Charter School Renewal Update July, 2019

# Cover Page

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# Executive Summary

**Mission:** ~~The mission of the Exploris School is to engage students in a rigorous, relevant, relationship‐based education. This is done through experiential, project­based learning that empowers students to build a connected, just and sustainable world.~~

**MISSION:**

Exploris is a diverse learning community that engages students in a challenging, relevant, relationship-based education. Through experiential, project-based learning we empower students to foster a just and sustainable world.

**VISION:**

Empowering learners to improve our world.

**CORE VALUES**

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The Exploris School has been serving students in the downtown Raleigh community for over 20 years and is committed to growing our school in size and diversity to expand support and opportunity for all students. Our educational program is built around four core pillars: Global Education, Project Based Learning, Co-Teaching, and Responsive Classroom. The articulation of our core values ground the school in our educational approach and community partnerships.

**INNOVATION -** In a constantly changing world, the ability to approach challenges in a new way is vital. Exploris teachers and students approach the learning process through divergent thinking, creativity, ideation, and risk-taking.

**SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT -** Students learn best when they are exposed to meaningful, complex issues that are applicable to their own lives. Teachers engage students in current, relevant issues by solving authentic problems that are being addressed beyond the four walls of the school building. Students realize that they have the power to change how their world works. They know how to navigate public systems, lobby public officials, and present their research and opinions as responsible citizens. Student work is tangibly connected not only to the local community, but to other regions of the world and to past and future events.

**RELATIONSHIPS -** A nurturing school environment is one where students are encouraged to build and maintain positive relationships and collaborate with their teachers, parents, peers, and community. With a keen understanding of the unique development of the age group which they teach, teachers are intentional about the structures and relationship-building activities that they design. Positive relationships and collaboration results in a tapestry of learners who know they can depend on each other and work together in almost any situation. The end-product is deeper, and Exploris students experience a collective sense of accomplishment and ownership.

**REFLECTION -** In an ever changing world of new ideas, the importance of reflecting on one’s own thinking and the thinking of others cannot be underestimated. Exploris values the creation of time to slow down, to reflect, and to build connections.

**CRAFTSMANSHIP -** Producing an exemplary product is challenging. It takes attention to detail, grit, perseverance, revision, and tenacity. It takes a growth mindset and a dedication to competing with one’s own personal best.

**CURIOSITY -** True knowledge does not occur without curiosity. Students are empowered to ask questions about the world around them and to explore possible answers.

**RESPONSIBILITY -** Students will take ownership of their learning and accountability for their actions and behavior. Students will recognize the importance of character, integrity, and honesty.

**CONNECTIONS TO NATURE -**  When students witness the power and elements of the natural world through adventure and stewardship, they begin to view themselves as just one species within a larger system.

The Exploris School exemplifies the best thinking in education and utilizes research on best teaching practices in grades kindergarten through eighth grade. The overall purpose of the Exploris School is to establish an engaging learning environment that supports each learner’s optimal development and growth in understanding. In this environment, learners are able to apply their ideas to real world situations and strengthen both understanding and problem‐solving skills. The school, through its partnerships with various museums, community leaders, nonprofits, industry experts, and international organizations provides an interactive, integrated, inquiry‐ based approach to learning in an environment that extends beyond the walls of the classroom to the community, state, and world.

Since its inception, the educational focus of the Exploris School has been based on a global learning model, featuring a project‐based, integrated approach to the North Carolina Standard Course of Study. The global learning model utilizes STEM best practices while also placing a strong emphasis on a social curriculum. This in turn creates independent learners, critical and creative thinkers, and active and responsible participants in a global society.

The Mission and Purpose of the Exploris School are evident in the day‐to‐day operations of the school and in any long range planning initiatives undertaken by the faculty and Board of Directors. Since 1997, Exploris students have achieved School of Excellence, Honor School of Excellence, or A status on the State Report Card in all but ~~two~~ four years (2003‐04; 2014‐15, 2016-2017; 2017-2018).

Through annual travel study trips, on‐going service learning projects, and the project‐based global learning model, Exploris students are able to connect their learning to real world issues and have a positive impact on their community. Exploris students and faculty have received numerous awards and recognitions over the years for their work in the community and for their educational achievements.

Exploris’s location and mission empower students and teachers to connect with the larger community to build and sustain partnerships that benefit both Exploris and the downtown Raleigh area. Each year programs are assessed and adjusted to meet the changing needs of our partners and our school. Exploris students regularly walk through downtown Raleigh to visit industry leaders or museums in the vicinity. Weekly service‐learning partnerships are established to be beneficial to partners, students, and the greater community. Exploris students volunteer weekly at places like the NC museum of Natural Sciences, the Raleigh City

Farm, the Centennial Campus for Wildlife Education, with Neuse Riverkeepers, and at other local elementary schools. Students have been presenters at venues throughout the state, including the NC State Legislature, the Emerging Issues Form, Walnut Creek Environmental Education Center, the Scaling STEM Conference, CAM Raleigh, a Box Turtle Workshop at the NC Zoo, NC Council of Teachers of Mathematics annual conference, and the NC Sustainability Symposium.

Since 1997, the faculty at the Exploris School has developed the structure, routines, and school climate necessary to support an integrated project‐based learning model. Using established instructional design methods and authentic assessment techniques all Exploris teacher teams develop content rich academic themes. This student‐centered approach has proven to be effective for producing academic growth. Students are held to high performance standards with differentiation provided based on individual needs. Exploris teachers effectively use data to help identify and target specific needs for enrichment and/or remediation.

~~For the fiscal year ending June 30, 2015, the Exploris School had a fund balance of $384,524 and net assets totaling more than $800,000.~~ The Exploris School’s Director of Operations and the Treasurer for the Board of Directors closely monitor the school’s budget and necessary adjustments are made proactively to ensure fiscal sustainability. The Exploris BOD reviews the annual audit and routinely meets with the school’s accounting firm ~~(Acadia North Star)~~ (Charter Success Partners) for planning purposes. The Exploris School has never had a negative fund balance.

# Goals and Objectives

In April, 2019, The Exploris Board of Directors approved a new 5 year strategic plan for 2019-2024. The following goals and objectives will allow The Exploris School to expand opportunities that foster academic achievement for all students.

~~In June of 2013, the Exploris Board of Directors approved a 5‐year strategic plan with a primary goal of expanding its middle school program to serve students in grades K – 8. The following 6 goals were adopted with accompanying strategies:~~

## ~~STRATEGIC GOAL 1: ENROLLMENT~~

*~~Exploris will increase student access by expanding enrollment to a K­8 population of approximately 500­600 students.~~*

**~~Strategy 1.1:~~** ~~Develop a sustainable Enrollment Plan for Exploris as a K­8.~~ **~~Strategy 1.2~~**~~: Commit to a demographic that reflects the local community~~ **~~Strategy 1.3:~~** ~~Gain Office of Charter School approval for a K­8.~~

**~~Strategy 1.4:~~** ~~Recruit and assign committees to develop and carry out action steps for Strategic Plan Goals 2­6.~~

## ~~STRATEGIC GOAL 2: FINANCE~~

*~~Exploris will develop adequate financial resources to ensure its long­term financial sustainability.~~*

**~~Strategy 2.1:~~** ~~Develop a sustainable budget for daily operating costs as a K­8.~~

**~~Strategy 2.2~~**~~: Develop a fund development plan, based on requirements from the facilities and infrastructure deliverables for transition to K­8.~~

## ~~STRATEGIC GOAL 3: FACILITIES AND INFRASTRUCTURE~~

*~~Exploris will acquire a facility that supports its educational program and is financially sustainable, while enabling the long­range strategic vision.~~*

**~~Strategy 3.1~~**~~: Articulate a set of facility and technology requirements to accommodate enrollment expansion, curriculum needs, and core values.~~

**~~Strategy 3.2~~**~~: Identify and acquire new space based on cost­benefit analysis.~~

**~~Strategy 3.3:~~** ~~Develop a facility and technology migration plan.~~

## ~~STRATEGIC GOAL 4: STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT~~

*~~Exploris will provide students with demonstrable skills and knowledge designed to equip them for solving problems across the street and around the world.~~*

**~~Strategy 4.1~~**~~: Create a curriculum map, with scope and sequence, for grades K­8~~

**~~Strategy 4.2~~**~~: Articulate essential skills and social competencies that embody success at Exploris~~

**~~Strategy 4.3~~**~~: Implement an assessment model for measuring outcomes related to the Exploris mission~~

**~~Strategy 4.4:~~** ~~Strengthen programming to maximize resources while ensuring a free and appropriate education for ALL students.~~

## ~~STRATEGIC GOAL 5: SCHOOL LEADERSHIP and HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT~~

*~~Exploris will attract, develop and retain cutting edge school leadership, instruction and ancillary supports to meet the needs of an expanding student population.~~*

**~~Strategy 5.1~~**~~: Develop a human resource needs assessment to identify current position requirements and identify staffing gaps for future hiring decisions.~~

**~~Strategy 5.2:~~** ~~Create a recruitment plan for filling new vacancies, including recruitment incentives, online application databases, and early employment contracts in order to attract the best and brightest while retaining a cutting edge staff.~~

**~~Strategy 5.3:~~** ~~Initiate a professional development plan, focused on continuous learning and improvement for returning staff and an orientation and training program for new personnel.~~

**~~Strategy 5.4:~~** ~~Develop a mentorship program for grooming new internal leaders.~~

## ~~STRATEGIC GOAL 6: BRANDING, MARKETING and ADVOCACY~~

*~~Exploris will establish itself as an educational leader in NC ­ widely recognized for its educational excellence, student success, leadership, and public advocacy~~*

**~~Strategy 6.1:~~** ~~Develop the Exploris brand as a center for educational innovation and achievement.~~

**~~Strategy 6.2:~~** ~~Develop a marketing and communication plan to address both internal as well as external communications~~

**~~Strategy 6.3:~~** ~~Extend Exploris’s network of public and private partnerships regionally, nationally, and internationally.~~

**STRATEGIC GOAL 1: FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

***Increase the number of partnerships with community organizations and parents to support students’ academic, social, and emotional needs.***

**Objective 1.1:** Explore grant and research opportunities to support school vision.

**Objective 1.2:**  Partner with local universities to increase education offerings and recruitment of new staff.

**Objective 1.3:** Partner with community organizations to provide resources for family engagement and wraparound support.

**Objective 1.4:** Support the development of an innovation center to transform education with other leading educators.

**STRATEGIC GOAL 2: FACILITIES**

***Transition successfully to a new K-8 facility that aligns with our core values and expansion needs.***

**Objective 2.1:** Begin construction in spring 2019.

**Objective 2.2:** Complete and occupy new building by fall 2021.

**Objective 2.3:** Develop alternate plan if construction does not begin by September 2019.

**Objective 2.4:** Develop interior design that meets the changing learning needs of all students and staff.

**Objective 2.5:** Ensure technology and infrastructure support instructional strategies.

**STRATEGIC GOAL 3: FACULTY AND STAFF**

***Attract and retain innovative and collaborative educators who are involved in shared decision making about issues that impact the success of Exploris and its students.***

**Objective 3.1:** Pay salaries competitive with other schools in the Triangle.

**Objective 3.2:** Provide teachers with opportunities to develop cultural competencies and remain innovative in education and professional learning.

**Objective 3.3:** Implement a 360-evaluation process for faculty and staff.

**STRATEGIC GOAL 4: STUDENT SUCCESS**

***Strengthen K-8 curriculum and instruction to embrace diversity and differentiation for achieving academic, social, emotional, and cultural growth.***

**Objective 4.1:** Increase academic support across all subgroups and build capacity to provide students with differentiated instruction, intervention, and enrichment.

**Objective 4.2:** Create a curriculum plan that guides K-8 instruction.

**Objective 4.3:** Align essential K-8 social and emotional competencies for successful

development.

**Objective 4.4:** Expand project-based experiences around relevant, community driven,

and hands-on learning aligned with curriculum goals.

**STRATEGIC GOAL 5: DIVERSITY**

***Increase the racial and socio-economic diversity of Exploris educators and students to reflect that of Wake County.***

**Objective 5.1:** Develop recruitment plan and remove barriers to increase the racial and socio-economic diversity of students and staff.

**Objective 5.2:** Secure funding to support needs of diverse school community.

**Objective 5.3:** Remove barriers for educationally disadvantaged students to ensure access to Exploris for all.

**Objective 5.4:** Develop strategies for helping students and families engage as community partners.

**STRATEGIC GOAL 6: FINANCE**

***Acquire adequate financial resources to ensure long-term financial sustainability of Exploris.***

**Objective 6.1:** Create a long-term financial plan and identify resources to ensure long-term financial sustainability of The Exploris School.

**Objective 6.2:** Develop sustainable operating budget to support strategic goals.

**Objective 6.3:** Expand the Finance Committee to further develop and execute financial strategies.

**Objective 6.4:** Create a salary structure for all staff that ensures the long-term financial stability of Exploris and ensures we are among the leading public schools in the Triangle.

**Objective 6.5:** Identify external sources and create a long-term development fund to support facility costs, and ongoing instructional and student support needs.

**Objective 6.6:** Ensurethat revenue allocated towards facilities expenditures is less than 20 percent.

1. The Education Program

## Curriculum

Exploris’s curriculum is founded on the principles of global education. According to David Selby and Graham Pike, international leaders in this approach, global education is based upon “the interconnectedness of communities, lands, and peoples, the interrelatedness of all social, cultural and natural phenomena, links between past, present, and future, and the complementary nature of the cognitive, affective, physical and spiritual dimensions of the human being. It addresses issues of development, equity, peace, social and environmental justice, and environmental sustainability. It encompasses the personal, the local, the national, and the planetary. Along with these principles, its approach to teaching and learning is experiential, interactive, children‐centered, democratic, convivial, participatory, and change‐ oriented.”

Teaching at Exploris is based on how students learn best – through an inclusive, interdisciplinary instructional approach in a small class setting. This approach is grounded in project‐based learning that empowers students to build a connected, just, and sustainable world. Keeping the school’s mission at the forefront, Exploris fosters a collaborative, real‐world approach to curriculum design and implementation. Using the Common Core and NC Essential Standards as jumping off points, teachers work together to create a compelling lens that drives the acquisition of content and skills. Teachers seek out university, governmental, and industry partnerships that add to the content‐knowledge delivered to students. From these experts, teachers also learn of current, complex issues that help to contextualize student learning and make it relevant for students. Teachers then design theme‐based individual and group projects that allow for the application of skills and content gleaned in language arts, social studies, science, technology, the arts, and civic action.

While the k‐8 model was not the design submitted in the original charter, much of the education model’s curriculum and instructional practices were captured in the original proposal. Exploris’s current educational program expands and deepens the work highlighted in the original charter.

## Instructional Methodology and Techniques

The curriculum and instructional methods used at Exploris go hand in hand. Instructional practices are research‐based and developmentally appropriate for each age level. Those practices utilize active, “hands‐on/minds‐on” activities, cooperative learning, and a variety of teaching/learning styles. Instruction is data‐driven and differentiated in order to optimally meet student needs.

Much of Exploris’s instructional methodology aligns with the work of other nationally known project‐based educational leaders, such as EL Education and the Buck Institute. Additionally, Exploris was recognized by the NC Department of Instruction in 2014 as a “Model” STEM school. Four attributes of NC’s STEM Model focus on instructional practice:

* + Project‐based learning with integrated content across STEM subjects
  + Connections to effective in and out‐of‐school STEM programs
  + Integration of technology and virtual learning
  + Authentic assessment and exhibition of STEM skills

## Accountability

Assessment at Exploris is ongoing and varied. Much of Exploris’s assessment methods are modeled after Rick Stiggins’s and Jan Chappuis’s work at the Assessment Training Institute. The school blends student‐engaged assessment strategies such as the use of long term and supporting learning targets, student self‐assessment and goal‐setting, student‐led portfolio conferences, and focused revision as well as more formal formative and summative assessments that include NWEA’s Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) benchmark testing; NC End‐of‐ Grade tests in reading, mathematics, and science; mClass; and the Iowa Algebra Aptitude test.

Exploris’s student report cards are standards‐based reports that align to the Common Core and NC Essential Standards, have extensive teacher narratives around the school’s Habits of Scholarship, and highlight each grade level’s trimester‐long project. These reports are sent home three times per year.

The 2012‐2013 school year was the first year in which Exploris utilized the Northwest Evaluation Association’s MAP tests for benchmark testing. End of the year data revealed Exploris student to not only be outperforming their national grade‐level peers, but to also have higher combined growth averages in all three subject areas tested (reading, mathematics, and language usage. That pattern has continued over the last three years.

Data, such as the aforementioned MAP data, is used in a variety of ways to improve educational outcomes at Exploris. Teachers collect and analyze data to understand student achievement

and make informed decisions to adapt instructional practice to better meet student need. Data is also used to flexibly group students in order to optimize student learning. For instance, in math across grades kindergarten through 6th grade, students are pre‐assessed before each unit. Students are then grouped across the grade level team according to their demonstration on content and skills. These groupings change for each unit depending on the individual student’s level of proficiency.

A school leadership team, called the Kaizen Team after the Japanese word “continuous improvement” meets regularly to review school level data (EVAAS, MAP, school created surveys) and make recommendations to the staff, and when appropriate the school’s Board of Directors. Using data of this type, the Kaizen team led the adoption of a school‐wide ~~professional development work plan for the 2015‐2016 school year.~~  School Improvement Plan for the upcoming 2019-2020 school year.

A Board of Director subcommittee on Educational Excellence utilizes school data to work with the school’s Executive Director and Associate Directors to measure and monitor academic success, expanding the traditional definition of student success to not only include mastery of knowledge but also responsibility, collaboration, grit, and craftsmanship.