



# COMMUNITIES OF EXCELLENCE

## IDAHO'S CHARTER SCHOOLS PROGRAM GRANT



### APPLICATION DETAILS

School Name: Gem Prep Meridian North	
Contact Person: Barb Femreite	Contact Email: <a href="mailto:bfemreite@idahoidea.org">bfemreite@idahoidea.org</a>
Application Type: Start Up	Grant Budget: \$800,000
Grades Served: K – 12	New Seats Created: 574
Application Status: Funded	

**RUBRIC**

<b>A. Grant Project Goals</b> <i>Identify</i> 3-5 grant project goals and <i>justify</i> each goal in terms of its value in supporting the planning and implementation of your proposed school. <i>All grant spending, including future revisions to your budget, must fit clearly within one of your stated project goals.</i>	
<b>Reviewer Comments – Grant Project Goals</b> <b>Strengths:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The five project goals are all quality goals and align strongly with the mission and vision of the school. Each goal includes appropriate metrics and timelines, and are focused on ensuring a quality educational experience for all students.</li><li>• The grant proposal thoroughly addresses all aspects of this rubric section.</li><li>• Application goals include a focus on increasing the number of high-quality charter school seats, providing advanced opportunities for students, meeting or exceeding state assessment measures, and mirroring local demographics.</li></ul>	

**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:**

- Curriculum and instruction are aligned with the school's goal to prepare all students for success in college. Use of technologies support individual student growth, and the school employs a variety of instructional environments (small group interventions, distance education, etc.). The goal for all students is to earn an associate's degree by graduation, by completing mostly college-level coursework in their 11th and 12th year. The school draws on the successes of other GEM network schools – utilizing their proven approaches and curriculum. Selection of subject-specific curriculum (ELA, math, science and social studies) is justified through research references and alignment to model. School leverages three charter autonomies – 1) acquisition and retention of high-quality teachers; 2) innovative, individualized instruction; and 3) development and implementation of college-ready competencies. The school utilizes a learning management system and adaptive technology to provide individualized learning – core to its educational philosophy.
- Elementary and high school key design elements were well explained as well as what curriculum will be used – research as well as success of other Gem Prep schools was identified. The philosophy and instructional practices tightly align to the mission and vision of the school.
- There is a committee that reviews curriculum on an annual basis
- The school will use three course formats: in-person, online, and virtual teleconferencing to provide a wide variety of courses. The school has identified evidence-based curriculum programs that align with Common Core Standards and have demonstrated positive outcomes in other Gem Prep Network schools. The instructional model will utilize small group instruction and leverage technology through adaptive instruction to meet the needs of students, provide real-time feedback and remediation.
- The school will have a culture of high expectations for both academics and behavior and provides opportunities to reinforce these expectations with students. Teachers will meet with all students 1:1 on a weekly basis to discuss data, goal set, track progress, and reflect on performance.
- College prep courses will be accessible for all 11th grade students with the goal of completing an associates degree upon graduation. The application cites research demonstrating the increased persistence rates for college students who had the opportunity to participate in college preparatory courses in high school.
- The school will offer free, full day kindergarten to establish a solid academic and behavioral foundation for all students early in their school career.
- The school will leverage technology through innovative and individualized instruction, development of college-ready competencies, and the acquisition and retention of high-quality teachers who can instruct through a variety of course formats.

**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 school uses a variety of standards-based assessments throughout the school year to identify student learning needs, adjust instruction, and identify students for additional intervention. Data review is built into all levels of the school, including teacher and principal data review and monthly student/teacher data conversations.
- The grant proposal thoroughly addresses all aspects of this rubric section and the ways in which differentiation is utilized to meet the needs of students who need enrichment as well as support.
- Teachers will implement standards based assessments including benchmark, diagnostic, lesson and unit assessments, summative and formative assessments to monitor student progress, evaluate efficacy of the curriculum, and gauge teaching practices.
- Interventions will include grade acceleration, adjustments in lesson pacing, differentiation of specific instructional strategies, and implementation of blended learning groups. Additionally, teachers will utilize reteaching during designated literacy and math blocks, computer adaptive assessments to monitor progress, and weekly after-school tutoring tailored to specific skill deficits and needs.

**Weaknesses:**

- RTI is not specifically mentioned nor is a tiered approach mentioned in this section. \*\*\*Identification and intervention is mentioned in section Part II: F, page 16-17, yet there is no mention beyond the teacher for Tiers beyond 1 and 2 – does the teacher also intervene or Tier 3?
- Paraprofessionals are mentioned in the proposal but there is no mention of how they provide services.

**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 school's application includes an assessment framework which outlines the range of assessment tools to facilitate a data-driven culture, from kindergarten through grade 12. The network employs and leverages its Chief Academic Officer, data manager and principal to work with individual teachers in evaluating their student data. Weekly professional development includes a review of data.
- An Assessment Framework for all grade levels was provided via a table.
- Weekly professional development activities center around a culture of data.
- The grant proposal thoroughly addresses all aspects of this rubric section as well as the Teaching and Learning section.
- The application outlined a comprehensive Performance Management plan including formative and summative assessments, ongoing data analysis, and a plan to adjust and inform policies and practices.
- Formative assessments will be used to personalize and adjust instructional practices while summative assessments will provide staff with a big picture of the overall school performance. Data will be shared across the Gem Prep Network and used to inform ongoing support for teachers. The network will be leveraged to pair teachers by grade level across all Gem Prep schools and provide master teachers as mentors of newer staff.
- Data will be disaggregated to ensure the performance of all students is monitored and any discrepancies across subgroups are identified.

**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:**

- The school utilizes a robust student recruitment plan to enroll a diverse student population. It uses a variety of print material, public forums, social media, strategic door-to-door campaigns to attract a student population that mirrors the local district's profile and which prioritizes enrollment of students of color and low-income students. The application cites very strong enrollment data of another of the network's schools, which is relatively proximate in location, and transfer enrollment is anticipated to bolster initial projections. The school's wait list is significant, with two additional years of recruiting to secure those seats.
- The application describes the school's use of a variety of committees to enhance parent and community engagement.
- Demographics are included in two tables.
- Future parent/family engagement is based on what has been done at other Gem Prep schools.
- The school and network have a sound strategy for marketing with a specific focus on low-income neighborhoods and diverse student populations to include social media, mailers, door to door campaigns, presence at public forums and community events. Marketing materials explicitly portray diverse learners and clearly articulate that the school serves all students, including students with disabilities. Other Gem Prep network schools serve 23% more low-income students than the district demonstrating successful implementation of this recruitment strategy.
- The school will utilize ClassDojo to communicate with families at the elementary school level and implement student portfolios school-wide. Parents and community members can play an advisory role and provide feedback through the Principal's Advisory Committee, Parent Teacher Organization, or volunteer opportunities.
- The school is actively building community partnerships with local art and performing art groups, as well as safety and first-responders.

**Weaknesses:**

- Current parent/family engagement has not been identified.

**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 school's commitment to all students' success via high expectations is clear throughout the application. A thorough description of the school's Response to Intervention system is included, and teachers norm around a definition of what rigor looks like in the classroom.
- The application describes an appropriate level of staffing to support students with special needs, including the development and implementation of Individualized Education Plans.
- The grant proposal adequately addresses all aspects of this rubric section.
- The school will utilize a Response to Intervention (RtI) model to identify and intervene with students who are struggling academically or behaviorally. In line with the school's culture, teachers will hold high expectations for all students while also providing robust supports for students who need it. To support staff in implementing these interventions, all teachers will be trained in equitable instructional methods and ongoing professional development on meeting the needs of diverse learners, including students with disabilities.
- At the secondary level, teachers will serve as advisors and support students with goal setting and reflection on both academic and nonacademic competencies including, habits of success.
- The school will contract out busing services and plans to run 3 to 4 routes to meet the needs of students in their geographic area. Additionally, at least one bus will be lift accessible to ensure transportation services can be accessed by all students.

**Weaknesses:**

- Although there appears to be no ELL students expected; there also appears no plan to serve these students if or when enrolled.
- The school identified that it will contract with the local school district for food services, utilizing the same model as other Gem Prep schools, however little detail is provided describing what this relationship will look like and what level of service will be provided to students and families.

**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:**

- A robust process for recruiting highly-qualified teachers is described in the application. Additionally, the school is hyper-focused on retaining its best teachers – offering mentorships, professional development leadership, and shared leadership opportunities – each of which carries a stipend for service.
- Twenty days are included in teacher contracts, in addition to weekly 2 hour trainings. Much of this training is facilitated by the school's/network's best teachers. These are significant investments of time and funding.
- The principal is the school's instructional leader, and spends time each week in classrooms. Immediate feedback is offered through an online tool.
- The proposal thoroughly addresses all aspects of this rubric section.
- The school will utilize a 26:1 student to teacher ratio and will employ support staff including paraprofessionals, a school counselor, receptionists, and operations manager. In order to recruit top instructional talent, the school will begin recruitment in January and utilize a four-phase application process. The school plans to encourage retention of high quality teachers through the use of retention bonuses and opportunities for leadership development including mentoring, facilitating professional development, and holding school leadership responsibilities, all of which will include stipends.
- Teachers will receive weekly professional development, have individualized professional development plans and receive weekly classroom observations with immediate feedback using Whetstone, an online observation tool. All new staff will participate in a Summer Bridge Academy and receive an Instructional Model handbook with codified and clear expectations for teaching.

**Weaknesses:**

- Given the projection that students with disabilities will comprise 8% of the student population, the current staffing plan for special education teachers and special education paraeducators may not be adequate to serve the needs of students.



**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 applicant's financial standing is boosted by its inclusion in the Gem Prep School network. Many operational expenses are distributed across the network of schools, rather than falling solely onto a single school. Additionally, the Albertson Family Foundation and Charter Schools Growth Fund contribute to the Gem Innovation Schools Foundation, offering additional financial stability. Financial projections are very conservative, and the application outlines contingency plans in the event that enrollment falls short or specific grants are not secured. Neither of these shortages seem probable.
- Planned CSP grant funds are aligned to project goals.
- The proposal adequately addresses most aspects of this rubric section.
- Projections for the school are reasonable and based on other Gem Prep schools' actual revenue and expenses. The budget does not assume any increases in state or federal funding or additional philanthropy beyond the Gem Innovation Schools Foundation. There is a plan to build a cash reserve beginning in Year 1.
- A location has been secured and land has been purchased to begin construction on a 50,000 sq ft K-12 facility.
- The application identifies a plan to adjust staffing or operating expenses if projected enrollment targets are not met. Additionally, the school will invest in recruitment with a goal of increasing enrollment.
- The school is sustainable without outside grant funding in FY 2023.

**Weaknesses:**

- Key personnel are not identified for the completion of activities/purchasing.
- The 3-year budget does not reflect salary adjustments for cost of living, transportation adjustments for inflation, and is reliant on donations from Gem Innovation Schools Foundation in Years 1 and 2. While the facility lease costs are below 20% of the school's budget, when facility operating expenses are included, all-in facility costs in Year 1 represent 24% of the school's budget and drop to 19% of the school's budget in Year 2.

**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:**

- The school benefits from a network-level board of directors who offer considerable experience and the right breadth of expertise for a growing network of schools. Professional learning needs are identified, and a board professional development plan is utilized to further the effectiveness of these volunteers. The school's budget includes financial provisions to support ongoing training.
- The board supports four committees: finance, academics, governance and facilities. The board reviews a monthly data dashboard that includes the school's academic, financial and operational performance.
- The board's governance structure, including its role and separation from school management, is detailed in the school's charter petition. Though a complete copy of the board's policies and procedures was not reviewed, the school's charter petition includes sufficient language to ensure clarity and inclusion of the following:
  - Compliance with Open Meetings and Open Records Law
  - Clear separation of the board's governance from school administration's operations
  - Performance monitoring, including academic, financial, operational and legal compliance
  - Annual review of policies
  - Completion of a Conflict of Interest form
- The proposal thoroughly addresses all aspects of this rubric section.
- The board reviews key indicators on the school's data dashboard on a monthly basis (enrollment, academic growth and achievement, financial stability, student demographic diversity, stakeholder satisfaction and teacher turnover).
- The board of directors is comprised of experienced board members with an average of 4.5 years of experience indicating long-standing commitments to the network. The board represents a diverse set of experiences and the Governance Committee specifically targets their recruitment efforts to skillsets when less than two current directors possess those areas of expertise. The board outlines a comprehensive set of board roles and responsibilities and utilizes four committees (finance, academic, governance, facilities) to monitor the Gem Prep network schools academic, finance, and operational performance.
- The network budgets \$5,000 in annual board training including participation in the Idaho School Board Association convention.

**Weaknesses:**

- The application narrative indicates that all recommended expertise areas are represented among the existing board of directors, however it is unclear which directors bring real estate expertise based on a review of provided resumes.

**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's management plan provides school support from a network-level of seasoned leaders, with leadership/management functions smartly dispersed across the team. This team manages most aspects of a school's operations – which in smaller schools, can often stress or break the school's approach. Functions such as human resources, legal matters, facilities, federal programs, purchasing, payroll, A/P, operations and financial management are all executed at this network level, freeing the school to focus on implementation of quality instruction, teacher recruitment and support, and student-level interventions.
- The application reflects a thorough understanding of the school's operational challenges, and a network-level team is in place to problem solve these challenges. The remaining school-level risk factor, that of ensuring effective, uniform instructional excellence in the context of a rapidly growing school, is honestly stated.
- The proposal thoroughly addresses all aspects of this rubric section.
- The Gem Prep network executive team is comprised of a CEO, CFO, CAO, COO, College Access Director, and Chief of New Schools who have experience in charter and district schools. With the support of the network team, the building level Principal focuses on instruction, culture, discipline, and family and community engagement. The Principal is evaluated by the CAO using the Danielson Evaluation Framework and receives monthly performance reviews. The proposed Gem Prep: Meridian North Principal was the founding principal of Gem Prep: Meridian, a high performing school in the Gem Prep network, and has continued to lead the school for two years since it's opening.

**Overall Comments****Reviewer Comments**

- The school is clearly positioned to utilize and benefit from a mature and highly effective network of established charter schools in Idaho – the Gem Prep network. The network, and its newest school, are articulate in all aspects of its school model – including leadership, curriculum and instruction, assessment, a culture of high expectations, and a seasoned board and network executive team. The application offers compelling data and narrative toward justifying charter networks as the way to grow and expand in order to meet greater numbers of students.
- This application is as strong an exemplar as this reviewer has ever seen. It is obvious that the founders are taking advantage of, and will be important contributors to, a vital charter network of schools in Idaho. No weaknesses are apparent – and thus, full points have been awarded.
- The proposal followed the rubric; descriptions were thorough and rubric items were highly justified.
- Gem Prep: Meridian North will be part of a network of high-performing Idaho charter schools and will utilize the network leadership team support and experienced school leadership to open the new school. The school will utilize curriculum, instructional strategies, assessments, and data analysis structures with a track record of success at other Gem Prep schools.
- The proposed staffing plan may be inadequate to meet the needs of students with disabilities.
- The proposed budget is reliant on outside philanthropy until Year 3 and does not account for increases in cost of living or inflation.