



COMMUNITIES OF EXCELLENCE

IDAHO'S CHARTER SCHOOLS PROGRAM GRANT



APPLICATION DETAILS

School Name: Gem Prep: Meridian, Inc.	
Contact Person: Barb Femreite	Contact Email: bfemreite@idahoidea.org
Application Type: Start Up	Grant Budget: \$800,000
Grades Served: K – 12 th	New Seats Created: 582
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:

- Goal 2 addresses the percentage of students who will take advanced opportunities courses; the school has a goal of students graduating with an associate's degree.
- Goal 4 sets a standard for all students in grades 4-8 to outperform the state proficiency and growth averages in Math and ELA.
- Goal 5 sets a standard that the school will serve a population that reflects local district demographics within 5%.
- Goal 3 is uniquely compelling -- that 75% of 7-8 grade students will take courses from a teacher who is physically located in a different building, preparing students for the global and digital workforce they will encounter.
- All 5 goals of the grant project align with the mission and vision of the school and the targeted population. Each includes justification and provides appropriate ways ways to measure the goals.



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:**

- Instructional methods are described clearly: highly individualized instruction through in-person classes, online classes, and virtual / "send and receive" classes.
- All instructional methodologies and content is selected with a singular goal of preparing students for success in college.
- By 11th grade students are taking mostly college-level coursework with a goal of earning an associate's degree.
- Students can access.
- All curricula is Idaho Core Standards aligned and research-based.
- Curricula for all core content areas is clearly identified and aligned to the school's mission, vision and instructional approach.
- Gem Prep utilizes adaptive learning software in math and ELA to track real-time student skills and progress.
- Gem Prep uses charter autonomies to implement college ready competencies and to maximize teacher quality.
- Proposal identifies the platform it will use to design content for all students (Canvas).
- Gem Prep Meridian is a college preparatory school. As such, all programs are aligned to prepare students for success in college and beyond. GPM includes foundational content at the elementary levels and an adaptive technology approach for personalized learning. This approach adapts instruction to students needs providing real-time feedback and remediation. Students are also served in small group instruction. Part of the elementary approach includes character and behavioral attributes. All of this allows for students to succeed as they enter middle and high school. Teachers meet weekly with students regarding progress, set goals and track progress and reflect. This helps in maintaining a culture of high expectations and allows for accountability. Elementary students engage in electives that include coding, engineering, art, music and Spanish. Each course is designed to build upon instruction in core classes while providing additional depth and application.
- In the secondary program, students become more independent and take more ownership of their learning as they are exposed to new skills. Courses are taught in person, on-line and through video-conferencing. Students at this level also participate in college preparatory courses. In 11th grade students take primarily college-level coursework with the goal of completing an associate degree. Students choose college level electives that align to their college goals. The grant cites research in this area.
- Learning materials are adopted based on rigor, sustainability, being evidence based and provide optimal access to information and learning opportunities. Curricula must meet the following: 1) rigor meets or exceeds common core state standards and 2) curriculum is research and evidence based.
- Core academic curriculum undergoes an extensive review process by an adoption committee.
- Curriculum is reviewed on an annual basis making sure it meets the criteria established as well as student demographics.
- GPM outlined the specific curriculum being used.
- Select classrooms are equipped with video teleconference equipment. Students interact with Chromebooks. Canvas is used for the learning management system. The school uses computer adaptive technology. Technology is also utilized to support safe, equitable and positive classroom environments using Class Dojo & GoGuardian web-based programs. Class Dojo is used by teachers to



communicate with students and families, track behavior, upload student portfolios & grades, daily messages, videos, tutorials, updates and photos. GoGuardian allows technology use to be tracked which facilitates staying on task. Both programs are secured digital formats.

- GPM utilizes autonomies in three central categories: acquisition and retention of high-quality teachers, innovative, individualized instructional models and development and implementation of college-ready competencies. Teachers are offered 1 year contracts ensuring access to teachers who fully support the model, and uses an instructional model with a variety of formats to meet their unique population (differentiation via blended learning, adaptive technology and grade and subject acceleration). A free, full-day kindergarten program has been established to lay the groundwork in building college competencies. The k-12 graduate profile is focused on the following areas: 1) college planning and saving, 2) evidence of college ready-competencies, 3) college and career coaching, 4) academic growth, 5) social/emotional development, and 6) self-advocacy.

Weaknesses:

- The proposal doesn't fully demonstrate that the selected curricula and instructional methods have been effective with a similar student population. The proposal states that all curricula is research-based but doesn't provide specific evidence. If the school is part of an existing network that is using the same academic model, it is curious that they didn't address its effectiveness at existing campuses.

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:**

- Robust and sophisticated use of digital assessments to track individual-, class-level, and school-wide performance. Teachers use data to identify students who need acceleration, remediation, and to inform pacing, lesson planning, etc.
- Teachers meet with principal monthly to review data; students meet with teachers monthly on individual goals and progress.
- The school uses a variety of course formats and instructional strategies that meet individual student needs of this demographic as well as to evaluate the efficacy of overall curriculum, gauge collective and individual teaching practices, and monitor student achievement progress. Types of assessments include benchmark, diagnostic, end of lesson and/or unit study, summative, and formative ways to collect and analyze data. Assessments mentioned include Illuminate K-8 reading and math interim and performance on the NWEA MAP reading and math.
- Teachers use data to identify students considered for grade or subject acceleration, struggling student intervention and inform classroom blended learning groups, lesson plans and pacing. Benchmark testing is used at the classroom, grade and school level to differentiate instruction based on student skill and standard mastery. Computer-adaptive assessments are used to frequently monitor student progress. (Istation Reading, Istation Math and Zearn Math).
- School-wide classroom data is shared with all practitioners on a weekly basis to identify strengths, areas of opportunity and learning trends. Each teacher meets monthly with the principal to review student data and collaboratively design data-informed lessons. Teachers also meet with each student monthly to review data, growth and self-select goals. Teachers are able to work with students one-on-one and in small groups, then students work independently at their instructional levels receiving challenging instruction while continuing in a supportive individualized environment offering a school-wide system of support.

Weaknesses:

- Instruction is clearly highly individualized and teachers work with students at their level to meet their specific needs. That said, the response does not address specific intervention systems that are available to support students who are struggling in the model.



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 proposal identifies a comprehensive set of formative and summative assessments by grade level.
- The proposal describes how data is used at the student- and school level to make immediate adjustments on an ongoing basis, to assess and support teacher quality, and annually to make adjustments to policy or practice at the building level.
- Student-level progress is monitored during weekly 2-hour PD.
- Student outcomes are tracked and measured on a consistent basis in order to gauge student performance and for teachers to personalize and adjust instruction. Measurement tools consist of formative and interim assessments, allowing quick adjustments in order to meet student needs. The school also uses a series of summative assessments on an annual basis in order to gauge overall student, classroom and teacher achievement.
- Data is shared across the school and the Gem Prep Network for the purpose of tracking where each teacher is, each classroom and each student and bring to light where teachers may need support to effectively serve students. Weekly professional development sessions are held to dialogue about the data in order to determine next steps. A table was provided in the narrative of the Assessment Framework. Wrap around support for struggling teachers is provided by a team. All student population subgroups are supported and equally expected to reach proficiency levels.
- Weekly, 2-hour PD is held and information is provided to the school on every student by Gem Prep Network. This is attended by staff, principals and teachers across all Gem Prep schools. Additionally, all aggregate GPM data is shared with all Gem Prep schools. Teachers are paired by grade level across all Gem Prep schools. The group's PD leader presents each teacher's data and facilitates a group discussion about challenges and successes. Struggling teachers are supported by the sharing of best practices and strategies that help all teachers become masters at what they do.
- The CEO, CAO, data manager and principals meet annually to review disaggregated data to ensure subpopulations are performing well. Academic benchmarks are reviewed and evaluated at this time.
- Data is leveraged to craft or revise policies and make leadership decisions.
- All of the above is evidence that the school's priority is serving all students.

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:**

- Data is provided to substantiate that the school is 95%+ enrolled in its first and second year with a waitlist of 449 students.
- The school exceeds the Ada school district's percentage of non-white, ELL, low income and SpEd students by nearly 13%; it exceeds the low-income percentage by 25%.
- Parents logged more than 1,400 volunteer hours in the school's first year.
- GPM recruitment plan intentionally enrolls a diverse population. Recruitment tools include social media, mailers, door-to-door campaigns in a variety of neighborhood where the enrollment would include students of color and low-income, public forums, preschools and community events and groups. Recruitment materials are also available in Spanish and feature students who represent racial diversity and a range of age levels. The materials make clear that GPM serves students at all academic levels as well as those with special needs. Social media parameters are narrowed to target these same neighborhoods and demographics. During summer months, staff attend free lunch in the parks intended for low-income families to inform families about school choice options. Funds are set aside in the budget for student recruitment.
- In its first year, GPM seats are over 95% filled with a waitlist of 100 students. For the 2019-2020 school year, seats are 96% filled with a waiting list of 449 students. This is evidenced by a table within the narrative.
- GPM's student demographic population exceeds the surrounding district's combined percentage of non-white, ELL, economically disadvantaged, and special education by 12.91%. A table has been provided in the narrative.
- Families are engaged in the school by volunteering, back-to-school night, parent/teacher conferences, attending student performances, educational fairs, marketing events, helping in the classroom, playgrounds and lunchroom and functioning and participating in social functions, after school activities, fundraising, committees, etc. Over 1400 volunteer hours have been recorded in the first semester of the first year.
- GPM has established partnerships with the local library, government organizations, local colleges and universities as well as children's dental offices and medical practitioners.

Weaknesses:

- The proposal identifies several strategies to engage parents (and is clearly doing so judging by volunteer hours), but limited explanation is provided for how parents are meaningfully engaged in feedback and decision-making. No examples are provided from the current year, and strategies to involve parents are mostly related to school events.
- Similarly, the proposal states that it has encouraged local organizations to become involved, but does not identify any that are / will be.

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 proposal demonstrates that the school maintains high expectations for and ensures access to a rigorous academic program for all students.
- Teachers are trained in and norm on equitable instruction.
- Gem Prep implements an RTI system.
- Gem Prep identifies and supports students in accordance with IDEA. Students are served in gen ed classrooms as much as possible or within SpEd classrooms as needed.
- Gem Prep provides a free/reduced price meal program.
- Gem Prep provides busing to students within its attendance zone.
- GPM implements a Response to Intervention system for students who need additional support (academically and behaviorally) beyond interventions in the classroom. Teachers are trained in and expected to utilize interventions. Secondary students meet with their college preparatory advisory class in small groups and individually to gain needed and specific support. Teachers intervene and assist before problems become larger as well as provide a place for reflection and ways to improve.
- Teachers norm around what rigor means and looks like in the classroom and school. They are trained in equitable instruction that ensures that students from disadvantaged circumstances are provided the same intellectual rigor and given additional support if and when needed. Parents are involved in any intervention plans whether it be academically or behaviorally.
- GPM provides a full continuum of services for students who require special education services. Students are identified as outlined in the Individuals with Disabilities Act. Once identified, an IEP is established by an IEP team who consists of the classroom teacher, special education teacher, parents and administrator. First, support options are considered in order to determine the least restrictive environment for services. Supplementary aids and interventions may be implemented based on the student's unique needs. Services are determined by the IEP (SLP, OT, psychological, etc). Special education staff undergo continuous PD going beyond state requirement in order to serve students at a high level.
- GPM participates in the National School Lunch Program. The school contracts with a local school district to provide meal planning, hot lunches and NSLP reimbursements. The school operations manager oversees the nutrition program and manages staff in the lunchroom.
- GPM contracts with Brown Bus Company to provide transportation to students within attendance boundaries. The bus company uses a program that analyzes the location of GPM students and identifies bus stops that best serve those who request busing. There are currently four bus routes. The school also provides a lift accessible bus to provide transportation to students with disabilities. Door service transportation is available for students who may be homeless, in foster care or whose disability necessitates such service. Busing is also available for extracurricular activities through the Brown Bus Transportation contract.

Weaknesses:

- The proposal includes limited details related to how SpEd students are supported for success in the virtual and early college components of Gem Prep's model.



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:**

- Positions are in high demand (40 applicants per position).
- Strong teacher retention plans in place: 20 days of PD + 2 hours weekly + summer PD for all teachers; incentive programs available.
- Strong coaching system in place with online platform.
- GPM's staffing model was explained in the narrative and the grant ensured roles and responsibilities of each staff member have been clearly identified to ensure students are well supported.
- GMP recruits staff through "...a wide network approach". The school widely advertises in early January to ensure a deep candidate pool and adequate time to vet potential staff. Efforts for recruitment include: social media, teacher fair, and leveraging personal contracts. An average of 40 candidates for each position was stated. Potential teachers complete a four phase application process: 1) application and screening, 2) video and written response, 3) live interview and 4) teaching demonstration.
- Retaining teachers with the highest performance are awarded a retention bonus. Teachers with proven track-records may mentor new teachers, run professional development, hold shared leadership responsibilities (all are stipended). The CEO personally contacts teachers who may indicate the possibility of leaving with the idea in mind to find ways to retain them.
- GMP strategically plans for time and support to ensure instructional excellence is the norm in all classrooms. Twenty extra days are added to the school year for PD as well as a weekly 2-hour training. All teachers and staff attend training prior to the start of the school year.
- As instructional leader, the principal spends time in every classroom, every week. An online tool (Whetstone) is used to provide teachers immediate feedback and coaching. Individual Professional Learning Plans are created to facilitate movement toward a highly effective teacher. Master teachers may be given the autonomy to innovate and try new instructional strategies to even better meet student needs.

Weaknesses:

- Curious that the applicant did not discuss network positions that support the school? How does the network support staff recruitment and hiring, if at all? PD?
- One of the goals of the grant program are for Gem Prep to maximize instructional quality by using teachers that are regionally dispersed; how does this factor in to staffing, PD, etc.? This aspect -- which is very interesting and promising -- is not addressed at all 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:**

- \$2.0M worth of grant funds over the pre-opening period to 2021 from Albertson Family Foundation and Charter School Growth Fund support school growth until reaching state of sustainability until year 4 of operation.
- Realistic revenue assumptions. Realistic expenditure assumptions for both staffing and operating costs.
- Strong balance (Greater than \$500k) from pre-opening to cover the organization from years 1-3 where a deficit or small surplus is anticipated.
- Plans for sustainable operations starting at year 4.
- The school presented a strong financial plan as evidence by the Operational Budget and Budget Narrative. The Budget Narrative also included justification of each Performance Measure and how each aligned to the school goals.
- Facilities costs fall below 20%.

Weaknesses:

- Budget accounts for financing a new build facility, but no other information is provided about the GPM facilities plan, including what type of learning environment is conducive to the academic model.
- Attachments and budget did not explicitly address the startup / implementation plan with key personnel and target dates.
- Budget did not note what would be reduced if they didn't receive \$400k for CSP grant.



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 develop to maintain board strength going forward.

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

- Current Board members possess deep and relevant expertise to govern the school.
- The Board invests in its continued development by allocating resources and planning to targeting development needs.
- The Board of Directors covers all necessary areas of governance (education, real estate, law, strategy, finance, management and community relations, etc.) as evidenced by board bios. A table within the narrative depicts board responsibilities. The board's Governance Committee is in charge of recruitment based on skill sets needed. When members do not possess certain skill sets, then training is provided within the existing board members.
- A board handbook clearly outlines roles and responsibilities of the board including establishing effective board policies and delegating authority – their role is to govern and delegate authority for the CEO to administer. Currently the board has four committees: finance, academics, governance and facilities. To ensure compliance, a data dashboard is included in the regular monthly board meeting packet. Included in the dashboard is: monthly and year-to-date snapshot of academic performance, financial, and operational performance; all reviewed by the board at each meeting. Also included are expenditure reviews and approvals, various contracts, etc.
- The board has retained legal counsel. The full board reviews and approves policy, the annual audit, evaluates the school's director and completes and reviews conflict of interest forms as well as anti-fraud statement. The board seeks board training opportunities identifying greatest need for professional learning. The school's budget includes funds for board training and development. A new board packet is provided to all new board members that includes the charter, roles and responsibilities, open meeting and record laws, state statute for charters, ethical standards, conflict of interest information, board policies, financial reports and budgets. New members are also provided educational materials relative to GMPs educational model.

Weaknesses:

- This section raises questions about the organization structure that the proposal doesn't sufficiently address. GPM will be governed by the larger Gem Prep board, but no explanation is provided to explain the relationship. As it relates to governance and this section of the proposal, the Board's capacity to govern an expanding network is unclear and its track record for good governance is not addressed.
- It is unclear how the Board ensures adequate representation of the GPM school community.

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 demonstrates an awareness of key operational challenges and is implementing plans to address them.
- The Gem Prep network clearly brings extensive experience / capacity to bear for GPM.
- The school's management plan provides support from an executive team comprised of a CEO, CFO, CAO, COO, special education director, and operations officer. The role of this team is to manage human resources, legal matters, facilities, federal programs, purchasing, payroll, accounts payable, operations and financial management. The principal's responsibilities include student academic success, building school community and culture, providing teacher mentoring and coaching, conducting staff evaluations, student discipline and facilitating parent and community relations.
- The board reviews key indicators each month (enrollment, academic growth and achievement, financial stability, student demographic diversity, stakeholder satisfaction and teacher turnover). If concerns arise, these are sent to the appropriate party to examine.
- A secondary instructional team addresses questions, challenges and iterate on the model to ensure success in the areas of operational challenges and technology. A handbook has been developed to facilitate this endeavor. The school's leadership team has also developed a portfolio of communication tools to share the vision of a GPM college preparatory education to stakeholders.
- Key risk factors were stated and how the school has developed strategies to mitigate these. All of the above help in this endeavor.

Weaknesses:

- In general this section raises more leadership questions than it answers. The entire proposal, until the governance section (and even then, it wasn't explicit) portrays the school as a new start / single site. In this section, there is information about the Gem Prep network staff and limited explanation for leadership / capacity at the building level.
- Although a leader(s) has been identified (judging by resumes submitted) the description of her capacity is not included here.
- The leadership and administrative roles at the school level are not well-defined; this section describes network-level administrators and their roles in greater detail.
- The division of responsibilities between network staff and the GPM principal are listed, but an explanation for the division of labor day-to-day is limited.
- It is unclear how the GPM principal will be evaluated and supported.

Overall comments**Reviewer Comments**

- The GPM academic model is very compelling and the proposal is overall very strong; still, it is curious why this proposal did not propose the school in the context of the network that it will be a part of. Understanding key elements of the school design -- in particular evidence of past success, staffing, and governance -- would be much clearer if the applicant provided the full context of the school within its broader network.
- The grant proposal flowed well, was succinct and aligned well to the rubric. The Budget Narrative was very clear as it not only included the timeline and details but also alignment to the goals and justification for each measure. It was very thorough.

