

## **Case Study**

### **Elevate STEM Charter School Application**

#### **Context**

Elevate STEM Charter School has applied to open a new public charter middle school. It is a difficult time for the district. Enrollment has declined over the past several years. The board recently closed two neighborhood elementary schools due to under-enrollment and several middle schools operate below capacity.

Because school funding is tied to enrollment, opening a new charter school could reduce funding for existing district schools. Some district leaders warn that further enrollment loss could lead to additional program cuts or school consolidations. At the same time, the application has generated strong interest from families seeking stronger STEM programming. Parents have organized meetings and submitted a petition supporting the school.

The board is now considering whether to approve the proposal.

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#### **Key Elements of the Proposal**

**School Model:** Elevate STEM proposes a project-based STEM program. The program includes robotics competitions, partnerships with local technology companies, and a longer school day to allow additional time for hands-on projects. Reviewers noted that the STEM vision is compelling but raised concerns that the application provides limited detail on how the school will support students who are significantly behind grade level.

**Special Education and Student Services:** The application states that the school will serve all students in accordance with state and federal law. However, the proposal does not clearly explain how the school will support students with significant disabilities or students who require intensive services. District special education staff noted that startup charter schools sometimes underestimate the staffing and resources needed to support these students.

**Leadership and Governance:** The proposed governing board includes parents, a nonprofit leader, a former district teacher, and a technology executive who previously managed a large engineering team. Several members are well known in the community and have been involved in local education initiatives. However, none of the proposed board members have previously served on the governing board of a charter school in Colorado.

The founding group has identified a potential school leader who currently serves as an assistant principal in a nearby district and previously led a successful STEM initiative at their current school. While the candidate has strong instructional leadership experience, they have never served as a principal or opened a new school.

**Financial Plan:** The school proposes to enroll 250 students in its first year and grow to approximately 400 students within five years. The financial projections show the school reaching stability once enrollment reaches projected levels. The school has secured letters of support from 150 families, and is confident it will meet enrollment projections.

Unlike many startup charter schools, the founding group has secured significant financial backing from a nonprofit partner and private donors who have committed startup funds to support the school during its early years. These funds provide a stronger financial cushion than is typical for new charter schools.

The facility lease for the proposed building has not yet been finalized, and district finance staff noted that enrollment projections assume strong early demand despite the district's overall enrollment decline.

**Community Context:** Some families strongly support the proposal and argue that the district needs more innovative STEM options. Other community members worry that opening a new school could weaken existing middle schools that are already losing enrollment. Several principals have expressed concern about the potential impact on their schools.

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## Board Decision

The board must now decide whether the Elevate STEM Charter School proposal should be:

- Approved
- Approved with conditions
- Denied

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## Discussion Questions

1. What strengths in the proposal support approval of the charter school?
2. What concerns appear most significant?
3. Are the weaknesses issues that could realistically be addressed through conditions of approval?
4. What additional information would you want before making a decision?
5. How should the board weigh community demand for new options against declining enrollment and financial pressure?
6. How would you vote — and why?