



Charter Schools Institute
The State University of New York

Summary of Findings and Recommendations

Proposal to Establish Wildflower New York Charter School

September 30, 2018

Charter Schools Institute
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Executive Summary

The applicant submitted the proposal to establish and operate the **Wildflower New York Charter School** (“Wildflower New York”) to the SUNY Charter Schools Institute (the “Institute”) in response to the Institute’s Request for Proposals (the “RFP”) released on behalf of the State University of New York Board of Trustees (the “SUNY Trustees”) on January 2, 2018 (available at: http://www.newyorkcharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2018-Request-for-Proposals_FINAL.pdf).

Wildflower New York intends to locate the school in a public or private facility in New York City Community School District (“CSD”) 9 in the Bronx. The proposed school will open in August 2019 with 18 students in Kindergarten and 1st grade and ultimately serve 77 students in Kindergarten – 5th grade during its first charter term. Wildflower New York will admit new students and fill seats that become available through attrition in all grade levels.

Wildflower New York will implement the century-old Montessori school model, detailed below, which provides a mixed-age environment that emphasizes student independence and self-efficacy. Montessori schools are purposefully arranged spaces designed to enable students to determine the pace and content of their learning under the guidance and observation of a Montessori-trained teacher. For these reasons, according to the applicant, classes are intentionally small with enrollment in the second and third years of operation below 50 students. When a charter school would serve fewer than 50 students after the first year of operation, New York Education Law § 2851(2)(i) requires the applicant to present a compelling justification therefor, which the Institute affirms.

Wildflower New York will contract with The Wildflower Foundation (“TWF”), a Minnesota-based Internal Revenue Code § 501(c)3 non-profit organization, for financial and other support in areas such as facilities development, operations, technology, governance, leadership development, and teacher development and training.

The Institute finds that the proposal for Wildflower New York rigorously demonstrates the criteria detailed in the Institute’s 2018 RFP, which are consistent with the New York Charter Schools Act of 1998 (as amended, the “Act”).

Based on the proposal, as amended, and the foregoing:

The Institute recommends that the SUNY Trustees approve the proposal to establish the **Wildflower New York Charter School**.

Findings

Based on the comprehensive review of the proposal and interviews of the applicant and the proposed education corporation board of trustees, the Institute makes the following findings.

1. The charter school described in the proposal meets the requirements of Article 56 of the Education Law and other applicable laws, rules, and regulations as reflected in (among other things):
 - the inclusion of appropriate policies and procedures for the provision of services and programs for students with disabilities and English language learners (“ELLs”);
 - the required policies for addressing the issues related to student discipline, personnel matters, and health services;
 - an admissions policy that complies with the Act and federal law;
 - the inclusion of the proposed by-laws for the operation of the education corporation’s board of trustees; and,
 - the inclusion of an analysis of the projected fiscal and programmatic impact of the school on surrounding public and private schools.
2. The applicant has demonstrated the ability to operate the school in an educationally and fiscally sound manner as reflected in (among other things):
 - the provision of an educational program that meets or exceeds the state performance standards;
 - the articulation of a culture of self-evaluation and accountability at both the administrative and board level;
 - the student achievement goals articulated by the applicant;
 - an appropriate roster of educational personnel;
 - a sound mission statement;
 - a comprehensive assessment plan;
 - the provision of sound start-up, first-year, and five-year budget plans;
 - a plan to acquire comprehensive general liability insurance to include any vehicles, employees, and property;
 - evidence of adequate community support for, and interest in, the charter school sufficient to allow the school to reach its anticipated enrollment;
 - the inclusion of descriptions of programmatic and independent fiscal audits, with fiscal audits occurring at least annually;
 - the inclusion of a school calendar and school day schedule that provide at least as much instruction time during the school year as required of other public schools; and,
 - the inclusion of methods and strategies for serving students with disabilities in compliance with federal laws and regulations.
3. Granting the proposal is likely to: a) have a significant educational benefit to the students expected to attend the proposed charter school; b) improve student learning and achievement; and, c) materially further the purposes of the Act. This finding is supported by (among other things):

- an authentic Montessori program, which provides a century-old, innovative approach to academics and school culture not currently available to families in the South Bronx;
 - a distinctive micro-school model where students learn in mixed-age shopfront classrooms intended to integrate the school with its surrounding community;
 - a unique management structure that empowers two teacher-leaders to oversee all aspects of school management, thus ensuring that all features of the school are tightly coupled;
 - an educational model focused that “whole child” that in addition to academic skills develops students’ independence, self-efficacy, and executive functioning skills; and,
 - organizational support from TWF, which will provide monetary backing and increase the school’s capacity in a variety of areas related to organizational management.
4. The proposed charter school would meet or exceed enrollment and retention targets, as prescribed by the SUNY Trustees, of students with disabilities, ELLs, and students who are eligible applicants for the federal Free and Reduced Price Lunch (“FRPL”) program as required by Education Law § 2852(9-a)(b)(i).
 5. The applicant has conducted public outreach for the school, in conformity with a thorough and meaningful public review process prescribed by the SUNY Trustees, to solicit community input regarding the proposed charter school and to address comments received from the impacted community concerning the educational and programmatic needs of students in conformity with Education Law § 2852(9-a)(b)(ii).
 6. The Institute has determined that the proposal rigorously demonstrates the criteria and best satisfies the objectives contained within the RFP, and, therefore, is a “qualified application” within the meaning of Education Law § 2852(9-a)(d) that should be submitted to the New York State Board of Regents (the “Board of Regents”) for approval.

The Institute developed the RFP “in a manner that facilitate[d] a thoughtful review of charter school applications, consider[ed] the demand for charter schools by the community, and s[ought] to locate charter schools in a region or regions where there may be a lack of alternatives and access to charter schools would provide new alternatives within the local public education system that would offer the greatest educational benefit to students,” in accordance with Education Law § 2852(9-a)(b). The Institute also posted the draft RFP for public comment and responded to same.

The Institute conducted a rigorous evaluation of the proposal under consideration including academic and fiscal soundness, and legal reviews. In addition, the Institute engaged independent consultants to evaluate the academic, fiscal, and organizational soundness of the school based on the criteria set forth in the RFP. Pursuant to its protocols, the Institute, as well as Trustee Joseph Belluck, Chairman of the SUNY Trustees’ Charter Schools Committee, conducted interviews with the applicant, the proposed board of trustees, and key Wildflower New York school leadership.

Background and Description

The first Wildflower school opened in Massachusetts in 2014 as a private early education program developed through the Media Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Over the next two

years, seven additional schools opened in Massachusetts and Puerto Rico as the organization refined its model and academic approach. There are currently 21 Wildflower schools operating in Massachusetts, Indiana, Kentucky, Minnesota, and Puerto Rico with several schools in development in other states as well. The schools contract with TWF for financial, instructional, and operational support.

The Wildflower model is unique in that the schools are typically located in small shopfronts with the goal of visually integrating the school and community environments such that children and families become a visible part of the surrounding neighborhood. Wildflower schools' uniqueness is further evidenced by their management structure in which two teacher-leaders divide responsibility for all administrative and instructional tasks at the school. The schools' small size – typically not more than 10 students per grade – enables teacher-leaders to oversee all aspects of school management including curriculum, instruction, operations, communication, and finance. Teacher-leaders work collaboratively in a non-hierarchical environment that facilitates autonomy, professional growth, and innovation. TWF supports school development by providing financial backing and resources for teacher-leader training and development.

Wildflower New York's lead applicant Mario Benabe, is a lifelong CSD 9 resident with experience as a teacher and administrator in district and charter schools. Mr. Benabe connected with TWF in 2017, and together they began to develop a vision for a publicly-funded Montessori school in the South Bronx.

Mission, Philosophy and Key Design Elements

Wildflower New York's mission is:

to offer tiny, shopfront, Montessori educational environments in which children have the tools and freedom to do the great work of constructing themselves, led by teachers operating as social entrepreneurs. Our students will develop strong academic foundations and skills in the areas of critical thinking, collaboration, creativity and communication, and grow into curious, capable contributors to their communities and the world.

All programming at Wildflower New York will be founded on the following key design elements:

- **Authentic Montessori method.** Wildflower New York will offer an authentic Montessori experience that focuses on child-directed learning in a mixed-age environment. Students in three-year age spans will learn collectively in open classroom environments purposefully designed to guide students through standards-aligned learning activities at a pace of their own choosing. Montessori-trained teachers will observe students according to a rigorous, research-based method and provide guidance intended to support students in mastering the required academic content while simultaneously developing their executive functioning skills and independence.
- **Montessori in an enriched environment.** The Montessori method places particular emphasis on classroom layout, and teachers spend significant time determining the placement of

furniture and supplies, the most important of which are the Montessori-specific materials that guide student learning. Wildflower New York's classroom will be a light-filled space that fosters creativity, exploration, and play. Students at all age levels take responsibility for cleaning and organizing classroom spaces, which promotes self-reliance and community accountability. Additionally, Wildflower classrooms incorporate the natural world by integrating plants, trees, and flowers into classroom and building designs.

- **Schools interconnected with the community beyond the classroom.** Wildflower classrooms are located in small shopfronts, which makes the work of educating students visible to passersby, thus creating interconnectedness between the schools and their communities. The school will rely on community vendors for services typically provided onsite in more traditional school settings. Wildflower New York will create alignment between children's home and school environments by encouraging parent/guardian participation in school activities and maintaining regular communication with students' families. Moreover, the school will maintain an equity-centered worldview that celebrates diversity and inclusion, as evidenced by the school's plan to enroll students of varying racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds and its implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy.
- **A school model committed to innovation and teacher leadership.** Wildflower New York will be an innovative, entrepreneurial environment that encourages innovation and novel ideas. Teacher-leaders will use scientific, data-driven methods to evaluate the efficacy of new approaches and make adjustments as necessary. Further, the school's unique management structure and small size will encourage accountability and autonomy among teacher-leaders and empower them to make day-to-day decisions aligned with the needs of their particular students and their families.

Calendar and Schedule

Wildflower New York will offer 180 days of instruction. The first day of instruction for the 2019-20 school year will be on or around August 28, 2019, and the last day will be on or around June 24, 2020. Subsequent school years will follow a similar calendar. The school day will begin each morning at 8:00 A.M. and end at 4:00 P.M. Wildflower New York will provide students with a total of approximately 1,116 hours of instruction, including tutoring, each year. This represents an increase over the state minimum of 900 hours mandated by Education Law § 2851(2)(n) and 8 NYCRR § 175.5 for 1st–6th grade and provided at the majority of schools within the district.

Academic Program

Wildflower New York will offer an authentic Montessori academic program in mixed-aged classrooms where two co-teacher-leaders oversee all aspects of curriculum and instruction. Wildflower New York intends to apply for authority from the New York City Department of Education ("NYCDOE" or the "district") to operate a three- and four-year-old pre-Kindergarten program, thus enabling the school to teach to students in three-year age spans at full capacity. Wildflower New York classrooms have a morning and afternoon work cycle of three hours each, which is devoted to core academic work.

Instruction in Montessori classrooms differs from that in traditional academic settings in that teachers typically do not provide whole-class direct instruction in specific subjects; rather, students select specialized classroom materials aligned to a particular skill while teacher-leaders observe students' work and take detailed notes. Teacher-leaders provide guidance and intervene if students require support, but the pace and content of the work is primarily student-driven. By not imposing a particular subject or activity on students, teachers foster an interdisciplinary approach to learning in which students may gain exposure to multiple content areas simultaneously. The result of this unique model is that teacher-leaders do not provide instruction according to traditional subject areas (e.g., English language arts ("ELA") and mathematics); instead, teacher-leaders use their observation notes to track student progress over time and ensure that students master skills aligned to the New York State standards for each grade level and subject area.

Primary Curriculum (Pre-Kindergarten – Kindergarten)

Instruction for students in the three- to six-year-old age span will focus primarily on language development through physical touch. Students will interact with classroom materials such as alphabet tiles to learn letters and their corresponding sounds in order to develop the foundational skills for reading and writing. Wooden rods, beads, and number tiles will help students develop numeracy skills and intuit the foundations for addition and subtraction.

Lower Elementary Curriculum (1st – 3rd Grade)

In 1st – 3rd grade Wildflower New York will divide student work into ELA, mathematics, and cultural studies, which encompasses social studies and science. Students continue to use Montessori materials to develop discrete skills in each subject area including reading comprehension, grammar and spelling, and creative writing in ELA; operations, fractions and decimals, and probability in mathematics; and, cause and effect, geography, engineering, and biology in cultural studies.

Upper Elementary Curriculum (4th – 6th Grade)

In 4th – 6th grade Wildflower New York will continue to divide student work into ELA, mathematics, and cultural studies. Specific topics include advance grammar, research projects, and etymology in ELA; multiplication and division, ratios and proportions, and introduction to geometry in mathematics; and, ancient civilizations, United States history, geology, and astronomy in cultural studies.

School Culture and Discipline

Wildflower New York will cultivate a school culture that values students' personal freedoms while simultaneously holding them accountable for their actions. The school will implement the principles of two research-based programs, conscious discipline and restorative justice, as the foundation for its culture and discipline program. Conscious discipline is a comprehensive classroom management program and social-emotional curriculum based on brain and child development research and developmentally appropriate practices. The concept of a "school family" is paramount within the conscious discipline program, which focuses on seven discrete skills: composure; encouragement; assertiveness; choices; positive intent; empathy; and, consequences. Restorative justice is an approach to student discipline that views misconduct as a violation that is damaging to relationships and affects both individuals and the larger school community. Within a restorative justice model, students receive consequences for misbehavior intended to repair the harm done to the community, such as replacing, repairing, cleaning, or apologizing.

Organizational Capacity

As detailed above, Wildflower New York's teacher-leaders retain primary responsibility for all aspects of school management, including curriculum, instruction, operations, communication, and financial oversight. TWF will support Wildflower New York by securing and funding technical support and teacher-leader coaching and development; facilitating the sharing of best practices among schools in the Wildflower network; supporting teacher-leaders with facility selection, lease negotiation, and construction management support; providing a site coordinator to facilitate the sharing of information between TWF and the school; and, providing assistance to the education corporation board to create effective governance processes.

Governance

The proposed by-laws of Wildflower New York indicate that the education corporation board will consist of no fewer than seven and no more than 15 voting members. The proposed initial members of the board of trustees are as follows:

1. Claudia Hamilton (Proposed Trustee)

Ms. Hamilton is a former Montessori teacher with strong continuing ties to Metropolitan Montessori School in Manhattan. She received her training in Montessori Primary (ages 3 to 6) education at Princeton Center Teacher Education and has a bachelor of science from Vanderbilt University Peabody College in child development and educational studies.

2. Stephanie Lancet (Proposed Trustee)

Ms. Lancet is a nonprofit professional who currently works with the National Center for Special Education In Charter Schools team to advocate for students with diverse learning needs and their ability to access and thrive in public charter schools. Ms. Lancet received her master's degree in education from Teachers College, Columbia University and her bachelor's degree in economics and philosophy from Boston College.

3. Emily Stone Gelb (Proposed Trustee)

Ms. Gelb began her career in education as a teacher in New York City public schools. She has since held progressively responsible roles at Teach for America and is currently vice president of executive director onboarding, where she leads the program for new executive directors in their first year. Ms. Gelb graduated from Harvard with a bachelor of arts in history and teaching certification from Harvard's Graduate School of Education. She also earned a master of business administration from Harvard Business School.

4. Javier Saldana (Proposed Trustee)

Mr. Saldana is a public administration professional with over 12 years of experience in developing and implementing initiatives that enhance employee and departmental performance. He is currently the workforce development manager at Hostos Community College in the South Bronx. Mr. Saldana is an education advocate in the South Bronx and was born, lives, and works in South Bronx, NY. He has degrees from Metropolitan College of New York and New York Institute of Technology.

5. William Haft (Proposed Trustee)

Mr. Haft is managing partner of Tandem Learning Partners. He is an education attorney and consultant with extensive experience in the charter school sector in roles such as vice president of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers. Mr. Haft is a graduate of Carleton College, Harvard Law School, and Arizona State University's Graduate School of Education.

6. Vivian Louie (Proposed Trustee)

Ms. Louie is Assistant NYC Commissioner of Housing. She formerly served as Assistant NYC Commissioner of Homeless Services. She has extensive experience managing people and funds. She also served in the grants management department of EdisonLearning, where she worked on charter school finance issues. She is a graduate of the University of Michigan School of Social Work.

7. Terrance Nance (Proposed Trustee)

Mr. Nance is a visual artist, filmmaker, professor, and Guggenheim Fellow. Mr. Nance is an education advocate and former teacher who supported the design of the first Wildflower schools in Massachusetts as an MIT Media Lab Fellow. He has degrees from New York University and Northeastern University.

8. Lucy Castilla (Proposed Trustee)

Ms. Castillo serves as chief governance and equity officer for Charter Board Partners, an organization that specializes in facilitating good governance in charter schools. She was formerly a senior managing director of Teach for America and attended Baruch College and Seton Hall University.

Facilities

Wildflower New York is committed to serving the Morrisania community in CSD 9 in the South Bronx, and has explored the neighborhood to identify viable facility options that will work with the particular requirements of the Montessori micro-school model the school seeks to implement. The school intends to explore all potential facility options and will inquire with the NYCDOE to determine whether there is an appropriate public facility where Wildflower New York can co-locate in shopfront space with the support of the community. Should co-located space not be available, the school intends to seek a private space. Wildflower New York has determined that there are numerous affordable, vacant storefront locations that fit their specific requirements in CSD 9. Some of these buildings are existing structures with vacancies; others are low-income housing facilities currently under construction, with retail space on the ground floor. The school has been in contact with numerous commercial realtors regarding these buildings and has obtained availability projections and price quotes.

Fiscal Impact

The fiscal impact of Wildflower New York on the district is summarized below.

Wildflower New York Charter School

	(A)	(B)	(C)	(D)	(E)	(F)	(G)
Charter Year	Expected Number of Students	Basic Charter School Per Pupil Aid	Projected Per Pupil Revenue (A x B)	Other District Revenue (SPED Funding, Food Service, Grants, Etc.)	Total Project Funding from District to Charter School (C+D)	NYC School District Budget	Projected District Impact (E/F)
Year 1 (2019-20)	18	\$15,307	\$275,526	\$130,910	\$406,436	\$25,600,000,000	0.002%
Year 5 (2023-24)	77	\$15,307	\$1,178,639	\$565,509	\$1,744,148	\$25,600,000,000	0.007%

*The NYCDOE budget was derived from the NYCDOE's website: <http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/funding/overview>.

The Institute finds that the fiscal impact of the proposed school on the district, public charter, public district, and nonpublic schools in the same geographic area will be minimal. In the event that the school opens with a slightly larger enrollment, the Institute has determined that the fiscal impact of the proposed school on the District, public charter, public district, and nonpublic schools in the same geographic area will also be minimal.

The Institute reviewed the school's proposed startup and fiscal plans and supporting evidence for each year of the proposed charter term. The Institute conducted further review into the Business Plan submitted as part of the application and specifically the philanthropic support assumed in the application and determined that support to be viable and reasonable. The Institute finds the budgets and fiscal plans are sound and that sufficient start-up funds will be available to the new charter school.

Notification and Public Comments

The Institute notified the district as well as public and private schools in the same geographic area of the proposed school about receipt of the proposal, and the proposal was posted on the Institute's website for public review. The district scheduled a public hearing pertaining to the proposal for September 17, 2018. A summary of public comments provided to the Institute is provided in Appendix C. The Institute carefully reviews and considers all public comments received prior to finalizing its recommendation.

Preference Scoring

Education Law § 2852(9-a)(c) requires authorizers to establish and apply preference criteria to applications meeting both statute and authorizer standards. The purpose of the criteria is to prioritize proposals in the event that the number of proposals meeting the SUNY Trustees' requirements exceeds the maximum number of charters available for issue. The RFP identified the

minimum eligibility requirements and preference criteria required by Education Law § 2852(9-a), as described in greater detail below. The proposal met the eligibility requirements, as evidenced by the following:

- the proposal was sufficiently complete, i.e., it included a Transmittal Sheet, Proposal Summary and responses to all RFP requests as prescribed by the Institute;
- the proposal included a viable plan to meet the enrollment and retention targets established by the SUNY Trustees for students with disabilities, ELLs, and students who are eligible to participate in the FRPL program (as detailed in Request No. 15); and,
- the proposal provided evidence of public outreach that conforms to the Act and the process prescribed by the SUNY Trustees for the purpose of soliciting and incorporating community input regarding the proposed charter school and its academic program (as detailed in Request No. 3).

As the proposal submission met the eligibility criteria, the Institute's evaluation continued with a full review of the proposal, an interview of the founding team and members of the proposed board of trustees, and requests for clarification and/or amendments to the proposal. The review process then continued with an evaluation of the proposal in relation to the 10 Preference Criteria contained in the RFP for which proposals can earn credit as described in the RFP's Preference Scoring Guidance. In the event of a tie for the last charter, both proposals will be rejected unless one applicant agrees to withdraw his or her proposal for consideration in a subsequent RFP. The preference criteria, which in addition to eligibility criteria and the overall high standards established by the SUNY Trustees, include the demonstration of the following in compliance with Education Law §§ 2852(9-a)(c)(i)-(viii):

- increasing student achievement and decreasing student achievement gaps in reading/language arts and mathematics;
- increasing high school graduation rates and focusing on serving specific high school student populations including, but not limited to, students at risk of not obtaining a high school diploma, re-enrolled high school drop-outs, and students with academic skills below grade level;
- focusing on the academic achievement of middle school students and preparing them for a successful transition to high school;
- utilizing high-quality assessments designed to measure a student's knowledge, understanding of, and ability to apply critical concepts through the use of a variety of item types and formats;
- increasing the acquisition, adoption, and use of local instructional improvement systems that provide teachers, principals, and administrators with the information and resources they need to inform and improve their instructional practices, decision-making, and overall effectiveness;
- partnering with low performing public schools in the area to share best educational practices and innovations;
- demonstrating the management and leadership techniques necessary to overcome initial start-up problems to establish a thriving, financially viable charter school; and,
- demonstrating the support of the school district in which the proposed charter school will be located and the intent to establish an ongoing relationship with such school district.

The proposed school earned a score of 15.5 preference points out of a total of 45. Based on this score and the other information and findings set forth herein, the Institute recommends that the

SUNY trustees approve the proposal to establish the Wildflower New York Charter School, which does not exceed the statutory limit of 28 charters in New York City permitted by Education Law § 2852(9)(a).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on its review and findings, the Institute recommends that the SUNY Trustees approve the proposal to establish the **Wildflower New York Charter School** education corporation and approve its authority to operate one school of the same name to open in August 2019.

APPENDIX B

Wildflower New York Charter School

Basic Identification Information

Lead Applicant(s):	Mario Benabe
Management Company:	The Wildflower Foundation
Partner Organization:	None
Location (District):	CSD 9
Student Pop./Grade Span at Scale:	Kindergarten – 5 th
Opening Date:	August 28, 2019

APPENDIX C



Summary of Public Comments Received During the SUNY Public Comment Period through September 26, 2018

On or about July 17, 2018 in accordance with Education Law § 2857(1), the Institute notified the NYCDOE as well as public and private schools in the same geographic area of the proposed school about receipt of the proposal to establish Wildflower New York. The notice reminded the district that the New York State Commissioner of Education's regulations require the school district to hold a public hearing within 30 days of the notice for each new charter application. A redacted copy of the proposal was also posted on the Institute's website for public review at:

<http://www.newyorkcharters.org/request-for-proposals/2018-request-for-proposals-round-2-fall-cycle/wildflower-new-york-charter-school/>.

The district scheduled a public hearing pertaining to the proposed school for September 17, 2018. 13 people attended the meeting and three spoke in support of the proposed school, citing its hands-on structure as a reason why they welcome this school in the community.

The Institute received direct comments in the form of letters of support from Ruben Diaz, Jr., Bronx Borough President; Gustavo Rivera, State Senator from New York's 33rd district; and, Nora Floor, education director of the James Walton Fund. The letters cited Wildflower New York's unique school model and its child-centered approach in their support of the school. The Institute also received several independent comments of support from members of the community via email.