

# PHASE I: Letter of Intent

Created Tuesday, February 10, 2015

## Page 1

Applicant groups and Existing Education Corporations interested in submitting an application to establish Regents-authorized charter schools are asked to complete this brief information sheet. The Department will use this information to plan and coordinate peer review panels with appropriate expertise to evaluate all application materials.

Please indicate whether an Applicant Group or an Existing Education Corporation is submitting this Round 1 Letter of Intent.

Applicant Group LOI to establish a single, brand new charter school

## Proposed Charter School Name

(Please write out the formal and full name for the school you proposed, and include the words "charter" and "school" in the proposed name(s)).

School Name	Aurora Academy Charter High School
Grades Served (K-5, .6-8, 9-12, etc.) During Initial Term	9-12
Number of Students During Initial Term	250

Proposed or Current Board Chair and Public Contact information, including mailing address, phone number, and email address.

(The entire chart may not be visible on your screen. Use the "tab" key to move from column to column. The first column will remain static as you do so).

	First and Last Name	Best Phone Number (###-###-####)	Email Address
Proposed/Current Board Chair	Elizabeth R. Wright	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
Public/Media Contact Person	Elizabeth R. Wright	716-839-8442	ewright2@daemen.edu

If available, please provide the URL to the website established for the proposed school or existing education corporation.

tinyurl.com/auroraacademych

Proposed Management and/or Partner Organization(s), such as a charter or educational management company or a university, academic program partner, or whole school change partner.

(See pages 45-46 of the application kit for definitions and guidance as only "substantial" partnerships should be listed here).

Proposed Management Company
Partner Organization 1
Partner Organization 2

Lead Applicant(s) Signature and Date

Use your PC mouse or your mobile device stylist to sign your name below.

Lead or Co-Applicant listed in section c above.

(Internet Explorer may not support this feature. Open the portal using Google Chrome, Firefox, or Safari).

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sergio A. Wright". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'S' and a distinct 'W'.

Date Signed (Lead or Co-Applicant)

2015/02/10

Thank you for completing this survey so that the Department may plan its review panel accordingly.

**a. Public contact:** The public may find out more information about the proposed Aurora Academy Charter High School by going to our website at: [tinyurl.com/auroraacademy](http://tinyurl.com/auroraacademy) At that site, an email address for lead applicant Elizabeth Wright can be found at [REDACTED]

**b. Application History:** Applicant Karen Wegst was an active founder of Pinnacle Charter School. The application was submitted in 2002 and approved by the NYS Board of Regents. Pinnacle Charter School opened in Fall of 2003. Karen Wegst remained on the Board of Trustees from 2003-2005.

## II. Proposed Charter School Information

- a. Proposed school name (include the words “charter” and “school” in the name);
- b. Aurora Academy Charter High School : This name is derived from the Aurora Borealis, which can be seen in Finland and in the northernmost parts of United States, thus bridging the two cultures and providing inspiration as a source of diverse and ever-changing light.
- c. **Proposed school location** (school district or community school district in New York City). Indicate whether the applicant group has requested to be sited in school district facilities;

The proposed location is the City of Buffalo. We have begun explorations of sites currently owned by the City of Buffalo that might be appropriate if retrofitted to meet our needs.

**Planned grades and enrollment** in each of the year of the proposed charter term;

Fall 2016 Year 1: Grades 9 and 10 (125 students at each grade level)

Fall 2017 Year 2: Grades 9, 10 and 11 (125 students at each grade level)

Fall 2018 Year 3: Grades 9, 10, 11 and 12 (125 students at each grade level)

Any students beyond the planned enrollment will be waitlisted and a lottery will be implemented for any future openings.

- d. **Proposed Management and/or Partner Organization(s)**, such as a charter or educational management company or a university, academic program partner, or whole school change partner;

While several community entities have relationships with Aurora Academy at this time, no financial partnerships related to the Charter are currently in place.

**e. Proposed School Mission:**

The mission of the Aurora Academy Charter School is to meet and exceed the New York State Common Core Learning Standards through personalized study paths preparing students for college and career readiness.

The mission is operationalized by supporting students to “experience, design and do” through holistic, research-based individualized study paths grounded in a school culture of equity and autonomy, while establishing the Aurora Academy as a regional Professional Development School of teaching excellence.

**f. School Overview:** A brief description of the design of the proposed school, including any innovative design elements that might require specific expertise to evaluate during the review process. For replications, please also discuss the extent to which school the design elements vary from the model school. Do not duplicate overview in section (h) below.

We propose a fusion of workable elements of the Finnish Upper Secondary School and Vocational models, and the New York State public high school model, offered within a public Charter High School.

For our students, we propose a Finnish-inspired school year calendar and daily structure (190 instructional days, with three tri-mesters that are segmented into two 6-7 week periods of instruction each, with a 90 minute rotational block schedule with 15 minute breaks between blocks, and free breakfast and lunch for all students) (**see Appendix 2 School Year, and Appendix 3 School Week**). We further propose a Finnish-based student schedule (individual pathways chosen by students called “trays” within multi-grade classes so as to remove stigma associated with any lack of success in any regents-based course). Trays are developed in collaboration with an assigned academic advisor. We further propose a curricular calendar, which, while compliant with NYSED requirements and aiming to achieve mastery of the Common Core learning standards and passage of the requisite Regents Exams, presents the curricula in Finnish-style six week segments followed by a testing week, thus “chunking” content-rich curricula into manageable segments (periods) within each of three trimesters. This calendar allows for frequent benchmark testing of students, prior to the high-stakes testing environment of the Regents exams, and allows opportunities for student-specific remediation. Students with organizational deficits, learning disabilities, and English language learners will also benefit from this planned “chunking” of the curriculum (**see Appendix 4 Division of Curricular Content, Appendix 5 Course Tray and Appendix 6 Sample Student Tray**). Also, as in Finland, we propose offering vocational/career opportunities for students while they attend Aurora Academy. Specifically, we plan to offer college credit for teacher preparation courses taken during the senior year at the school, and an opportunity for students to roll up into regional participating teacher preparation programs. This consortium of regional teacher preparation programs, and our goal to make Aurora Academy a true Professional Development School for future teachers, is discussed later in this Letter. For those students who are not ready to commit to higher education, but are interested in education-related professions, we also propose offering courses during the senior year that prepare students for teacher aid and teaching assistant positions upon graduation. Finally, we propose two additional non-curricular opportunities for our students. First, we will offer a weekly social- emotional support course for all our students called “SISU” where students learn the skill sets needed to show grit and persevere in high school and in life. This course will be based on the research of Angela Duckworth et al. (2007) regarding “grit” and Daniel H. Pink’s book titled Drive (2009). Sisu is a Finnish word which means to persevere against all odds. We will also offer personal development courses for students who wish to pursue a hobby, internship, career interest, or participate in service to the community. These independent project-based experiences will be developed by faculty members in cooperation with local cultural attractions and will meet requirements necessary to earn elective credit for students.

For our faculty, we propose a re-professionalized teaching environment achieved through the cultivation of teacher-leaders within the school. An American Chief Academic Officer will be hired

along with Finnish Director of Effective Pedagogy and School Culture. The hiring of our Finnish member of the leadership team and a teaching faculty member hired to turn-key pedagogical aspects of the Finnish educational system to the school's teachers through professional development, will be facilitated through a relationship with EduCluster, Finland Limited. EduCluster is part of the school's advisory board. A particular priority for the teaching faculty will be the co-development of a creative Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Math (STEAM) project-based curriculum to be implemented in alignment with the Common Core learning standards and in cooperation with cultural partnerships within the city of Buffalo. A relationship has been developed with the Teacher Leadership Quality Partnership (TLQP) administered at Daemen College by Dr. Jeffrey Arnold, and we look forward to additional meaningful professional development inclusive of GESA training (Generating Expectations for Student Achievement: An Equitable Approach to Educational Excellence for all teaching faculty. All faculty members will remain subject to a rigorous evaluation system modeled on Charlotte Danielson in order to comply with APPR requirements. The school will operate within the parameters and expectations established within NYSED's Performance Framework and benchmarks.

As stated previously, through this model, we also plan to create a professional development school for teacher candidates affiliated with a consortium of regional teacher preparation programs. Daemen College has already developed CITEP, the Center for International Teacher and Educator Preparation. Through this entity, we are currently conducting research on the attitudes and values of teacher candidates who engage in exchange opportunities in Finland, and we are sending students from consortium member teacher preparation programs abroad to Finland. While we need to seek funding in order to expand the consortium and its reach to additional programs, currently, Niagara University is working in partnership with Daemen College through CITEP and a Niagara University graduate level teacher candidate is currently in Finland at the University of Jyväskylä with a Daemen College graduate level teacher candidate. We hope to receive funding to allow additional exchange opportunities for Aurora Academy Charter School teachers and teacher candidates who roll up into consortium member teacher preparation programs. We also look forward to opportunities for pedagogical discussions between teacher candidates at the University of Jyväskylä and consortium member teacher candidates through the international use of instructional technologies. Finally, it should be noted that CITEP has an MOA with the University of Jyväskylä and its affiliated Teacher Training School (what we would call a Professional Development School). Additional opportunities for international student communication between Aurora Academy students and students at the Teacher Training Upper Secondary School also exist and are ripe for study by faculty at consortium member institutions.

If successful, our applicant group envisions a cascade/replication of this model within city schools across Buffalo, the region and the State. We believe that Buffalo can serve as an exemplar for how High Schools should educate young adults in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, rather than as a talking point for failure within our Governor's State of the State (Opportunity Agenda) address (January 21, 2015) (see **Appendix 7 Emerging Justification for Education Model** ).

**g. Target Population/Community Served:** Briefly describe the school's target population and the community that the school intends to serve;

Finnish schools are guided by the theories of John Dewey. Under this paradigm, all students can learn if given proper opportunities and support. We will appropriately serve all students who apply to the Charter, and will follow Charter guidelines for all acceptances, along with the creation of a lottery process, if needed. Our target population is City of Buffalo high school students.

**h. Replication of High Quality School Models:**

Not Applicable

**III. Enrollment and retention of students with disabilities, English language learners, and students who are eligible applicants for the free and reduced price lunch program. (For replication applications, please explain the extent to which strategies may vary from those used by the model school).**

Describe the school's strategies to attract, recruit and retain its students, specifically:

- a. Those identified in the school's mission,
  - b. Students with disabilities,
  - c. English language learners, and
  - d. Students who are eligible applicants for the free and reduced price lunch program.
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- a. Students identified in our mission include all students eligible to attend Buffalo Public High Schools. We believe all students can learn with appropriate supports (Dewey). All students will receive academic advisement from the academic counsellor and individualized assistance to select their "Tray" of courses. All students will participate in the weekly "SISU" course and will receive personal development training around drive, perseverance and grit as studied by Angela Duckworth et.al 2007 and Daniel Pink (2009) as well as training regarding cooperative learning through projects. We believe that active personal development and social/emotional skill building within our "SISU" period will aid in retention.
  - b. Students with disabilities under IDEA or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 will receive instruction as determined appropriate by the Buffalo School District Committee on Special Education. Students in need of special education and or related services will receive such services from a certified special education teacher as dictated by their Individualized Education Plan (IEP). We believe that students with disabilities will benefit from the block schedule with built in breaks and "chunked" calendar with frequent curriculum based measures, and this will lead to better retention rates for identified students with disabilities.
  - c. English Language Learners will be actively recruited with Spanish recruitment materials and advertisement. Additional recruitment materials will be printed in more diverse languages (e.g. Arabic if we are located in south Buffalo, and Somali or Burmese if we are located on the West side of Buffalo) if necessary, once the school location is determined. All students who qualify for ELL services will receive them from a qualified ELL instructor. These services will contribute to retention efforts.
  - d. All students who attend the school will receive a free breakfast and lunch as in Finland. The school will determine eligibility as prescribed by Federal law and meet all reporting requirements. We will then use school budget funds to underwrite receipt of free breakfast and lunch for the remaining students attending the school. We believe that if

all students in attendance at school are not hungry, it will aid in a daily attendance and overall retention.

#### **IV. Public Outreach and Community Support**

- a. Describe the public outreach conducted to date to solicit community input regarding the proposed school. This may include public meetings held, discussions with community parents, stakeholders or organizations, public awareness campaigns, media coverage or results from surveys conducted.

Elizabeth R. Wright developed, along with the applicant group and advisory board, a logo for the school. The logo has been made into business cards, letterhead and envelopes. The logo is also on the home page of the proposed charter website, [tinyurl.com/auroraacademy](http://tinyurl.com/auroraacademy). Elizabeth Wright also participated in a radio interview on February 4<sup>th</sup> on the Brian Rusk Report, am radio 540. This interview will air Saturday, February 14, 2015 from 6:30am-7:00 am in seven states. She explained key elements of the proposed school. The applicant group also arranged four (4) informational meetings at Riverside, Niagara, Merriweather, and Dudley Buffalo public library branches within the month of February. A two-week ad, at a cost of \$250.00 has been placed in the Buffalo Rocket, a community newspaper that reaches constituents residing in Buffalo neighborhoods wherein the branch libraries are located (see **Appendix 8**). The meetings are also posted on the proposed Charter web page and the City of Buffalo library site <http://www.buffalolib.org/content/library-locations>

- b. Describe your initial assessment of parent interest in your proposed charter school to allow the school to reach its anticipated enrollment. Include in your response a description/analysis of any data you have collected to support the initial assessment of interest.

A community resident affiliated with The Greater Emmanuel Temple Church (Bisa Drayton) distributed a flyer before and after services on Sunday February 8<sup>th</sup> (**Appendix 9**). Individuals who received the flyer were asked to sign a roster indicating interest in the Charter. Eight (8) signatures were obtained. In addition, a community resident affiliated with the Delavan-Grider Community Center (Moe Badger) distributed the same flyer (see **Appendix 9**) and had community members sign a roster as well. Fourteen (14) signatures were obtained. Both rosters will be available along with rosters from the information sessions throughout the month of February in the full application. Both individuals are willing to continue their efforts on behalf of the proposed charter High School. In addition, our website has had 177 hits since its establishment and contains a tab to request information. Four inquiries have been received to date.

#### **V. Proposed Board Chair Signature and Date**



Elizabeth R. Wright, Esq. Proposed Board of Trustees Chairperson  
2/10/2015

NAME OF APPLICANT GROUP MEMBER	EMAIL ADDRESS	CURRENT EMPLOYMENT
Elizabeth R. Wright Esq.	[REDACTED]	Associate Dean, Education Department, Assistant Professor, Daemen College
Michael Brogan	[REDACTED]	Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of Daemen College
Karen Wegst	[REDACTED]	Retired School Principal/Adjunct Faculty, Daemen College Education Department
Paul Vermette	[REDACTED]	Associate Professor School of Education, Niagara University
Karla Gadley	[REDACTED]	Vice President First Niagara Bank

**TABLE 1: APPLICANT GROUP INFORMATION****\*Minimum of 5 members must be designated as Trustees**

<b>RELEVANT EXPERIENCE, SKILLS, AND ROLE ON APPLICANT GROUP (Key Words)</b>	<b>PROPOSED ROLE (if any) (Trustee, Employee, Consultant, or None Continuing Role)</b>	<b>PROPOSED POSITION ON THE BOARD (e.g., officer, trustee, or constituent representative)</b>	<b>LENGTH OF INITIAL TERM</b>	<b>VOTING MEMBER (YES OR NO)</b>
Education Law/Special Education Law Attorney/Legal Communications	Trustee	Board of Trustees Chair Person	3 Years	Yes
Program Fiscal Management/Health Science Curriculum Development	Trustee	Board of Trustee Members	2 Years	Yes
School Wide Professional Development	Trustee	Board of Trustee Members	3 Years	Yes
Pedagogy/Curriculum Development	Trustee	Board of Trustee Members	2 Years	Yes
Finance Fiscal Management	Trustee	Board of Trustee Members	2 Years	Yes