



# PHASE I: Letter of Intent

Last updated: 06/10/2015

## Basic Contact and Application Information

### 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	716-839-8442	<a href="mailto:ewright2@daemen.edu">ewright2@daemen.edu</a>
Public/Media Contact Person	Elizabeth R. Wright	716-839-8442	<a href="mailto:ewright2@daemen.edu">ewright2@daemen.edu</a>

### **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	(No response)
Partner Organization 1	Daemen College
Partner Organization 2	University of Jyvaskyla/Educluster Finland Limited

**Proposed Board Chair Signature**

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

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light gray background. The signature reads "Elizabeth R. Wright" in a cursive script. The first name "Elizabeth" is written in a large, flowing cursive. The middle initial "R." is smaller and more compact. The last name "Wright" is also in a large, flowing cursive.

**Date**

2015/06/10

**Thank you for completing this form.**

## I. Applicant Group Information



a. and b. See Table 1 Attachment

c. **Public contact:** Elizabeth Wright; phone: 716-839-8442; email : [erwpug@roadrunner.com](mailto:erwpug@roadrunner.com)

d. **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. The school subsequently closed well after her tenure on the Board ended.

## II. Proposed Charter School Information

a. **Proposed school name:** Aurora Academy Charter High School

b. **Proposed school location:** City of Buffalo. We are exploring the currently vacant former Pinnacle Charter School location with the Neil Development Group (115 Ash Street, Buffalo NY 14204).

c. **Planned grades and enrollment:**

Grant Year	Grade (s)	Enrollment per grade	Total enrollment
Fall 2016 Year 1	9 and 10	125	250
Fall 2017 Year 2	9,10, and 11	125	375
Fall 2018 Year 3	9,10,11,and12	125	500
Fall 2019 Year 4	9,10,11,and12	125	500
Fall 2020 Year 5	9,10,11,and12	125	500

d. **Proposed Management and/or Partner Organization(s):** The Charter plans to work closely with Daemen College, the University of Jyväskylä, Department of Education, EduCluster Finland, Ltd., Niagara University, and regional vocational training institutions e.g. Erie County Community College, Niagara County Community College, etc. to fulfill its mission. In addition, in order to support our targeted students with economically disadvantaged backgrounds, we will further partner with local not for profit agencies including Baker Victory Services, Parent Network WNY, Say Yes, Buffalo and Kids Escaping Drugs. We will also implement our mission by building regional partnerships with cultural and community organizations such as Albright Knox Art Gallery and the Buffalo Science Museum in order to implement a project-based learning curriculum linked to Regents exam requirements.

e. **Proposed School Mission:** The mission of the Aurora Academy Charter School is to meet and exceed the New York State Common Core Learning Standard through personalized study paths and project-based learning opportunities that prepare students for college and career readiness. The mission is operationalized by supporting students, **particularly those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds**, to “experience, design and do” through holistic, research-based individualized study paths and project-based learning opportunities, grounded in a school culture of equity and autonomy, while establishing Aurora Academy as a regional Professional Development School of teacher training excellence.

f. **School Overview:** 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 New York State 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. 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 also 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.

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 and vocational opportunities. 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 or other meaningful vocational opportunities. We plan to work with regional career-focused institutions (e.g. Erie County Community College, Niagara County Community College etc.) as well as Daemen College and Niagara University to develop programming that works for all our students. 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” (a Finnish word meaning “to persevere against all odds”) wherein students learn the skill sets needed to demonstrate 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). 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 and community organizations 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 Academic Culture. The hiring of the 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 international 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 NYS Common Core learning standards and Regents requirements, and in cooperation with cultural partnerships within the city of Buffalo. In addition, proposed Board Member, Dr. Joanne Sadler will work with faculty to develop additional **cross curricular projects for students that integrate Regents materials in English and Global History with the unique history and culture of the east side of Buffalo, including topics such as the underground railroad, the Colored Musicians Club, the Locust Street Arts Center, the oral story-telling tradition, and poetry slamming.** A relationship has also 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 **Charter School Performance Framework** and benchmarks.

Through this model, we also plan to create a professional development school for teacher candidates affiliated with a consortium of regional teacher preparation and vocational programs. Daemen College has already received funding and has 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 additional 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. Specifically, a Daemen College graduate teacher candidate, along with a Niagara University graduate level teacher candidate exchanged to the University of Jyväskylä, Department of Education in Finland spring 2015. Preliminary research findings were presented in June at the 2015 Conference of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education. 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 can educate young urban adults in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

**g. Target Population/Community Served:** 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. Our target population is City of Buffalo high school students, **with a particular focus on students who have socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds**. Based on the 2013-2014 District Report Card, 76% of students residing in the district are from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, with 13% of the population coming from Limited English Proficient backgrounds, while 21% of the populations of students are students with special needs.

**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.**

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

- a. Students identified in our mission** include all students eligible to attend Buffalo Public High Schools, with particular emphasis on **students experiencing a socio-economic disadvantage**. Currently, 76% of the BPS students come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. We believe all students can learn with appropriate supports (Dewey). We will **attract and recruit** students through a **planned media campaign** targeting students experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, students with disabilities, English Language Learners, and students receiving free and reduced lunch. **Recruitment goals will be grounded in BPS demographic data**. We will set annual goals to **attract and recruit** a percentage of students experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage proportionate to those students identified throughout the BPS District (76% or higher).
- b. Students with Disabilities** identified 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 in compliance with their IEP and or 504 Plan as appropriate. **We will actively seek to attract students with disabilities to our school through our comprehensive media campaign referenced in III.a. above**. We will set annual goals to **attract and recruit** a percentage of students with disabilities proportionate to those students identified with disabilities throughout the district (21%).

We will develop a Special Education Parent-Teacher Association to support open parent-teacher communication and parental involvement, and will work closely with **The Parent Network of WNY** to provide accurate and important information and training to families around issues impacting students with disabilities. We believe that students with disabilities will benefit from the block schedule with built in breaks and “chunked” curriculum with frequent curriculum based measures, and this will lead to better retention rates for identified students with disabilities. We will set annual goals to **attract and recruit** a percentage of students with disabilities proportionate to those students identified with disabilities throughout the district (21%).

- c. **We will attract and actively recruit English Language Learners** with school materials and advertisement materials written and communicated in Spanish and other high-incidence languages (translation available through **the International Institute of Buffalo**) as part of comprehensive media campaign referenced in III.a and b. above. We will set an annual recruitment goal proportionate to 13% of students requiring ELL services found in the District’s enrolment. Additional recruitment materials will be printed in more diverse languages as needed. Students who qualify for ELL services will receive them from a qualified ELL instructor.
- d. We will set annual goals to **attract and recruit** a percentage of students eligible to receive free and reduced lunch proportionate to those students identified as qualifying for free and reduced lunch within the BPS District (79%). **We will budget to have 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 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 daily attendance and overall retention. A wellness model with support services available on site will be used to support the overall health and well being of students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds who require free and reduced lunch, and all our students. These concepts will be made part of our comprehensive media campaign to attract and retain students, referenced in III. a-c above.

**Describe the school’s strategies to retain its students, specifically:**

- a. 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 plan to partner with not for profit support agencies (**Baker Victory Services, The Parent Network of Western New York, Kids Escaping Drugs, and Hispanics United**) and will potentially house an office for each of these organizations that support our students on the second floor of the Ash street location. Such co-location would benefit the students and community, and allow for community health and wellness fairs to easily and regularly be held on site. We will actively work with **Say Yes, Buffalo** in order to implement an effective plan to **retain** students who are successfully recruited in an effort to well surpass Buffalo’s 2013-2014 graduation rate of 53% (District Report Card 2013-2014). **We will set high expectations for retention and graduation at 80% or higher by the time the first freshman cohort graduates (spring 2019), with each year’s rate closing the gap towards 80% by half. We also anticipate that 20% of students will attain NYSED’s Aspirational Goals for ELA/Math (80% or higher) and diploma’s received (80% or higher).**
- b. We will develop a Special Education Parent-Teacher Association to support open parent-teacher communication and parental involvement, and will work closely with **The Parent Network of WNY** to provide accurate and important information and training to families around issues impacting students with disabilities. Well informed families and students, involved in the transition planning portion of an IEP will have greater persistence to graduation. We also believe that students with disabilities will benefit from the block schedule with built in breaks and “chunked” curriculum with frequent curriculum based measures, and that this schedule will lead to better retention rates for identified students with disabilities. These students will be part of a **retention plan** developed in cooperation with **Say Yes, Buffalo. We will set high expectations for retention and graduation at 80% or higher by the time the first freshman cohort graduates (spring 2019), with each year’s rate closing the gap towards 80% by half. We also anticipate that 20% of students will attain NYSED’s Aspirational Goals for ELA/Math (80% or higher) and diploma’s received (80% or higher).**
- c. We anticipate working with Hispanics United to offer culturally appropriate support services to our Latino and Latina students, and with the TLQP to ensure a school academic environment of equality, as all faculty will be GESA trained through our partnership with TLQP. These students will be part of a **retention plan** developed in cooperation with **Say**

**Yes, Buffalo. We will set high expectations for retention and graduation at 80% or higher by the time the first freshman cohort graduates (spring 2019), with each year's rate closing the gap towards 80% by half. We also anticipate that 20% of students will attain NYSED's Aspirational Goals for ELA/Math (80% or higher) and diploma's received (80% or higher).**

- d. We believe that if all students in attendance at school are not hungry, it will aid in daily attendance and overall retention. A wellness model with support services available on site will be used to support the overall health and well being of students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds who require free and reduced lunch. These students will be part of a **retention plan** developed in cooperation with **Say Yes, Buffalo. We will set high expectations for retention and graduation at 80% or higher by the time the first freshman cohort graduates (spring 2019), with each year's rate closing the gap towards 80% by half. We also anticipate that 20% of students will attain NYSED's Aspirational Goals for ELA/Math (80% or higher) and diploma's received (80% or higher).**

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

a. **Describe the public outreach conducted to date to solicit community input regarding the proposed school.** In spring, 2015, Board representatives attended 11 community events and meetings, and distributed 300 flyers. Examples include block club meetings, wellness fairs, and the purchase of a table at the recent Juneteenth celebration in MLK Park on June 13, 2015. The applicant group and advisory board developed a logo for the school. The logo has been made into business cards, letterhead and envelopes and can be found so on the home page of the proposed charter website, <http://tinyurl.com/auroraacademych>. The applicant group also developed a community interest survey that was distributed at wellness fairs, community meetings, and community events. So far, 54 people have taken the survey with 91% being Buffalo residents. 85% of the survey completers think a Charter High School like Aurora Academy is needed in Buffalo. Elizabeth Wright also participated in radio interviews on February 4<sup>th</sup> on the Brian Rusk Report, am radio 540, and WBLK News and Views May, 2015 (recording available on our website). We also held 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 was placed in the Buffalo Rocket, a community newspaper that reaches constituents residing in Buffalo neighborhoods wherein the branch libraries are located. The meetings were also posted on the proposed Charter web page and the City of Buffalo library site <http://www.buffalolib.org/content/library-locations>.

b. **b. Describe your initial assessment of parent interest in your proposed charter school:** Our website has had 1404 hits since its establishment in January 2015. We attribute the site's success in part to a community flyer with web site information that has been handed out the 15 events and informational meetings with more than 300 distributed flyers so far. As mentioned, 85% of the 54 survey respondents think that the Aurora Academy Charter High School is needed in Buffalo. Finally, our proposed school has been met with an incredible amount of community support. We currently possess letters from: Sam Radford, President District Parent Coordinating Council; Nathan Hare, CEO of the Community Action Organization; Erwin Rakoczy, Director, Filmore Corridor Neighborhood Coalition; South Buffalo Charter School, Brian M. Weisenger, Superintendent; Tapestry Charter School, Lynn Bass, High School Principal; Daemen College, Gary Olson, Ph.D. , President; TLQP, Jeffery Arnold, Ph.D. Director; Center for Sustainable Communities and Civic Engagement, Sharon Benz, Director; University of Jyvaskyla Department of Education, Tiina Silander, Ph.D., Chair; EduCluster, Finland Ltd., Elise Tarvainen, Executive Director; Niagara University, Department of Education, Debra A. Colley, Dean of College of Education; Say Yes, Buffalo, David P. Rust, Executive Director; The Parent Network WNY, Susan Barlow, Executive Director; Baker Victory Services, Terese M. Scofidio, CEO, and Albright Knox Art Gallery, Janne Siren, Ph.D., Director.

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



Table I Applicant Group Information

Applicant Group Member * Name/Email Address	Current employment	Relevant experience/skills and role on applicant group (Key Words)	Proposed role(s) if any (Trustee, Employee, or None)	Proposed Position on the board (e.g., officer, trustee, or constituent representative)	Length of initial term	Voting Member Y/N
Elizabeth R. Wright, Esq. [REDACTED]	Associate Dean, Education Department, Assistant Professor, Daemen College	Education Law/Special Education Law Attorney Legal/Communications	Trustee	Board of Trustees Officer, Board Chairperson	3 years	Y
Michael Brogan [REDACTED]	Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of Daemen College	Program Fiscal Management health/science curriculum development	Trustee	Board of Trustee Member	2 years	Y
Karen Wegst, M.S. [REDACTED]	Retired School Building Principal, Adjunct Faculty Daemen College Education Department	School –wide professional development	Trustee	Board of Trustee Member	3 years	Y
Paul Vermette, Ph.D. [REDACTED] <a href="#">u</a>	Associate Professor, School of Education, Niagara University	Pedagogy and Curriculum Development	Trustee	Board of Trustee Member	2 years	Y
Karla Gadley [REDACTED]	Vice President, First Niagara Bank	Finance, Fiscal Management	Trustee	Board of Trustee Member	2 years	Y
Theresa Guenther, Esq. [REDACTED]	Senior Clerk, Erie County Family Court	Family Court System navigation	Trustee	Board of Trustee Member	3 years	Y
Mark Brown, Ph.D. [REDACTED]	Associate Professor, School of Education Daemen College	Special Education expertise	Trustee	Board of Trustee Member	3 years	Y
Joanne Sadler Ph.D. [REDACTED]	Associate Professor School of Education Daemen College	Prior Buffalo Public School Administrator	Trustee	Board of Trustee Member	2 years	Y