

DCSD Staff Recommendation on Charter School Application



Recommendation: The recommendation from DCSD Staff is to **Deny** the 2025 Charter School replication application of STEM School Highlands Ranch.

Overall Recommendation Guidance

- No verifiable letters of intent have been submitted with the application.
- There is no verification that there is sufficient evidence of demand for the replication.
- No geographic location has been identified and no viable school location has been selected.
- No facilities plan was submitted with the application.
- An application would be welcome in the future when the demonstration of demand has been established.

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Evaluation

Evidence of Support

Provide details on the student population to be served, how the founding committee has reached out to parents of targeted students, how many parents have expressed interest in the school by submitting letters of intent to enroll, and what community organizations, colleges and universities, nonprofits, and local groups are in support of the school as evidenced through letters of support.

Strengths:

- There is a developed plan for recruitment and milestones.

Concerns:

- There is no evidence of demand that was submitted with the application.
- The target population is across multiple Districts. A new campus located in Castle Rock may not be accessible to students from other Districts.
- There is not a targeted area that is identified. There are multiple areas identified and not a clear outreach plan in any one area.
- The demographic evidence provided in the application does not align with the demographic reports secured by the District. Residential growth and population growth do not always translate to enrollment growth.

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Financial Plan/Budget

Provide structured evidence of the systems and procedures in place to ensure the school and Board follow sound financial practices to make sure their school is financially stable and funds are appropriately used to support the mission and vision of the school. Additionally, provide a summary of the 5-year school budget that includes a description of the school start-up plan, services and specific programming for both the academic and non-academic program, and any other areas of service that are unique to the school model.

Strengths:

- The 5 year budget template contains reasonable revenues and expenses assumptions that escalate and reflect their academic plan, i.e. teacher, supplies, etc. They also have a unique management structure for shared services which is owned by Koson.
- STEM has shown its understanding and compliance with State and District requirements over the past years by submitting budgets and audited financial statements by the deadline.
- STEM is currently running a financially stable charter school as shown by their balanced budget and \$14m fund balance. This shows the leadership's commitment to being fiscally responsible and proactive. The staff has also managed enrollment fluctuations over the past several years while maintaining a strong financial position.
- The narrative addresses audit, financial transparency and clearly shows management is aware of and prepared to meet requirements set forth in statute and the charter contract with the District.

Concerns:

- Enrollment is the key factor to financial success; the application does not show evidence of community support.
- Budget accounts for initial building with \$40m-\$50m but addition in future is not addressed for additional 20-40,000 square feet for expansion. If value engineering is proposed this should be addressed in the maintenance budget.
- Budget reflects evidence that facility costs may exceed 18% of the school's budget if enrollment projections are not met.

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Educational Plan

Show an educational program detailing an effective, well thought out, research-based educational program that aligns with the school's mission, goals, and the student population, along with the state standards of Colorado. Additionally, define the Curriculum and program alignment, instructional strategies, structures and supports for specials and electives, and professional learning requirements of the school.

Strengths:

- Modeled after the current STEM educational philosophy and includes PBL practices and philosophy, a research based model for education.
- The curriculum is aligned to Colorado Academic Standards. The application states that they will be using resources that are approved by the DCSD BOE. (Envision Math and Benchmark Literacy)
- They have a strong clearly defined multi-tiered system of support for students. Their instructional model is based on research based PBL.
- In this section, they focus on supports for special populations. Culturally responsive teaching is called out.
- There are a wide variety of special and electives outlined in the application that are aligned to their instructional philosophy. T
- There is strong support for social-emotional support through advisory classes, counseling and embedded trauma informed practices.
- The application states that they have a wide variety of offerings for extra curricular activities.

Concerns:

- Suggest providing staffing ratios for GT and multilingual learners in alignment with DCSD staffing ratios.
- Suggest providing a statement about STEM following DCSD compliance procedures, for MLs, including redesignation, and in alignment with state and federal laws.
- Programming model does not describe services for students with multi exceptionality (e.g., Twice exceptional learners, MLs who are gifted, advanced learners, and/or need special education services).
- Plan does not include staffing ratios for Gifted Education.
- Budget does not reflect all proposed staffing ratios.

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Parent and Community Involvement

Show a clearly defined target population, and evidence that demand for the program among the target population exceeds available space. Include the roles of parents/guardians, community members, and community organizations and the role they will play as part of the school community.

Strengths:

- Multiple anticipated and prospective community partnerships are listed.
- Response indicates outreach opportunities targeted to at risk and special populations

Concerns:

- Response discusses how the strategic plan was communicated to current STEM families. However, it does not describe that students, staff or families were engaged in the creation of this strategic plan, or if non current STEM families were included.
- Unclear if any engagement opportunities have happened as of now and in what communities