

# Iowa State Board of Education

## Executive Summary

January 11, 2024



- Agenda Item:** Empowering Excellence Charter School
- State Board Priority:** All
- State Board Role/Authority:** Per Iowa Administrative Code 256E, the State Board shall approve or deny a charter school application.
- Presenter(s):** Tina Wahlert, Chief  
Bureau of School Improvement
- Janet A. Boyd, Consultant  
Bureau of School Improvement
- Attachment(s):** One
- Recommendation:** It is recommended that the State Board approve the charter with or without conditions per the Application Summary.
- Background:** Iowa Code 256E established a charter school law, where both local school boards and founding groups may apply to the State Board for approval to establish and operate a charter school. Charter schools, under this law, are a part of the state’s program of public education. Empowering Excellence Charter School applied under the founding group-state board model. Iowa Administrative Rule chapter 19 states that in order to operate a charter school for the 2024-2025 school year, applications are due no later than November 1, 2023, and the Empowering

Excellence Charter School application was received prior to the deadline. Department staff have scored the charter school application, completed an interview with the applicant, and attended a public forum with residents, all of which are required components of the application.



January 11, 2024

# Empowering Excellence Charter School Application

## Background

[Iowa Code 256E](#) established a new charter school law in Iowa that affirmed charter schools shall be a part of the state's public education system. The law allows for two different charter school models; the school board-state board model and the founding group-state board model. In conjunction with Iowa Code 256E, the Iowa State Board of Education has also approved [Iowa Administrative Rule Chapter 19](#). Chapter 19 establishes specific application deadlines, additional performance criteria, and finance modifications for charter schools. The deadline established in Chapter 19 to submit an application to open a charter school during the 2024-25 school year was November 1, 2023 11:59 pm.

The Iowa Department of Education (Department) received a founding group-state board model application from Empowering Excellence. The applicant was notified via email the application was received before the deadline and was under review.

## Applicant Overview

As indicated in the application, Empowering Excellence values improved learning, well-being, and post-secondary success for students who are at-risk of dropping out. They are committed to increasing learning opportunities for STEAM and STEM, work-based learning opportunities, and early literacy along with greater flexibility to meet the educational needs of a diverse student population. Empowering Excellence provided their vision for the proposed charter as:

*Our vision is to Cultivate students who are prepared for life after high school through mentoring, educational counseling, and career-related programs.*

Details regarding grades served, target population, location, opening date and requested waivers are provided in Table 1 below.

**Table 1. Empowering Excellence Details**

Grade Levels	Target Population	Proposed location	Opening date	Waivers requested
11th and 12th	Underserved students	Cedar Rapids	Fall of 2024	256.11 (offer and teach) 279.10, subsection 1 (1080 hours)

## Application Review Process

Iowa Code 256E.5 subsection 5 states:

*In reviewing and evaluating charter school applications, the state board shall employ procedures, practices, and criteria consistent with nationally recognized principles and standards for reviewing charter school applications. Each application review shall include thorough evaluation of the written application, an in-person interview with the applicant, and an opportunity in a public forum for local residents of the public school district within which the applicant proposes to locate the charter school to learn about and provide input on each application.*

The Department completed the following to adhere to the requirements of Code 256E.5:

1. [Implemented a Review Process](#) to review each submitted application using the Charter School Scoring Rubric aligned to Iowa Code 256E.
2. [Conducted an Interview Process](#) based on the application review results, and aligned with Iowa Code 256E.
3. [Supported a Public Forum](#) within the community identified within the application.

## Review Process

The Department organized each application for review, and selected reviewers based on expertise in the bureaus of School Improvement and School Business Operations. Reviewer training was conducted on November 6, 2023 that included a review of Iowa Code 256E and an extensive discussion of each required component of the written application. Reviewers were assigned applications to review using the Charter School Scoring Rubric based on a three-point likert scale aligned to Iowa Code 256E.

In addition, on November 8, 2023 the Department conducted an applicant webinar with slide presentation to define the parameters of the interview and public forum. The webinar was recorded and provided to all applicants.

A summary of Empowering Excellence's strengths, challenges and average reviewer score is provided below.

### Strengths

The following items were identified by Department staff as strengths - Empowering Excellence provides:

- A strong connection with students and ability to re-engage students who have given up;
- Personalized, flexible educational services focused on what students need as they need it;
- A committed governing board (e.g., members attended the interview and public forum);
- A good understanding of the Iowa standards and Chapter 12;
- Demonstrated success in serving students at risk in the Cedar Rapids Community School District; and
- Solid community support with testimonials within the application, a letter of support from Goodwill and community representation at the November 28th public forum.

### Challenges

The following items were identified by Department staff as challenges - Empowering Excellence:

- May encounter challenges starting and operating a school separate from the local school district; and
- Has limited financial resources, which may cause difficulty as the charter grows.

### Average Reviewer Score

**The average reviewer score for Empowering Excellence is 51.9 with a range of 51-54.** The reviewer score summary is available upon request. Note that the rubric is on a 3-point likert scale where, in general:

- 0=item is not addressed
- 1=item is addressed as intended
- 2=item is addressed as intended, and the applicant provided additional information

\*There are 48 possible items to rate on the scoring rubric, however 3 of these items are not required that an applicant address. If an applicant scores a 1 at a minimum across each scored item, the maximum points possible is a total average score of 45.

## Interview Process

The Department conducted interviews with each applicant. Each question was based on Iowa Code 256E, as well as on the results of the application review. Therefore, each applicant was asked a series of common

questions, with additional applicant-specific questions. A schedule of the interview is provided in Table 2 below.

**Table 2. In person interview with applicant**

Founding Group/Department participants	Date	Location	Questions
Empowering Youth of Iowa (EYI): Sarah Swazy, Jim West, Joseph Nyugen Department: Janet Boyd, Barbara Ohlund	November 28, 2023 3:00 pm to 5:00 pm	Empowering Youth of Iowa 1800 1st Ave NE #201, Cedar Rapids, IA 52402	Questions were based on the purposes outlined in 256E and any additional questions from the application. A summary of the interview is available upon request.

## Public Forum

The Department supported public forums for each applicant. Two department staff were present at each public forum. All forums were recorded. Details of Empowering Excellence’s public forum are provided in Table 3 below.

**Table 3. Public Forum for local residents**

Founding Group/Department participants	Date	Location	Public Present
Empowering Youth of Iowa (EYI): Sarah Swazy, Jim West, Joseph Nyugen Department: Janet Boyd, Barbara Ohlund	November 28, 2023 5:00 pm to 6:00 pm	Empowering Youth of Iowa 1800 1st Ave NE #201, Cedar Rapids, IA 52402	Iowa Coalition for Public Charter Schools: Mike Huguélet Public Members: Approximately 22

## Recommendation

Empowering Excellence Charter School received an average score of 51.9 across the required components in Iowa Code 256E. The applicant responded affirmatively to all of the assurances and conditions in the charter school application. The applicant did request waivers. The submitted calendar indicates a start date prior to the required August 23rd date, legal counsel advises the applicant is exempt from Iowa Code 279.10 (1). It is recommended that the State Board approve the charter, with or without conditions.

### Conditions:

*In accordance with Iowa Code 256E.5 subsection 8. The state board shall approve a charter school application if the application satisfies the requirements of this chapter. The state board shall approve or deny a charter school application no later than seventy-five calendar days after the application is received. If the state board denies an application, the state board shall provide notice of denial to the applicant in writing within thirty days after board action. The notice shall specify the exact reasons for denial and provide documentation supporting those reasons. An approval decision may include, if appropriate, reasonable conditions that the applicant must meet before a charter school contract may be executed pursuant to section 256E.6. An approved charter application shall not serve as a charter school contract.*

**Potential Conditions:**

- Provide documentation to the Department of Education as requested.
- Meet with the Department of Education as requested.
- Required meetings with Student Reporting and School Business consultants.
- Any other items needed or requested by the Iowa State Board of Education.