

VIII.A.

Connecticut State Board of Education Hartford

To Be Proposed:

April 1, 2026

Resolved, That the State Board of Education, pursuant to subsection (g) of Section 10-66bb of the Connecticut General Statutes, renews the charter of Explorations Charter School from July 1, 2026, through June 30, 2029, subject to the conditions and recommendations set forth in the Commissioner's April 1, 2026, memorandum to the State Board of Education, and directs the Commissioner to take the necessary action.

Approved by a vote of _____, this first day of April, Two Thousand Twenty-Six.

Signed: _____
Charlene M. Russell-Tucker, Secretary
State Board of Education

**Connecticut State Board of Education
Hartford**

To: State Board of Education

From: Charlene M. Russell-Tucker, Commissioner of Education

Date: April 1, 2026

Subject: Renewal of State Charter: Explorations, Winsted

Executive Summary

Introduction

Section (§)10-66bb(g) of the Connecticut General Statutes (C.G.S.) provides that upon the submission of an application for renewal, charters may be renewed for a period of up to five years in accordance with the same procedures that govern the granting of new charters under Section 10-66bb. In determining the appropriateness of potential charter renewals, the State Board of Education (SBE) considers the following performance standards:

1. *School Performance:* Is the school a successful model resulting in strong student outcomes and a positive school climate?
2. *Stewardship, Governance, and Management:* Is the school financially and organizationally healthy and viable?
3. *Student Population:* Is the school promoting equity by effectively attracting, enrolling, and retaining students, particularly among targeted populations?
4. *Legal Compliance:* Is the school acting in compliance with applicable laws and regulations?

The Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) and the SBE carefully evaluate qualitative and quantitative evidence and longitudinal data aligned to the four performance standards outlined above when making charter renewal decisions. The charter performance framework drives the CSDE's charter school accountability systems and processes, including initial approval decisions, annual monitoring, and renewal determinations. From inception to renewal, charter schools must abide by the CSDE's charter school accountability procedures and performance framework. Charter monitoring takes place through annual reporting, meetings, correspondence, data submissions, and site visits, as appropriate. In accordance with C.G.S. §10-66bb(g), renewal may be granted upon application if the charter school has demonstrated satisfactory performance relative to the school's academic and organizational performance goals.

History/Background

Explorations Charter School (Explorations) opened in the fall of 1997 and is completing its 29th year of operation. The mission of Explorations is to “meet the unique educational, social, and emotional needs of our diverse student population in a safe nurturing, and non-traditional environment.” With a maximum approved enrollment of 92 seats, the school currently serves 77 students in Grades 9-12 and 49 reside in the City of Torrington, Connecticut (the charter school’s largest sending district). Of those students, 58.4 percent qualify for free or reduced-price meals and 37.7 percent receive special education services. Table 1 on page 13 of the attached *Charter Renewal Report* provides the most recent audited enrollment and demographic data for the 2024-25 school year.

On June 5, 2024, Explorations was granted a two-year charter for the period July 1, 2024, through June 30, 2026. As part of its corrective action plan, the school was required to address chronic absenteeism and improve academic achievement, as well as develop a rigorous and engaging course of studies that provides students with a broad range of coursework aligned to college and career readiness. Explorations was also required to provide status updates to the SBE Accountability and Support Committee in October 2024, and January 2025.

Despite implementing multiple strategies, chronic absenteeism at Explorations remains a persistent and unresolved challenge. The issue is further compounded by the fact that nearly half of entering ninth-grade students were previously chronically absent. Three years of data show a consistent pattern in which absenteeism rates rise into the high 40 to low 50 percent range each spring, with the 2025–26 school year showing a particularly sharp increase to 48.2 percent by January. Breaking this cycle will require sustained, targeted student re-engagement efforts, with particular urgency during the critical January through March period.

Charter Renewal Process

Application for Renewal of Charter: The CSDE accepted an application for the renewal of Explorations’ charter on September 12, 2025. The application detailed the charter school’s progress, operations, and achievement in relation to the CSDE’s previously noted charter school performance standards: (a) school performance; (b) stewardship, governance, and management; (c) student population; and (d) legal compliance. Explorations submitted data and evidence to substantiate the charter school’s written responses.

A renewal team consisting of CSDE staff with expertise in curriculum, assessments, special education, English learners/Multilingual learners (ELs/MLs), school management, finance, and governance reviewed the renewal application, seeking clarification and additional information as needed.

Renewal Site Visit: On September 30, 2025, the CSDE renewal team conducted an onsite visit at Explorations to evaluate the school’s programs, policies, practices, and procedures. The assessment focused on their effectiveness and alignment with the school’s charter and operational systems. Evidence was gathered through observations, document reviews, interviews, and focus groups. The team met with the school’s board members, administrators, staff, students, parents, and community members to ensure the school’s compliance with legal requirements and its mission. Additionally, the team verified the accuracy of the renewal application’s responses regarding compliance with the law, the CSDE’s performance framework, and the accountability plan.

Invitation for Written Comment: The CSDE requested written comments on Explorations’ charter renewal from the Superintendent of Winchester (WPS) and the neighboring districts of Barkhamsted, Colebrook, Litchfield, New Hartford, Norfolk and Torrington. Letters of support were received from Winchester Public Schools Superintendent, Dr. Julie Luby, and Colebrook Public School Superintendent, Robert Gilbert, in response (Attachment A).

Public Hearing: Ms. Kristen A. Record, a member of the SBE, along with CSDE staff, held a public hearing on October 9, 2025, in Winsted to receive comment on the potential charter renewal of Explorations and its impact on the community. Ten individuals, including parents, students, and staff provided testimony in strong support of the school and the renewal of its charter. A total of fourteen individuals attended the hearing, and comments were also received from the Winsted Public Schools Superintendent. Letters of support (Attachment B) were submitted by Brett Fiore, Principal of the College & Career Accelerator and Regional Learning Center Director at EdAdvance, and Kris Griffin, Executive Director of the Northwest Connecticut Housing and Innovation Center.

Review of Documents and Site Visit Findings

The charter school performance framework ensures accountability by evaluating charter schools across four key standards: school performance; stewardship, governance, and management; student population; and legal compliance.

School Performance: Explorations' 2024–25 Next Generation Accountability Index stands at 57.7, marking over a 12-point increase from 45.3 in 2023–24. Progress is evident in college and career readiness, arts access, postsecondary preparation, and sixth-year graduation rates. Despite notable areas of growth, the school performs below both the host district and statewide averages on the Next Generation Accountability Index. Of importance is that the school's chronic absenteeism rate of 42.4 percent remains significantly higher than both the host district's average of 18.8 percent and the statewide average of 18.3 percent for the same years. Recent student performance indicators are provided in the *Charter Renewal Report* beginning on page 7.

Stewardship, Governance, and Management: Explorations satisfies two of the five indicators for effective policies and practices. Explorations demonstrated strong financial compliance with materially compliant audits, robust liquidity (i.e., 119 days cash on hand), and compliant governance practices. Site visit findings highlighted the need to enhance governance practices through refinements to governing council policies, school policies, and associated procedural manuals. In addition, long-term financial stability can be strengthened through the identification of additional and diversified funding sources and strategies. The school has reported it has a goal to work collaboratively with its governing council on financial viability and to leverage partnerships to sustain school programming. Evidence supporting these ratings for Explorations can be found on page 10.

Student Population: The school's student population does not appear to mirror the student demographics of the majority sending district. While the school reports it has historically operated at near capacity or at capacity with a waitlist, waitlist numbers in more recent years—particularly during the last renewal period—have been minimal, though enrollment has increased in the 2025-26 school year. Explorations meets two of the three criteria for student population indicators. Evidence supporting these ratings for Explorations can be found on page 11.

Legal Compliance: Explorations met five of the six indicators and demonstrates strong operational compliance. However, the site visit revealed systemic special education compliance gaps that require immediate action. Areas of concern include a failure to meet Individualized Education Program (IEP) deadlines, a lack of protocols to support the transition of incoming students with IEPs, and misalignment between documented IEP services and the services that are provided. Evidence supporting these ratings for Explorations can be found on page 12.

Charter Renewal Recommendation

Community support for Explorations is evident through testimony provided at the public hearing and feedback gathered from stakeholder interviews conducted during the site visit; however, there are areas in which improvements are necessary. Based upon an overall evaluation of Explorations, the CSDE recommends that the SBE renew the school's charter for a three-year term, from July 1, 2026, to June 30, 2029, subject to the following conditions:

1. The chronic absenteeism rate observed at Explorations remains higher than both the majority sending district and the state. Whereas a substantial portion of students enrolling in the school have a history of chronic absenteeism, individual student attendance does improve after enrolling at Explorations. Despite individual student-level gains, the aggregate chronic absenteeism rate warrants continued focused attention. By August 31, 2026, Explorations shall, in partnership with the CSDE, submit a detailed three-year plan for continuous improvement acceptable to the Commissioner of Education that includes, but is not limited to, a focus on reducing chronic absenteeism.
 - a. Explorations shall provide one status report for each month of the academic school year to the CSDE, as well as progress reports on a quarterly basis and again at the end of each school year.
 - b. By January 1, 2027, Explorations must report at least one status update to the CSDE and will be required to meet directly with the SBE Accountability and Support Committee to provide an overview of student attendance as well as improvement updates.
 - c. By April 30, 2028, Explorations must report at least one progress update to the CSDE and may be required to meet directly with the SBE Accountability and Support Committee.
2. Explorations' data suggests that students have access to preparatory learning experiences; however, corresponding outcomes indicate a gap between exposure to college and career readiness coursework and college and career readiness examinations. By August 31, 2026, Explorations shall, in partnership with the CSDE, submit a detailed three-year plan for continuous academic improvement acceptable to the Commissioner of Education outlining targeted strategies to strengthen student learning in foundational academic areas and maintain rigorous post-secondary readiness expectations.
 - a. During the 2026-2027 school year, Explorations will report a minimum of two status updates to the CSDE Turnaround Office as well as documentation detailing the implementation and completion of processes for tracking instructional fidelity and consistency; specifying clear action steps that integrate assessments of learning and assessments for learning; and establishing key performance indicators that use assessment results to inform instruction.
 - b. During the 2027-2028 school year, Explorations will, in consultation with the CSDE, provide a minimum of four progress reports on academic achievement efforts and outcomes, monitoring its year-to-date progress toward improving student academic achievement.
 - c. By March 31, 2029, Explorations must report a third status update to the CSDE and will be required to present improvement updates directly to the SBE Accountability and Support Committee.

3. The school must meet compliance with applicable state and federal laws, rules, and regulations relevant to student populations. Consistent with a state charter school's status as a local education agency (LEA), the school must comply with applicable state and federal laws, rules, and regulations regarding students with disabilities. By August 31, 2026, Explorations shall submit a detailed plan acceptable to the Commissioner of Education, focused on ensuring operational compliance related to the provision of services and supports for students with disabilities, and on improving practices related to special education, in accordance with applicable laws and in a lawful manner.
 - a. During the 2026–27 school year, the CSDE will conduct a randomized IEP desk audit using a single sample representing at least 25 percent of Explorations' students with disabilities population, rounded up to the nearest whole number. This same sample will undergo quarterly record reviews to monitor ongoing compliance.
 - b. During the 2027–28 school year, the CSDE will perform a minimum of two randomized IEP desk audits for at least eight students with a designated special education status who attend the school. Additionally, the CSDE will conduct at least two planned site visits by staff from the Bureau of Special Education, the Office of Student Supports, or both, to provide direct oversight and support.
 - c. During the 2028-29 school year, the CSDE will perform a minimum of two randomized IEP desk audits for at least eight students with a designated special education status who attend the school as well as a minimum of one unannounced site visit conducted by at least one member of the CSDE Bureau of Special Education, CSDE Office of Student Supports, or both.
 - d. By January 31, 2029, Explorations must report at least three status updates to the CSDE and will be required to report at least two progress updates to the CSDE Turnaround Office and charter renewal Cross-Functional Team. Additionally, any corrective actions or corrective action plans resulting from internal CSDE review, consultation, coordination, and issuance during the three-year renewal period must be addressed by the school.
4. The school's governing council has bylaws in effect. Minor modifications to Explorations' policies and procedures can better align the school with recommended best practices and promote more effective, positive outcomes.
 - a. By March 31, 2027, Explorations' governing council shall update the Board Policy and Procedures Manual (BPPM) to detail the functions and responsibilities of the governing council and its subcommittees, including school oversight, to ensure continuity in the governing council overseeing financial and other school matters. By June 30, 2027, the board chairperson of Explorations' governing council shall report a status update to the CSDE and provide documentation of implementation.
 - b. By March 31, 2027, Explorations shall revise its Accounting Policies and Procedures Manual (APPM), with governing council approval, to address the observations noted in the Charter Renewal Report. Required updates include policies on school contracts, auditor selection and responses to audit findings, travel pre-authorization, cash handling, credit card use, check-signing authority, asset inventory management, and payroll changes for existing staff. The APPM must document revision dates and formally note the governing council's annual review.

- c. Explorations shall also update its Employee Handbook to incorporate policies and procedures related to cash handling, travel reimbursement, employee salary advances, and the prohibition of personal use of school facilities. By June 30, 2027, Explorations must provide the CSDE with a status update and documentation demonstrating implementation.
5. Explorations will report, through the submission of a plan for continuous improvement, the school's recruitment strategies for multilingual learners and students of color. During the 2026-2027 school year, the school, as requested, will provide a minimum of two progress updates on the implementation of this plan to members of the CSDE's Turnaround Office Charter School Team and charter renewal Cross-Functional Team. By December 31, 2028, Explorations will report at least one status update on the implementation of this plan for continuous improvement to the SBE Accountability and Support Committee, detailing progress on the recruitment and retention of multilingual learners and students of color.

Prepared by: Anika Matin, MBA
Associate Education Consultant, Turnaround Office

Reviewed by: Melissa Jenkins, Ed. D.
Chief Turnaround Officer, Turnaround Office

Approved by: Charles E. Hewes, Ed.D.
Deputy Commissioner for Academics & Innovation

CHARTER RENEWAL REPORT | 2026

Charter School Information		
Charter School Name:	Explorations Charter School	
School Director/ Principal:	Jill Johnson	
School Board Chairperson:	Robert Peterson/Sarah Haynes	
Location (City/Town):	Winsted	
Rating Key		
Meets	The school demonstrates effective policies and practices, resulting in positive outcomes.	
Pending Action	The school requires minor modifications to its policies and/or practices. The school is taking satisfactory measures to remedy and address these issues in a timely manner.	
Does Not Meet	The school falls below performance expectations with significant concerns noted, which require immediate attention and intervention.	
School Performance Indicators	Points/Max	% Points Earned
Accountability Index:	288.3/500	57.7
24-25 Accountability Index:		
Explorations Charter School: 57.7 State: 71.8 Host District: 68.7		
<p>Current Status:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explorations' Accountability Index of 57.7 percent places its performance in Category 3. • Explorations' full Next Generation Accountability Report is shown in detail on page 8. 		

Next Generation Accountability, 2024-25– Explorations Charter School (Grades: 9-12)

School Category: 3

Indicator	Index/Rate	Target	Points Earned	Max Points	% Points Earned	State % Points Earned
1a. ELA Performance Index - All Students	.	75	.	.	.	86.3
1b. ELA Performance Index - High Needs Students	.	75	.	.	.	73.2
1c. Math Performance Index - All Students	.	75	.	.	.	81.5
1d. Math Performance Index - High Needs Students	.	75	.	.	.	67.5
1e. Science Performance Index - All Students	.	75	.	.	.	83.5
1f. Science Performance Index - High Needs Students	.	75	.	.	.	69.5
2a. ELA Academic Growth - All Students	.	100%	.	.	.	60.6
2b. ELA Academic Growth - High Needs Students	.	100%	.	.	.	55.7
2c. Math Academic Growth - All Students	.	100%	.	.	.	62.3
2d. Math Academic Growth - High Needs Students	.	100%	.	.	.	55.9
2e. Progress Toward English Proficiency - Literacy	.	100%	.	.	.	58.7
2f. Progress Toward English Proficiency - Oral	.	100%	.	.	.	55.7
4a. Chronic Absenteeism - All Students	41.1%	<=5%	0.0	50	0.0	51.3
4b. Chronic Absenteeism - High Needs Students	45.3%	<=5%	0.0	50	0.0	20.8
5. Preparation for CCR - Percent Taking Courses	95.1%	75%	50.0	50	100.0	100.0
6. Preparation for CCR - Percent Passing Exams	19.5%	75%	13.0	50	26.0	62.9
7. On-track to High School Graduation	.	94%	.	.	.	91.4
8. 4-year Graduation: All Students (2024 Cohort)	65.2%	94%	69.4	100	69.4	94.6
9. 6-year Graduation: High Needs Students (2022 Cohort)	92.6%	94%	98.5	100	98.5	92.9
10. Postsecondary Entrance (Graduating Class 2024)	.	75%	.	.	.	89.3
11. Physical Fitness (estimated participation rate = 85.7%)	22.2%	75%	7.4	50	14.8	65.4
12. Arts Access	79.5%	60%	50.0	50	100.0	91.9
Accountability Index	.	.	288.3	500	57.7	71.8

Data is suppressed to ensure student data privacy.

Gap Indicators

Indicator	Non-High Needs Rate	High Needs Rate	Size of Gap	State Gap Mean +1 Standard Deviation	Is Gap an Outlier?
ELA Performance Index Gap	
Math Performance Index Gap	
Science Performance Index Gap	
Graduation Rate Gap (2022 Cohort)	.	92.6	.	8.6	

If the Non-High Needs Rate exceeds the ultimate target (75 for Performance Index and 94% for Graduation Rate), the ultimate target is used for gap calculations. If the size of the gap exceeds the state mean gap plus one standard deviation, the gap is an outlier.

Assessment Participation Rates

Indicator	Participation Rate (%)
ELA - All Students	100.0
ELA - High Needs Students	100.0
Math - All Students	100.0
Math - High Needs Students	100.0
Science - All Students	95.2
Science - High Needs Students	.

Minimum participation standard is 95%.

Standard 1: School Performance Indicators	Rating
1.1. Family and Community Support	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> PA <input type="checkbox"/> DNM
1.2. School Culture and Climate	<input type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> PA <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DNM
1.3. Mission	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> PA <input type="checkbox"/> DNM

Notes and Evidence:

- Indicator 1.1:** Explorations convenes monthly parent meetings that focus on a range of topics, including strategies for supporting students’ mental health and accessing community resources for parents and guardians. During the 2024–25 school year, the school expanded its engagement strategies beyond its traditional pasta dinner by implementing additional family-centered events, including parent dinner nights, karaoke nights, and schoolwide fundraisers. Evidence from student and family feedback indicates increased connection and engagement within the school community. Ongoing communication is supported through a monthly newsletter that highlights recent activities and upcoming initiatives. Additionally, the Student Handbook includes an Explorations School–Parent Compact that clearly delineates shared responsibilities among staff, families, and students, reinforcing accountability and partnership in support of student achievement.
- Indicator 1.2:** At the renewal public hearing held on October 9, 2025, 14 individuals attended, and 10 provided testimonies in strong support of the school and the renewal of its charter. Parents, governing council members, students, staff, and alumni emphasized that the strong relationships fostered within the school and the broader community form the foundation for Explorations’ positive and lasting impact on students’ academic development, personal growth, and sense of belonging in a safe and nurturing environment. Parent and student interviews conducted by the CSDE renewal team further affirmed that families believe Explorations not only changes lives, but in many cases, saves lives. Students reported that the school’s smaller class sizes allow them to focus and complete their work effectively, and that the school’s culture enables them to be their authentic selves while building their confidence.

CSDE site visit staff found that the school’s culture and climate policies were clearly articulated, and classroom observations confirmed consistent implementation of the schoolwide behavior management model.

Over the 2022–24 period, the school’s average chronic absenteeism rate of 42.4 percent remains significantly higher than both the host district’s average of 18.8 percent and the statewide average of 18.3 percent for the same years. Prior to attending the school, nearly half of enrolled students have histories of chronic absenteeism. However, increases in attendance among a number of students after enrollment indicate an emerging positive shift.

From 2022–24, Explorations’ average suspension rate of 8.55 percent remains consistently lower than both Torrington’s average of 13.8 percent and slightly higher than the state’s average of 6.9 percent over the same period.
- Indicator 1.3:** Explorations Charter School’s mission is to meet the unique educational, social, and emotional needs of their diverse student population in a safe, nurturing, and non-traditional environment. To support this mission, the school partners with EdAdvance and offers multiple pathways for credit recovery and acceleration, including Study.com and Apex Learning, as well as opportunities to earn college credit. Students also have access to internships and other experiential learning opportunities that support postsecondary readiness. Schoolwide Restorative Practices are firmly established, and Explorations has strengthened its systems for monitoring student achievement by tracking attendance and academic performance and maintaining consistent monthly communication with families through email and parent meetings.

Standard 2: Stewardship, Governance, and Management Indicators:	Rating
2.1. Fiscal Management	☑ M ☐ PA ☐ DNM
2.2. Financial Reporting and Compliance	☐ M ☑ PA ☐ DNM
2.3. Financial Viability	☐ M ☑ PA ☐ DNM
2.4. Governance and Management	☐ M ☑ PA ☐ DNM
2.5. School Facility	☑ M ☐ PA ☐ DNM
Notes and Evidence:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indicator 2.1: The CSDE site visit staff reviewed Explorations’ last three certified financial audits, and the school materially complies with applicable state and federal laws, rules and regulations relating to financial management and oversight expectations as evidenced by annual independent audits. Indicator 2.2: The CSDE staff reviewed Explorations’ Accounting Policies and Procedures Manual (APPM), Board policies and procedures, budgets, and conducted interviews with school leadership, staff, and governing council members. Based on this review, the CSDE observed that the school’s APPM does not include guidance related to contract approval authority (approved signers, authorization levels, and Board approval thresholds); auditor selection and responses to audit findings; travel pre-authorization; same-day transfer of cash to the business office; asset inventory management including additions, disposals, and tracking of federally purchased equipment with Federal Uniform Guidance; and written authorization for employee payroll changes. Although the school’s credit card policy (3004.1) is posted on the website, the CSDE observed the credit card utilization procedures were not documented in the APPM. During the renewal visit, a teacher reported holding fundraising cash until the conclusion of the fundraiser rather than submitting funds daily, which increases the risk of loss or misappropriation. The CSDE also observed the Employee Handbook does not include clear policies and procedures related to cash handling; travel reimbursement; employee salary advances; and the prohibition of personal use of school facilities. Indicator 2.3: Staff from the CSDE Office of Internal Audit reviewed Explorations’ most recent independent financial audit. The review found that the school maintains strong liquidity and cash reserves. Specifically, the school has sufficient assets to cover its short-term obligations, maintains adequate days of cash on hand (119 days), and meets recommended benchmarks related to overall debt levels and cash balance. However, two key indicators raise concern. The school’s operating margin shows that expenses are exceeding revenues, and its debt service coverage ratio suggests that current operations may not consistently generate enough funds to comfortably cover debt payments. While the school is not in immediate financial distress, these measures indicate potential challenges in sustaining operations over the long term if adjustments are not made. The Executive Director has indicated that she will work closely with the governing council to identify additional funding sources and strategies to strengthen long-term financial stability. Indicator 2.4: A review of Explorations’ Board policies and procedures found the school complies with applicable state and federal governance requirements. Meeting minutes for all subcommittee meetings are posted on the school’s website in accordance with Section 10-66kk of the Connecticut General Statutes. While the governing council’s bylaws outline certain roles, duties, and policies, the CSDE noted that the principal and executive director’s duties and responsibilities were not adequately documented. The governing council expressed the same concern and indicated that they were doubtful all the executive director’s responsibilities for non-financial duties are documented. In the event of an unforeseen circumstance requiring transition of duties, it would be difficult to maintain continuity and efficiency of these key functions. Indicator 2.5: As evidenced during the site visit, Explorations has safe and well-maintained school facilities to support teaching and learning. The facilities have been approved by the Fire Marshal and Building Departments. The school has proof of property insurance. 	

Standard 3: Student Population Indicators Indicators:	Rating
3.1. Recruitment and Enrollment Process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> PA <input type="checkbox"/> DNM
3.2. Waitlist and Enrollment Data	<input type="checkbox"/> M <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PA <input type="checkbox"/> DNM
3.3. Demographic Representation	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> PA <input type="checkbox"/> DNM
Notes and Evidence:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indicator 3.1: The latest CSDE audit of student enrollment data from Explorations identifies 77 students in Grades 9-12, 49 of whom reside in Torrington (the largest sending district). Twenty-eight students come from nine sending districts. A review of the school’s student enrollment policy and interviews with school staff, governing council members, and parents determined all students are admitted through a blind lottery. Indicator 3.2: A review of Explorations’ waitlist data (Table 5, page 14) indicates that there is no waitlist for the school. The school reported in its 2025 annual report that under-enrollment over the past two school years has largely resulted from factors outside the school’s control, including student mobility, family circumstances, and alternative educational pathways. In 2023–2024, students withdrew due to transportation challenges, moving out of the area, transitioning to homeschooling, enrolling in GED or Adult High School Diploma programs, graduating mid-year, or needing to work to support their families. Similarly, in 2022–2023, students left because of relocation, Planning and Placement Team (PPT) placement decisions, transfers to local or private schools, homeschooling, or pursuing GED programs while taking on employment. Together, these patterns show that under enrollment stemmed from logistical, personal, and educational shifts rather than school-based issues. The executive director communicated that interest and demand still exist, and that the enrollment/admissions committee will continue outreach and expand opportunities for outreach to increase enrollment. Indicator 3.3 A review of Explorations’ 2024-25 Public School Information System (PSIS) data shows that 58.4 percent of students qualify for free and reduced-price meals and 37.7 percent receive special education services. 	

Standard 4: Legal Compliance Indicators	Rating
4.1. Open Meetings/Information Management	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> PA <input type="checkbox"/> DNM
4.2. Students with Disabilities	<input type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> PA <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DNM
4.3. English Learners	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> PA <input type="checkbox"/> DNM
4.4. Rights of Students	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> PA <input type="checkbox"/> DNM
4.5. Teacher/Staff Credentials, TEAM and EESP	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> PA <input type="checkbox"/> DNM
4.6. Employee Rights	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> PA <input type="checkbox"/> DNM
Notes and Evidence:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indicator 4.1: The school’s website and governing council documents demonstrate that the governing council meetings are open and accessible to the public. The yearly meeting schedule and agendas are posted on the school’s website. Indicator 4.2: The site visit revealed systemic compliance gaps in service delivery (4 of 8 students had service verification issues), Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) implementation (all services provided exclusively in resource room), and specialized instruction quality (i.e., minimal Individualized Education Program (IEP) goal-focused teaching observed). However, strong family partnerships, positive school climate, and collaborative LEA relationships provide a foundation for improvement. To ensure compliance with state and federal special education requirements, the charter school must take immediate action in the area: Address compliance gaps by scheduling PPT meetings for students with overdue IEPs, conduct a comprehensive review of all 30 IEPs to verify services are provided as written, and develop compensatory service plans for students who have experienced service gaps. Concurrently, the CSDE observed that the school needs to strengthen foundational processes by establishing clear written protocols for incoming students with IEPs (including PPT meetings within 30 days of enrollment), develop a Child Find procedure for suspected disabilities, and create a Section 504 protocol independent of sending LEAs. The school also needs to improve IEP Quality by attending IEP Quality Training, revise Present Levels of Performance to include quantitative data and assessment dates, ensure services are determined by individual student needs rather than school schedules, and develop a continuum of services beyond the resource-room-only model. Moving forward, annual PPT meetings throughout the 2025–26 school year and beyond must systematically review each student's LRE placement, service effectiveness, and progress on IEP goals, with revisions made as needed to ensure meaningful academic and functional growth and to transform the resource room from a homework-completion space into a setting for effective specialized instruction aligned to IEP goals. These combined efforts will support the school to meet legal obligations while building sustainable, student-centered systems for all learners with disabilities. Indicator 4.3: Through documents shared with the Cross-Functional Charter Renewal Team and interviews with relevant school staff, it was clear that the Home Language Survey is referred to and administered as needed. Indicator 4.4: Explorations’ student rights policies and procedures include admissions, handling of student information, due process protections, and state nondiscrimination laws. Interviews with parents and staff at the school supported the proper implementation and use of the policies. Indicator 4.5: A review of Explorations’ staff file of February 2026, reported 100 percent of staff in compliance with certification. Explorations has a current Teacher Education and Mentoring (TEAM) District Support Plan on file, which is valid from 2024-2027. The school has one Beginning Teacher currently in the TEAM Program and one trained Mentor. The Mentor is up to date on professional learning through July 2026. Indicator 4.6: A review of legal actions brought against Explorations determined that no government agency alleged the violation of any law by the school or undertaken any investigation of any violation of law by the school. 	
Prepared by:	Reviewed by:
Anika Matin, Associate Education Consultant	Dr. Melissa Jenkins Chief Turnaround Officer

EXPLORATIONS CHARTER SCHOOL DATA TABLES

Table 1: 2024-25 Student Enrollment and Demographic Information

Grades served:	9-12
Total enrollment:	77
Percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals:	58.4
Percentage of students with disabilities:	37.7
Percentage of students identified as English learners/Multilingual learners:	0
Percentage of American Indian or Alaska Native students:	0
Percentage of Asian students:	0
Percentage of Black or African American students:	*
Percentage of Hispanic or Latino students:	13.0
Percentage of students with Two or More Races:	*
Percentage of White students:	71.4

*N<=5. Data is suppressed to ensure student data privacy.

Table 2: School Performance: All Students

Indicator	2022-23			2023-24			2024-25		
	School	Host District	State	School	Host District	State	School	Host District	State
Accountability Index	54.5	66.1	69.3	45.3	66.2	70.8	57.7	68.7	71.8
ELA-All Students									
Performance Index (Target 75)	46.7	60.6	63.9	38.8	59.7	63.9	*	60.5	64.7
Math-All Students									
Performance Index (Target 75)	39.6	53.0	59.7	32.0	53.7	60.2	*	54.6	61.1
Graduation-All Students									
Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (Target 94%)	56.8	80.0	88.4	65.2	76.4	88.9	N/A	N/A	N/A

Table 3: School Performance-High Needs Students									
	2022-23			2023-24			2024-25		
Indicator	School	Host District	State	School	Host District	State	School	Host District	State
ELA-High Needs Students									
Performance Index (Target 75)	*	57.4	54.1	*	56.1	54.1	*	56.8	54.9
Math-High Needs Students									
Performance Index (Target 75)	*	49.9	48.9	*	50.6	49.5	*	51.1	50.6
Graduation-High Needs Students									
Six-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (Target 94%)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

*N<=5. Data is suppressed to ensure student data privacy.

Table 4: School Culture and Climate									
	2022-2023			2023-2024			2024-2025		
Indicator	School	Host District	State	School	Host District	State	School	Host District	State
Chronic Absenteeism Rate (%)	48.8	22.4	20.0	37.3	16.4	17.7	41.1	17.8	17.2
Suspension Rate (%)	9.2	13.5	7.0	*	14.0	7.0	7.9	13.9	6.8
Discipline Tier	1	4	3	1	4	3	1	4	3

*Data are suppressed to ensure confidentiality

Table 5: Explorations Student Wait List and Mobility Information			
Performance Metric:	2023-2024	2024-2025	2025-2026
Waiting number:	0	0	0
Number of enrolled students who left during the school year:	21	19	11
Number of students who did not re-enroll the next year and had not completed the highest grade at the school:	12	3	0



Winchester Public Schools

338 Main Street, P.O. Box 648 Winsted, CT 06098
 Telephone: 860-379-0706; Fax: 860-738-0638
 Julie Luby, Ed.D. Superintendent of Schools

October 20, 2025

Dear Dr. Jenkins,

I am writing to provide my strongest recommendation and support for the renewal of Explorations Charter School's charter. This school is a vital part of our community's educational system.

Explorations takes students who have not met with success in traditional settings. They offer individualized, holistic opportunities for students to succeed. Student outcomes are greatly improved by their participation in this program.

Jill Johnson, the Executive Director, is a compassionate school leader who is willing to go to extraordinary lengths to support students, their families and their success. I have witnessed first-hand how this school creates a community around its students and gives them the space to be who they are while still moving forward academically. Not all schools are able to do this.

I would urge you to review the school's data with a careful analysis that reflects the student population that it serves. A significant portion of the Explorations students were not on target to meet expectations academically, behaviorally and in their attendance, prior to coming to Explorations. Given that the school has a disproportionate number of students with this profile, their data ought not be compared to a typical high school.

As a member of the Explorations Board and as the in-town public school Superintendent, I feel that the school demonstrates superb collaboration and communication. They are active participants in town initiatives such as the Schools' Safety Committee.

When I had occasion to reach out to the school about a student in crisis, I was overwhelmed by the school's openness to the student and all of his "baggage" and by the way they embraced him and made sure that his needs were met. This is in direct opposition to his experience at his "home" high school. This is just one example of the critical need for Explorations to continue.

In closing, Explorations Charter School is of significant value to the Winchester community and to the other communities that it serves. It is vital that its charter be renewed. Please do not hesitate to contact me for further testimony.

Very truly,

Julie Luby
 Dr. Julie Luby
 Superintendent





Colebrook Consolidated School

P.O Box 9, 452 Smith Hill Rd. Colebrook, CT 06021

www.colebrookschool.org

Phone: (860) 379-2179 Fax: (860) 379-9506

Robert F. Gilbert, Superintendent

William E. Wesley, Principal

October 21, 2025

Dr. Melissa Jenkins
Chief Turnaround Officer
CT State Department of Education

Dear Dr. Jenkins,

I am replying to your September 25th request for comments on the Explorations Charter School in Winsted, CT.

While we have not had any specific and direct contact with this school in recent years, I would like to go on record saying that I have heard positive comments about the work they do and the unique student needs that they strive to meet.

If I can be of any further assistance, please let me know.

Sincerely,

Robert Gilbert
Superintendent
Colebrook School District



To Whom It May Concern,

I sincerely apologize for not being able to attend this evening's meeting. However, I kindly ask that you accept this letter as my formal testimony in full support of the renewal of Explorations Charter School's charter.

I was appointed principal of EdAdvance's College & Career Accelerator (CCA) in March 2024. Since that time, I have had the privilege of working closely with Executive Director Johnson and her exceptional team of faculty and staff. During our collaboration, I have found the Explorations staff to be hard-working, dedicated, and consistently willing to go above and beyond in identifying opportunities that will help their students succeed.

One such example of their forward-thinking and student-centered approach is Explorations Charter School's early decision to partner with the College & Career Accelerator. In our first year together, this partnership enabled five students to earn a combined 36 college credits. Additionally, two students in the engineering cohort achieved an industry-recognized credential in Computer-Aided Design.

For the 2025–2026 school year, the College & Career Accelerator has expanded its offerings to include new pathways in public safety and health care, complementing our existing tracks in education and manufacturing/engineering. Thanks to the ongoing commitment of the Explorations staff, seven additional students are now enrolled in the program. If all twelve students remain on track, they are projected to earn a combined total of 105 college credits.

It's important to note that opportunities like these are not currently being offered by all students' neighborhood schools. For example, the College & Career Accelerator presently has no participants from either Torrington High School or The Gilbert School where most of the Explorations students would go if they could not attend Explorations Charter School. More critically, the experiences provided by CCA are distinct in that they engage students not only in earning college credits and industry-recognized credentials but also in meaningful career-connected learning experiences.

The Career-Connected Learning (CCL) program is a structured educational strategy that integrates academic content with real-world workplace experiences. Through internships, pre-apprenticeships, job shadowing, and experiential learning, students gain valuable insights and skills that prepare them for their future careers. These experiences enhance the relevance of classroom instruction and help students develop a greater understanding of industry practices while exploring potential career pathways.

Explorations Charter School's participation in and support of programs like ours demonstrates the school community's dedication to student development, innovation, and long-term success. I strongly urge you to renew their charter, allowing them to continue offering transformative

educational opportunities to students in need of a different path to success. If you have any questions or would like to speak further, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Brett Fiore (she/her)

College & Career Accelerator Principal & Academic Director

(860) 597-9515



Jill Johnson
Exploration Charter School
Winsted, Connecticut

October 9, 2025

Subject: *Support for Exploration Charter School – CSDE Charter Renewal*

Dear Jill,

On behalf of the Northwest Connecticut Housing & Innovation Center (NCHIC), I am pleased to express our strong support for Exploration Charter School as a valued educational partner and key beneficiary of the Center's future programs. The school's proximity to the NCHIC campus, combined with its demonstrated commitment to experiential learning, positions it to play an integral role in advancing our shared mission of preparing students for success in an increasingly technology-driven economy.

Through collaboration with NCHIC, Exploration students will gain hands-on access to advanced manufacturing, clean energy, and digital technology learning environments. This partnership will provide meaningful opportunities for internships, apprenticeships, and project-based learning experiences with regional businesses and industries engaged with the NCHIC and our partners, including the Connecticut Center for Advanced Technology (CCAT), CT State Northwestern, Central Connecticut State University, and the University of Connecticut.

Future programming will also include pathways for **Early College Enrollment** and **technical certificate training** aligned with high-growth manufacturing and technology sectors. For example, MIT's recently launched *TechAMP* (Technologist Advanced Manufacturing Program) — a 12-month, industry-recognized credential — offers a model for high school students interested in advanced technical careers. NCHIC intends to support pre-TechAMP preparation and other early-college opportunities that allow Exploration students to earn credentials and credits while still in high school.

Faculty at Exploration Charter School will likewise benefit from access to related professional development workshops, collaborative curriculum design initiatives, and shared use of NCHIC's makerspace and training labs. These opportunities promise to strengthen your instructional capacity and ensure that teaching aligns with current and emerging industry practices.

Together, our institutions are creating a **continuum of learning** that connects education to postsecondary pathways, advanced technical training, and meaningful local careers. Exploration Charter School has been a dedicated partner in this effort, and its continued operation is essential to maintaining a vibrant, inclusive, and future-ready educational ecosystem in Northwest Connecticut.

We are proud to support Exploration Charter School's charter renewal and commend its leadership for fostering curiosity, innovation, and opportunity among its students and faculty.

Sincerely,

Kris Griffin
Executive Director, Northwest Connecticut Housing & Innovation Center