



COMMUNITIES OF EXCELLENCE

IDAHO'S CHARTER SCHOOLS PROGRAM GRANT



APPLICATION DETAILS

School Name: Anser Charter School	
Contact Person: Heather Dennis	Contact Email: hdennis@ansercharterschool.org
Application Type: Expansion	Grant Budget: \$800,000.00
Grades Served: K-8	New Seats Created: 302
Application Status: Funded	

RUBRIC

A. Grant Project Goals

Identify 3-5 grant project goals and **justify** each goal in terms of its value in supporting the planning and implementation of your proposed school. **All grant spending, including future revisions to your budget, must fit clearly within one of your stated project goals.**

Reviewer Comments – Grant Project Goals

Strengths:

- The school's goals for this expansion grant are well-aligned to the school's vision and demonstrated successes over the past twenty years. The goals, as a whole, speak to the school's desire to expand the number of high quality charter school seats – by utilizing a rigorous EL Education framework, network supports, and the school's own considerable internal capacity. In order to grow and scale further, the school requires investments in technology, Makerspace supplies, program-related equipment, and adventure equipment. Goals include a desire for Anser students to continue to exceed state proficiency and growth standards in math and ELA. Each goal includes appropriate metrics and timelines, and are focused on replicating and extending success to many new students.
- Goals align with mission and vision, especially the vision to set high academic standards and vision to create a community where students are inspired to achieve their potential. All grant measures and metrics are appropriately rigorous for targeted student populations.
- Each goal is justified and relates back to the clearly stated mission and vision for the school. The application includes goals for student outcomes, teacher satisfaction, a rigorous model, and expanded high quality seats, all of which are relevant to this grant. That the application calls out Anser's underperformance in meeting the 5% threshold for EL students and students with special needs is appreciated.

Weaknesses:

- Specific student outcome goals are conspicuously lacking, with the application stating that "Anser students will continue to exceed the state proficiency and growth standards in Math and ELA, as evidenced on Anser's Idaho Report Card." There are also no concrete teacher satisfaction benchmarks against which to measure progress. Because of this, the rigorousness of the metrics are unknown.



B. Educational Philosophy, Instructional Practices, and Curriculum

Fully *describe and justify* the design of the academic program in terms of the educational philosophy, instructional practices, and curriculum that will be utilized to meet the school's performance objectives. Be sure to include key design elements, references supporting its validity and alignment to state and federal requirements, and rationale for why this education model was chosen and how it will produce strong outcomes for the unique community and student population the school will be located within.

Reviewer Comments - Educational Philosophy, Instructional Practices, and Curriculum**Strengths:**

- The school was founded on the tenets and practices of EL Education (Expeditionary Learning), and describes in great detail the structures and traditions it utilizes to ensure that students achieve at very high levels, develop attitudes of care and concern and service to others, and create high-quality work. The school has distinguished itself as a "mentor school" within the network of EL schools nationwide, and was also one of the first "credentialed" schools in the network.
- With few exceptions (math), the school does not utilize published curriculum packages. Teachers use the framework provided by EL Education core practices to design and create curricula that are developmentally appropriate, accessible by all students, and rich in local connections. Learning expeditions – the core curriculum structure – are aligned to Idaho state standards.
- The application presents a strong set of research evidence on the success of the EL Education approach, as well as school-level results that demonstrate students in grades 3 to 8 exceeding district and state achievement results in math, ELA and science. Subgroup data is even more impressive, with low income, students with disabilities, and ELL students performing much higher than their district and state counterparts.
- The school provides widespread and consistent access to technology, and the application describes this breadth and depth in sufficient detail.
- School leverages three charter autonomies: 1) acquisition and retention of high-quality teachers; 2) innovative instruction, program and curricular development; and 3) access to a rich array of STEM, art, service and adventure opportunities.
- Key design elements are grounded in strong research by Dewey and Hahn, and evidence of success at the school level.
- The "Painted Lady" example helped illustrate how the EL curriculum can go in-depth, covering English Language Arts, math, science, social studies and the arts.
- Curricular choices are justified through the use of published research on the EL model as well as Anser data results.
- Technology plan is suitable for the EL model.
- Application clearly outlines Anser's autonomy and flexibility.
- This is the strongest Educational Philosophy, Instructional Practices, and Curriculum Review application section that this reviewer has seen. All three components are clearly laid out in plain language and justified. It is obvious that Anser has honed its educational approach over its 21 years of existence. This is a model application in this section. Outcomes, especially in science, are impressive.



C. Teaching and Learning

Fully *describe and justify* the design of the instructional strategy in terms of the educational philosophy, instructional practices, and curriculum that will be utilized to meet the school's performance objectives. Be sure to include key design elements, references supporting its validity and alignment to state and federal requirements, and rationale for why this strategy was chosen and how it will produce strong outcomes for the unique community and student population the school will serve.

Reviewer Comments – Teaching and Learning**Strengths:**

- The application describes a variety of diverse and flexible instructional approaches that align with EL Education's student-centered approach. Crew leaders (teachers) make personal connections with students in their crew (classroom) to ensure they are well-known and supported. Teachers use a variety of classroom-based assessment practices to monitor student performance and engagement. Various standardized assessment tools are also utilized, including the Idaho Reading Indicator, AIMSweb Curriculum Based Measurement, CORE Phonics Survey, STAR Reading and Math, and Words their Way.
- Differentiation and intervention structures, all part of the school's Building Intervention Team, are described. This specialized and inclusive team offers supports to students within classrooms that are experiencing academic or behavioral concerns.
- The school uses and proposes detailed and realistic instructional practices and types of tools that are consistent with the proposed educational program.
- The narrative clearly explains how the school will use classroom and standardized assessments to determine the needs of individual students and to drive and differentiate instruction.
- Intervention structures are identified and justify how these systems will be used to respond to the needs of individual students.
- Again, the specificity included in this application is noteworthy. Specific instructional practices – such as the crew structure – are outlined and justified. Assessment, differentiation and intervention (building intervention team) practices described are appropriate.

Weaknesses:

- Though the terms RTI and MTSS are not explicitly named in this section, the structures and processes inherent in those systems is described.



D. Student Academic Achievement Standards

As an independently governed public school, charter schools need to ensure plans, systems, and tools for strong oversight and monitoring in the areas of academic performance. In this section, persuade the reader that your school will have rigorous goals and adequate oversight to ensure quality implementation, operation, and accountability.

Reviewer Comments – Student Academic Achievement Standards**Strengths:**

- The application includes thorough descriptions of the school's performance management plan for monitoring and reporting progress. The school's board utilizes a Continuous Improvement Committee to monitor the school's academic performance, set annual student achievement goals and provide support for academic growth. This group, in concert with the school's Education Director, oversees an achievement monitoring plan – which is implemented by classroom teachers, the literacy specialist and exceptional child services staff. A robust and complete monitoring/assessment timeline is included in the application.
- Classroom teachers conduct ongoing data analysis to inform instructional practices. Online training in every assessment utilized by the school is also provided. A data analysis protocol is used each fall and spring to "deep dive" into school-wide data – establishing a school-wide goal that every teacher will pursue.
- The Board provides adequate oversight and monitoring to ensure quality implementation, operation, and accountability through the achievement-monitoring plan.
- Sound assessment practices that effectively monitor student and teacher performance are clearly outlined in the assessment timeline.
- Data analysis leads to identifying trends, informing instructional and scheduling plans.
- Anser has in place a high quality plan for interim and summative student assessment, as well as a clear process for examining and making decisions with the data. Roles in this process are clearly stated in the application. That a student has his or her own achievement goals is a best practice.

Weaknesses:

- Creating and sustaining this kind of data-driven instructional culture, especially one that values and includes such disparate voices and perspectives, is exceedingly complex work. This is not a weakness of the application, but instead a challenge to continue making it happen over time.

E. Student Demand and Community/Local Support

Schools funded under the CSP subgrant must ensure they are in tune with their communities' needs and priorities. In this section schools will document their vitality and long-term sustainability through demonstrating their dedication to developing and maintaining community partnerships and connections.

Reviewer Comments – Student Demand and Community/Local Support**Strengths:**

- Currently serving 373 students in K-8, the school typically has about 40 openings and over 400 students apply for entrance via a lottery system. Expansion plans – the purpose of this grant – targets growth at the lower grades where the waiting list is most extensive. Smart growth is the plan – growing one to two classes per year, eventually in four years from 373 to 675 students. The school is focusing extensive outreach on underserved communities in order to broaden the school's diversity. The application will fund a Community Engagement Coordinator to identify and implement recruiting strategies. The application describes a variety of creative approaches to connecting with and attracting diverse families.
- The school has developed extensive connections with community service groups – which it will use to connect with prospective families served by those programs.
- Goals are reasonable and supported by data. Strategies have been developed with parents, community partners, board members, and staff.
- Not only does the application describe, in numeric terms, the need for expansion, more it importantly it addresses Anser's current deficiencies in addressing diverse populations and how the grant will enable the school to more effectively serve these students. Enrollment goals are specific and realistic, given the demand. Current and planned parent and community engagement activities are robust.

F. Effectively Serving All Students

Charter schools are obligated to take specific actions to ensure an open, fair, non-selective method of attracting and enrolling students, and all charter schools need to be ready to serve the group of students that choose to attend. In this section, describe your plan to offer a continuum of services for all types of students, including those that are educationally disadvantaged (such as low-income, special education, English learners, homeless, migrant and other at-risk students) and gifted and talented.

Reviewer Comments – Effectively Serving All Students**Strengths:**

- The applicant describes a thoughtful description of programs and interventions to support educationally disadvantaged students. Screening and identification begins with enrollment, when families complete the home language survey and provide educational background about their child. Kindergarten teachers conduct home visits for every incoming learner. Other screenings include hearing tests in first and sixth grades and gifted and talented testing in first grade. The exceptional child services team includes highly trained, specialized teachers who work in coordination to offer a broad array of services including special education plans, RTI, 504, and gifted and talented planning. To every extent possible all students complete the same standards and work towards the same learning targets. An IEP team determines services, accommodations, and curricular modifications based on the needs of each student.
- Programs, tools and instructional supports for students needing specialized support include varied instructional groupings, inclusion support provided by special educators, study skills classes for middle school students, and a variety of research based programs for academic instruction.
- Economically disadvantaged students' needs are met beyond academic in special education services. A full-time student support specialist is a trained school social worker. This individual conducts staff training on trauma, and how to support students through safe and predictable structures. The application describes a variety of connections and programs coordinated by the student support specialist to meet the needs of the school community.
- The narrative justifies the design of the programs and interventions that will serve all students.
- Specificity again serves this application well here. The narrative explains how Anser addresses the needs of both high performers and struggling learners, and names concrete interventions for specialized support instead of the vagaries found in other applications. Services and interventions are appropriate to serve the needs of diverse and high need students.

Weaknesses:

- Application requires description of a plan for meeting the nutritional needs of its educationally disadvantaged and at-risk students, as well as a plan that meets the transportation needs of its current and projected student population. Neither of these is fully described, though some inferences to this planning is included.
- The application mentions the nutrition program and adding breakfast, as well as other resources such as utilizing local food banks and specific assistance programs such as Picnic in the Park. A more in-depth plan, however, would have provided stronger evidence regarding how the school will provide meals equitably, how these plans will be funded, the predicted sustainability of programs, and how the plans address the nutritional needs of the school's current and projected student population.
- The narrative lacked a transportation plan. Although this is included in the budget, a clear plan would have helped address the need and implementation of this complex service.
- Transportation is not addressed in this portion of the application, though it is to some extent elsewhere. Still, details regarding current transportation services and planned improvements are sparse.



G. Staffing and Professional Development Plan

Describe the approach to staffing, inclusive of ratios, positions, etc. required for effective implementation of the chosen education model. Further, describe the process in which all staff will be supported in their ongoing professional development.

Reviewer Comments – Staffing and Professional Development Plan**Strengths:**

- The school averages smaller class sizes, multi-age classrooms, inclusion model services, learning outside of the classroom, and a variety of integration strategies as part of its implementation of EL education. The school will employ, at expansion, three full-time special educators, a reading interventionist, and approximately eight paraprofessionals that support classroom instruction. Students benefit from an adventure coordinator, electives teachers, and eight paraprofessionals that support classroom instruction.
- A robust process for recruiting highly-qualified teachers is described in the application. Typically, the school sees 20 applicants for every opening. Additionally, the school invests in significant professional development. 14 days of professional development are built into its calendar for all teachers, and new staff attend a weeklong "EL 101" orientation and attend monthly mentor classes. The EL national network provides access to its national conference and dozens of content-specific "institutes." Additional staff supports – specifically an Assistant Education Director and an additional Instructional Guide – will be hired in fall 2020 to support the school's growth in volume.
- Staffing and professional development plans are robust.
- Anser takes advantage of its national expeditionary learning network to access a nationwide applicant pool, in addition to appropriate Idaho-based avenues. The school includes a weeklong EL 101 course and 14 PD days per year in its calendar. It appears that Anser's teachers have access to assistance from an appropriate range of support staff.

Weaknesses:

- The application is somewhat thin on coaching and feedback for staff, but not enough to lose credit here.

H. Financial Management and Monitoring Plan

As independently governed public schools, charters are fully responsible for ensuring quality financial management practices and ongoing financial stability. In this section, explain your school's plan to be compliant, strategic, and responsible with finances and business services.

Reviewer Comments – Financial Management and Monitoring Plan**Strengths:**

- The school has been in operation for over 20 years, and demonstrates strong financial management experience. The school's budget projections are built upon this experience and are conservative in nature. The budget assumes no increases in salary based apportionment, includes reduced per capita fundraising revenue in anticipation of serving more economically disadvantaged students, and increased expenditures for Special Education, ELL and Medicaid based services. The school's grant expenditures are scheduled to allow for a smooth schedule of pre-opening activities spread over an 18 month planning period and two-year implementation. The school has secured an additional \$885,000 in foundation support and is seeking additional grant funds to support expansion. The school will leverage its \$3.5 million equity to remodel and expand its building on its current property.
- The school's anticipated grant expenditures are focused on ensuring that project goals are met. A table outlining each goal, a summary of expenditures, and rationale make for exceptionally clear communication in this area.
- The applicant has demonstrated through a clear and comprehensive plan the operational and financial capability to manage the successful and sustainable implementation of the expansion.
- The application and attached financial documents ensure a viable, well-conceived facilities plan.
- The school's budget contains sufficient resources to successfully carry out strategies and programs for educationally disadvantaged and at-risk students, including transportation and nutrition plans.
- Extra resources and training for exceptional child service staff (which are sufficient in number) are mentioned several times in the budget narrative. Anser is showing strong cash flow, and the budget narrative includes costs for new equipment and technology that seem reasonably commensurate with expansion.

I. Board Capacity and Governance Structure

A competent, trained governing board is essential to the success of a public charter school. In this section the school will demonstrate how it has developed a strong governing board with a diverse set of skills. Board members should understand their roles and responsibilities and have in place a transition plan and ongoing professional development to maintain board strength going forward.

Reviewer Comments – Board Capacity and Governance Structure**Strengths:**

- Board composition and selection is clearly articulated, and individuals represent a breadth of critical expertise, including finance, legal, construction, management and charter governance. The board completes an annual needs assessment and composition matrix to guide strengths and areas of need of the current board. Policies include compliance with open meetings and open records law. A robust number of board committees divides the work of the board into manageable chunks, and guides its overall governance functions.
- The application prioritizes professional development for all board members. Specific resources are identified, and an annual self-evaluation is utilized to identify specific areas of continuous improvement and ongoing training. The school's annual budget includes monies for board training and access to experts outside of the board itself as needed.
- Board has a clear structure. Training and professional development are available. Additional information such as board by-laws and member bios/resumes support the evidence that the board brings diverse experience and expertise and is well-supported.
- The application describes an appropriate range of areas of expertise for board members, and states that the governance committee recruits new members if the board lacks expertise in needed areas. It is good to see the list of board subcommittees. New and continuous board training seems exemplary.

J. School Leadership and Management

This section should describe the intended leadership structure of your school and demonstrate a strong leadership and staffing plan that ensures high-quality implementation and sustainability of the school.

Reviewer Comments – School Leadership and Management**Strengths:**

- The school was founded twenty years ago under a shared leadership model – utilizing an Education Director and an Organization Director. The ED oversees all educational aspects of the school, supervising certified staff, discipline issues, special education program oversight, and is the school's liaison with the EL Education Network. The OD oversees all operational functions, including finance, legal compliance, operations, lunch programs, facilities and IT staff. This organization structure ensures that all aspects of a very diverse organization are met effectively.
- Operational challenges and risks during the school's expansion have been identified, including 1) increased needs for special education services and 2) additional discipline, teacher evaluation, and staff training needs. A robust and thoughtful plan is presented, including budgeting for a Special Education/Federal Programs Director and both an Assistant Education Director and second Instructional Guide.
- The school identifies a comprehensive and reliable process for evaluating leadership.
- The school is uniquely aware of risk factors they anticipate during expansion and proposes reasonable plans to address these risks.
- The application gives ample detail and justification of its leadership structure and evaluation system. Material challenges and risks are identified here and throughout the application, especially as they pertain to the planned influx of high need students.

Overall comments

Reviewer Comments

- The Anser grant application is exceptionally thoughtful, complete and articulate. Beginning with a history of its twenty year vision and implementation of EL Education, the grant proposes goals that are SMART and will clearly help to advance the success and progress of the school as it expands to almost double the number of children it will serve. Writers of the application revealed a deep understanding of what the grant rubric asks for, and descriptions within each section of narrative are spot on. Multiple research references – from the school's own successes to the effectiveness of the national EL Education network of schools – add the weight of evidence and credibility to the applicants' assertions. Grant budget documents articulate exactly what each dollar will pay for, and a strong rationale for its inclusion. Overall, this is one of the very strongest applications this reviewer has ever had the pleasure of evaluating.
- This application is as strong an exemplar as this reviewer has ever seen. It is obvious that the school's leaders are already vital contributors to the Idaho charter school network, as well as to the national landscape as represented by EL Education schools.
- Lastly, it is this reviewer's opinion that every effort should be made to support the expansion of effective charter schools. The work of launching brand new charter schools, absent a network of expertise to guide and grow from, is grueling and sometimes hit-or-miss work. When schools like Anser can leverage decades of success in service of additional students and their families, it's a win for all.
- Overall the application provides a strong, clear, and reasonable plan for expansion.
- In terms of serving all students, this reviewer was looking for more detailed and in-depth responses to nutrition and transportation plans.
- This application is exemplary. But for the lack of quantifiable goals, almost every other section gave a clear, specific, and insightful description of Anser's current and planned activities. Not only is the instructional model well-defined, the application acknowledges Anser's current constraints in serving high need students and what it is doing to address those constraints. A pleasure to review.
- Quantified student outcome goals are essential and should be included here. It would have been useful if the application had included more detail about current transportation difficulties and plans to ameliorate them.