

VII.F.

Connecticut State Board of Education Hartford

To Be Proposed:

June 5, 2024

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, 2024, through June 30, 2026, subject to the conditions and recommendations set forth in the Commissioner's June 5, 2024, memorandum to the State Board of Education, and directs the Commissioner to take the necessary action.

Approved by a vote of _____, this fifth day of June, Two Thousand Twenty-Four.

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: June 5, 2024
Subject: Renewal of State Charter: Explorations Charter School, Winsted

Executive Summary

Introduction

In accordance with Section (§) 10-66bb(g) of the Connecticut General Statutes (C.G.S.), charters may be renewed, upon application, in accordance with the provisions for the granting of new charters. The State Board of Education (SBE) may renew a charter for a period of up to five years. The SBE makes renewal decisions based on evidence of 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), a charter may be renewed upon application if the charter school has demonstrated satisfactory performance relative to the four performance standards.

History/Background

Explorations Charter School (Explorations) opened in the fall of 1997. Explorations has the maximum approved student enrollment of 92 seats. The latest CSDE audited student enrollment data from 2023-24 reports 88 students in Grades 9-12, with 63.6 percent residing in Torrington (the majority sending district), 19.3 percent from Winchester (the host district), and the remaining 17.1 percent of students coming from eight area towns. Of those students, 63.6 percent qualify for free or reduced-price meals and 33.0 percent receive special education services. Table 1 on page 17 of the attached Charter Renewal Report provides the latest available audited 2023-24 student enrollment and demographic data. 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.”

On April 6, 2022, Explorations received a two-year charter renewal with conditions. Conditions stated in the 2022 renewal required Explorations to develop two corrective action plans: 1) improve student academic achievement; and 2) target and address chronic absenteeism. Additionally, the school administration was required to meet with the CSDE staff from the Academic Office and Turnaround Office to review Explorations’ curricula and unit plans. Technical assistance was provided to ensure Explorations’ curricula revision work with a focus on increased rigor, higher-order questioning, and student-centered lessons was completed and in place for the 2022-23 school year. Administration from Explorations was required to meet with the Accountability and Support Committee of the SBE on June 5, 2023, to provide a status update of its corrective action plan to address student achievement, chronic absenteeism, and provide an overview of the curricula development and implementation schoolwide. At that meeting, Explorations’ school administration communicated to the Committee that they had not implemented the plan strategies, nor did they complete relative action steps of the school’s corrective action plan to improve instruction, student outcomes in academic achievement, and chronic absenteeism. As a result, the CSDE provided intensive interventions and targeted support to school administration with the implementation of prioritized strategies of the corrective action plan specific to curriculum development and attendance/chronic absenteeism.

The CSDE's support of Explorations has been consistent, intensive and cross-divisional in nature. The school has been afforded and participated in multiple professional learning and technical assistance opportunities provided by several offices across the Department:

- 2020-2023, the CSDE Attendance Pilot Project, a two-year commitment;
- 2021, five on-site visits by Turnaround Office consultants focused on observing the school's classroom instruction and instructional practices. Feedback and actionable next steps with follow-up tasks were provided.
- 2022, technical assistance calls from the CSDE were made to address student attendance with effective strategies relative to removing barriers for students and families;
- 2022-2023, Attendance Peer Learning Network (APLN), a customized professional learning series hosted by the CSDE in collaboration with the State Education Resource Center (SERC) and Attendance Works. Four virtual APLN sessions were conducted where practices inclusive of structures, evidence-based strategies, and tiered supports were shared. Also, included were self-assessment activities and on-site coaching sessions to meet the unique needs of the school and build the capacity for school attendance teams;

- Spring and summer of 2022, the CSDE consultants from the Offices of Academics and Student Supports and Organizational Effectiveness provided technical assistance (e.g., social-emotional learning and advisory plan initiatives) content to aid the school in developing its corrective action plans in the areas of student academic achievement and chronic absenteeism;
- 2023, Talk Tuesdays, a CSDE initiative where a series of informal, virtual information sessions provide districts and school staff the opportunity to support each other and their work to improve student attendance and engagement; and
- 2023, five on-site visits from the Turnaround Office and the Academic Office took place to review curricula, unit, and lesson plans. Monitor the progress of the school's action steps in the aforementioned areas, and provide recommendations regarding loss of credit, credit recovery, and the school's grading policy.

Charter Renewal Process

Application for Renewal of Charter: The CSDE accepted an application for the renewal of Explorations' charter on September 8, 2023. The application detailed the charter school's progress, operations, and achievement in relation to the CSDE's 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 comprised of the CSDE staff with expertise in curriculum, assessments, special education, English Learners/Multilingual Learners (ELs/MLs), school management, finance, and school governance reviewed the renewal application and requested clarification and additional information where necessary.

Renewal Site Visit: On November 16, 2023, the CSDE renewal team conducted an on-site visit at Explorations. The purpose of the on-site visit was to observe Explorations' programs, policies, practices, and procedures to assess their efficacy and fidelity to the school's charter and aligned operating systems. Evidence was collected through the on-site visit observations, document reviews, interviews, and focus groups. The team spoke with board members, administrators, staff, students, parents, and community members. The team used this process to ensure that the school was functioning in compliance with the law and the school's mission. The team verified the responses detailed in the renewal application regarding compliance with the law and the CSDE's performance framework and accountability plan.

Invitation for Written Comment: The CSDE solicited written comments on the renewal of Explorations from the Superintendent of Winchester Public Schools and from contiguous school districts: Barkhamsted, Colebrook, Litchfield, New Hartford, Norfolk, and Torrington. The CSDE received a letter from Robert F. Gilbert, Superintendent, Colebrook Consolidated School (see Attachment A), which provided no reason or comment that reflects poorly on the school. The CSDE received no letters against the renewal of the school's charter.

Public Hearing: Donald F. Harris, Jr., member of the SBE, and the CSDE staff held a public hearing on December 12, 2023, in the City of Winsted, and heard from individuals on the potential charter renewal of Explorations and the impact it is having on the community. Public hearing participants included members of the Explorations community, including a member of the governing board, a state representative, family members, and school staff. Fifteen people attended the public hearing. Ten individuals offered testimony supporting the school's efforts and the renewal of the charter. No one spoke out against the renewal of the school's charter.

Review of Documents and Site Visit Findings

The most recent available data and information contained in the Charter Renewal Report and the state student data (beginning on page 9) indicate Explorations' performance according to the four performance standards. The report highlights the school's strengths and areas for continued growth.

Areas of Strengths Include:

- Explorations' Accountability Index score of 44.6 percent in 2021-22 increased 9.9 percentage points to 54.5 percent in 2022-23.
- Explorations' Six-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate of 87.5 percent in 2018-19 exceeded the host district and state average.
- Explorations' 2022-23 suspension rate of 9.2 percent is below the majority of sending districts and within 2.2 percentage points of the state average of 7.0 percent.
- Explorations' 2022-23 Discipline Tier was Tier 1, which is below the host district and below the state. Tier 1 designates a school with a low suspension rate and low disproportionality.
- Explorations is in compliance with teacher certification requirements.
- Explorations is in compliance with the Teacher Education and Mentoring (TEAM) Program and the Educator Evaluation and Support Plan (EESP) Program.
- Explorations' website and governing board documents demonstrate that the governing board meetings are open and accessible to the public.
- No significant findings, conditions, or internal weaknesses were uncovered in Explorations' three most recent certified financial audits.

Areas for Continued Growth Include:

- While Explorations' Accountability Index score of 44.6 percent in 2021-22 increased 9.9 percentage points to 54.5 percent in 2022-23, it has decreased 3.7 percentage points from a score of 58.2 percent in 2018-19, and was below the majority of sending districts and the state in 2018-19, 2021-22, and 2022-23.
- Explorations' ELA Performance Index – All Students has decreased 2.1 index points from an index of 48.8 in 2018-19 to an index of 46.7 in 2022-23, and was below the majority of sending districts and the state in 2018-19 and 2022-23.
- While Explorations' Mathematics Performance Index – All Students has increased 0.4 index points from an index of 39.2 in 2018-19 to an index of 39.6 in 2022-23, it was below the majority of sending districts and the state in 2018-19 and 2022-23.
- Explorations' Arts Access Index of 51.2 percent reported in 2022-23 indicates that all students may not have access to at least one dance, theater, music, visual arts, or media arts course in the school year.
- The school has been cited for chronic absenteeism as an issue in the last three charter renewals, May 6, 2015, May 2, 2018, and April 6, 2022. As a condition of the three renewals, Explorations was required to develop and implement corrective action plans to target and address chronic absenteeism. A review of Explorations' student attendance data from EdSight reveals that chronic absenteeism has averaged 33.75 percent over the last 10 years reported (see table on page 5), excluding attendance data from 2020-21 for which the CSDE received a reporting exemption by the United States Department of Education. The school's chronic absenteeism rates have increased and exceed the rate of majority sending districts and the state: 32.1 percent in 2019-20, 33.3 percent in 2021-22, and 48.8 percent in 2022-23. Students who are chronically absent face multiple academic challenges such as missed classroom instruction, student-to-student and student-to-teacher engagement.

A review of Explorations’ chronic absenteeism rate from EdSight through March 2024, is 48.2 percent.

Explorations’ Chronic Absenteeism 10-year History

School Year	Percent Chronically Absent	Number of Students Chronically Absent	Total Number of Students
2022-23	48.8	40	82
2021-22	33.3	29	87
2019-20	32.1	27	84
2018-19	29.4	25	85
2017-18	37.5	33	88
2016-17	28.8	23	80
2015-16	30.6	26	85
2014-15	28.4	23	81
2013-14	29.1	23	79
2012-13	39.5	30	76

- The school’s Accounting Policies and Procedures Manual (APPM) does not include policies and procedures for establishing and maintaining asset inventory including additions, disposals, tracking of equipment purchased with federal funds, contract approved signers, and thresholds. Additionally, the school has policy edits to make to the Employee Handbook.
- Explorations’ governing board and its Finance and Audit Committee does not formally document in a Board Policies and Procedures Manual (BPPM) specific roles and responsibilities for oversight of school operations, including financial management and management team. The BPPM must document processes such as budget development/approval, budget monitoring, and overall financial monitoring. By doing so, Explorations will ensure consistent practice and timely completion of critical board monitoring functions.
- A review of Explorations’ financial viability by the CSDE staff using the school’s latest certified financial audit raised concerns. The CSDE recommends that Explorations’ administration and governing board be mindful of its revenue and expenditure projections when developing/approving future budgets, especially with federal COVID relief grants being phased-out. The governing board must monitor the approved budget throughout the year to ensure that the school remains on-track and is making budget adjustments as necessary. The board should investigate opportunities for increasing revenue. The governing board and finance committee must develop a periodic review process to monitor the overall financial health of the school.

Conclusion

On April 6, 2022, Explorations received a two-year charter renewal with the condition that the school develop a corrective action plan that includes measures to improve student academic achievement. A review of the school's student achievement performance indicators in ELA and Mathematics – All Students show that since its last renewal in the spring of 2022, the school was challenged in providing an educational model that results in improved academic achievement of the students it serves. While Explorations' Mathematics Performance Index – All Students increased slightly between 2018-19 and 2022-23, the school's ELA Performance Index – All Students decreased during the same time period, and both the mathematics and ELA performance remained well below the majority of sending districts and the state averages during the two years reported.

Furthermore, the continued issue of chronic absenteeism has been cited in the last three charter renewals and remains of significant concern for Explorations and its student population. Improving attendance requires a systemic approach, which Explorations has struggled to implement. As a condition of the three previous renewals, Explorations was required to develop and implement corrective action plans to target and address chronic absenteeism. A review of Explorations' student attendance data reveals that Explorations did not meet the identified outcomes of the 2022 corrective action plan to effectively reduce rates of chronic absenteeism. The increasing chronic absenteeism rate has diminished the integrity and quality instruction of on-grade level content. This is evidenced by the data collected during the on-site renewal as members visited multiple classrooms where an average of between two to seven students were present.

Charter Renewal Recommendation

Based on Explorations performance indicators, the CSDE recommends that the SBE renew the school's charter for a period of two years and require the charter school to file a corrective action plan within the statutorily prescribed timelines.

Pursuant to Section 10-66bb(h) of the C.G.S., the Commissioner of Education may, at any time, place a charter school on probation if the school has failed to adequately demonstrate student progress or comply with applicable laws and regulations.

As a result, the Commissioner recommends Explorations to be renewed for two years with increased rigorous interventions with targeted strategies to include:

1. By July 8, 2024, Explorations shall submit a corrective action plan acceptable to the Commissioner of Education. The corrective action plan must target and address chronic absenteeism by: (a) isolating the root-causes of chronic absenteeism; (b) identifying interventions to target causes; and (c) monitoring interventions and applying midcourse corrections, as necessary. The plan shall be developed in consultation with the CSDE Turnaround Office. Explorations shall implement the corrective actions within thirty days following the Commissioner of Education's acceptance of the plan. The CSDE will review on EdSight the school's chronic absenteeism data monthly and at the year-end, beginning October 2024. It is important for the school to reexamine, refine, and further develop systems and resources to identify and address barriers that negatively affect student attendance and reengage students' desire to attend class and learn.
2. By July 8, 2024, Explorations shall submit a revised corrective action plan acceptable to the Commissioner of Education. Explorations shall engage in a root-cause analysis utilizing the CSDE [Needs Assessment Toolkit \(ct.gov\)](#) to determine the root cause for lack of academic achievement. The corrective action plan must include revisions to the identified strategies and action steps in the 2020 corrective action plan to improve student academic achievement. The school must convene a team to develop and monitor the implementation of the revised plan that intentionally addresses implementing a standards-based curriculum with daily lesson plans while focusing on the teaching of prioritized, essential content, and maintaining a high level of rigor for all learners. Explorations shall submit to the CSDE, monthly beginning October 2024, a report monitoring its year-to-date progress of improving student academic achievement. The plan shall be developed in consultation with the CSDE Turnaround Office. Explorations shall implement the corrective actions within thirty days following the Commissioner of Education's acceptance of the plan.
3. By July 8, 2024, develop a corrective action plan that includes student and family input on developing a course of studies that is engaging, rigorous and provides students with a wide variety of coursework necessary for college or career readiness.
4. In October 2024, Explorations administrative staff will be required to meet with the Accountability and Support Committee of the SBE and provide a status update of its corrective action plan to address student achievement and chronic absenteeism. At that time the Accountability and Support Committee members and department staff will analyze the performance data to determine if the prioritized strategies in the corrective action plans are making a positive impact on student outcomes, teacher practice, and chronic absenteeism.
5. In January 2025, Explorations administrative staff will be required to meet with the Accountability and Support Committee of the SBE and provide a second status update of its corrective action plan to address student achievement, chronic absenteeism, and provide an overview of the curricula development and implementation school wide.
6. In March 2025, pending State Board of Education notification, the Commissioner will evaluate Explorations' satisfaction of the foregoing issues and determine if probation is warranted for the 2025-26 school year.

The CSDE will notify Explorations of action taken by the SBE following its meeting on June 5, 2024. The school will be advised of relevant technical assistance opportunities designed to improve its educational program. The CSDE will conduct follow-up site visits to ensure Explorations is addressing the issues raised in this memorandum.

Prepared by: Robert E. Kelly
Charter School Program Manager, Turnaround Office

Reviewed by: Irene E. Parisi, M.Ed.
Chief Academic Officer

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

CHARTER RENEWAL REPORT | 2022-23

Charter School Information		
Charter School Name:	Explorations Charter School	
School Director/ Principal:	Jill Johnson	
School Board Chairperson:	Robert Peterson	
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.	
Standard 1: School Performance Indicators	Points/Max	% Points Earned
Accountability Index:	490.8/900	54.5
Notes and Evidence:		
<p>Explorations Charter School’s (Explorations) 2022-23 Accountability Index of 54.5 percent is 14.8 percentage points below the state’s Accountability Index of 69.3 percent. Schools that meet Standard 1: are schools earning an accountability index score from 85 to 100 (Category 1), schools earning an accountability index score from 70 to 84.9 percent (Category 2), and schools earning an accountability index score of 69.9 percent or lower and have not been identified as a Turnaround or Focus School (Category 3). Explorations’ Accountability Index score of 54.5 percent places its performance in Category 3, which earns a Does Not Meet for Standard 1. Explorations’ 2022-23 Next Generation Accountability Report is shown in detail on the next page.</p>		

Next Generation Accountability, 2022-23 – 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	46.7	75	93.4	150	62.3	85.2
1b. ELA Performance Index - High Needs Students	.	75	.	.	.	72.1
1c. Math Performance Index - All Students	39.6	75	79.3	150	52.8	79.6
1d. Math Performance Index - High Needs Students	.	75	.	.	.	65.2
1e. Science Performance Index - All Students	.	75	.	.	.	82.1
1f. Science Performance Index - High Needs Students	.	75	.	.	.	68.2
2a. ELA Academic Growth - All Students	.	100%	.	.	.	57.2
2b. ELA Academic Growth - High Needs Students	.	100%	.	.	.	52.5
2c. Math Academic Growth - All Students	.	100%	.	.	.	61.8
2d. Math Academic Growth - High Needs Students	.	100%	.	.	.	55.5
2e. Progress Toward English Proficiency - Literacy	.	100%	.	.	.	55.3
2f. Progress Toward English Proficiency - Oral	.	100%	.	.	.	56.1
4a. Chronic Absenteeism - All Students	48.8%	<=5%	0.0	50	0.0	39.8
4b. Chronic Absenteeism - High Needs Students	55.6%	<=5%	0.0	50	0.0	6.0
5. Preparation for CCR - Percent Taking Courses	58.7%	75%	39.1	50	78.3	100.0
6. Preparation for CCR - Percent Passing Exams	17.4%	75%	11.6	50	23.2	59.0
7. On-track to High School Graduation	.	94%	.	.	.	87.7
8. 4-year Graduation: All Students (2022 Cohort)	82.4%	94%	87.6	100	87.6	94.6
9. 6-year Graduation: High Needs Students (2020 Cohort)	85.0%	94%	90.4	100	90.4	91.1
10. Postsecondary Entrance (Graduating Class 2022)	30.0%	75%	40.0	100	40.0	88.2
11. Physical Fitness (estimated participation rate = 100.0%)	10.0%	75%	6.7	50	13.3	60.6
12. Arts Access	51.2%	60%	42.7	50	85.4	90.9
Accountability Index	.	.	490.8	900	54.5	69.3

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	.	.	.	16.6	
Math Performance Index Gap	.	.	.	18.0	
Science Performance Index Gap	.	.	.	17.8	
Graduation Rate Gap (2020 Cohort)	.	85.0	.	8.7	

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	.
Math - All Students	100.0
Math - High Needs Students	.
Science - All Students	95.7
Science - High Needs Students	.

Minimum participation standard is 95%.

Standard 2: Stewardship, Governance, and Management Indicators:	Rating
2.1. Fiscal Management	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> PA <input type="checkbox"/> DNM
2.2. Financial Reporting and Compliance	<input type="checkbox"/> M <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PA <input type="checkbox"/> DNM
2.3. Financial Viability	<input type="checkbox"/> M <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PA <input type="checkbox"/> DNM
2.4. Governance and Management	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> PA <input type="checkbox"/> DNM
2.5. School Facility	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> PA <input type="checkbox"/> 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 uncovered no significant findings, conditions, or internal control weakness. • Indicator 2.2: The CSDE site visit staff reviewed Explorations’ last three certified financial audits, Accounting Policies and Procedures Manual (APPM), Board Policies and Procedures Manual (BPPM), budgets, and interviewed the school’s staff, executive director, principals, and governing board members. Staff from the CSDE’s Office of Internal Audit determined the APPM contained the standard sections of an APPM; however, the APPM does not include policies and procedures for establishing contract approved signers and threshold requirements of approved signers, maintaining asset inventory including additions, disposals, tracking of equipment purchased with federal funds, and written authorization of salary changes. The school’s Employee Handbook was last updated in 2019. The personnel committee of the school’s governing council submitted the final draft of the undated Employee Handbook for review at the school’s next council meeting. All items mentioned have been addressed as needed to ensure compliance with the requested requirements. The governing board must also review and approve the employee handbook and all other school policy manuals annually to ensure timely changes to policies and procedures. Additionally, it was noted that the employee handbook required the following policies and procedures: cash handling, travel reimbursements, employee salary advances, and prohibition of personal use of school facilities. The Explorations governing board and its finance and audit committee have specific roles and responsibilities for oversight of school operations, including financial management and management team; however, the roles and responsibilities are not formally documented in a BPPM to ensure consistency and continuity. The BPPM must document processes such as budget development/approval, budget monitoring, and overall financial monitoring to ensure consistent practice and timely completion of critical board monitoring functions. A final draft of all new policies and procedures, the APPM and the Employee Handbook have been submitted to the school’s governing council that will be reviewed and approved by the full governing council at its next council meeting. 	

- **Indicator 2.3:** Staff from the CSDE's Office of Internal Audit reviewed Explorations' latest certified financial audit and determined its debt-to-asset ratio (total liabilities/total assets) meets or exceeds the ranges recommended by the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA). However, the Office of Internal Audit expressed concerns about other ratios used to determine overall financial viability of the school including current asset ratio (current assets/current liabilities), days of unrestricted cash (unrestricted cash/ ((total expenditures – depreciation)/365)), and cash flow. It is recommended that the school's administration and governing board analyze and monitor the school's financial position and take the appropriate steps to ensure the financial viability of the school is improved and maintained. The CSDE recommends that Explorations' administration and governing board be mindful of its revenue and expenditure projections when developing/approving future budgets, especially with federal COVID relief grants being phased-out. The governing board must monitor the approved budget throughout the year to ensure that the school remains on-track and is making budget adjustments as necessary. Increasing revenues will help and should be investigated. The governing board and finance committee must develop a periodic review process to monitor the overall financial health of the school. The use of the ratios that the CSDE considers when evaluating school financial viability may prove helpful in this work.
- **Indicator 2.4:** A review of Explorations' school policies regarding conflict of interest and nepotism were found to comply with the CSDE administrative oversight guidelines. Explorations' policies and procedures regarding background checks of staff and board members, open board meetings, board membership, and membership training were reviewed and found to comply with state and federal laws, rules, and regulations. This finding is supported by a review of school policies and procedures, background checks, board training records, and the school's website including board meeting minutes. A review of Explorations' bylaws found them to comply with state and federal laws, rules, and regulations.
- **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 appropriate Fire Marshal and Building Departments. The school has proof of property insurance.

Standard 3: Student Population 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 checked="" type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> PA <input type="checkbox"/> DNM
3.3. Demographic Representation	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> PA <input type="checkbox"/> DNM
3.4. Family and Community Support	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> PA <input type="checkbox"/> DNM
3.5. School Culture and Climate	<input type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> PA <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DNM

Notes and Evidence:

- Indicator 3.1:** The latest CSDE audited student enrollment data from 2022-23 reports 88 students in Grades 9-12 with 63.6 percent residing in Torrington (the majority sending district), 19.3 percent from Winchester (the host district), and the remaining 17.1 percent of students coming from eight area towns. A review of the school’s student enrollment policy and interviews with school staff, board members, and parents determined all students are admitted through a blind lottery.
- Indicator 3.2:** A review of Explorations’ waiting list information (Table 5, page 18) determined that the school maintains a small waitlist of three students in both 2022-23 and 2023-24.
- Indicator 3.3:** A review of Explorations’ latest CSDE audited Public School Information System (PSIS) data from 2022-23 reported 63.6 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals. The percentage of special education students enrolled at Explorations is 32.95 percent, which exceeds the state’s average by 15.03 percentage points.
- Indicator 3.4:** Explorations demonstrates strong community support, as evidenced by parent interviews conducted by the CSDE renewal team on the day of the site visit. The parent focus group described various communication methods between the school and families, including texts, phone calls, emails, and written communication including translations in second languages, when necessary. Currently, parents report receiving regular updates from the school that detail student academics and behavior. Parents expressed support for what they perceive as a good educational model that prepares their children for adulthood. Parents indicated they were satisfied with the school’s commitment to serving students with diverse needs while providing a safe and nurturing environment. Student interviews conducted by the CSDE renewal team on the day of the site visit reported they were generally happy with the school and choice opportunity that the school provides. Fifteen people attended the public hearing. Ten individuals offered testimony supporting the school’s efforts and the renewal of the charter. No one spoke out against the renewal of the school’s charter.
- Indicator 3.5:** Explorations’ suspension rate in 2021-22 was too small to report to ensure confidentiality. In 2022-23 it increased to 9.2 percent, below the majority sending district and within 2.2 percentage points of the state average of 7.0 percent.

In 2022-23, Explorations was at Tier 1 for discipline, which is below the host district and below the state. Tier 1 designates a school with a low suspension rate and low disproportionality.

A review of chronic absenteeism at the school is of concern due to its continued pervasiveness. The school has been cited for chronic absenteeism as an issue in the last three charter renewals: May 6, 2015, May 2, 2018, and April 6, 2022. As a condition of the three renewals, Explorations was required to develop and implement corrective action plans to target and address chronic absenteeism. A review of student attendance data from EdSight reveals that chronic absenteeism at Explorations has averaged 35.75 percent over the last 10 years reported, excluding attendance data from 2020-21 which the CSDE was exempted by the United States Department of Education from reporting. A review of the school’s chronic absenteeism of 32.1 percent in 2019-20, 33.3 percent in 2021-22, and 48.8 percent in 2022-23 have increased and exceed the majority of sending districts and the state. A review of the school’s chronic absenteeism rate from EdSight through March 2024, is 48.2 percent.

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 checked="" type="checkbox"/> PA <input type="checkbox"/> DNM
4.3. English Learners	<input type="checkbox"/> M <input checked="" 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:

- Indicator 4.1:** The school’s website and governing board documents demonstrate that the governing board meetings are open and accessible to the public. The governing board’s meeting schedule for the year and meeting agendas are posted on the school’s website. Education records and testing data are kept in locked file cabinets in a secure room.
- Indicator 4.2:** A review of Explorations’ latest audited 2023-24 Public School Information System (PSIS) data reported the percentage of special education students at the school is 32.95 percent. At the time of the CSDE site visit there were 27 students receiving special education and related services attending Explorations. Related service providers for speech and language services, occupational therapy, and physical therapy are all sent to Explorations by the sending districts to provide related services in accordance with the Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Explorations employs a school social worker and a recently hired school counselor through EdAdvance. Related service providers sign in and out of the building, but their services are not formally tracked. The school indicated there were no concerns reported with the delivery of related services.

Explorations employs two full-time special education teachers. These special education teachers are hired by Explorations and the sending districts are billed for reimbursement of services. General education and special education teachers provide instruction to special education students. Specialized instruction is provided by the special education teachers. The special education teachers identified their focus as supporting their student’s access to the general education curriculum. The staff mentioned the use of ReadWorks, easyCBM, and Star 360 assessments in the planning, monitoring, and delivery of lessons. Students participate in a writing lab class multiple times a week. This class directly supports and addresses their writing goals and objectives in their IEPs. There is also a math lab class taught by a regular education teacher with special education support.

Instruction is differentiated in the classrooms. Students are provided accommodations and modifications as needed and outlined in their IEPs. Examples of accommodations provided were extra time and chunking of assignments. The special education teachers noted their role in helping students to get acclimated and to support their development of advocacy skills. Planning for co-taught instruction was described as collaboration during their common prep time or after school. The special education staff model lessons, strategies, and interventions for the general education teacher in their classroom.

Students receive special education instruction from special education teachers in the general education classroom (push-in), and in the resource classroom across grade levels (pull-out).

Planning and Placement Team meetings (PPTs) are scheduled by the sending district/local educational agency (LEA) who also creates the PPT invitation. Explorations uses the CT-SEDS system. Special education teachers and related service providers input student information directly into the system in collaboration with the LEA. The sending district finalizes the IEP. The Explorations staff who attend PPT meetings include the principal, content area teacher, special education teacher, and school social worker/school counselor, as applicable. The director or an assigned administrator from the sending district also attends PPT meetings.

Case managers provide teachers with a list of the special education students in their class. They also meet with the teachers. The staff utilizes Education Modified, an online dashboard that organizes their students' needs and includes easy access to goals, accommodations and modifications, strategies, progress monitoring, and graphing of student progress. Explorations has moved away from keeping paper special education files in the building and solely utilizes CT-SEDS. Several special education files were randomly selected and viewed in CT-SEDS. The student files in CT-SEDS contained all pertinent information including current IEPs, PPT invitations, evaluation reports, consent to evaluate, and progress reports.

The school is aware of their Child Find responsibilities. The school's principal works with the out-of-district coordinator from the LEA. Students receive intervention support and data is shared with the sending district when Explorations requests a PPT meeting. Teachers or parents also refer students when there is a concern.

Explorations must have members of their crisis team trained in seclusion and restraint in accordance with Public Act (P.A.) 18-51. Training of staff members must be submitted to the CSDE to satisfy the Pending Action rating under section 4.2 Students with Disabilities in the Charter School Renewal.

The special education teacher at Explorations was trained as a seclusion and restraint trainer in February 2024. He began training school staff in March 2024.

The completion of related service logs must be implemented to allow the school and the sending districts to accurately monitor delivery of related services. These logs assist with monitoring and tracking any missed services that need to be made-up. Documentation of a related services tracking log will satisfy this requirement. The school has since implemented the use of related service logs.

- **Indicator 4.3:** A review of Explorations' latest audited 2023-24 PSIS data reports indicate that the percentage of students identified as English learners/Multilingual learners (ELs/MLs) at the school is data suppressed to ensure privacy. Through an analysis of the renewal materials and prior communications with the school, it is evident that there is a willingness to strengthen policies for ELs/MLs and that there is an opportunity for growth in understanding among staff of obligations regarding the instruction, assessment, and notifications for ELs/MLs at the school. It appears that leadership at Explorations is committed to building their own knowledge and the school's systems regarding ELs/MLs and learning more about best practices, initiatives, and grant opportunities. The school is not mandated to provide a bilingual program in the 2023-24 school year. The school is required to revise its Home Language Survey, Parent Notification Letter, Annual English Language Proficiency Assessment, and Exit Procedures.
- **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 March 21, 2024, reported 100 percent of staff in compliance with certification.

Explorations is in compliance with the Teacher Education and Mentoring (TEAM) Program and the Educator Evaluation and Support Plan (EESP) Program.

- **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 has undertaken any investigation of any violation of law by the school.

Prepared by:	Reviewed by:
Robert E. Kelly Charter School Program Manager	Irene E. Parisi Chief Academic Officer

EXPLORATIONS CHARTER SCHOOL DATA TABLES

Table 1: 2023-24 Student Enrollment and Demographic Information	
Grades served:	9-12
Total enrollment:	88
Percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals:	63.6
Percentage of students with disabilities:	33.0
Percentage of students identified as English Learners:	*
Percentage of American Indian or Alaska Native students:	N/A
Percentage of Asian students:	N/A
Percentage of Black or African American students:	*
Percentage of Hispanic or Latino students:	18.2
Percentage of Two or More Races:	*
Percentage of White students:	68.2

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

Indicator	2018-19			2021-22			2022-23		
	Explorations	Torrington	State	Explorations	Torrington	State	Explorations	Torrington	State
Accountability Index	58.2	68.0	74.2	44.6	66.5	69.7	54.5	66.1	69.3
ELA-All Students									
Performance Index (Target 75)	48.8	62.4	67.7	*	61.3	64.2	46.7	60.6	63.9
Math-All Students									
Performance Index (Target 75)	39.2	55.8	63.1	*	52.1	58.6	39.6	53.0	59.7
Graduation-All Students									
Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (Target 94%)	83.9	81.5	88.5	82.4	82.0	88.9			

In 2019-20, Connecticut received a waiver from the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) to be exempt from administering state academic assessments and holding schools and districts accountable using the Next Generation Accountability System.

In 2020-21, Connecticut secured a waiver from the USDOE to be exempted from implementing the Next Generation Accountability System for schools and districts; and while districts made their best effort to assess as many students as possible, there was not a requirement to test at least 95 percent of students as in past years. Additionally, school learning models changed throughout the school year and students were remote to varying degrees due to factors beyond educator control. Also, some students tested remotely, which was a new construct. As such, 2020-21 testing data is not being used as part of this analysis.

Table 3: School Performance-High Needs Students									
	2018-19			2021-22			2022-23		
Indicator	Explorations	Torrington	State	Explorations	Torrington	State	Explorations	Torrington	State
ELA-High Needs Students									
Performance Index (Target 75)	*	58.6	58.1	*	57.9	54.2	*	57.4	54.1
Math-High Needs Students									
Performance Index (Target 75)	*	52.1	52.7	*	48.9	47.7	*	49.9	48.9
Graduation-High Needs Students									
Six-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (Target 94%)	87.5	82.8	85.2	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

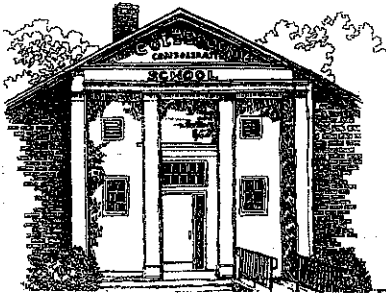
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Table 4: School Culture and Climate									
	2019-2020 ¹			2021-2022			2022-2023		
Indicator	Explorations	Torrington	State	Explorations	Torrington	State	Explorations	Torrington	State
Chronic Absenteeism Rate (%)	32.1	14.7	12.2	33.3	23.7	23.7	48.8	22.4	20.0
Suspension Rate (%)	16.3	6.0	4.9	*	11.7	6.5	9.2	13.5	7.0
Discipline Tier	1	1	3	1	1	1	1	4	3

Table 5: Explorations Student Wait List and Mobility Information				
Performance Metric:		2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
Waiting number:		0	3	3
Number of enrolled students who left during the school year:		18	17	N/A
Number of students who did not re-enroll the next year and had not completed the highest grade at the school:		1	3	N/A

¹ In the 2019-20 school year, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person classes were cancelled in mid-March; all districts switched to fully remote instruction for the remainder of the school year.



Colebrook Consolidated School

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Robert F. Gilbert, Superintendent

Elizabeth Driscoll, Principal

November 22, 2023

Irene E. Parisi
Chief Academic Officer
Robert Kelly
Charter School Program Manager
Connecticut State Department of Education
P.O. Box 2219
Hartford, CT. 06145

Dear Ms. Parisi and Mr. Kelly,

I am in receipt of your letter dated November 6th that requests written comments on the potential renewal of the Explorations Charter School in Winsted, CT.

The Colebrook School District is a K-6 district and does not send any students directly to Explorations (grades 9-12) therefore, we do not have any direct interaction with this Charter School. That being said, I can informally say that, through conversations and professional relationships, we are aware that the program at Explorations has successfully met the needs of many students who do not experience success or thrive in a traditional High School Environment.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Gilbert', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Robert F. Gilbert
Superintendent