

Charter School Application Report

# Pahrump Valley Academy Charter School

*Recommendation from the Summer 2019 Charter Application Cycle*

## General Information

<b>Proposed Name</b>	Pahrump Valley Academy Charter School
<b>Proposed Mission</b>	Prepare all students for highly successful high school and college careers through highest quality instruction delivering most rigorous, standards-aligned curriculum, designed to accommodate learners' cognitive, academic, social, and personal growths on their way to becoming life-long independent learners.
<b>Proposed EMO or CMO</b>	N/A
<b>Proposed Grade Configuration</b>	Kindergarten – 8 <sup>th</sup> grade
<b>Proposed Opening</b>	August 2020
<b>Proposed Location</b>	89061

## Process/Key Dates for Pahrump Valley Academy

- New Charter Application Training
- March 15, 2019 – Notice of Intent is received
- July 15, 2019 – Application is received
- August 14, 2019 – AB 462 Addendum is received
- November 8, 2019 - Capacity Interview is conducted
- December 17, 2019 – Recommendation is presented

# Planned Enrollment Chart

	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26
<u>K</u>	50	50	50	50	50	50
<u>1</u>	50	50	50	50	50	50
<u>2</u>	50	50	50	50	50	50
<u>3</u>	25	50	50	50	50	50
<u>4</u>	25	25	50	50	50	50
<u>5</u>	25	25	25	50	50	50
<u>6</u>	0	25	25	25	50	50
<u>7</u>	0	0	25	25	25	50
<u>8</u>	0	0	0	25	25	25
<u>9</u>						
<u>10</u>						
<u>11</u>						
<u>12</u>						
<b>Total</b>	225	275	325	375	400	425

## Executive Summary and Recommendation

The review committee and SPCSA staff find that the Pahrump Valley Academy charter application exhibits shortcomings within three of the four components of the submitted application. SPCSA staff find that the proposed academic, organizational and financial plans do not meet the standards as outlined in the charter application rubric. The applicant was unable to provide the review team with a clear basis for assessing the capacity to carry out the vision and plans for the school. Deficiencies exist with at least one of the proposed vendors as little information is provided, with the service-provider assuming significant responsibilities during the incubation year. Financial information is also incomplete and lacks sufficient detail in key areas such as teacher recruitment and proposed amounts for vendors.

The review committee and SPCSA staff find that the Pahrump Valley Academy charter school academy has satisfactorily met the Geographic component of the Academic Needs within the SPCSA Academic and Demographic Needs Assessment. The applicant demonstrates an intent to create a 4 and 5-star school in a community that has multiple 1 and 2-star schools, and also provides a number of Intent to Enroll forms as well as community letters of support.

For these major reasons, in addition to those outlined throughout this document, staff’s recommendation is to deny the Pahrump Valley Academy charter school application.

***Proposed motion:*** Deny the Pahrump Valley Academy charter school application as submitted during the 2019 Summer Application Cycle based on a finding that the applicant has failed to satisfy the requirements contained in NRS 388A.249(3).

## Summary of Application Section Ratings

The State Public Charter School Authority is required to assemble a team of reviewers and conduct a thorough evaluation of the application, which includes an in-person interview with the applicant designed to elicit any necessary clarification or additional information about the proposed charter school. The SPCSA is required to adhere to its policies and practices, namely the application guidance, training and rubric, regarding evaluating charter applications. Ultimately, the SPCSA must base its determination on the documented evidence collected through the application process.

Rating options for each section are Meets the Standard; Approaches the Standard; Does not Meet the Standard. These are defined as follows:

- **Meets the Standard:** The response reflects a thorough understanding of key issues. It addresses the topic with specific and accurate information that shows thorough preparation; presents a clear, realistic picture of how the school expects to operate; and inspires confidence in the applicant’s capacity to carry out the plan effectively in a way which will result in a 4- or 5-star school.
- **Approaches the Standard:** The response meets the criteria in many respects but lacks detail and/or requires additional information in one or more areas.
- **Does Not Meet the Standard:** The response is undeveloped or incomplete; demonstrates lack of preparation; or otherwise raises substantial concerns about the viability of the plan or the applicant’s ability to carry it out.

The rubric is broken into four major sections as outlined below and detailed descriptions of each rubric item can be found in the full rubric located on the SPCSA Application website:

[http://charterschools.nv.gov/OpenASchool/Application\\_Packet/](http://charterschools.nv.gov/OpenASchool/Application_Packet/)

### Meeting the Need: Meets the Standard

- Targeted Plan
  - Meets the Standard
- Parent and Community Involvement
  - Meets the Standard

### Academic Plan: Does Not Meet the Standard

- Mission and Vision
  - Approaches the Standard
- Transformational Change
  - Does Not Meet the Standard

- Curriculum & Instructional Design
  - **Does Not Meet the Standard**
- Distance Education Requirements
  - N/A
- Pre-K Requirements
  - N/A
- High School Graduation Requirements
  - N/A
- Driving for Results
  - **Does Not Meet the Standard**
- At Risk Students and Special Populations
  - **Approaches the Standard**
- School Structure (Culture)
  - **Approaches the Standard**
- School Structure (Student Discipline)
  - **Does Not Meet the Standard**
- School Structure (Calendar and Schedule)
  - **Approaches the Standard**
- A Day in the Life & Scenarios
  - **Does Not Meet the Standard**

#### **Operations Plan: Does Not Meet the Standard**

- Leadership Team
  - **Approaches the Standard**
- Leadership for Expansion (Experienced Operators Only)
  - N/A
- Staffing
  - **Does Not Meet the Standard**
- Human Resources
  - **Does Not Meet the Standard**
- Scale Strategy (Experienced Operators Only)

- N/A
- Student Recruitment and Enrollment
  - Meets the Standard
- Board Governance
  - Approaches the Standard
- Incubation Year Development
  - Does Not Meet the Standard
- EMO Relationships and School Management Contracts (If Applicable)
  - N/A
- Services
  - Does Not Meet the Standard
- Facilities
  - Approaches the Standard
- Ongoing Operations
  - Approaches the Standard

**Financial Plan: Does Not Meet the Standard**

## Meeting the Need Section

The applicant clearly identifies there are a significant number of 1-2-star schools in Pahrump, and the committee to form aims to open additional choices for families in Pahrump. The committee has demonstrated its ability to build foundational support in Pahrump and the commitment to the community is clearly outlined. The township is clearly described with information about the demographics of the population as well as information about the schools currently serving the town, ultimately demonstrating a need for high-quality schools. The applicant also provided the rationale that by adding an additional school in the Pahrump community, the school would be a resource for those students who struggle with additional learning needs and/or could otherwise be considered at-risk.

### Areas of Strength

- The applicant has clearly aligned with the SPCSA Demographic and Needs Assessment by proposing to locate in an area with predominantly 1 and 2 star schools.
- The applicant proposes to have extended school days thereby increasing the amount of learning time for students. This is particularly important, again, given that the applicant team intends to locate in an area of geographic need.
- The application provided information about the ways the committee to form will engage parents after approval, and during the capacity interview, the committee to form was able to speak to how this work has occurred to date.
- The application is explicit about not requiring volunteering and/or fees in lieu of volunteer time and the totality of the discussion about engagement once the school is open is thoughtful and compelling.

### Areas of Concern

- It is not clear how much the community has been involved in shaping the proposed school model as presented. While the community clearly supports the proposed school, it may be primarily because of the lack of quality options, not because of community-wide discussions about what model would be most beneficial to the Pahrump community.

## Academic Section

Overall, the Committee to Form appears committed to a shared mission of providing an additional choice for families in Pahrump. Additionally, the guiding priorities and associated goals are clear and targeted, although the exact measurement tool is not always identified. However, during the interview the committee to form struggled to answer questions specifically related to the academic program. Relationships between the Executive Director, Principal and vendors (CSMC and Saphira) raised concerns that there is not a clear hierarchy and appropriate expertise within the school staff. The applicant could not adequately describe how their instructional model will move the needle for students, particularly EL students or students with disabilities. The focus on ELL instruction would mainly come through professional development, but it could not be described in detail. There is an emphasis on classical pedagogy and approach in the written proposal, but the interview revealed a much more general attitude toward art, music and French, which are listed as critical components of the educational program and many times in the application. These classical programmatic elements, for the most part, are not supported in the budget.

### Areas of Strength

- The proposed Board is composed of residents of Pahrump, and were able to speak to the positive impact this school could have for students and families.
- The guiding priorities and associated goals for the school are clear and targeted.
- The proposed leadership team has a passion for serving the students of Pahrump and bring with them complementary backgrounds that could pair well together.
- The proposal and the capacity interview show the team is passionate about serving all students.

### Areas of Concern

- The committee to form struggled to answer several questions specifically related to the academic program, and the consultant from CSMC stepped in and provided the most concrete answers concerning the academic program.
- The combination of the proposed Executive Director and proposed Principal is interesting in that the proposed Executive Director does have a background with intervention, and the Principal has a special education background and credentials. However, the structure and organizational lines don't quite make sense, and it seems very unlikely and unrealistic that the proposed Executive Director could spend as much instructional time as planned and also effectively handle the jobs of the Executive Director, especially in light of the Executive Director job description.
- The proposed Principal indicated he would take the lead on discipline and behavior/culture as well as data analysis, but as the one with special education experience, it is unclear why he wouldn't be more focused on academics and interventions and ensuring at-risk subgroups were being properly served.
- The representative from Saphira Associates was best able to answer some of the detailed, in-depth questions about curriculum choices and academics. Since the proposed Executive Director and proposed Principal are both educators, this was a surprise. The founding



team staff members are primarily tasked with implementing the academic program, not the vendor. It is critical that the school's leadership team is able to demonstrate a firm understanding of the proposed academic program.

- It was unclear what the relationship is between CSMC and Saphira. During the capacity interview, it was mentioned by the proposed Executive Director that CSMC and Saphira regularly work together, sharing services in some cases. But if it wasn't for the specific interview question, the Authority would not have been aware of this relationship as Saphira was not mentioned in detail in the application and the relationship between vendors was not disclosed. This raised heightened questions for the review committee about a lack of transparency by the applicant team, and that more information should have been disclosed by a proposed vendor given their scope of work.
- Toward the end of the interview, the Saphira representative said the committee to form was getting tired but did know how to better answer questions. It is unclear how much of a role this representative played in crafting the proposal. The comment actually reinforced concerns that the applicant does not yet have the capacity to carry the interview alone. The committee to form did not effectively demonstrate ownership of the proposed program and did not instill confidence among the review team that the applicant has the capacity to carry out the vision and plan articulated in the charter school application.
- The RtI process described during the interview for Tiers 2 and 3 lacks detail. It is critical for the Committee to Form to articulate with clarity and detail the plans for intensive supports during the capacity interview. Questions related to specific plans for remediation also fell short. This is especially troubling given the student population the school plans to serve.
- There is an emphasis on classical pedagogy and approach in the written proposal, but the interview revealed a much more general attitude toward art, music, and French, which are listed as critical components of the educational program many times in the application. These programmatic aspects, for the most part, are not supported in the budget, and it was revealed by the Saphira representative during the capacity interview that the emphasis was on other things such as college-prep and interventions, and that these items would be scaled-up later after being done on a small scale the first few years – but this isn't what is reflected in the application.
- The team could not adequately describe how their instructional model will move the needle for students, particularly EL students or students with disabilities. The plan for EL students relies heavily on professional development of general education teachers, but it could not be described in detail.
- The plan for remediating students for remediating students lacked clarity. This concern was compounded by the Committee to Form's acknowledgement that many students that the proposed school would serve will require significant remediation.

## Operations Section

While there were a few notable strengths identified within this component of the application such as a diverse Board and evidence of student recruitment and a prospective facility, a number of concerns prevented this section from being highly rated. The Committee to Form struggled to speak to strategies to effectively recruit and retain teachers and the relationship between the proposed school and Saphira Associates remains ambiguous. The incubation year plan was also underdeveloped with few benchmarks and little clarity about the role of individual owners.

### Areas of Strength

- While the narrative within the application didn't include the full details of the facility, the interview revealed a former school site has been identified, is ready and available, and that the team could have access as soon as a proposal is moved forward toward authorization.
- Student recruitment is already underway as the Committee to Form spoke to the number of Letter of Intent forms (approximately 200) the school had received. This indicates that there is demand for another school option in the community and that the school has established its brand.
- The Committee to Form and proposed Board has a diverse set of backgrounds that could effectively govern the proposed school. All members are residents of the Pahrump community and spoke to the need for a high-quality public school option in the area.

### Areas of Concern

- The Committee to Form did not demonstrate a firm understanding of how challenging teacher recruitment is likely to be in a rural community, especially in a state with a well-documented teacher shortage. The answers to questions about teacher recruitment reflected a lack of thoughtfulness and intentionality on this topic, and a thorough plan with detailed benchmarks was not provided.
- It is not clear how Saphira and Associates is affiliated with the school as they are barely mentioned in the application and the attachments. Saphira is disclosed in the incubation plan timeline by being listed as a key player for many aspects of establishing the academic program (curriculum alignment) and running the school, but no narrative explained the relationship. The full picture of the relationship and structure only came to light through follow-up questions in the capacity interview. The lack of transparency and clarity in describing the relationships was troubling, and prevented a more thorough and necessary vetting of that relationship. Moreover, it appears that Saphira has significant responsibilities during pre-opening (curriculum, professional development) and during the initial term of the school (systems, leadership training, SIS system).
- While there are a large number of Intent to Enroll forms provided, questions remained about student recruitment the capacity interview. The Committee to Form actually said at one point a variation of the phrase "if we build it they will come" which does not demonstrate a thorough understanding of what it takes to fully enroll a school. While the CTF seems prepared to adapt, the expectation is that the CTF must be able to defend and justify the proposal as submitted. The Committee to Form even said at one point that the

original plan was to start with fewer students and they had to increase the number after one town hall, but when asked for evidence/data/an explanation of what caused this change, the group still struggled to provide concrete details.

- The incubation year plan lacks benchmarks that can signal to the proposed board whether or not the school is on-track to be successful. Aligned with bullet points above, the incubation year includes notes about Saphira Associates providing assistance. However, no detail is provided about the nature of their relationship with the applicant, nor is there a draft service-agreement.
- Despite having both the proposed ED and Principal in the interview, the Committee to Form struggled to answer many questions, relying on the help of the CSMC and CSMC/Saphira representatives. The capacity and skill of leadership seems promising, but neither seems ready yet to fully comprehend – and therefore plan around – the challenges of being a start-up charter school.
- The proposed organizational structure between the proposed Board, Principal and Executive Director raises questions about effective accountability structures. Specifically, the Executive Director serves as a part-time interventionist, but this role reports to the proposed Principal, who in turn reports to the Executive Director, or the same person proposing to serve as the interventionist. This matrix relationship is underdeveloped and requires more detailed plans and structures to be implemented effectively.

## Financial Section

The Committee to Form exhibited a few strengths during the capacity interview such as significant budgeting experience as well as an understanding that the budget will need to be monitored frequently, especially through the incubation year and the first year of operation. Ultimately, there were significant shortcomings within this component that were reaffirmed during the capacity interview. The proposed Board was unable to provide detailed answers about the proposed budget, and it was unclear that all the necessary items were included in the proposal, namely consultants and key items for a rural school such as teacher recruitment.

### Areas of Strength

- The applicant team noted that the budget will need at least monthly monitoring by the Board during the incubation year as well as Year 1 given the number of variables associated with opening a new school. This shows that the Board is prepared to be engaged with the finances of the school and knows that the initial 18 months is a critical time.
- The applicant team noted that multiple members of the Committee to Form own small businesses, reaffirming that there is business acumen should there be a need to implement contingency plans that are budget-related.

### Areas of Concern

- During the capacity interview, budget and finance questions were very difficult for the Committee to Form to answer without the help of the CSMC representative who was in charge of crafting the budget. For example, the Committee to Form relied on a vendor to explain what the 'break-even' point would be in terms of enrollment. It is not clear that the budget was thoughtfully crafted with involvement from the Board and school staff.
- It is not clear that the budget adequately supports teacher recruitment, professional development and materials and resources necessary to implement the classical pedagogy and instructional program being proposed. When asked during the capacity interview if Saphira Associates was accounted for in the budget, another vendor (CSMC) confirmed that they were not included, but likely would fall into the professional development category. It is concerning that the applicant team appeared unaware of where Saphira was accounted for in the budget, and that a vendor would provide this answer on behalf of the team.
- It is also unclear why the school needs a procurement provider on top of a back-office provider and multiple office staff members. The organizational structure doesn't seem to be logical and well-developed, which has serious budget implications because the school would be paying so many various consultants but would also have layers of in-house staff.
- The team could only articulate one area to cut if enrollment targets weren't met. The Committee to Form was able to articulate that the Nevada Revolving Loan could be an additional source of income for the school, but appeared unaware that this is a competitive loan.
- The applicant was unable to say how much they would apply for in the Charter Schools

Program (CSP) grant application. This left lingering questions that the Committee to Form does not have a complete and full understanding of the budget and where potential funding gaps may lie.

## Capacity Interview Summary

Based on the independent and collective review of the application, the review committee conducted a 90-minute in-person interview of the applicant to elicit any necessary clarifications or additional information about the proposed charter school and determine the ability of the applicants to establish a high-quality charter school. The capacity interview for Pahrump Valley Academy was conducted on Friday November 8. All but one of the proposed members of the Committee to Form attended on behalf of the applicant. Additionally, the two representatives of current and proposed vendors of the applicant – Charter School Management Corporation (CSMC) and Saphira Education Associates – attended the capacity interview. Questions during the capacity interview were developed by the team of reviewers to specifically address the details of the Pahrump Valley Academy application and focused primarily on four key areas:

- The ability of the applicant to meet one or more of the academic or demographic needs as outlined in the SPCSA Academic and Demographic Needs Assessment.
- The operations plan, including student recruitment, organizational chart, staff recruitment and proposed vendors.
- The academic plan, including curriculum, remediation, student support services and assessments.
- The financial plan, including the proposed budget, prospective facilities, staff recruitment, proposed vendors, and alignment to the proposed academic model.

Information gleaned from the capacity interview were coupled with the initial review of the application to determine final ratings on the rubric. Relevant information from the capacity interview is incorporated in the findings outlined above.

## District Input

Per Assembly Bill 462 (2019), the SPCSA solicited input from the Nye County School District regarding this application<sup>1</sup>. This input is provided as an attachment alongside this item.

- September 16, 2019 – Memo sent to NCSD soliciting input.
- September 26, 2019 – Written input provided from NCSD to SPCSA.

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<sup>1</sup> Assembly Bill 462 (2019) section 6.3, subsection 1, paragraph (d): “The proposed sponsor of a charter school shall, in reviewing an application to form a charter school...If the proposed sponsor is not the board of trustees of a school district, solicit input from the board of trustees of the school district in which the proposed charter school will be located.”