts? Does the budget reflect that compensation expense? If not, how do you plan to onboard them with limited time before school starts?
- What does ongoing onboarding look like?
- What differences exist in the process for hiring mid year if staff vacancies come up? How do you onboard a new teacher in the place-based philosophy, innovations and curriculum in the middle of the school year?

**L2. Facility Identification**

- The applicant documents that "Finding a school facility is difficult in Los Alamos because of limited availability of private buildings and no vacant public buildings." and states that "Many of

the [potential] facilities were either too small to accommodate Polaris School, did not meet eOccupancy standards, or renovation was either too costly.”

- The applicant approaches the criteria because the one potential property listed, located at 81 Camino Entrada, does not seem viable. A long term tenant currently occupies the property and the current owner would have to finance the purchase for the school. Also, the school seems dependent on the CSP grant (which is non-recurring) for funding the initial facility.

**Overall, in this section of the application, 85% of the possible points were earned for Organizational Plan and Governance/Organizational Framework. However, two responses were scored as “Falls Far Below the Criteria”.**

Application Section	Points Received	Applicant School's Possible Points
<b>BUSINESS PLAN/ FINANCIAL FRAMEWORK</b>	30	44
<b>Evidence/Statements Supporting Score in this Section:</b>  <p>The applicant scored “Meets Criteria” in six (6) indicators, “Approaches the Criteria” in one (1) indicator, and “Falls Far Below the Criteria” in one (1) indicator.</p> <p>According to the peer reviewers, with respect to the application, the areas that did not meet the criteria were found to be inadequate for the reasons described:</p> <p><b>B2. Five Year Budget (Falls Far Below)</b>  The Operational Budget is not balanced in any of the years. Revenues do not equal expenditures. Total Revenues in year 5 are listed at 1,812,635, but the 910b-5 calculation is \$2,002,672. CSP Grant is not balanced in the planning year (0). The ERB Contributions are under-budgeted in all 5 projected years. (14.15% is required.) Also, budget for water/sewer/refuse was not included.</p> <p><b>B4. Budget Adjustments</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Applicant does not appear to have met the criteria to describe budget control strategies as well as budget adjustments that will be made to meet financial budget and cash-flow challenges. What is the budget impact of not meeting enrollment by 10%, 20%? How much would the budget have to be cut and then which specific cuts would be recommended? For instance, the 1st year they project 75 students. If the enrollment was only 67 students (-10%), how much revenue would be lost and where would cuts be made? Same questions if enrollment was only 63 students (-20%). At what point would you have to consider RIFs?</li> <li>• The Applicant does not appear to have met the criteria to describe budget control strategies as well as budget adjustments that will be made to address the failure to receive any anticipated funding sources. See above.</li> </ul>		

- The Applicant appears to have approached the criteria to include address how special education students will receive services before special education funding is provided, based on accurate 40-day counts.

**Overall, in this section of the application, 68% of the possible points were earned for Business Plan / Financial Framework and one response was scored as “Falls Far Below the Criteria”.**

Application Section	Points Received	Applicant School's Possible Points
EVIDENCE OF SUPPORT	24	24

**Evidence/Statements Supporting Score in this Section:**

The applicant scored “Meets Criteria” in all four (4) indicators.

**Overall, in this section of the application, 100% of the responses were rated “Meets the Criteria” and 100% of the possible points were earned for Evidence of Support.**

Section	Points Received	Applicant School's Possible Points
CAPACITY INTERVIEW	98	116

**Evidence/Statements Supporting Score in this Section:**

The peer reviewers asked fifteen standard questions (#1-15) and fourteen (#16-29) school specific questions. The applicant scored “Meets Criteria” on 20 responses and “Approaches the Criteria” on nine (9) responses.

The proposed school was represented by the following:

- Liz Martineau, founder
- Bill Hargraves, founding team member
- Scott B. Johnson, founding team member
- Amy Bartlett-Gaunt, founding team member
- Branden Willman-Kozimor, founding team member
- Kenneth Holmes, proposed board member
- Robert Gibson, potential board member
- Katie Rarick, business manager support

According to the peer reviewers, the following responses to the questions in the Capacity Interview were found to be inadequate for the reasons described:

Question 6: How does a high quality process to evaluate the effectiveness of the governing body and the school contribute to the success of a charter school? Describe your strategic process for conducting these evaluations. How will these processes support the success of your proposed school?

- Defined ideas but did not talk about the strategic process
- The how and when were not identified
- Talked about the feedback they were going to get but did not talk about the synthesizing process and how they would be using it.

Question 8: Explain the importance of by-laws and policies to the success of a charter school. Describe the strategic processes the proposed school will use to establishing and implementing them and how these will contribute to the success of the proposed school.

- Mission and culture need to be supported by the bylaws, look at existing bylaws to support in the creation of their bylaws.
- The governing board need to have a strategic plan process for the school year
- Policy should be driven by compliance, not the mission of the school
- Concern that committees are set to manage aspects of the operations and functions

Question 10: Describe your plan for acquiring a facility and ensuring that the facility meets educational occupancy standards required by applicable New Mexico construction codes and the weighted New Mexico Condition Index. Whose responsibility will it be to carry out this major piece of opening a charter school? Please include details about locating, securing, and funding the facility.

- Facility not yet established, for how ambitious the mission requirements have been outlined
- How do you plan to combat the limitations of potential real estate available to the school?

Question 16: Regarding the mission goal, how is the mastery based assessment aligned to the state standards and how will it impact renewal?

- School will use Novare system to target performance.
- With the mastery based system, it will be difficult to demonstrate growth at renewal. The school will need use the state-mandated student assessment to evaluate student proficiency and growth.

Question 17: Regarding the Bilingual Multicultural, Hispanic, and Native American acts, how are you actually addressing the acts/statutes?

The school is too focused on the culture and not the law of the Acts. The school needs a better understanding of the Acts and how those will impact the school.

Question 19: Can you please discuss how you will or will not identify ELL students as SPED students? It was implied but not stated explicitly.

The school understood the process of ELL identification and Sped but did not address these issue of ELL being over-identified as special ed students.

Question 22: The school is not just hiring a principal, but rather a superintendent. The head administrator job description provided is not comprehensive and cohesive in terms of all the administrative functions of the job. How will you ensure that the person hired is able to oversee the school, handle all key functions, and also handle all outward facing needs? What primary roles and responsibilities, not just academic needs, are you expecting to be handled by the head administrator?

The school did not delineate roles and responsibilities. Volunteers and creating committees is not a substantial fix.

Question 23: How do you plan to address potential teacher vacancies mid-year based on your very specific mission and goals?

The school, because of its program design, creates a unique concern for hiring midyear and having substitutes carry on the mission. These teachers will not be trained in the specific pedagogy for PBL.

Question 26: How will grievances be handled, specifically for students receiving special education services? How are you going to be compliant with IDEA laws, federal guidelines, and what is your process for dealing with these issues?

The school was relying too much on the PED. The school should be versed and should have a better understanding of IDEA laws and federal guidelines.

**Overall, in this section, 84% of the possible points were earned for the Capacity Interview. However, nine (9) responses (31%) were scored as “Approaches the Criteria”.**

## COMMUNITY INPUT HEARING

During the July 16, 2019 community input hearing in Los Alamos, NM, attendees expressed both support and opposition of the school. **Two representatives of the school district attended the hearing, Dr. Kurt Steinhaus, Superintendent, and Jenny McCumber, a member of the governing Board. Dr. Steinhaus spoke in opposition to the school and Ms. McCumber raised what she referred to as a “procedural issue” and a potential “conflict of interest.”**

The proposed school was represented by the following representatives:

- Liz Martineau, founder
- Bill Hargraves, founder
- Scott Johnson, founder
- Amy Bartlett-Gaunt, founder
- Branden Willman-Kozimor, founder
- Kenneth Holmes, proposed board member
- Robert Gibson, potential board member

**Eight (8) attendees spoke, with eight (8) in favor and none in opposition.**

Of the forty-seven (47) individual people that signed in, four (4) were either undecided or did not indicate support or opposition. Of the remaining forty-three (43) people, **89.4% (forty-two 42) individuals were in support of the school.**

Please see the transcript of the Community Input Hearing for details regarding all comments made.

## LETTERS OF SUPPORT OR IN OPPOSITION

Several letters and email messages were received by the deadline of three business days after the applicant's PEC hearing (by 5:00 pm on July 19, 2019).

Of the twenty-eight (28) documents received, **75% expressed support of Polaris Charter School. Seven (7) letters of opposition were received.**

The correspondence received is attached here in their entirety in Appendix B.

## SUMMARY

Overall, the application submitted by Polaris Charter School is complete, yet inadequate. During both the application review process and the capacity interview, the applicant team failed to demonstrate the capacity to implement the organizational plan and governance (organizational framework), and the business plan (financial framework). The team is not yet prepared to open a high quality charter school.

The minimum scoring expectations set by the Public Education Commission, from page 3 of the New Charter School application are:

- No scoring area received a score of *"Falls Far Below the Criteria"*.
- No more than 3 responses were evaluated as *"Approaches the Criteria"* in any one section of the application
- The applicant must earn at least 80% of the available points in order for a positive recommendation by independent reviewers

Though the proposal received a score of 85.61%, there were three indicators scored as *"Falls Far Below the Criteria"* and four (4) responses scored as *"Approaches the Criteria"* in the Organizational section. In addition, there were nine (9) *"Approaches the Criteria"* ratings for responses to the capacity interview questions.

**The CSD recommends denial of this application.** The scoring does not meet the minimum expectations set by the Public Education Commission to enter into an implementation year. However, it is also recommended that the school take the feedback provided via the evaluation process and resubmit a stronger application in 2020.

## APPENDIX A

Letters of Support (21) or in Opposition (7)

**From:** [Brett Nadler](#)  
**To:** [Schools, Charter, PED](#)  
**Subject:** [EXT] Letter in support of Polaris Charter School  
**Date:** Friday, July 19, 2019 4:52:02 PM

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To whom it concerns,

My wife and I have three children under the age of 10 and have been active in their early education, from primary schooling to supplemental learning and extracurricular activities. Each of the three have unique personalities that are exhibited in different interests and ways of learning. We have pursued a K-6 education with a local Montessori school that has continuously encouraged and had patience with our children's learning styles. As a result, not only have they felt comfortable at school, they have scored in the 90th percentile each year in national testing. As we look towards a middle school education, our parental approach has been to inquire, observe, and review the effectiveness of the Los Alamos middle school for our three children. The results have made us follow and support the Polaris Charter school initiative. We feel that the play-spaced education with a focus on project completion permits the social and education interactions that has influenced many school children in other institutions, and would fit our familiar needs. It allows our children to excel in their particular interests while presenting additional social learning and activities for successful adulthood at the middle school age where it is developmentally important.

Sincerely,

Brett and Kristy Nadler  
5 Los Arboles Drive  
Los Alamos, NM 87544  
858-245-3815



**From:** [Dianne Wilburn](#)  
**To:** [Schools, Charter, PED](#)  
**Subject:** [EXT] Polaris Charter Schools  
**Date:** Thursday, July 18, 2019 7:58:22 PM

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My name is Dianne Wilburn and I would like to offer my support for an alternative middle school in Los Alamos. My two sons left the county and attended a private school in Santa Fe for their middle school years. Different schools work for different people. Alternatives give students choices to help them decide which school works for them.  
Dianne Wilburn

**From:** [B Wolf](#)  
**To:** [Schools, Charter, PED](#)  
**Subject:** [EXT] Polaris Charter School  
**Date:** Thursday, July 18, 2019 4:15:40 PM

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Dear State PED,

I am afraid to publicly voice my stance against Polaris Charter School because one of the founders is the principal of my son's school. Another founder is a school board member. I respect and admire my son's principal. Los Alamos does not need a charter school. It would be damaging to the delicate balance we have here with number of students and resources, programs, and facilities.

Our schools in Los Alamos are high performing and full of extracurricular activities including art, music, performing arts, and social support and community building activities. I spent fourteen years raising my oldest daughter on the southwest side of Santa Fe where all the public schools are overcrowded and failing. They really need a charter school there. Los Alamos does not, and I believe that although Polaris may have good intentions, it is a selfish act of entitlement for them to ask the state to approve a charter school for Los Alamos. A better solution is for the Polaris group and LAPS to combine their energy to improve our middle school that is already very very good. My twins have attended LAPS since August 2016 and will be in 6th grade this August.

Thank you,  
Bridget Wolf

**From:** [GABINO-CAROLINE MANZANARES](#)  
**To:** [Schools, Charter, PED](#)  
**Subject:** [EXT] re: Full support  
**Date:** Thursday, July 11, 2019 12:57:38 PM

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Hello,

I would like to express my support for the newly proposed charter school in Los Alamos (Polaris). We as community members really need an alternative to the traditional school model. As parents, we realize, all of our children are unique individuals and one school model does not suit all. I am excited and confident that this charter school will be a great addition and opportunity to the abundance of students in Los Alamos and surrounding communities. Please approve and support this endeavor.

Sincerely,

Caroline Manzanares

Los Alamos Resident

**From:** [Carrie Labunski Shimek](#)  
**To:** [Schools, Charter, PED](#)  
**Subject:** [EXT] Expressing support for Polaris Charter School, Los Alamos, NM  
**Date:** Wednesday, July 17, 2019 2:30:21 PM

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To whom it may concern,

I support innovation in education and see a need in Los Alamos for a different learning model. Our school district is big enough to support a second middle school as evidenced by our current middle school being at or beyond capacity. Polaris Middle School would be a welcome addition to our community.

Thank you for your time and consideration,  
Carrie Shimek

1912 Spruce Street  
Los Alamos, NM 87544  
505-695-6912

TO: Charter School Division of the NM Public Education Department

Dear Charter School Division, I would like to submit a letter endorsing the application of the Polaris Charter School in Los Alamos. My two children grew up in Los Alamos but took advantage of educational opportunities outside the Los Alamos County Public School system to meet their educational goals. Therefore, I am very excited about the opportunity of other options for students.

My children attended Canyoncito Montessori School and Santa Fe Preparatory School because their learning styles were more in sync with the opportunities offered at these schools. When I am asked about school options, I tell people that what works for one student may not work for another. Educational choices are personal and options are needed so that each student finds the best fit to meet their educational goals. I think this is an especially important decision during the middle school years when we need to offer students the opportunity to pursue their interest so they stay engaged with learning.

Thanks for your consideration of the application for the Polaris Charter School.

Dianne Wilburn  
1042 Oro Court  
Los Alamos, NM 87544

## **Statement to the NM Public Education Commission**

**Django Salas**

Hello. My name is Django. I will be starting 5<sup>th</sup> grade next month. I go to Mountain School Elementary. My favorite subject is PE. I like to play cello and hockey.

I like school, but I get overwhelmed when there are too many kids around in a big place, and I can't function well. I think Los Alamos needs a smaller middle school to help kids like me. It will help me behave better. I know other kids that would get the same benefit.

Mr. Johnson was my first grade teacher. He was very awesome to kids like me, and I know that he will do a great job helping to run Polaris.

I hope you will approve the charter school.

Thank you. Have a good day.

**From:** [Elizabeth Allen](#)  
**To:** [Schools, Charter, PED](#)  
**Subject:** [EXT] Letter of support for Polaris Charter School  
**Date:** Friday, July 19, 2019 2:01:15 PM

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To whom it may concern:

I am writing in support of the creation of Polaris Charter school in Los Alamos. I believe that our community would benefit from additional educational choices. Moreover, the model Polaris proposes would greatly benefit my children.

At the beginning of the year, I became part of a support group for parents with children in special education. This support group was born out of feelings from many parents of frustration, fear, helplessness and lack of choices when it comes to our children's educational needs. The idea that Polaris can provide a different educational model is very exciting for many parents.

I have a child who last year struggled in a 3rd grade classroom with 40 children. Although there were two teachers in the classroom, he fell behind and no one recognized that he was struggling for many months. He experienced anxiety in the large classroom and had to start counseling. Toward the end of the year - we received a dyslexia diagnosis to explain some of his educational struggles. This child finds school difficult and boring - and I worry that he will continue to get lost. I honestly believe that Polaris is an answer to many of my concerns for his future education. He excels at project based learning in small classroom settings. If Polaris is approved, I plan on being the first in line to place my child in this school.

I appreciate your consideration on the Polaris school. Thank you for your time.

Elizabeth K. Allen

**From:** [Elizabeth Bailey](#)  
**To:** [Schools, Charter, PED](#)  
**Subject:** [EXT] Polaris Charter School-Comments  
**Date:** Wednesday, July 17, 2019 11:51:47 AM

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To Whom it may concern,

My name is Elizabeth Bailey, and I ask that you take the following email as public comments in support of the proposed Polaris Charter School. I attended LAPS for my entire school career, K-12, and I was a child that fell through the cracks.

I was by all accounts a smart, hardworking, yet shy student throughout my elementary career, always completing my work and spending my down time with my nose in a book. However upon entering Middle School, all of this changed in a drastic way. I struggled with anxiety in large class settings, I feared I would be judged by my teachers and peers if I asked questions when I didn't understand, I felt like I had no one to lean on or talk to at my school when I needed assistance. These issues led to incomplete homework, misbehavior in the classroom, threats of being retained or failed, in school suspension, and punishment at home from my parents.

I began to feel stupid, overwhelmed, and unwanted in the classroom. I longed for connections with my teachers like what I had experienced in elementary school. I hated being trapped in a desk in the classroom, where a teacher expected us to all learn in the same way and at the same pace. My anxiety and feelings of not belonging only worsened the situation, and strained what relationship I did have with my teachers and school leadership. This struggled continued with me into High School, and I was lucky to have graduated on time with my class.

I have since worked very hard, becoming a successful and engaged member of the community, and started a family of my own.

My daughter will begin Kindergarten in the LAPS system this fall, and I am so thrilled- what wonderful schools she will attend! My daughter may thrive and succeed in traditional classrooms, with traditional teachers and learning methods. But if she does not, I welcome and pray that there will be another option for her during those difficult Middle School years. I hope that this will be the option for all children like me, who needed something different in order to succeed in their school career.

I ask you to consider that Polaris will not take away anything from the current schools, students, or teachers. And what they will bring to this community, will be such a gift to all of those they can touch and nurture and educate.

Thank you,

**Elizabeth Bailey**

Private Banking Officer / Enterprise Bank & Trust  
505-661-4436 Office

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**From:** [Elizabeth Watson](#)  
**To:** [Schools, Charter, PED](#)  
**Subject:** [EXT] YES Polaris School in Los Alamos  
**Date:** Wednesday, July 17, 2019 8:11:31 AM

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Hello,

I write to cast my vote in favor of the Polaris Charter School in Los Alamos, NM. I recently worked in the Los Alamos Middle School for 3 years starting and running an online digital learning program for students that could not function in the traditional classroom. This offered an alternative, but was not the complete answer.

Learning theory informs us that people learn in a variety of ways, and sitting in a chair in a classroom is often stifling to the learning process. Our community needs an alternative educational program that incorporates a variety of learning opportunities. Polaris Charter school will support a place based, student-centered, small school option geared to support the critical middle school population. This population is currently under-served and not well understood. If we can focus on providing middle schoolers with what they need, they should have greater academic success and fewer challenges fitting in.

Thanks,  
Elizabeth Watson  
505-412-8185

July 16, 2019

Dear Public Education Commission;

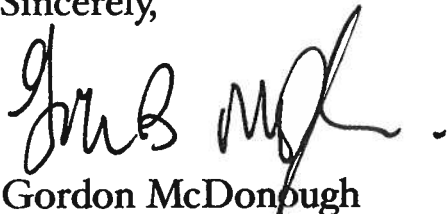
I am writing to express my support for the establishment of Polaris Charter School in Los Alamos.

I am a former middle school teacher, parent of two children fortunate enough to have matriculated at Monte Del Sol Charter School in Santa Fe, and I have read Polaris' proposal from cover to cover. This is an ambitious and exciting project and will serve our community well.

As a teacher of adolescents, I was terribly aware that some of my students, most often not the high achievers, nor the low ones, were falling through the cracks. I was once one of these students myself and can only imagine what a difference it might have made to me if I had been availed some of the focussed social and emotional support proposed by Polaris Charter School. As it is, my junior high school memories are troublingly dark and regrettable.

Los Alamos was once home to imaginative and pioneering educators David and Frances Hawkins and Frank Oppenheimer. It will be a well earned tribute to their heritage to establish an innovative, far-sighted school in this community.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gordon McDonough", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Gordon McDonough  
1063 Pinon Loop  
Los Alamos, NM 87544

**From:** [Julie Wiens](#)  
**To:** [Schools, Charter, PED](#)  
**Subject:** [EXT] Polaris charter school support  
**Date:** Thursday, July 18, 2019 10:14:23 PM

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I would like to add my support for a Charter school in Los Alamos. We have a unique population and I feel that often times that uniqueness supports a certain type of student over another. I can really see a need for Polaris in town. I have literally known people to move because they felt our science oriented schools would leave their child behind. We need a bit more balance to bring everyone into the fold.

Thanks you,  
Julie wiens

**From:** [Lori Heimdahl Gibson](#)  
**To:** [Schools, Charter, PED](#)  
**Subject:** [EXT] Polaris Charter School Community Input Hearing  
**Date:** Thursday, July 18, 2019 9:05:34 PM

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Members of the Public Education Commission:

I was one of the eight community members who spoke at the Input Hearing on Tuesday, July 16th at UNM-LA.

I appreciate the opportunity to complete my comments by email, since I ran out of time during the hearing.

I strongly support the Polaris effort because too many students at LAPS are falling through the cracks and/or

are not fully engaged with their learning. My experience with LAPS students has been in-depth interactions

as an academic advisor at UNM-LA, an adult volunteer with the LA Youth Leadership program for 3 years, and

as founder and coordinator of JUNOTS, a joint youth leadership program with Espanola Valley and Los Alamos

youth for five years.

Some of the main reasons I strongly support Polaris are its emphasis on:

- project and place-based education
- focus on students..... with teacher roles more as facilitators
- developing students' natural talents
- much better opportunity for individualized instruction
- more student directed learning
- focus on building strong relationships and social/emotional skills
- more natural, organic methods of learning
- real world applications
- student empowerment and engagement
- a sense of belonging and involvement and community
- critical thinking and problem-solving skills
- not allowing students to "fall through the cracks"

I was part of the XQ initiative and was involved with the effort to have Dr. Steinhaus and the LAPS School Board

adopt the approach that Polaris is now taking. They had every opportunity and turned it down. Thus Polaris was

born. Los Alamos needs this different learning option for many students and has powerful support from the community.

Please authorize the Polaris Charter School.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Lori Heimdahl Gibson

Retired Educator - 25 years (15 years as HS and MS classroom teacher)

## **Statement to the NM Public Education Commission**

**Luce Salas, Los Alamos Parent, [lucesalas@gmail.com](mailto:lucesalas@gmail.com), 505-695-6431**

Good afternoon, members of the Public Education Commission. My name is Luce Salas, and I'm the parent of a 5<sup>th</sup> grader at Mountain Elementary School.

I am here to wholeheartedly support and urge you to approve the establishment of Polaris Charter School.

While I speak to you from a position of great personal interest, I believe Los Alamos County's demographics is such that the ENTIRE community LAPS serves would benefit well from piloting the proposed model of a brain-friendly instructional method. With just one middle school through which five elementary schools are funneled, our community has long needed another option for students who need a less traditional educational approach.

In the years he has attended elementary school here, my child has been fortunate to receive dual IEP services to address a gifted intellect coupled with mild social and emotional delays due to an atypical background.

The promise of Polaris Charter School to integrate social-emotional learning and active citizenship with academics is mostly in keeping with what I have seen in the school district's elementary schools. However, I do worry that, due simply to the sheer number of pre-teen kids attending the middle school, the non-academic "soft skills" of social-emotional resilience and good citizenship can get short-shrifted among the subset of kids who do not thrive in the traditional middle school.

I request your approval of Polaris Charter School.

Thank you for considering my input.

**From:** [Mary Snow](#)  
**To:** [Schools, Charter, PED](#)  
**Subject:** [EXT] Subject: Polaris Charter School - Letter of Support  
**Date:** Thursday, July 18, 2019 10:43:12 AM

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Date: July 18th, 2019

To: Public Education Commission

Please accept this letter of support for the creation of the Polaris Charter School in Los Alamos.

I moved to Los Alamos from Austin Texas in 2008. I was surprised to find that the Los Alamos community had a limited choice of schools for K-12 students. There are a few private schools and an active home school network; but no charter schools in Los Alamos.

I worked for LAPS as a Substitute Teacher, GATE Teacher, and an After School Robotics Club Leader from 2009 to 2015.

During that time I encountered a number of students who would have benefited from the engagement and motivation that a school like Polaris Charter School could provide with its opportunities for place based learning, project based learning, and personalized learning.

Parents would tell me about the increased engagement and motivation they observed in their children who participated in the robotics club. This led to a few parents discussing options for alternative or home schooling, and questions about the LAPS GATE program.

During the period in the meeting when PEC members questioned the applicants on their charter school application the range of experience and skills of the applicants became clear. The PCS Governing Board members experience, prior employment, and education are described on the Polaris Charter School/ Governing Board website. Their range of experience and skills are comparable to that of a Startup Company. Given its expertise, the Governing Board is most likely to succeed in creating the Polaris Charter School as described in their application.

I support the Polaris Charter School. I hope it will be granted a charter, and open in the fall of 2020. I expect it will be an important addition to the Los Alamos community.

Mary Snow  
700 Totavi St  
Los Alamos, NM  
[mary@cw-ms.org](mailto:mary@cw-ms.org)

**From:** [Nate McClennen](#)  
**To:** [Schools, Charter, PED](#)  
**Subject:** [EXT] support for Polaris Charter School  
**Date:** Wednesday, July 17, 2019 3:11:39 PM

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Dear New Mexico Charter School Commission:

Polaris Charter School is uniquely positioned to offer an innovative place-based middle school program that serves as a model for the entire region. The school is a partner within the Place Network, a network of rural schools that connect learning to community to increase engagement, outcomes, and community impact. The network has been working with the Polaris team for a year as they have written their application - they are focused and committed.

With the approval and launch of Polaris, students in the Los Alamos region will have an innovative choice to both learn and impact their local communities through a learning model that sets up students with not only the knowledge, but the skills and dispositions to support college and career readiness as well as personal and professional success in high school and beyond.

In 2019.20, Place Network will have 11 schools across nine states all sharing around a common learning model. By 2020.21, we expect to be closer to 20 schools. The power of the network is considerable for a small charter start up.

We extend our support for Polaris and hope that students in the area will begin to have this choice in the fall of 2020. This will be a great option for students.

Sincerely,  
Nate McClennen  
Director, Place Network

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**Nate McClennen**

Vice President of Education and Innovation | Teton Science Schools

p: 307.734.9850

m: 307.413.5654

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**From:** [Schools, Charter, PED](#)  
**To:** [Woerner, Karen, PED](#)  
**Subject:** FW: [EXT] Polaris Charter School  
**Date:** Tuesday, July 16, 2019 3:00:00 PM

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A little late, but here is a letter in support on Polaris.

**From:** Nicole McGrane [mailto:nlmcgrane@gmail.com]  
**Sent:** Tuesday, July 16, 2019 2:09 PM  
**To:** Schools, Charter, PED  
**Subject:** [EXT] Polaris Charter School

To Whom It Concerns:

My name is Nicole McGrane. There was a public meeting today for the Polaris Charter School today that I was unable to attend. Consequently, I am writing today as both a teacher and a parent to support the Polaris Charter School in Los Alamos, NM. Middle School is a huge transition time for students and Los Alamos needs to do better for this age group. Polaris offers an alternative to the traditional middle school education provided by LAPS. This alternative model could make all the difference for many students. My kids are now at the High School but I wish there were options when they were going through middle school. Our education system as a whole needs to be restructured and work better for the students it serves. We must support those trying to do better for our kids. Please approve Polaris Charter School's application and allow them to make their vision a reality. Feel free to contact me if needed.

Sincerely,

Nicole McGrane, M.Ed  
Teacher/Parent/Author  
[Teaching While Handcuffed](#)

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overcoming them is what makes life meaningful." - Joshua  
Marine**



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**From:** [Ning Tao](#)  
**To:** [Schools, Charter, PED](#)  
**Subject:** [EXT] Polaris Charter School  
**Date:** Thursday, July 18, 2019 8:23:39 PM

---

To whom it may concern,

I am writing to express my support for Polaris Charter School at Los Alamos.

Thank you!

Ning Tao

**From:** [Qinjun Kang](#)  
**To:** [Schools, Charter, PED](#)  
**Subject:** [EXT] support Polaris Charter School  
**Date:** Thursday, July 18, 2019 8:14:13 PM

---

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am writing to support Polaris Charter School at Los Alamos.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Qinjun Kang, Los Alamos resident

**From:** [Becky Cocina](#)  
**To:** [Schools, Charter, PED](#)  
**Subject:** [EXT] Letter in support of Polaris Charter School\_Los Alamos  
**Date:** Thursday, July 18, 2019 11:23:12 AM

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To whom it may concern,

I'm writing to pledge my full support for the Polaris Charter School in Los Alamos, NM. We have had wonderful experiences in the public school system in Los Alamos, I have two children still in elementary and I recently took a job teaching at the high school. I do feel like more options would be a huge benefit to our town, especially at the middle school level. For one, breaking up the group a bit so the class sizes are not as big would be great, this town is growing and the school is going to have to contend with that. I also think students at these ages do not always thrive in the traditional setting. Having a school that provides project based, more differentiated and engaging instruction, will help a lot of students learn in a different way and gain educational independence by learning to take control of their learning. I love that this school has been proposed and I respect the team of people who have worked so hard to get it this far.

Know that my family and I are very excited and we would definitely put our children in the school if at all possible.

Sincerely,

Rebecca Cocina  
Special Education Math Teacher  
Los Alamos High School

**From:** [Ruth Burns](#)  
**To:** [Schools, Charter, PED](#)  
**Subject:** [EXT] Fwd: Support for Polaris Charter School Los Alamos  
**Date:** Thursday, July 18, 2019 12:37:10 PM

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> Good Afternoon,  
>  
> I am writing to support the proposed Polaris Charter School in Los Alamos.  
>  
> Our community has little choice in education, especially for Middle and High School kids. It is either the LAPS Middle School or home schooling.  
>  
> I feel that a small school option would be helpful for some students who struggle in a large Middle School (a time of life that is often fraught with difficulties). This would help empower families with their education choices.  
>  
> Yours in full support  
>  
> Ruth Burns  
> (505) 709-7521

**From:** [Adelaide Jacobson](#)  
**To:** [Schools, Charter, PED](#)  
**Subject:** [EXT] Polaris Charter School  
**Date:** Friday, July 19, 2019 4:44:13 PM

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July 19, 2019  
Sent by email to  
[Charter.Schools@state.nm.us](mailto:Charter.Schools@state.nm.us)

Dear Public Education Commissioners:

The following is a letter I wrote for publication in two of three possible digital community news outlets. In my letter I allude to reading about the hearing belatedly (it was in fact the evening of Sunday, July 14,) announced in the Los Alamos Reporter, but not both publications and, surprisingly, not in the Los Alamos Daily Post -that is the most read and the official newspaper of record in the county.

In addition to the sentiments contained in the letter I would like to address the following topics which arose during the hearing on Tuesday.

Transportation: While it would be possible for a student to ride on either the Blue or Green routes of NM Park & Ride from some locations in Rio Arriba County, in my 10 year experience as a teacher in the Gifted & Talented program in the Los Alamos Public Schools I never had, or even heard of, an out-of-district student in the school whose parent was not employed in Los Alamos County. I would estimate depending on the year that at least, one-fifth of my students came from out-of-district. I had students traveling from Truchas -34 miles and Ojo Caliente-41 miles away.

Los Alamos Public Schools students are currently, I believe it was said at the meeting, to be 67% Caucasian. It would be interesting to know what the diversity numbers are in the district when looking at in-district population and the diversity of LAPS when looking at total population including out-of-district students. In any event, because of out-of-district parents transporting their children to school the possible population who would apply to attend Polaris from out-of-district, I think, will be comparable to those students who currently apply to the Los Alamos Public Schools. Further, transfer into the high school by out-of-district students after the 8th grade may be difficult.

I am unfamiliar with the demand for state charters but do note from the Commission's website that there is a maximum number of charters granted per year and further there is a maximum that can be granted in a five year period. In your decision-making, I am sure, consideration should be given to the needs of the entire state.

Place-based learning through PEEC is not unusual in the educational curriculum at LAPS. The Pajarito Environmental Education Center has many outreach programs to schools in Los Alamos and elsewhere and many classes participate.

The PEEC website states: "We offer programs for students in preschool through 12th grade that can be tailored to meet the unique needs and learning goals of your class and students"

PEEC also offers for the middle school students: Bird Banding Field Trips, Astronomy Lessons, Snowshoe Hikes, DPU (Department of Public Utility) Field Trips to talk about county water and energy facilities and usage. I know I have gone as an adjunct teacher on two bird banding trips and an astronomy trip, and declined a snow-shoeing opportunity. Participation in these activities is currently commonly experienced by students in LAPS schools.

An example of an Authentic Learning Project in Polaris's application is National History Day. I am familiar with it having had students for four years participate, several of whom went to Nationals. In fact this past spring two LA Middle School students were NM state finalists and eligible to go to Nationals. It is an excellent program.

Collaboration and topic integration among teachers is not unusual in LAPS depending on the school and the staffing, at least from my experience at three schools.

Where do I see differences in the Polaris proposal and LAPS? In the Daily Schedule. The setting aside of a 1/2 hour advisory time with a student will hopefully aid a teacher understanding a child and her/his needs. The afternoon, After School-Open Studio/Maker Space session as part of the school day is also different. I correlate the Open Studio with the after school programming currently offered by the Family YMCA and the Teen Center.

The Polaris School will provide parents and students with a publicly funded educational alternative but it may not be markedly different from the educational experiences of students currently in the Los Alamos schools.

Thank you for your consideration,  
Adelaide Jacobson  
Los Alamos, NM

Below is the letter sent to Los Alamos Daily Post and the Los Alamos Reporter:

The Los Alamos Public Schools and the proponents of the Polaris Charter School (Grades 6-8) regrettably, in my opinion, have failed the citizenry of Los Alamos concerning the Polaris application currently pending before the Public Education Commission. Prior to the submission of the charter school application by Polaris, it would have been nice to have had a public forum in which the charter school proponents and the school district presented information about the positive and negative effects if any, that the charter school would have on various aspects of Los Alamos life, especially our schools. The application submission indicates numerous presentations before many organizations in the county. If there was a joint presentation, I am unaware of it and stand corrected.

I attended the Tuesday, July 16 meeting before the Public Education Commission held at UNM-LA (after belatedly reading about it) and was struck by the number of community entities possibly affected by the Polaris plans: LAPS facilities (Little Forest School was specifically mentioned by Superintendent Steinhaus) and LAPS funding; donation of real estate owned by LA County for a possible build site for the school; use of the facilities within the county to meet the educational goals or requirements to operate the school: the Family YMCA, PEEC, Maker Space and Art Lab, Mesa Public Library, the Teen Center, outdoor gardens and open space.

While use of entities within the community is positive, use by a projected capacity enrollment of 240 students after the fifth year of operation does have an effect on all who use these same facilities.

State funding for public education in NM goes to the school in which a student is enrolled. It was expressed that the school could be a private entity but that the preference was for a public one open to students from Los Alamos and from adjoining communities as has been the practice of Los Alamos Public Schools. We are a small community with many

educational needs. The community at large has not had the opportunity to properly evaluate if establishing a charter school will best meet those needs.

The Polaris Charter School application can be found at:

<https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/.../2019-new-applications/>

and scroll down to Polaris Charter School

Comments on the application per Commission hand-out must be filed by 5:00 p.m. of the third business day after the applicant's PEC hearing, which in this case is Friday, July 19.

Comments may be made via email to [Charter.Schools@state.nm.us](mailto:Charter.Schools@state.nm.us) with the subject line Polaris Charter School.



**From:** [Cheryl Pongratz](#)  
**To:** [Schools, Charter, PED](#)  
**Subject:** [EXT] Comments on Polaris Charter School Proposal  
**Date:** Friday, July 19, 2019 10:26:56 AM

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Patricia Gibson:

I am, in general, a supporter of Charter Schools and, in fact, find the often common public school negative response to charter proposals to be shameful. I am a retired public school teacher and administrator (elementary, middle and high school principal and assistant superintendent—all in Los Alamos) and love innovation and change. The current Polaris request for a state charter represents both innovation and change.

However, I am opposed to this charter for the following reasons:

1. The changes proposed are good but should apply to ALL students. If those who champion this type of change leave the public system, the public system is less likely to change for all. Parents who opt out of the public system need to work inside the system to make changes. This is especially true for parents of the students Polaris hopes to attract from outside Los Alamos—they are badly needed in their home public school systems.
2. The current middle school has, since its opening in 1984, focused on best practices in middle level education. School size and inertia do make change slower, but the school has kept pace with research. I am not convinced there is a need.
3. No one on the committee has a strong middle-level administrative background. I'm biased, but believe the leader is critical to school success. A good curriculum and excellent delivery are important but someone leading the vision is essential. I think that is the one component sorely missing in this proposal. I don't know of any firm commitment by experienced middle-level teachers who have demonstrated their ability to move their vision to reality. They may be there but there is a large gap between theory and implementation.
4. With any charter school, I am concerned about special education services, a disproportionate number of kids who are already unsuccessful, unrealistic high parent expectations, etc. which all comes back to the need for strong administrative leadership.

Thank you,

Cheryl Pongratz

**From:** [Eli Ben-Naim](#)  
**To:** [Schools, Charter, PED](#)  
**Subject:** [EXT] Polaris Charter School  
**Date:** Thursday, July 18, 2019 6:19:45 PM

---

Dear Public Education Commission members,

As a citizen of the Los Alamos community, I write to comment on the proposed charter school. For two decades now, my three children have been attending Los Alamos Public schools.

The proposed charter school is A SOLUTION IN SEARCH OF A PROBLEM!

The charter school application makes the case that adolescent mental health is a major issue in Los Alamos. Yes, this is true. At the same time, Los Alamos schools have been addressing this issue head on and are making serious progress toward improving the emotional well being of the kids in our district. I can write with confidence, based on sending three children to LAMS during the years starting in 2006 and ending in 2016, that the middle school has continually improved including the quality of instruction, atmosphere, safety, child well being, and the facility itself. When weighted against the damage that a charter school can inflict upon a successful school district, the reasoning given is all too weak.

Please ask yourself: what problem are we fixing here? I am not sure what acute problem is being addressed by creating a charter school.

Please ask yourself: is this a precedent you would like to set? Take the top performing school district in the state and send the message that the middle school in this district is so broken that it needs such a dramatic fix.

Even the top district in the state could use some improvement, and surely, there is room for improvement. The most effective way to address this is through strengthening the existing schools.

Finally, charter schools should be established only in districts where the current public schools are broken beyond repair. I am baffled by the educational system in New Mexico where apparently it is even possible to consider proposals for charter schools in top performing districts.

I urge you. PLEASE DO NOT FIX WHAT IS NOT BROKEN!

Yours,

Dr. Eli Ben-Naim

White Rock, New Mexico

Disclosure: my spouse is the president of the LAPS school board. I am writing as a private citizen.

**From:** [Morris Pongratz](#)  
**To:** [Schools, Charter, PED](#)  
**Cc:** [Cheryl Pongratz](#)  
**Subject:** [EXT] Polaris Charter School.  
**Date:** Friday, July 19, 2019 1:57:05 PM  
**Attachments:** [Charter School Comments.pdf](#)

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I have attached my comments regarding the Polaris Charter School application.  
Thanks for your consideration.

--

Morris B. Pongratz, PhD  
505-662-2728 (H)  
505-699-5312 (C)

MORRIS B. PONGRATZ  
900 CIRCLE DRIVE  
LOS ALAMOS, NM 87444

July 19, 2019

New Mexico Public Education Department  
Public Education Commission  
300 Don Gaspar Avenue  
Santa Fe, NM 87501

Dear Commissioners:

I write in response to the Polaris Charter School application. A rather famous document begins "*When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve ... a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.*" I find the "Community Need" statement in the proposed Polaris Charter School application to be wholly inadequate in addressing the need requirement.

An old proverb says, "*If it ain't broke, don't fix it.*" I think that it applies in this instance. By any measure the Los Alamos Public Schools system is the crown jewel of public education within the state of New Mexico. Many, many parents residing in neighboring districts apply to get their children educated here. In fact, our school's capacities limits acceptance of all the requests. Our neighbors are "*voting with their feet*".

I write as someone who is familiar with the needs of middle school-aged children and the Los Alamos Public Schools (LAPS). In the 70's I taught Earth Science briefly at Benjamin Tasker Junior High in Bowie, Maryland. In my eight terms as an elected official in Los Alamos County (including one term on the LAPS Board of Education) I have frequently worked with middle school-aged children. My experience working with young teens includes Youth Working with Youth, Key Club, Builders Club, and United Way Youth Team, among others. These efforts have been project-focused "*learning opportunities that are socio-culturally relevant real-world experiences*". I know from experience that this approach appeals to young teens. These techniques can be implemented within the current LAPS curriculum without the need for a charter school.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

*Morris Pongratz*

Morris Pongratz

**From:** [wrwadt@aol.com](mailto:wrwadt@aol.com)  
**To:** [Schools, Charter, PED](#)  
**Subject:** [EXT] Recommend disapproval of Polaris Charter School application  
**Date:** Wednesday, July 17, 2019 11:02:06 AM

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To the Members of the New Mexico Public Education Commission:

I recommend that you disapprove the proposal for the Polaris Charter School in Los Alamos, New Mexico. The applicants include several talented, committed educators who want to help students, whose needs are not being met, using a research-based approach to more effectively engage students and support their social-emotional and academic learning. Although the proposal has many salient ideas, it is not clear that the team has the wherewithal to establish a school that can sustainably meet the lofty goals they proffer. My concerns are heightened by the phase-out of the additional funding for small schools in the State Equalization Guarantee, which will shrink the resources available to the proposed Polaris Charter School.

Given the relatively small size and isolated nature of Los Alamos, I feel that the proposed State charter school, if approved, would be divisive and, in general, would not be in the best interests of all students. A more productive approach, I think, would be for the team to work with the leadership of the Los Alamos Public Schools to incorporate their ideas on restorative justice, social-emotional learning, and place-based education into the curriculum and to provide students more learning opportunities that meet their individual needs. Since these ideas are in basic alignment with the Strategic Plan of the Los Alamos Public Schools, there is a clear framework for using the hard work of the applicant team to improve the learning environment for students without the division and added cost in human, financial, and physical resources that a charter school would require.

One the reasons for my concerns about the capacity of the team to successfully launch and operate the proposed charter school is that in four years they have not been able to identify an appropriate facility for the school. Several years ago I was part of the team, when the issue of the facility was being considered. The fact that this issue has not be resolved undermines my confidence in the team to execute the operational aspects of a charter school. Open land and empty facilities are in very short supply in Los Alamos compared to other communities. I recall we discussed several years ago the few empty commercial facilities, at least one of which might be suitable for the High Tech High design the team prefers. I was very surprised and disappointed at the July 16 public input meeting to hear that the team had not made any progress on the facility issue in more than two years.

When I was a member of the team considering new learning opportunities for students, I advocated engaging the district leadership in the context of the district strategic plan, which supported many of the key educational innovations that the team was considering. Unfortunately, it appears that communication broke down. I believe, that disapproving the Polaris Charter School would provide another opportunity for two-way communication to be restored and the worthy goals of the applicants to be realized in a broader context by incorporation into the district efforts to map and integrate its curriculum as recommended by an AdvancED site review team.

My perspective on this issue is based on my efforts to improve the education system in New Mexico for over twenty years. In 1997 I helped to create the Los Alamos National Laboratory Foundation. Since then I have been active in governance and currently serve as board treasurer. From 2003 to 2011 I served on

the Governor's Business Executives for Education. In 2011, I helped to transfer its mission to Quality New Mexico under the aegis of New Mexico Excellence in Learning, for which I am currently vice chair. I have served on the State advisory council for AdvancED/Measured Progress for the past 5 years and have participated in accreditation site visits. Finally, I have facilitated strategic planning and data analysis for the Los Alamos Public Schools since 2011 and have tried to promote community involvement and understanding of the best practices based on research in brain development and how children and youth learn.

In summary, I strongly recommend that you disapprove the application to create the Polaris Charter School.

Sincerely yours,

Willard (Bill) Wadt

1405 Big Rock Loop

Los Alamos, NM 87544

**From:** [Jennifer McCumber](#)  
**To:** [Schools, Charter, PED](#)  
**Subject:** [EXT] Polaris Charter School application  
**Date:** Friday, July 19, 2019 9:37:47 AM  
**Attachments:** [20171113 Cuddy&McCarthy.pdf](#)

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Dear Chairperson Gipson and Commissioners:

Please accept my written comments in opposition to the Polaris Charter School application.

I am a school board member for Los Alamos Public Schools. My concerns about the Polaris application relate to the conflict of interest created by Bill Hargraves being both a school board member and also an applicant for the Polaris Charter School application. This creates a problem in several areas:

1. As a board member, Mr. Hargraves directly supervises the LAPS Superintendent, Kurt Steinhaus. Dr. Steinhaus is expected to evaluate the charter school application and provide input as part of his job for the school district. This puts the superintendent in an unfair position to provide that input.
2. The Public Education Commission expects to receive objective feedback in order to make a decision about the application. This situation puts a cloud over that process.
3. Our board was advised legally that it would pose a conflict of interest for Mr. Hargraves to be an applicant or a governing board member for a charter school. See attached letter from Cuddy & McCarthy, LLP (which the board voted to make public).

As a board member for LAPS, I have an obligation to speak up because I believe the school district is being negatively impacted by this conflict of interest situation and I wanted to make sure the Public Education Commission was made aware of the issue.

Thank you for your consideration of my comments.

Sincerely,

Jenny McCumber  
Secretary, LAPS Board

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SAM W. MINNER  
OF COUNSEL:  
JOHN F. KENNEDY

REPLY TO SANTA FE OFFICE

November 13, 2017

**CONFIDENTIAL ATTORNEY-CLIENT PRIVILEGE**

Ms. Jenny McCumber  
School Board President  
Los Alamos School Board  
[jmccumber@laschools.net](mailto:jmccumber@laschools.net)

**Re: Charter School Organizing Activities with the Los Alamos Community**

Dear Ms. McCumber:

This letter confirms the telephone conference call I had with you and Dr. Kurt Steinhaus, the Los Alamos School's Superintendent a couple of weeks ago regarding the activity within the Los Alamos community to organize a charter school, presumptively under the New Mexico's Charter Schools Act. When we discussed this issue, you and Dr. Steinhaus presented several questions about the involvement of Los Alamos School Board member Bill Hargraves in this organizing effort. You asked whether the School Board should be concerned about conflict of interest, when a Board member is participating as part of the charter school organizing group? Given the potential for a charter school to affect the public school district's funding, you asked if it was permissible for a School Board member to continue to serve or even be an applicant for a charter school?

The simple answer is that, as a citizen, Mr. Hargraves has the right to participate as an organizer of the prospective charter school, but it would pose a conflict of interest for him to be a member of the charter school's governing body or the applicant for charter school approval, when the charter application is submitted either to the local school board, or to the Public Education Commission, which has the authority to approve state charters under the Charter School's Act. After we discussed this issue by telephone, I received two phone calls from Mr. Hargraves about these issues. I have cautioned him that his activities as a member of the charter school's organizing group must be kept scrupulously separate from his role as a public school board member. He must be very clear in his activities that he is acting solely as a private citizen,



November 13, 2017

Page 2

not as a member of the School Board, nor as a representative on its behalf. He cannot speak for or purport to voice opinions or positions on behalf of the Los Alamos School Board in this effort. Mr. Hargraves has assured me that he has been diligent in keeping his roles clear and separate when he engages in any charter school organizing efforts and activities.

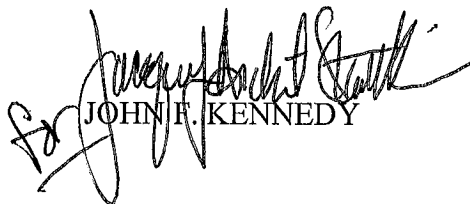
When we spoke by conference call, you and Dr. Steinhaus also asked how the Superintendent should address requests for the Superintendent's involvement by the charter school group. Apparently they have asked Dr. Steinhaus to attend meetings and express his support for their effort, and Mr. Hargraves presented a written statement, which was drafted either by Mr. Hargraves or the organizing group, by which Dr. Steinhaus would have publicly supported the creation of the charter school. Dr. Steinhaus has declined to sign such a statement. When I discussed this charter school issue with Mr. Hargraves, I advised him that there is a natural tension, which sometimes extends to open hostility between local public school boards and administrators, and charter school organizers, since the charter school necessarily solicits students to attend the charter school from the local public school population, receives a portion of the public school's budget and operates somewhat in competition with the public schools in generating enrollment and funding. While both you and Dr. Steinhaus, as well as Mr. Hargraves, have advised me that you would like to work cooperatively, how far Dr. Steinhaus goes in "supporting" the charter school effort is a matter which the Superintendent and the local School Board should decide, because of this inherent tension and potential conflict.

Finally, you asked what the School Board should do to prepare for the establishment of a prospective charter school in your district. The School Board would like to anticipate the effect on its budget, and respond to questions or comments received from the community about the effort to organize such a charter school. While the School Board does not want to appear defensive or hostile, it will need to anticipate the possible impact on its students, staff and budget should such an application for a charter be submitted. If the charter application is presented to the local School Board, naturally, the Los Alamos School Board will need to analyze it and take action to assure that the prospective charter meets the criteria of the Charter School's Act. If the charter application is submitted to the state Public Education Commission for a state charter, the local Board should avail itself of the opportunity to present its views both in writing and at any public hearing held in the charter approval process. At that time, the Los Alamos School Board will have the opportunity to take a position on the charter application, and its compliance with the many criteria in the Charter School's Act, as well as the underlying issue of the impact of the charter, its program and curriculum on the public school district and its student population and budget.

I trust that this information will be helpful to you in your discussions of this issue, and would be glad to assist, should you require further information or assistance. Please do not hesitate to call upon me, if needed.

November 13, 2017  
Page 3

Very truly yours,

  
JOHN F. KENNEDY

JFK:kjl

cc: Dr. Kurt Steinhaus  
Los Alamos School Board members

**From:** [Kurt Steinhaus](#)  
**To:** [Schools, Charter, PED](#)  
**Cc:** [Ellen Ben-Naim](#); [Steinhaus, Kurt](#)  
**Subject:** [EXT] Comments about the Polaris Charter Application  
**Date:** Friday, July 19, 2019 2:25:37 PM  
**Attachments:** [Polaris Comments for the PEC - Steinhaus.pdf](#)  
[Polaris Charter School Supplemental Comments - steinhaus.pdf](#)

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Greetings from the Los Alamos Public Schools!

Attached are comments about the Polaris Charter School application. Please feel free to contact me if you have questions.

Regards,  
Kurt

*Dr. Kurt Steinhaus*  
Superintendent

**[Los Alamos Public Schools](#)**

*We prepare capable and confident life-long learners*

Phone: (505) 663-2230



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## Los Alamos Public Schools

"We prepare confident, life-long learners."

July 19, 2019

RE: Recommend Disapproval of the Polaris Charter Application

Dear Chairperson Gipson and Commissioners:

Thank you for the opportunity to present a school district perspective at your July 17, 2019 hearing in Los Alamos. Since we ran out of time, here is a summary of key points about why the Polaris Charter should *not* be approved.

1. The budget does not support the Polaris educational plan. Proposed small class sizes have created a staffing plan that is unworkable.
2. The data used to justify the need for another school are incorrect. In addition, most of the main innovations like Social and Emotional Learning, Project Based Learning, Restorative Justice are already being implemented at all of our sites.
3. The Polaris proposers have not found a facility or land for portable buildings. Los Alamos is landlocked and out of space for another school.
4. There is no plan for transition from Polaris to Los Alamos High School and the lack of curriculum scope and sequence sets high school students up for failure.
5. The proposed charter school staff and Governing Board do not have the expertise necessary to start or run a successful school. The proposed school leader has not been a Principal, does not have an administrative license, and admits very limited experience with mid school students.
6. There is no business manager included in the budget. We have seen many charter schools fail in New Mexico because of forgetting about the need to manage the school.

Disapproval of the Polaris Charter proposal will allow staff in the Los Alamos Public Schools to work with the Polaris writing group to identify ways to work together and better meet student needs. For example, LAPS has a robust school within a school model at Los Alamos High School to meet the needs of students who thrive in smaller classes. A similar model could be feasible for Los Alamos Middle School.

Attached are supplementary presentation slides. Please feel free to contact me at 505-663-2230 if you have any questions.

Sincerely Yours,

Dr. Kurt A. Steinhaus  
*Superintendent*  
Los Alamos Public Schools

CC: LAPS School Board President

July 16, 2019

# Initial Comments Prepared for the Public Education Commission

To Assist in Making an Informed Decision about  
a Proposed Charter School in Los Alamos





# Topics

1. Context
2. State System
3. Community
4. Priorities
5. Data Check and LAMS
6. Unintended Consequences
7. Wrap-up

## Overarching LAPS Approach







# Context: Mid School Students

**“I have arrived” “What just come out of that trumpet?”**

- Start detaching from parents
- Want more independence and individuality
- Exceptionally sensitive about being embarrassed
- For companionship, often form a second social family of friends
- Puberty includes hormones that drive growth
- Physical appearance changes in ways they do not control

***Reminder: we need to be extremely careful about decisions that impact our students for the rest of their lives***





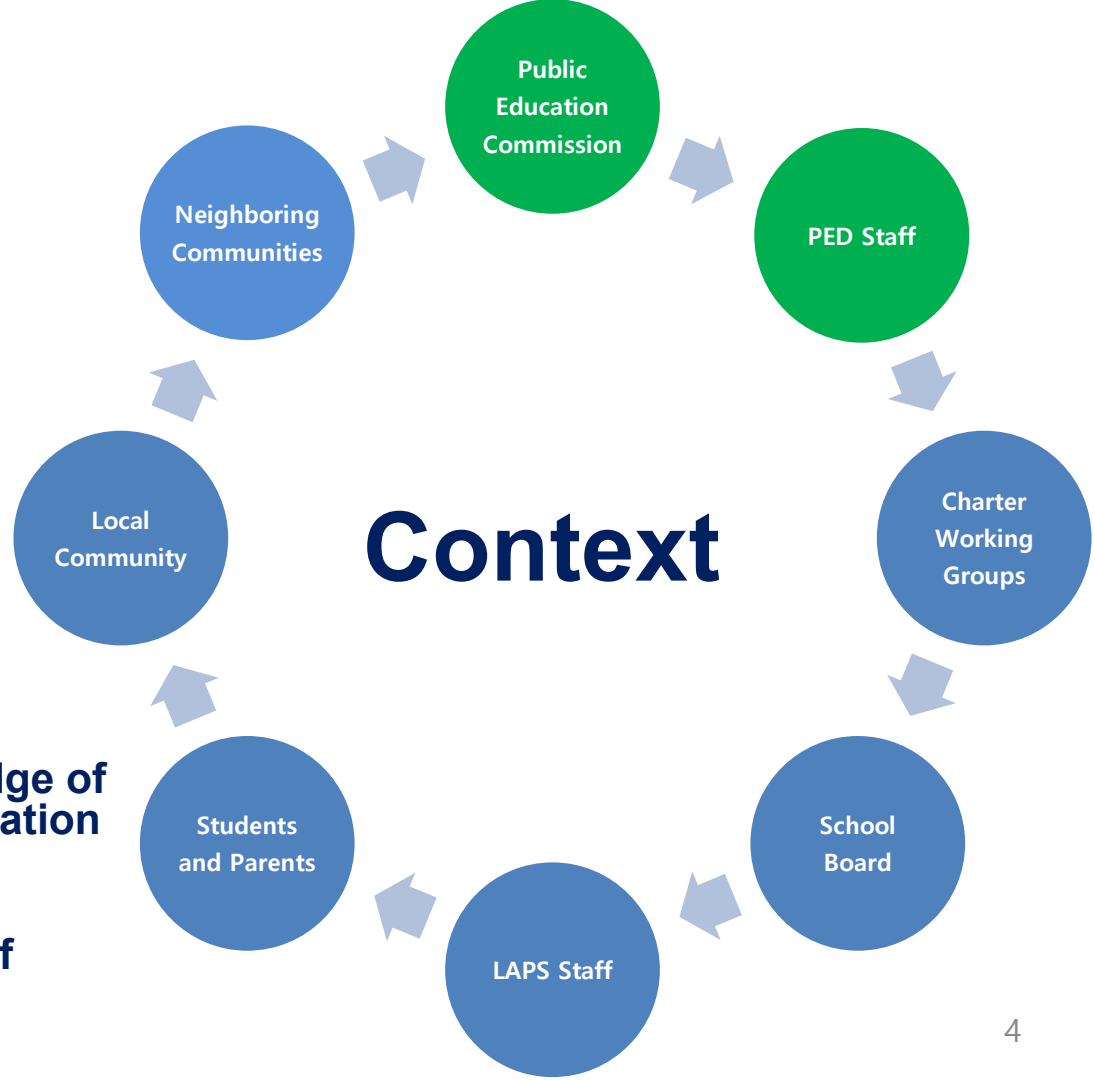


# Los Alamos and Taos are Small Towns



## Color Key

-  Varying knowledge of our unique education needs
-  Higher chance of misconceptions







# State System

1. **Chartering Authority** – PEC or local School Board
2. **Inherent Tension** – resources, facilities, transportation, federal programs, funding applications
3. **Enrollment Lottery** – challenges in focusing on specific student population





# Community Feedback

1. Bi-modal distribution
2. Many questions
3. Possible confusion about Los Alamos Mid School teachers – they *are* student centered, effective, dedicated, always improving (PD Squad)
4. Big difference between an application and actually running a school
5. Why not work with the Mid School and elementary schools to provide another option? (example: Los Alamos School of Choice)
6. Polaris application is a mix of buzz words, cut and paste from web sites and different sections are repeats or disconnected
7. Parallel administration is wasteful
8. Community Need stated in the application is not valid or scientific
9. What about a school nurse, electives, counselor, preventing risk behaviors, mental health expert?
10. Concern about limited resources, fields, busses, facilities, community investments, HB33, Bond funds, etc.





# Los Alamos Big Picture Priorities



High-quality Early Childhood Education

Workforce Development Center

Los Alamos School Board

- Student Well-being
- Student Learning
- Staff Well-Being and Excellence



# LAPS Priorities and Polaris Objectives Overlap

- ***Student Well-being*** – *prevention program, Healthy Schools Initiative, school climate, transitions, and social emotional learning*
- ***Student Learning*** – *student-led goal setting, professional development about improving instructional strategies, and curriculum alignment*
- ***Staff Well-Being and Excellence*** – *refine teacher mentor program, data analysis and informed decisions to improve instruction*

**Priorities from AdvancED** (external team of experts, International Accreditation for Mid School) 1. align education systems, 2. curriculum mapping, and 3. improved use of data



# NM History of Place-Based Education

## *Education Reform in New Mexico*

by Loyd Tireman

*In the 1930s, University of New Mexico faculty and school teachers organized two experiments in progressive education, tailoring to the child rather than fitting the child into a standard curriculum.*

*“Individualized education, peer tutoring, use of community resources”*

*East San Jose near Albuquerque  
Nambe Community School*





# Data Check

1. Page 2 reference to 2015 Student Survey; correction: CDC Report about Los Alamos
2. Survey of need for another choice (44 people)
3. YRRS data, school grades

## LAMS is a Top-Rated School

1. Outstanding academic achievement & performance (e.g. state tests, band, athletics, math counts, and much more)
2. More than 85% of LAMS staff trained in mental health awareness and suicide prevention
3. Social emotional, Restorative Justice, *Thrive*, MAPs, continuous improvement, etc.
4. Last two years – greatly expanded electives and options for the “middle student” (e.g., AVID)



# Unintended Consequences<sup>1</sup>

## Impacts and effects that are unanticipated

- Lost curriculum alignment from elementary, mid to high school
- Missing the scope and sequence of math and English Language Arts
- Impact will be felt by the whole school district (e.g. reduction in teachers, forced transfers, budget cuts)
- Students not prepared for high school culture and rigor
- *Proposed solutions can have serious negative consequences for the overwhelming majority of students*<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [Unintended Effects of Charter School Programs](#), by Christian Buerger, December 2014;  
[Study shows potential unintended effects of charter school movement](#), by University of Kansas, September 2, 2017

<sup>2</sup> [Unchecked, decades-long experiment with charter schools yields unintended consequences](#), Erika Jones, May 29, 2019



# Wrap up...

## Key questions:

1. Will the PEC *pause* and allow us to address unintended consequences, find solutions, and work on options for Los Alamos?
2. With very limited resources, what is the best investment for our students? How can we be good stewards of public education funds?

