

Public Comment
Public Charter School Applications

Laurel Virtual Academy

1. Linda Risdon

As a special education aide, I see the apathy in our schools, and many behavior issues as well. This is in the general education students, and not so much in our SpEd kids. There is a lack of parental involvement with those students, which just carries through to their lack of interest. These observances are noted daily. If the Charter School can help with that, I believe it would be a good option.

2. Rhonda Rosencranz

I strongly support the Laurel Public Schools application to become a charter school. We were part of a Charter school in UT. Both my child and I felt like it was a wonderful learning environment.

3. Joe Holzwarth
Laurel, MT

I am writing to you to express my opposition (at the current moment) to the Laurel Virtual Academy Charter School. I believe that technology has changed the way we need to evaluate teaching and how some kids can flourish in an online environment, but I believe there is some confusion as to how the charter school will operate. I have compiled a list of questions/concerns that I have had a hard time finding an answer for:

- Will the charter school operate outside of the local school district and local school board? If so, I am fully against the charter school. I do not believe we need a separate school outside of the school district and that the online component should be operated within the district and follow the same criteria for success as our local schools.
- What is the criteria for both students and educators that will be hired to administer the online academy? Before I can support a charter school, the criteria for success needs to be evaluated. Hiring teachers that do not meet the current standards and requirements that in person teachers are required to have would be detrimental to the potential success of online students - their standard for a thorough education should be the same.
- The information gathered currently states that if successful, the charter school will be funded with a \$400,000 grant. Is this a one time grant? Is it a yearly grant? Does the district need to reapply yearly or bi-annually to ensure funding? What grant program are the funds being pulled from? A mix of federal and state funding? Would it be taking a portion of local levies and applying it to the online academy? What happens if the grant is no longer available? If that funding isn't coming from a long term source, what is the long term plan to keep the charter school operational? Will funds be pulled from other areas within the county/district to cover the deficit? I would hate for the academy to get operational and have funding removed and collapse due to no long term objectives being established and shared with the community.

While I commend the idea of developing strategies to embrace technology and build programs to help more students succeed in getting a formal education that cannot attend in a traditional/public setting, until more information is disseminated to the public to review, I cannot support the Laurel Virtual Academy at this time. I also thoroughly believe that this should not be a separate entity, but should be a part of our local school district (that may be the case, but the information has been lacking and it has sounded like this is a separate entity outside the district). We have the opportunity to develop a hybrid program within our local

school district to allow kids to succeed in every situation. As a citizen of Laurel with children in the school district, I believe that building this hybrid is important, but it should be developed within the operation of the current school district and following their policies and procedures to ensure high levels of education. However, there is a lot of missing information and uncertainties with the current proposed iteration that I cannot support.

I firmly believe that the community of laurel does not need a separate charter school that operates separately from our local school district to meet these goals and objectives and the virtual portion should be incorporated into the local school district.

Thank you for your time and your ability to look at developing new ways to reach kids and build their education - it's a commendable feat.. I look forward to learning more about this proposal and project. If there needs to be any more clarification on my end, please don't hesitate to reach out to me at the below contact information.

**4. Ryane Holzwarth
Laurel, MT**

I am writing this email to express my concerns with the online Charter School being proposed for Laurel School District. I am opposing my views at this time due to lack of information in regards to how Laurel is going to sustain the program. I also have the following questions:

1. Even though I recognize the need for online teaching for students who are struggling in a classroom setting, has a study been conducted to see how many students this will benefit? How has the school assisted these students in a classroom setting and have there been documentation presented to the parents? Is the decision being based on student's testimony alone?
2. Is this opportunity being presented because of the decline in interest in the Public Education system due to lack of resources and funding for qualified teachers? Who is going to be the oversight into the Charter School? Is the school curriculum going to be in alignment with Laurel Public School? If not, what difference will this be compared to online home schools that are already in place?
3. What is the long-term plan for funding with this Charter School if the grant funds no longer apply? How will this look with the tax payers? Will it be presented in another Mill Levy? Will this take away from Public School funding where funding is already spread thin? How is the public going to stay informed if this passes?

Thank you for taking the time to look into my concerns. As much as I am so appreciative of the concerns for all students and innovative ways to assist students in reaching their full potential in the education system, I do feel that more studies and a firm plan needs to be established within our local Public Schools before outside resources are looked into. The public has the right to know the differences between Charter schools and Publicly funded schools and I would like to see the comparisons of successes and failures other states have seen with online Charter school models. If the board can present resources to the public prior to a final decision along with another public comment after materials have been presented so that the public has been better informed.

Libby Central Charter School

1. Diane Rewerts

I am writing to wholeheartedly express strong support for Libby School District's Charter School application. Libby School District works diligently to meet the needs of students and will enhance student

learning and allow for more flexibility in designing programs that reach our most vulnerable students. Libby Schools continually work to be accountable to the public and strive for continuous improvement

Montana Connections Academy

1. Diane Rewerts

I am writing in strong opposition to consideration of funding for a for profit charter school. Public dollars should be used for public schools and should not go to an out of state for profit entity.

Yellowstone Experience School (YES)

1. Meghaan Bauer Livingston, MT

I am writing in support of the Yellowstone Experience School's charter application. Our community is in dire need of options for students outside of the traditional classroom model or parochial school, as not all students excel in either of the aforementioned environments.

As a prior local School Board member & parent, I do not feel that the presence of a charter school detracts from our existing public schools but, rather, provides students with the opportunity to attend the school that best aligns with their needs.

Our teachers work hard to provide students with every available opportunity, and I feel that we can best support them by ensuring that their classroom is filled with students who benefit most from the teaching style being offered. I have no prior affiliation with YES, but I ask that you consider approving their application.

2. Veronica Collins Livingston, MT

I wanted to voice my support for the new charter school. I've struggled with the public school system in Livingston for years for my child with an IEP and would love to have other high school options. I think there are many families in the community that would like alternatives to the public school option based on conversations I'm having throughout the community. We are currently homeschooling for a couple of classes for one of our kids (the other is in full time attendance at the high school) and I feel that at some point out of a lack of options and decent support for our daughter's learning disability, that we may go to full time homeschooling. It would be much better for us to have another option in the creation of this charter school.

3. Emily Jones Livingston, MT

I am a Livingston resident in full support of our existing public schools. I have three children who are almost through the school system, and it has been everything they put into it. It has been a great experience.

I believe Livingston has been a strong community because we share the schools and other great organizations and institutions. I would love to see the creativity and energy of Yellowstone Experience School support our whole district and everyone in it. Add those resources to our schools instead of separating them and taking away from our schools. Schools can be, rightfully, slow to change, and most parents have

ideas about new or different ways of approaching education. That can feel less than perfect, and we all want perfect for our children. Still, I think fracturing into different schools instead of working together may weaken all schools and leave some kids behind. Our schools have budget and staff issues already. How can we support another?

**4. Janet Lidow
Livingston, MT**

I am writing to express my **strong opposition** to the proposed charter school, Yellowstone Experience School, in Park County. I am a resident of Livingston, MT within the Livingston Public School District boundary. The Livingston Public Schools offer solid educational experiences and many unique opportunities for their students (e.g., Farm to School and CSC programs). I have worked closely with the middle and high schools for the past 4 years through my nonprofit's mental health program. I have been consistently impressed with the resources and supports LPS offer their students. It would be a big mistake to create a charter school when excellent options are already available. As a taxpayer, I want to ensure that my taxes support high quality education for the children in my community. That already exists. I do not think a charter school is needed in Park County. It will result in costing the local taxpayers more money and result in poorer educational outcomes for students. Please do NOT approve the Yellowstone Experience School.

In general, I am opposed to charter schools because they do not have to meet the same standards that public schools. This is a disservice to children. Additionally, school districts in Montana are largely very small and have difficulty finding sufficient staff, particularly in rural regions. Adding charter schools will only increase the current qualified teacher shortage and fragment communities rather than improve the education and opportunities available to children.

**5. Satoshi Yamamoto
Livingston, MT**

I'd like to state my opinion regarding the possibility of building a charter school within Livingston School District as a parent and a school employee.

I personally see the point of building or organizing another school. It was only last year, 2023, that Washington School was closed down due to the financial reasons and the ever decreasing student enrollment.

So why would anyone consider having another school in Livingston?? Totally nonsense.

Another factor is that, due to ever increasing personal living costs - mostly renting a place to live in Montana, the school district has been having hard times to find and recruit teachers and staff.

I also know that the Livingston school district is hiring people every so often. Every now and then there is a shortage of bus drivers and there are many students/parents who can't sign them up.

So, if the city or the state has some funds to build and organize a new school, why wouldn't they apply those funds to the already-existing school to improve equipment and facilities and to hire enough employees?? Please discuss and come up with what is right for current students, parents, and employees.

**6. Ahnnika Herne
Livingston, MT**

I have a 9-year-old son in the public school system here in Livingston. I heard about this new school and was excited because I feel it is amazing. My son has had several issues since starting public school. He went to a Montessori school when he was younger, and we never had any problems. I feel the classrooms in public school are too large, there is not enough hands-on learning, and they are just not a good fit for us. However, we cannot afford private schools. I think this school would greatly help him overcome the horrible anxiety he experiences daily on the ride to school. I also think this school would reduce the bullying. Honestly, I would feel safer and better sending my son to Yes than to the other schools here. This school can do many great things for the community. I also like the real life curriculum, as an adult now I don't use have the stuff they teach in school.

**7. Yvonne Brutger
Livingston, MT**

I am writing to ask that The Board NOT approve the application for the Yellowstone Experience School in Livingston MT. I reside in the school district and I am the founder and current Board Member of the Community School Collaborative (CSC), a nonprofit that has an Interagency Agreement with the Livingston School District. CSC provides innovative career exploration education at Sleeping Giant Middle School. In this capacity I have worked extensively with the school administration and students and have seen the work that is being done to address the educational needs of all students. I believe approving a charter school in Livingston will siphon off students from the current district schools, decrease funds available and undermine the education of the students that attend those schools. The money that would be needed to establish and support the YES Charter School would be better used by the Livingston School District to improve and expand their educational programming. I also have a concern that students with significant behavioral issues or educational challenges will not be accepted at the YES.

**8. Joel Mowrey
Livingston, MT**

I am writing in regards to the proposed charter school in Livingston (Yellowstone Experience School - YES).

My quick response to YES is NO!

Livingston Public Schools are already underfunded and cannot afford to have any existing funds shifted to another school of questionable value and quality. In my estimation, both the public schools and the charter school will mutually suffer the same fate and consequences: neither of them will have adequate funding to provide a quality education.

According to 20-6-805, MCA, "only approve charters whose promise of improved educational outcomes outweighs potential increased costs to state and local taxpayer."

In the Livingston School district, we already have the foundation of a quality education but are severely limited by the lack of funding to enrich the experiences of all students. "Promises of improved educational outcomes" are just that - promises.

As a local citizen of Livingston and one who volunteers at the Sleeping Giant Middle School, I do not support the splitting of my tax dollars for a private school that does not currently exist and that appears to only enrich the pockets of the people forming the school. Why don't those individuals work with the local school and state government to pull all of our time and financial resources to support one school - the Livingston public school. Again, I strongly vote NO on the charter school!

**9. David and Alicia Herman
Livingston, MT**

I am writing to express my strong support for establishing a public charter school in Livingston, Montana. The current state of education within our school district, particularly at the middle school level, is deeply concerning and fails to meet the basic educational needs of our children.

The middle school has not met minimum accreditation standards for years, leaving students without consistent access to essential grade-level content. For instance, there is no yearlong science or history curriculum in place. My children, along with many others, have not had access to grade-level science instruction in two years.

Currently, when teachers are absent, there are no substitutes available, and students are placed in the cafeteria under the supervision of office staff via security cameras. There is not even an adult present, let alone being provided any sort of meaningful instruction. Additionally, students are given an hour of "advisory" daily, which often amounts to little more than homework club, playing games on chromebooks or silent reading. This approach does not offer the structured, grade-level learning opportunities our students need to succeed.

It is not surprising that our county now has more students being homeschooled or enrolled in private schools than attending public schools. This trend is a direct reflection of the district's inability to provide a robust and effective education. Low academic standards, frequent teacher resignations, behavioral disruptions, and a lack of enrichment opportunities have left families with few viable options.

While there has been some improvement in addressing behavioral issues with new administration at the middle school, the educational deficits remain staggering. Students who need advanced learning opportunities or those seeking to meet or exceed grade-level standards are particularly underserved.

Parents and students deserve a choice. A public charter school could provide the structured, rigorous, and innovative education that so many families in our community are seeking. It would offer an alternative for families who have lost confidence in the current system and could serve as a catalyst for improving public education standards across our county.

However, I must express a concern about oversight. Livingston Schools have consistently failed to meet minimum accreditation standards, and the local school board appears unaware of its supervisory responsibilities. Additionally, the board lacks educational professionals among its members. Entrusting charter and public school oversight to local boards in Montana has exacerbated inequities in education quality across communities. There appears to be insufficient oversight from the Board of Public Education (BPE) and the Office of Public Instruction (OPI), which further compounds these issues.

We urge the Board to consider the establishment of a public charter school in Livingston. Our children deserve access to quality education that meets minimum accreditation standards, provides opportunities to

engage with grade-level content and high-quality instruction, and prepares them for academic and future success.

10. Molly O’Neil
Livingston, MT

I am a resident within the Livingston Public School District. Please do NOT allow the charter school.

11. Cheyenne and Joseph Mikkelsen
Livingston, MT

My husband, Joseph, and I have two young daughters and live in Livingston, MT. I am writing to you to show our support of the Yellowstone Experience School. We are very excited and passionate about the prospect of this school coming to life. Livingston needs this for its current residents and for the growing population of our town. Our daughters would be students there, and I, personally, would love to be involved in this type of educational system. Thank you very much for your time and consideration!

12. Vicki Perry
Livingston, MT

On behalf of the Board of Directors of the Livingston Education Foundation I would like to submit that it is not our intention to include the YES District, if approved, in our scope of work.

The Livingston Education Foundation currently works with our community to support the Livingston School Districts 1&4. We partner with many organizations that are actively and innovatively teaching the youth in our schools. While we are in favor of looking outside the box and providing exceptional opportunities for the students in all of Park County, we feel that our current district and teachers are working to provide many of things proposed in the YES school application.

13. Ashley Rogers
Livingston, MT

I wanted to share my overwhelming support for the Yellowstone Experience School (YES). We are residence and home owners in Livingston. Adding a charter school and improving educational options could be a strong benefit to the community.

14. Molly Flynn-Berman

I’m writing this letter as the parent of three neurodiverse children to express my enthusiastic support for the establishment of the Yellowstone Experience School (YES) in Livingston. The unique educational opportunities this school promises to provide will be a transformative resource for families like mine and others in the area.

For neurodivergent children, finding an educational environment that fosters their individual strengths, accommodates their needs, and nurtures their potential can be challenging—especially in rural areas where specialized services are often limited. YES is poised to bridge this gap by offering an inclusive, innovative, and adaptable learning model tailored to diverse learners.

What particularly excites me about YES is its commitment to smaller class sizes, personalized learning plans, and access to trained educators who understand the unique needs of neurodivergent students. These features are crucial for my children's success. My children thrive in environments where there is understanding and flexibility—qualities that traditional schools, due to larger student populations and constrained resources, may struggle to provide consistently.

Moreover, the school's focus on experiential learning and social-emotional development aligns perfectly with the kind of support my children require to build confidence, develop critical life skills, and achieve academic success. This approach not only benefits neurodivergent students, but creates a learning culture where every child can excel.

As a parent, I've seen the profound impact that the right educational setting can have on a child's growth and well-being. All three of my children have attended schools run by Leslie Kennedy and Emily Post. The growth we witnessed from them while they were in the care of these dedicated educators was deeply transformative, both for them and for us as a family. YES, the brainchild of these women in partnership with Baily Goodwine, represents an opportunity to provide children with diverse learning needs a chance to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. It also offers parents in our community peace of mind, knowing that their children are in an environment where they are valued and supported. I have the deepest confidence and trust in Emily, Leslie, and Baily to not only meet the expectations of our community, but to exceed them.

I urge you to approve the establishment of the Yellowstone Experience School and support its mission to serve as a beacon of hope and opportunity for families in our area. This school has the potential to set a new standard for inclusive education in rural communities and to change the trajectory of countless lives—including my children's.

**15. Ashlie Sarah Slunaker
Livingston, MT**

I am currently a reading/math intervention teacher in Livingston Public Schools. I have many misgivings about the charter school that is being proposed in Livingston by Emily Post.

Ms. Post was previously the director/owner of Eduactio, a private elementary school here in Livingston, MT. Since its inception, we have had MANY students transfer into our school from Eduactio, and ALL have been SIGNIFICANTLY behind their peers in not only reading by math as well.

This year, specifically, I am working with a 2nd grader who did not know a SINGLE letter of the alphabet, yet Ms. Post assured his parents that it was not crucial that he learn to read as a 2nd grade student. He was never evaluated for a learning disability, although he has been flagged by EVERY scientifically based academic screener we have in place at Winans school. He has not responded to intervention and upon testing, was discovered to be a dyslexic student with double deficits in math and reading. This has happened not only this year but also the two years previous.

Should Ms. Post be allowed to open a charter school, I worry that students with disabilities will be handed over to our public school and overtax our systems. She has proven time and time again to not know what students with disabilities need or deserve in order to learn. I am disgusted by her philosophy of letting students fail while simultaneously charging parents an exorbitant price for her supposed educational expertise. A school with her as a leader will certainly be a failure.

16. Nickie Nelson
Livingston, MT

I am writing to share my thoughts about the Yellowstone Experience School as an educator and concerned citizen of Livingston. I have been a teacher for 20+ years both in California and Montana. I currently work at Winans Primary School and teach first grade.

While I do feel there is a need for an education option for families and children who don't thrive in the traditional school model, especially in grades 6-12, I am deeply concerned about the person who is spearheading this project. Emily Post (owner of Educatio) has made a name for herself as a person who has provided low quality education experiences that have resulted in dramatic lags in proficiency.

I have am friends with two families who attended Educatio and in both cases, the students were up to 2 years behind in grade level proficiency in math and reading skills. I was asked to tutor one of these students and gave her a standardized assessment for first grade which she did not pass as a 3rd grader. This is alarming. Her handwriting skills, writing and math skills, and overall education appeared to have been lacking in all areas.

In addition, it was shared with me that the staff who worked for Emily Post were also not paid the wages they were earned as Ms. Post had mismanaged her funds and was forced to close her doors and shut the school down. This left the families in her attendance in a difficult position. They had no school to attend and were very behind academically.

The concept of Yellowstone Experience School (YES), as a "magnet" type school such as a project-based learning option, would benefit our community as an alternative choice for children who would prosper in a different academic setting. However, the management of that school and design would require a skilled and proven leader, which Emily Post is not.

The YES charter school would pull resources and funding from Livingston's public schools that are already facing difficulties due to budget cuts. Opening YES would offer a subpar experience by a leader who has produced results that are far from desirable. I truly believe this would be a mistake and a gross misuse of funds that are needed by our public schools in Livingston.

17. Crystal Cropper
Livingston, MT

I wanted to share our experience with Educatio last year (2023/2024) and hopefully help stress the importance and need for such schools in our rural community.

While we only had one year to experience the wonderful services that Educatio provided, it was one of the best years we had had educationally in the 4 years we had lived in Montana. Being the "new kid" is not an easy thing for children to endure here in this rural setting, where many of the children have grown up with each other and have been in the same classroom together since kindergarten. Educatio provided a safe and caring environment that is imperative for children's self esteem and healthy development. Educatio and their staff were also there for us during one of the most difficult years of our life. The safe and caring environment of this school was exactly what we needed after a very unexpected personal loss. The individualized education that my child recieved during this year helped tremendously and the real life experiences they offered the students are not something you often see offered in a public school setting (I am sure, due some of the restraints that are often put on public schools). The experiences these students

were given were truly impactful. From real world experience such as learning about the city and state they live in, to banking, ordering and purchasing their own lunches at local restaurants, coming up with their own fundraising ideas and implementing them, to an amazing informational trip to Washington DC; the opportunities were huge and not something you typically see in a larger school setting. My child is thriving in the school he is in now (academically and socially) and a part of the credit for this goes to Educatio and its educators for setting the students up for success. Had the option to continue at Educatio been available this year, we would have done so.

In my time working in education as a district testing coordinator and other various roles here in Montana I have noticed the rural setting in this area limits different educational opportunities, especially for grades 7-12. This area is, unfortunately, lacking in offering different opportunities for educational needs and the addition of a school such as Yellowstone Experience School would greatly bridge those gaps and offer students and their families an additional option in their educational needs, especially if they are noticing that those needs are not being met with the current options in this area.

Over the years educational needs of students have changed significantly and are continuing to change constantly and I can only see the addition of such a school as a benefit to the community for years to come.

18. Tara Livermore Livingston, MT

I am an MTSS Coordinator in Livingston and I am writing a public comment about the Yellowstone Experience School (YES) that is being considered as a public charter school in our district.

In our district, there have been multiple privately funded schools that seem to be a promise for families of a more project-based approach. These schools tend to last a very short time for whatever reason. In the event of these schools shutting down, these students are pushed back into our public school system.

Educatio, previously owned and operated by Emily Post, was a school that looked like a fun, exciting place for students to learn. But when the school closed due to poor financial management, these students were sent to our public school system and it was very apparent that these students had little academics being taught to them. During initial screening at Winans, students from Educatio were grade levels below in benchmark testing in Literacy and Math. I also have friends in the community that feel like their children that attended Educatio were cheated out of an educational opportunity and paid for it financially and at the expense of their child's learning.

Aside from Academics, students with challenging behaviors seem to have little to no support within our private schools and Educatio alike. In the 2024-2025 academic school year, we have had three students that have had to leave their private school and sent our direction because the behaviors are too overwhelming for their schools. They do not have the resources like we have diligently worked hard to obtain over the course of the last ten years. Currently, at our school, we have many moving parts including an ABA certified behavior specialist working with students, contracted mental health provider services that supply our school with therapy for students exhibiting challenging behaviors and paraeducators that are able to follow through with intervention plans for students with these behavioral needs.

Livingston School District has a great product for students attending public school. We provide specialist classes, like Library, PE, Music and Guidance. Our special education services include specialized academic instruction from highly trained teachers and behavioral staff. Within that, we provide speech, physical and occupational therapy. Students who are challenged academically, but do not meet special education criteria

have support through our MTSS intervention model. Students in our schools, district-wide have access to individual behavioral therapy and family support. Parents and students have access to our partnership with the parent liaison program that gives resources assisting with basic family needs. Students have access to nurses to assist with their healthcare needs. Livingston's Farm to School program has given students healthy meals and opportunities to grow their own foods and learn about sustainability. The list can go on. There are so many great things happening in our schools that haven't always been in place and that is because we have worked so hard as a state, district and community to provide for our families and their children. I worry that charter schools, like YES, will pull from these resources that are already challenging to fund and staff.

19. Kris King
Livingston, MT

I am a tax payer within the Livingston Public School District giving public comment on the application of the Yellowstone Experience School (YES) public charter school. I have been paying into public school districts for over four decades despite having no children. This does not mean that I do not feel strongly about the importance of a public school education. I believe that Charter Schools take funds away from public schools, are less accountable and more vulnerable to individual or extreme belief agendas. The recent attacks on public school teacher curriculum, attempts to ban books and other extreme parental interference has some guard rails with school boards, teacher unions (I hope!) and public support of those under attack. I am not confident these guard rails would be in place at a charter school and would further undermine the overstretched public school budget.

20. Michele Boyd
Livingston, MT

I am a resident of Livingston as well as a retired teacher from the Livingston Public School System. Currently, I am a youth services librarian and a tutor. I am **NOT** in favor of the Yellowstone Experience School (YES) proposal for many reasons. A few of the key ones I will address here.

1. The women who have written this proposal are not licensed educators who know what it takes to run an accredited school and meet the educational needs of the children of Livingston.
2. They state the possibility of using Washington School as a learning site. This school was closed because it needs many updates and repairs which are very expensive and the expenses were not within the school district budget to fix. This building would not be suitable for K-12 students as everything in the building is suitable for young children, not young adults such as high school students. There is only one bathroom for boys and one for girls. Not a good situation for students ranging in ages 5-18.
3. They state over and over throughout their proposal of having a small teacher to student ratio. That would not be the case with 40 K-3 students in one classroom, which isn't even legal, nor are the classrooms large enough for that many students. Our public schools keep class sizes within accredited standards plus many if not most, of our primary classrooms have a second adult in the room to assist with students
4. They talk about contracting with the Park County Coop for special services. Quite honestly, they need at least one person if not 2 on site to help with special services whether that be speech, OT, 504 plans, or learning disabilities.

5. The proposed calendar is not conducive to consistent learning when they are constantly taking a full week off each month. Young children need consistency in their learning if they are going to make gains in reading, writing, and math skills , which are essential for the lower elementary students.

I could go on and on but I will stop here for now. I appreciate you taking the time to read my email and consider my comments that the YES proposal is not in the best interest of our children and community.

21. Joe Kmetz
Livingston, MT

I am a resident of Livingston with a daughter at Winans. I am writing to let you know that I am against the Yellowstone Experience School and I feel the board should not approve their application. I would much rather see our taxpayer money spent on our existing schools, teachers and resources already in place.

22. Rae Stevenson
Livingston, MT

I would like to speak out against the YES charter. I was born and raised in Livingston and its public school through Winans, Sleeping Giant and Park High which prepared me well for medical school and am now a physician in town. I was also raised by a teacher. I have been very concerned that our Montana teachers are short staffed and underpaid. There is nothing more equalizing or liberating than access to a high quality public school system. I plan to raise my boys in the Livingston Public School system. I know how hard teachers work and they deserve to be well compensated and fully staffed.

I really appreciate all that you do. We need to be certain that our core public education and amazing teachers are well funded and well supported before investing tax dollars in another school system.

23. Jennifer Sestrich
Livingston, MT

I am a resident of Livingston and reside in the Livingston school district. My three children have attended the Livingston schools for the past 12 years. I am against approval of the YES charter school as I fear this will detour funding for our already financially strapped school district. In addition, I feel that without standards for the charter school, when these students resume into the public school system, the lack of standards will create even more of a discrepancy in student competency which ends up affecting all the students in the class when the teachers end up trying to catch students up academically or fill in gaps that might have been missed. Approval of a public charter school in Livingston will have a negative effect on our students.

24. Piper Kmetz
Livingston, MT

I have a 7-year-old daughter who attends Winans Elementary. I am against the Charter School because I fear that it will take kids, funds and resources away from the public school system. We live in a small community and I strongly believe we need to pull TOGETHER to raise our Livingston children rather than divide apart. I fear that a charter school will further segregate children in this community economically as well. There are obviously people who are very passionate about education and children in Livingston and I think we would be best served to pour those passionate resources into the public school system we already have in operation. Together we can be stronger and I fear that divided we will just be separate, disjointed

and not as cohesive as an educational community. I would love to see resources pooled into the existing educational structures we have and not re-invent the wheel to further segregate our community.

25. Madeleine Doak
Livingston, MT

I am a Livingston resident within the public school district and a mother of 3 children who have been or are currently enrolled at Park High.

I am against the YES proposal. Our district is already struggling to find teachers to fill all the necessary positions and funding is spread thin. Another school is not necessary for our current population and would add to the difficulty of finding teachers and funding for the schools that already exist in our district. We need to focus on improving the existing schools and increasing pay for teachers rather than diluting resources by adding another school.

26. Rachael Jones
Livingston, MT

As a long-time Livingston resident, parent and executive director of a school-based nonprofit, I do not support this charter school application.

The proposal lacks much-needed school support, risks diverting resources from the existing public schools and does not clearly show how it will achieve better outcomes without adding financial strain to taxpayers. That said, I believe the school district has an opportunity to explore the positive elements of the application, such as innovative educational approaches, and use them to enhance its own offerings and strengthen community relations. I hope our community can build on what's already working in our schools while creating areas for improvement collaboratively.

I urge the Board to prioritize strengthening our current public schools and leveraging this moment to foster growth and innovation within the district.

27. Ben Hahn
Livingston, MT

As Dean of Students at Winans Primary School and resident within our Livingston school district, I, Ben Hahn, am incredibly proud to be a part of the Livingston Public School District. Our district is not just a hub of academic excellence but also a community that thrives on collaboration, innovation, and the unwavering commitment of its educators and staff. Each day, I witness the remarkable efforts of our teachers and support staff who create an environment where every child feels valued, supported, and encouraged to reach their full potential. The shared dedication to student success defines our schools and propels our district forward.

At Winans Primary School, I have had the privilege of seeing extraordinary growth in our students firsthand. From mastering foundational skills to developing a love for learning, our students inspire me with their curiosity, resilience, and enthusiasm. This growth is a direct result of the exceptional educators who invest time, creativity, and care into their teaching. They make learning meaningful and ensure every student is set up for success, creating a foundation that will serve them well throughout their academic journey and beyond.

This commitment to excellence extends beyond our classrooms. Recently, our teachers made us proud by participating in a national literacy summit, where they not only learned from leading experts but also showcased their own innovative practices. Hosting workshops and sharing research that gained national attention underscores the caliber of educators we have in our district. It is moments like these that highlight how Livingston Public Schools not only meets but exceeds the standard for educational leadership. Together, we are building a brighter future for every student who walks through our doors.

With all of this in mind, I am opposed to the establishment of the proposed YES Public Charter School, as our community simply does not require such an institution. Our current public schools are already meeting the needs of our students with strong academic programming and a deep understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities in our area. The introduction of a charter school risks diverting critical funding and resources from our existing schools, which have a proven track record of success. Furthermore, serious concerns must be raised about the ability of the YES founders to manage and sustain a school effectively, given their questionable track record in education. Without demonstrated competence and a clear, evidence-based justification for this school, I believe this initiative could do more harm than good for the families and students in our community.

**28. Genevieve Reid
Livingston, MT**

We are long time residents of Livingston and have had a child in the public schools here since 2006, our last will graduate in 2033(!!!). That's a lot of personal experience with the Livingston public school system with different kids, with different needs, different teachers, superintendents, principals etc. and 99% of our experiences have been positive. Teachers and administrators have been creative and responsive to children's needs and have worked to find solutions to institutional and individual problems.

Opening a charter school here, that offers no new solutions, is a distraction of attention and a dilution of limited resources with no clear need or benefit. Please do not approve this application for a new school in our community.

**29. Ann Fuer
Livingston, MT**

I had the good fortune of hosting the Forest School, the first iteration of the YES school, on my four acres in Livingston, Montana. Instead of being in a classroom, these children had formal lessons under a huge willow tree and by a creek. In free time, they discovered the secret lives of animals, birds, fish, insects, and reptiles. They fed chickens and red worms. First came their observation, then exploration, then understanding, then imagination and invention. There were answers and questions from the teacher. They learned to be considerate of their peers and the natural environment. They learned a deep understanding of how the world of Nature works; when the wind blows how does it affect the trees and creek water. They could see and feel how movement generates more movement. By being still they could be watchful; observation leads to inventions and in this busy world we need new solutions to how we can adapt to changing weather patterns and earth upheavals.

The currency of the future world will be in the relationships of trust between Nature and Humanity. The need for alternative education is a priority.

30. Lindsay Counts
Livingston, MT

I am a resident of Livingston, MT. My two children attend schools within the Livingston Public Schools District.

I do not support the implementation of YES Public Charter School at this time. Our financial resources for our public schools are stretched thin as it is without the addition of another school which seeks public funding. I would prefer we focus those resources on our current schools.

31. Quinten Counts
Livingston, MT

I am a resident of Livingston, MT. My two children attend schools within the Livingston Public Schools District. I do not support the implementation of YES Public Charter School at this time.

32. Baily Goodwine
Livingston, MT

I am writing to express my enthusiastic support for the Yellowstone Experience School (YES) and its mission to provide an innovative, community-centered education option for families in Livingston and the surrounding areas. As someone deeply connected to our community, I believe YES will address an important need for diverse and high-quality educational opportunities in Park County.

The Yellowstone Experience School offers a unique blend of rigorous academics, experiential learning, and character development. Its focus on cultivating critical thinking, environmental stewardship, and a love of lifelong learning is perfectly aligned with the values and needs of our community. By integrating Montana's rich cultural and natural heritage into its curriculum, YES will empower students to become engaged citizens and thoughtful leaders who are deeply rooted in their environment and history.

Livingston is a vibrant community, but like many rural areas, we face challenges in meeting the diverse educational needs of our families. YES will complement existing public school options by providing an alternative model tailored to hands-on learning and individual growth. This school will not only attract and retain families seeking innovative education for their children but will also strengthen our local economy and build a foundation for a more resilient and connected community.

The team behind YES is composed of passionate educators and community leaders dedicated to fostering an inclusive and collaborative environment. Their commitment to transparency, accountability, and high standards of academic excellence ensures that this school will be an asset to our region.

I urge the State Board of Education to approve the Yellowstone Experience School's charter application. This school represents a forward-thinking approach to education that will benefit students, families, and the broader Livingston community for generations to come.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or require further insight into the community's need for YES.

33. Chelsey Murphy
Livingston, MT

I am a Livingston Montana resident, mother, and educator. I specialize in Early Childhood Education and hold a Montessori Teaching Certificate.

As an educator, I fully believe that there is not one approach to education that fits the needs of all. This can be due to family values, beliefs, child personalities, and a proper and appropriate approach to educational engagement.

That being said, I do not feel that YES would be beneficial to our community at this time. One of the leading reasons for this is due to the foundation of people putting forth this proposal. The YES model has been adapted from a previously failed private school that was based on a project based curriculum. I LOVE this idea. However, many students, including my own child, experienced a highly inappropriate approach to learning and communication which drastically affected their reading scores while in the facility.

I have spoken to the founding board as well as the head of the project. I am also on the sounding board and have received the same feedback in this position. There has been no clear communication regarding their approach to education, curriculum, or standards they will set during the teacher hiring process. As a matter of fact, they are refusing to address community concerns as a whole for clarification and understanding.

If this Charter School was to be approved it would affect the community, schools, and students as a whole. Without appropriate planning and realistic understanding of what YES would be is concerning. Especially when it will directly affect our schools and the employment of the teachers we already have in place for our students. I wonder if this proposal would be most successful as a private entity.

34. Bob Westermann
Livingston, MT

Please note I am a resident, property owner, and tax payer within the boundaries of Livingston Public School District.

I believe in the power of quality public education as currently provided by Livingston Public Schools. I have personally witnessed excellent academic and social growth by my two grandson's who have attended Livingston Schools for 8 and 6 years respectively. Consolidation of Livingston's limited financial resources into one educational model is the BEST path forward. Funding a second option (YES) will harm the current schools and launch an educational model in Livingston that has demonstrated, over time, very limited academic success.

Please act in our children's best interests and deny the establishment of Yellowstone Experience School. Thank you for your time and consideration of my comments above.

35. Marshall Swearingen
Livingston, MT

Thank you for the opportunity to comment about the application for the proposed Yellowstone Experience School (YES) public charter school. I reside within the city of Livingston and have a six-year-old attending kindergarten at our public Winans Primary School.

In brief, although I sympathize with the goals of the YES organizers, I'm concerned about the impact to our Livingston public school system and encourage you to deny this application.

Prior to my son attending Winans, he went to a private Montessori daycare/school for almost five years. That school offers programs for children up through age 14. We were very happy with the care and education that our son received there, and view it as a good option if he needs a different educational environment in the future. The proposed YES curriculum seems to have a lot of overlap with Montessori in terms of project-based learning and giving individual attention and flexibility to students who may struggle with traditional curriculum. The Montessori school tuition was sometimes a challenge for us, although in the last couple years they have worked to connect parents with the financial support services available through the state.

Livingston has multiple Montessori schools and also the Educatio project-based private school. These are schools that have been established and maintained with private funding and tuition. I think it's great that we have these options for our kids. But I'm opposed to using our limited tax dollars to help fund a private charter school.

My son at Winans is already feeling the effects of the budget crunch in our school district. As you may know, kindergarten until recently had its own space at Washington school. Because of deferred maintenance and the fixed costs of operating in multiple locations (this is my understanding of the issue), Washington closed and kindergarten is now packed into Winans along with first and second grade. If we're struggling to fund our basic school infrastructure, how can we add and support an additional charter school within the district? This seems like a basic and obvious rationale for denying this application.

Our highest priority should be ensuring that our Livingston public schools have the resources they need to provide quality education to all our kids. Thank you for your consideration.

36. Jared White
Livingston, MT

I'm writing to share my concerns about the proposed charter school, Yellowstone Experience School (YES), in Livingston. As someone who is currently raising a 4-year old and 6-year old with the help of our public schools, I worry about what this might mean for our community.

Our public schools are already stretched thin, and funding YES would take even more resources away. Public schools rely on stable budgets to keep good teachers, run important programs, and give every kid a fair shot. If funding is pulled, it could hurt the schools most families in our community count on.

There's also the issue of accountability. YES wouldn't answer to our local school board, which means it wouldn't reflect the needs of Livingston families. That's a big deal for a small town like ours.

Lastly, charter schools like YES can create divisions. While it might attract some families, it risks leaving behind kids who need the most support, making our schools more unequal.

Instead of starting something new, I believe we should focus on making the schools we already have stronger. I ask the Board to reject this application and keep public education a priority for all our kids. Thank you for your time.

37. Kim Pfof
Livingston, MT

Please note I am a resident, property owner, and tax payer within the boundaries of Livingston Public School District.

I believe in the power of quality public education as currently provided by Livingston Public Schools. I have personally witnessed excellent academic and social growth by the many children of Livingston I associate with. Consolidation of Livingston's limited financial resources into one educational model is the BEST path forward. Funding a second option (YES) will harm the current schools and launch an educational model in Livingston that has demonstrated, over time, very limited academic success. Please act in our children's best interests and deny the establishment of Yellowstone Experience School.

38. Brogan Ballard
Livingston, MT

I am a Livingston resident, a father, and a Special Education teacher in Livingston. Thank you all for your hard work and dedication to education in Montana. I am reaching out to please urge you to **vote no on the Yellowstone Experience School charter school application.**

The YES Charter school is not in a place to start a public charter school at this time. Their application is incomplete and it would be unreasonable to expect them to be ready to open with their current staffing and location challenges.

The Livingston school board voted against the charter school because they do not see a viable way for the school to run successfully and feel it would take funding and resources away from the Livingston School District.

Lastly, this school would put additional, non-required, financial burdens on the residents of Livingston through additional levies/resource distribution.

It seems that all approved Charter schools in Montana have been under the umbrella of their home district and has ENHANCED the home district. The Yellowstone Experience School does not enhance our current district, students, or community. Thanks for all your hard work.

39. Shanna Webb
Livingston, MT

As a member of the Livingston community, local scout leader, and parent of a third grader at the public school, I would like to express my opinion against the formation of a charter school. I believe this to be an unnecessary addition to Livingston. Currently there are several alternative elementary schools in Park County available to our residents.

A charter school would take more from our children than it would contribute. In addition to much needed tax money being syphoned away from the public school our special services staff and support staff would be stretched to the limits of their patience.

I think it would be shortsighted not to consider the quality of life of our skillful and trained professionals. Many of our teachers have their own children in the public system. Can we afford to lose any of these people?

Instead I would encourage parents who have a strong desire to ensure a quality education to become a bigger part of our parent and school community. It is likely they are unaware of what is available to them and their child.

**40. KJ and Barth Schretenthaler
Livingston, MT**

We are long-time residents of Livingston, MT and have a 17 y.o. son in the public school system here. We are writing this email to express our opposition to the MT BOE approving the pending application from YES to become a public charter school in Livingston. We do not feel there is a need for this in our community, as several of their proposed programs are already offered in our school district. They are also proposing more administrative positions than teachers, creating added financial burden. Our public schools are not perfect, but they serve EVERYONE, including those with special needs. Our family and many others in our community are very pleased with Livingston Public Schools' teachers, administration and curriculum and don't want to see them lose students or funding by approving this poorly-planned public charter school. Our schools are already underfunded, which has worsened with decreased enrollment #'s during the pandemic. Therefore, we strongly encourage you to deny this application.

**41. Julie Williams
Livingston, MT**

I want to register my concerns about the Yellowstone Experience School (YES) charter application. I am writing as a resident of Park County as well as a parent to express my concerns with this charter application and the inaccuracies within it.

First, the charter application claims that the local school district building (Washington elementary) they hope to use was shut down due to low enrollment on the district. This is a flat out lie. The building was shut down due to much needed repairs that the school district could not fund with the current budget. There is a high probability this building will need to be repaired and reopened in the next few years due to the increase in births in Park county from 2021-today. The classrooms that were in Washington are all currently housed in Winans elementary, where they are stretched to capacity. The application was disingenuous in their phrasing around this building, and I feel it's important that the state know the full details of the situation.

Second, Emily Post, the person spearheading the efforts to get YES going, is the former head of the failed Educatio private school in town. This school could not retain qualified staff and failed the students who were enrolled, many of whom were far behind their public school peers by the time the school failed completely. I believe in having options as a parent. But I do not believe that public funds should go to support a model that has already been tested and failed miserably. If the model that YES proposes was working well, it would not have left students unprepared and parents reeling with the collapse of Educatio.

Third, as a lifelong educator and someone who currently works with people with disabilities, the lack of plan for students with disabilities is appalling. This is not something to be pieced together as an afterthought, unless you consider students with disabilities as second class citizens who aren't your concern. My concern is that is what YES is doing due to their lack of planning and care on this matter.

My child recently started school in Livingston and the local schools are doing amazing things with a budget that does not meet their needs. The thought of taking away money from my child's education to fund something that has already been tried and failed makes me nauseous. The impact of YES becoming "a district within a district" as they have proposed would have a negative effect on this community.

Please listen to the people living here who will be impacted, and vote no on this charter application. Thank you for your time and consideration.

42. Shayla McKnight Livingston, MT

My name is Shayla McKnight and I live in Livingston, MT. I am writing to express my concerns regarding the proposed Yellowstone Experience School (YES) and its application for charter status. While I understand that the intention behind YES is to offer an alternative educational model, I believe there are several issues that should be carefully considered before moving forward with this proposal.

1. **Questionable Educational Approach:** YES emphasizes a mixed-methods pedagogy that includes Montessori, Project-Based Learning, and other alternative teaching strategies. While these methods can be effective for some students, there is limited evidence supporting their long-term success in public education, especially for a large and diverse group of students ranging from kindergarten to 12th grade. A one-size-fits-all approach to education may not adequately address the varied learning needs and academic challenges of all students, particularly those who struggle with untraditional teaching methods.
2. **Impact on Traditional Public Schools:** With the YES School proposing to attract students away from existing public schools, the potential for decreased enrollment in local districts is concerning. The loss of students could exacerbate funding issues already facing traditional public schools in Park County, reducing the resources available for students who remain in those schools. This could lead to a further division in education quality between students in public and charter schools.
3. **Limited Accountability and Oversight:** The success of a school with such an unconventional structure is highly dependent on the quality and effectiveness of its teachers. However, there is little information on how YES will ensure accountability for teaching performance, student outcomes, or curriculum delivery. With a curriculum that involves mixed-age groups and varied educational approaches, it is unclear how student progress will be effectively measured or maintained, particularly for those who may struggle in an individualized, less structured environment.
4. **Potential Equity Concerns:** While YES's mission includes promoting equity by providing an alternative for students whose needs may not be met in traditional schools, there is no clear plan for ensuring that the school remains accessible to all students, especially those from underserved communities. The enrollment model, which begins with a small number of students and gradually increases, may also limit access for some families, particularly those in lower-income areas who may not be able to take advantage of a year-round, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. schedule.
5. **Financial Sustainability:** The proposal mentions the expansion of public funding for YES, but it remains unclear how the school will manage such significant growth while maintaining high standards of education and ensuring financial sustainability. The projected increase in student numbers from 130 to 390 over five years raises concerns about whether YES can truly provide the individualized education it promises, or whether the focus may shift to increasing enrollment numbers rather than prioritizing educational quality.

In light of these concerns, I urge the Board to take a cautious approach in reviewing the YES School's application. While the desire for alternative educational options is understandable, it is crucial that any new school adheres to standards that ensure both quality education and equitable access for all students. I believe

more comprehensive oversight and clearer plans for accountability are needed before approving this charter school.

43. Heather Jurvakainen
Livingston, MT

This letter is in opposition to the proposed YES charter school in Livingston, Montana. Our public school district is already strapped financially, and this charter school would only take more money and needed resources away, further stressing our system. Also, Livingston school district is known for its high number of students on free and reduced lunches. Charter schools are known for cherry-picking students, while skirting laws and regulations. Our community has no need for this charter program and we need to stay focused on improving our current public school district.

I have been a Park County resident for nearly 20 years with 2 children in the public school system. There are other options in our area for parents who would like an alternative. Thank you for your time.

44. Meredith Herzog

I am writing to express my strong opposition to the proposed creation of a charter school that would operate in the Livingston Public School District. As a resident of Montana, I am deeply concerned about the impact this decision would have on our already limited public education system, particularly in a small district with only four schools.

Livingston Public Schools play the primary role in fostering community cohesion and providing equitable access to education for all students. Diverting public funding to a charter school threatens the stability and resources of these schools, which are already operating under limited budgets. Charter schools draw funding directly from public school districts, leaving fewer resources for existing schools to meet the needs of their students. This is especially concerning in a small district, where every dollar is critical for maintaining staff, programs, and facilities.

Charter schools often lack the infrastructure and resources necessary to adequately support students who are behind academically, despite frequently attracting this population. Unlike public schools, which are equipped with specialized staff such as interventionists, special education teachers, and counselors, many charter schools allocate resources toward marketing and administrative costs rather than robust student support services. Charter schools often do not employ licensed and credentialed teachers. Additionally, charter schools may struggle to provide individualized education plans (IEPs) or implement evidence-based interventions for students requiring additional assistance. This results in a situation where students who most need academic support are underserved, leaving them further behind and exacerbating existing educational inequities.

The creation of a charter school also poses significant questions about transparency and accountability. Public schools are subject to oversight by elected school boards and adhere to state education standards. Charter schools, however, often lack the same level of accountability, raising concerns about the equitable use of taxpayer funds and the quality of education being delivered.

Rather than diverting resources and attention to a new charter school, I urge the Board to focus on strengthening our existing public schools. Our efforts should be directed toward supporting these schools through increased funding, expanded programs, and enhanced professional development for educators—not fragmenting our community and educational system further.

I respectfully request that the Montana Board of Public Education reject the proposal to create a charter school. It is imperative that we prioritize the well-being and success of all students in our community by supporting the existing schools and infrastructure.

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter. I trust that you will carefully consider the potential consequences of this decision and act in the best interest of our students and schools.

General Comments

1. Mary Stegner Hall

I'm not sure why Montana tax payers should be expected to pay for other parents' choice to send their children to private charter schools. Our granddaughter who lived in Arizona attended a charter school in Maricopa arizona....

Montana Board of Education

12-20-24

Greetings to all:

I am writing to urge you to support the Liberty Academy Charter School Application. I have been a neighbor, friend, and done business with many of the colonies most all of my life. I know them very well and appreciate their unique lifestyle and educational needs.

The charter school will be a good fit for them. It can be tailored to their needs and lifestyle. They are very committed to education and a life skills approach to life. Their agrarian lifestyle along with great business skills will help keep them competitive.

I have always admired their ability to memorize from a very young age. This serves them very well as they grow up and move into leadership positions. This model serves them well in their ability to compete and survive in a very competitive environment. Their success helps provide a more stable property tax base in our rural counties. This is very important in our rural less populated counties.

I urge you to give them your approval and support.

Bruce "Butch" Gillespie

Senate District 9

To: Montana Board of Public Education
From: Senator Josh Kassmier
Topic Liberty Elementary Public Charter School
Date 12/8/2024

Dear Montana Board of Pubic Education

I am writing to express my enthusiastic support for Liberty Elementary School's application for charter status. As a dedicated advocate for educational excellence in our community, I have witnessed firsthand the remarkable impact Liberty Elementary has on its students and the surrounding neighborhood.

Liberty Elementary stands out as a beacon of academic achievement and innovation. The school's commitment to fostering a nurturing and inclusive environment for all students is evident in its diverse curriculum, dedicated staff. By emphasizing individualized learning and critical thinking, the school provides its students with the tools necessary to thrive in an increasingly complex world. The implementation of project-based learning initiatives has not only enhanced student engagement but also cultivated essential life skills, such as collaboration, creativity, and problem-solving.

The curriculum at Liberty Elementary provides their students unique opportunities to explore their interests and develop their talents. These programs not only enhance academic performance but also encourage students to pursue their passions, ultimately contributing to well-rounded, confident individuals prepared for future challenges.

As Liberty Elementary seeks to achieve charter status, I am confident that the school will continue to uphold its mission of educational excellence and community service. Charter status will enable Liberty to expand its programs, attract dedicated educators, and further enhance the learning experiences of its students.

In conclusion, I wholeheartedly endorse Liberty Elementary School's application for charter status. The school's unwavering commitment to academic achievement and holistic student development makes it an invaluable asset to our community. I look forward to seeing the positive impact that charter status will bring to Liberty Elementary and the students it serves.

Sincerely,
Senator Josh Kassmier



ATTORNEYS:
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114 3rd Street South, Great Falls, MT 59401
2020 Charlotte St., Ste 8, Bozeman, MT 59718

December 23, 2024

Via E-Mail

Montana Board of Public Education
46 North Last Chance Gulch
Helena, MT 59601

**Re: Liberty Elementary School District No. 10 - Liberty Academy Charter School
Our File No. 240253**

Dear Members of the Montana Board of Public Education:

I have been asked to represent Liberty Elementary School District No. 10 ("Liberty School District") with respect to its pending Charter School Application for Liberty Academy Charter School ("Liberty Academy"). It is my understanding that Chair Tharp raised some issues and concerns regarding jurisdictional authority of the Board of Public Education with respect to the Liberty Academy application at the December 11th meeting.

Chair Tharp's comments appear to raise two fundamental issues regarding the scope of HB 549 and the Board's authority with respect to the specifics of the Liberty Academy application:

1. May a Charter School enroll students who reside outside of the Governing Board District.
2. May a Charter School enroll and provide instructional services (on-site and web based or remotely) to students at physical locations using facilities located both within and outside the Governing District?

As stated below, we do not believe there is any statutory impediment to the Board's authority to grant the Liberty Application. The Board's approval of Liberty's application is consistent with the terms and provisions and does not violate HB 549 or any other statutory provision.

On its face HB549 addresses the question regarding enrollment of students in the Liberty Academy Charter School who reside outside the Governing District. Section 8(1)(a) requires a Charter School to admit "any student residing in the state." Consistent with this language and correct understanding of HB549, at least three (3) charter school applications approved by the Board in 2023 clearly state in their applications regarding student recruitment and enrollment that each school intends to

comply with that provision. As stated in the 2024 Liberty Academy proposal, it is likewise the intent of the applicant to comply with State Law as outlined and articulated in HB 549 by providing enrollment to students both from within and outside the Liberty District who are residents of the State of Montana.

In addition to this initial citation, there are also additional sections and language contained in HB 549 which support the Legislature's intent to provide statewide open enrollment opportunities for students. HB549 clearly states and contemplates that all charter school student enrollment would include students residing outside school districts of residence. In particular, the following provisions of HB549 cannot be read to limit Charter School enrollment to only those students residing in the Governing District. Rather, these provisions clearly contemplate provision of educational and instructional programming to students anywhere in Montana and residing outside the Governing District's.

Section. 8(2)(a) states that the *"public charter schools shall give enrollment preference to students who are residents of the located school district"*. If the Legislature did not expect or intend for student enrollment in charter school programs to include both *"in district"* and *"out-of-district"* students, Section 8(2)(a) has no meaning or significance. Why would there be any need for a local district student enrollment preference all students must be from the Governing District? As a general principle of statutory construction, each provision must be interpreted to have meaning. Multi-District student enrollment is the only interpretation that gives Section 8(2)(a) any meaning.

Section 12.(3) also elaborates on the expectation that students residing outside the district of attendance would be recognized differently than the students of residence for purposes of calculating funding wherein it states *"students attending a public charter school governed by a local school board who are NOT residents of the located school district generate funding in the same manner as other nonresident students attending a school of the located district under an out-of-district attendance agreement pursuant to Title 20 chapter 5, part 3"*.

In addition to the citations above taken directly from the legislation, it would also appear that by and through their previous actions in approving three (3) specific applications submitted during the 2023 cycle that the Board of Public Education has already addressed and resolved this first concern when it sanctioned similar student recruitment and enrollment structures to those being proposed by both the Liberty Academy and the Montana Connections Academy (2024). Excerpts taken directly from the applications submitted in 2023 and 2024 include the following.

Bozeman Charter School (2023)

3. Describe plans and timelines for student recruitment and enrollment, including lottery procedures.

“The BoCS is currently operational and available to students in-district as well as out-of-district”.

Kalispell Flathead -PACE (2023)

“Recruitment for the 2024-25 school year takes place during the high school registration process. This process begins in January of 2024, when current students at Flathead High School learn about course offerings and pathways. The Flathead PACE Academy Registration Handbook information will be provided alongside the traditional Flathead High School Registration Handbook information. We offer recruitment opportunities for students outside of FHS”.

Missoula CONNECT Academy (2023)

“The Application Process The annual application process will be open each spring for Montana residents in grades 6-12”.

Montana Connections Academy-Park City (2024)

“2. Identify the targeted student population and the community the public charter school proposes to serve. 2. Targeted Student Population & Community Targeted Student Population. MTCA will serve students throughout the state who are eligible to enroll under Montana law, including general education students, students with learning or cognitive disabilities, at-risk students, accelerated students, and English learners. It is anticipated that the school may also serve highly mobile students and will help these students be successful during the time period that a full-time online school is needed. MTCA will provide an alternative learning environment for students who are not thriving in traditional school settings.”

It is important to note that each of the above applicants, whose charter school proposals were either approved by the MT BPE in 2023 for implementation during the 2024-2025 school year, or those cited herein who have submitted applications during the current proposal cycle (2025-2026), clearly indicate their intent to provide opportunities for open enrollment to students from outside the Governing District.

As to Chair Tharp’s second concern, review of the applicable Montana Statutes which guide, govern and inform the process, includes reference to a statutory mechanism outlined in MCA 20-3-363 wherein educational services may be provided to these resident students by an adjacent school district though the use of a Multidistrict Agreement. Under this legal structure, a located school district who is responsible for providing educational services to students who are recognized residents of the district, may receive direct educational services that are not being provided by the district of residence, but rather through agreement by a district of attendance. Liberty Elementary School District has in the past provided services to students residing outside the Liberty District using this process. Beginning in 2023, due to the introduction of very

complicated and confusing legislative changes in the Multidistrict Agreement Structure (HB 214), Liberty District has, despite repeated attempts, been unable to reach agreement with one or more resident school districts for the continued operation of these sites.

(MCA 20-3-363) This statute presupposes using a Multidistrict Agreement structure reached between two or more districts to allow for example, school district "B" to provide educational services to students who have been attending classes at a "SCHOOL" located within school district "A's" boundaries. Through this agreement, each participating district recognizes the delivery of services at a "SCHOOL" site currently maintained by the district of residence. Authorization is provided through the Multidistrict Agreement for educational services to continue at the resident school location.

Unfortunately, five (5) of the colony communities identified in the Liberty Academy Charter School Application as likely to seek enrollment for their children in the Liberty Academy, have been left without reasonable and viable access to onsite educational services, although they have a history of nearly three decades of continuous onsite educational services. In some instances, these colony communities have been without access to a local public education system for nearly two years for their children due to the failure of their district of residence to either reach agreement with an adjacent School District for the continued delivery of onsite educational services, or to agree to meet their primary obligations to provide culturally rooted, ELL or ESL focused onsite personalized educational services at each of the colony locations. Having no viable alternative for the receipt of appropriate educational services, each of these colony communities has reluctantly been compelled to implement the equivalent of a private or de facto homeschool structure to ensure that their children continue to receive some semblance of a structured educational experience.

It appears that the underlying question to be answered remains, what is the distinction between what is provided for in statute, and what is being proposed by the Liberty Academy Charter School in its application for the operation of off-site remotely located instructional facilities? First and foremost, the applicant is not intending to operate any additional "schools" as part of its operational plan as defined in Montana Code Annotated (MCA 20-6-501), but rather to incorporate the use of appropriate "remote instructional facilities" for the delivery of remote classroom instruction (MCA 20-7-118) to students enrolled in the Liberty School District and receiving instructional programming at any one of the facilities which make up the proposed Liberty Academy Charter School campus.

It is the position of the Liberty Elementary School District Board of Trustees that MCA 20-3-363 is NOT applicable to the operational structure outlined in the Liberty Academy Charter School application as, again, it is not the intent of the Academy to incorporate the use of recognized SCHOOLS which are geographically located within another school district, as schools within the charter program, but rather, and most importantly, the distinction is that the Liberty Academy Charter School will offer students enrolled in

Liberty District an opportunity to attend classes and receive a combination of both on-site and web-based instruction offered through the Liberty Academy, at any one of the remote instructional facilities managed as part of the Liberty Academy Campus. Please Note: the remote instructional facilities identified by and through the Liberty Academy Charter School structure are owned and operated entirely by the individual Hutterite colonies at no expense to the public (state, county or located school district) and therefore are not schools as identified and defined in MCA 20-6-501.

Furthermore, the Liberty district's assertion that these sites are intended solely to be recognized as remote facilities for instructional purposes within the district as opposed to "schools" located outside the District's boundaries is further supported by the language contained in MCA 20-6-501 which identifies the definition of various schools, and states, *"as used in this title, unless the context clearly indicates otherwise, the term "school" means an institution for the teaching of children that is established and maintained under the laws of the state of Montana **at public expense**".* It logically follows that as no public money was used in the building, operation or the maintenance or of these remote instructional facilities, that they are NOT subject to the definition of a school and are therefore not subject to any authority or control by a public school district wherein they may be geographically located. As such, there appears to be no statutory prohibition on identifying them as remote instructional facilities recognized as part of the Liberty Academy campus, nor as incorporating them into the operational structure of the Liberty Academy Charter School. In conclusion, the inference to MCA 20-3-363 by Board member Tharp is NOT applicable to the Liberty Academy Charter School student enrollment and operational plan as the district will NOT be providing student instruction at "schools" located outside their district boundaries, but rather as indicated in the application, will be utilizing the availability of remotely located instructional facilities as an extension of the existing Liberty District and Liberty Academy Campus.

This interpretation and application of the appropriate statutes is further supported by the very language outlined Section 11(5)(f) of HB 549 which states the following:

"The governing board of a public charter school district has all the powers necessary for carrying out the terms of its charter contract, including the following powers:

(f) to acquire real property, for use as its facility or facilities, from public or private sources;"

Additional MCA Citations which are potentially applicable to the discussion of what state laws authorize student instruction at "remote" classroom locations include the following:

MCA 20-7-118. Remote instruction. (1) A school district may provide remote instruction, including the provision of services through electronic means. A district shall comply with any rules adopted by the board of public education that specify standards for remote instruction. The provision of remote instruction by a district is limited to pupils:

(a) meeting the residency requirements for that district as provided in 1-1-215;

(b) living in the district and eligible for educational services under the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act or under 29 U.S.C. 794; or

(c) seeking remote instruction in the nearest district when the pupil's district of residence does not provide remote or in-person instruction in an equivalent course (Insert - Culturally rooted ELL or ESL Instruction) . A course is not equivalent if the course does not provide the same level of advantage on successful completion, including but not limited to dual credit, advanced placement, and career certification.

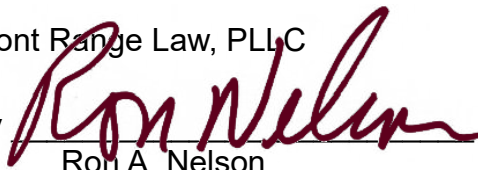
(2) A school of a district providing remote instruction shall provide remote instruction to an out-of-district pupil under subsection (1)(c) unless, because of class size restrictions, the accreditation of the school would be adversely impacted by providing remote instruction to the pupil.

(3) The superintendent of public instruction shall adopt rules for the administration and enforcement of this section.

Charter schools represent an intentional transition to a different delivery form for educational services. As with any new paradigm, there are questions that must be analyzed and answered as we progress. The issues raised are worthy of consideration and need to be understood in the context of this transition. Nonetheless, the Legislature has considered and addressed both issues. The Board clearly has authority to grant Liberty Academy's application. The issues raised do not preclude or undercut Liberty's application in any way.

Front Range Law, PLLC

By



Ron A. Nelson

- c. Client
Dylan Klapmeier
Todd Hanson

To: Montana Board of Public Education
From: Dr. Gerry Nolan
Topic: Liberty Elementary Public Charter School
Date: 12/5/2024

Dear Montana Board of Public Education

It is an honor for me to present this letter of support on behalf of the public charter school application being submitted to the Montana Board of Public Education by the Liberty Elementary School District # 10. It was my good fortune to serve as the superintendent of Liberty Elementary School in 2022 and 2023. I can attest to the commitment and professionalism of the Liberty Elementary School Board of Education. I can also attest to the total commitment to the children's education by the parents and communities served by Liberty Elementary School. There are no better people anywhere. You will find them a joy to work with. In addition, Todd Hanson and the team at Four Poles Consulting provide quality educational services, direction, and counsel for the Liberty Elementary Board, community and students.

The proposed Liberty Charter Academy will provide an opportunity for the parents and children living in these communities to exercise their rights to choose a public school system which best provides opportunities for students to develop their full educational potential. As an advocate for public education systems that meet the needs of all our children, I am voicing my support and am encouraging the Board of Public Education to approve the Liberty Elementary School District – Public School Charter application.

Having served the Liberty Elementary School District and the six colony schools that it supports, I can assure you that this is one of those unique situations for which Public Charter Schools were made. Liberty Charter School will become the poster child for Charter Schools in Montana. As an advocate who loves our profession and has worked in public education for over forty years, I wholeheartedly support the Liberty Charter School application and initiative.

Respectfully Submitted,

Dr. Gerry Nolan

Gerry J. Nolan

PO Box 738

West Glacier, Montana – 59936

406.890.3691

gnhermit@gmail.com

Rebecca Ayler, M.A.T., M.Ed.
1610 East Lewis Street
Livingston, MT 59047
becky.ayler@livingston.k12.mt.us
January 12, 2025

Board of Public Education
Montana Office of Public Instruction
1301 E. 6th Ave.
Helena, MT 59620

Dear Members of the Board,

I am writing to express my concerns regarding the proposed Yellowstone Experience School (YES) Charter in Livingston, Montana. As a member of the community, a public educator; I am the principal of Sleeping Giant Middle School (SGMS) and have taught and led at both Park High School and SGMS for over 10 years, and an advocate for quality education, I believe it is essential to carefully consider the implications of introducing a new charter school in our area.

My experience as a public educator for 18 years both here in Livingston and in Denver, CO has given me a great insight and knowledge into how charter schools can help communities and provide unique opportunities, however, in the case of YES, it is my professional opinion that neither of these outcomes would come to fruition. I have been in attendance for both of YES's presentations to our local school board and when they presented to you all virtually. I have read their proposal, and I have found extensive evidence as to why this charter should not receive approval to move forward. Below I have outlined such evidence:

1. **Impact on Resources:** Our district and community face challenges with funding and stretching the public dollar thin. Just last year, our community voted down a technology levy in our high school district. Should we introduce another district within our community those already highly sought-after dollars would become even more challenging to secure for our schools and students. In addition, YES proposes purchasing one of our schools that we had to close in recent years. One of the great misconceptions for the closure of that school is that it was due solely to declining enrollment. This is not true – the condition of the building requires so much improvement that it would not be fiscally responsible to try to fix the problems. Also, to my knowledge, the building is not for sale yet. It is presumptuous for the YES charter to assume that they could just purchase the building without the support of our board and superintendent.
2. **Equity in Education:** YES's application and presentations were lacking in their identification of how they would support students with learning disabilities. As an administrator, this is one of the areas of education that requires most of my time. Many of our students with disabilities come from families in poverty and do not have the ability to support their students' needs outside of school. They rely heavily on the school to support their students' learning. My concern is that YES would either not serve those students to the level of need they require, or that they would not admit students with disabilities, leading to huge inequities in our community. In addition, YES proposes paying teachers at higher rates but requiring more work time. As a graduate student in the doctoral program at Montana State University, my area of research is in Collective and Self Efficacy – based on my research and understanding of the practical day-to-day leadership of a school, we know that salary does not directly relate to the improvement of a school, but the

collective efficacy of a staff and the self-efficacy of individuals is what has the greatest impact. Working longer hours will not improve this regardless of the salary.

3. **Accountability Standards:** It is important that all educational institutions, including charter schools, are held to the same high standards of accountability and transparency. My understanding from other states is that charter schools do not have to comply with the same level of standardized testing as public schools. Should this be the same for Montana charters, YES would not have to hold the same rigorous academic expectations that we in the public sector would have to. In addition, we have evidence from experience and testing those students who attended the school previously owned by one of the leaders of YES (Educatio), came to our district after it closed and were at least 2 grade levels behind in reading and math abilities. This is highly concerning. Livingston Public Schools just completed two rounds of the literacy grant from OPI and we are now leaders in early childhood literacy in the state. Our staff present at international conferences and provide a framework for literacy to other academic institutions.
4. **Community Input:** While I understand that YES is taking feedback from the community, they have not taken a moment to ask if what they are proposing is being addressed in our public schools. Based on the individuals who have spoken out in support for YES, it is my belief that they either 1) do not know the incredible work that we are accomplishing in our district, or 2) are disgruntled with our public schools from when they were students, or with a disciplinary issue with their own children and the public schools. Our schools have changed and improved tremendously, even in the decade I have worked for LPS. Our early childhood literacy programming is revolutionary and, as stated before, a model in the state. We host partnerships and provide programming and classes for robust work-based learning at the middle and high school level which are being recognized throughout the state. This year at Sleeping Giant Middle School, we have begun a partnership and the work to integrate place-based learning with Ripple, an organization established by a former teacher, and in partnership with Montana Tech University. We offer robust partnerships with Farm to School where students K-12 are learning sustainable and healthy food production and care. We have so much to offer at LPS, that it would be such a shame to lose enrollment, potentially faculty, and funding to a school whose plan is lofty dream, at best.

I appreciate your time and consideration of these matters as the board deliberates on the future of the Yellowstone Experience Charter School. I urge you to prioritize the needs of our existing public schools and the students they serve.

Sincerely,

Rebecca S. Ayler, M.A.T., M.Ed.
Principal, Sleeping Giant Middle School

December 30, 2024

Dear Members of the Montana Board of Public Education,

I am writing to express my opposition to the charter application for the Yellowstone Experience School (YES) in Livingston, Montana. As a product of and teacher in Livingston Public Schools, a parent of two Park High graduates, a resident within the Livingston School District boundaries, and as a Park County tax payer, I have significant concerns regarding the potential impact and feasibility of this proposal.

The establishment of YES may **divert critical funding** away from Livingston's traditional public schools, which are already facing budgetary constraints. Public schools rely on stable funding to provide equitable opportunities for all students, maintain essential programs, and hire qualified staff. Under HB 549, YES would receive state funding based on student enrollment, effectively redirecting resources away from public schools that serve the majority of our community's children.

Additionally, there are concerns about the financial sustainability of the entitlements YES would receive. The funding required to support a charter school may **place undue strain on the state's education budget**, potentially resulting in reduced resources for existing public schools. This reallocation of funds could further erode the ability of traditional public schools to meet the diverse needs of their students.

The governance structure of YES, which operates independently of the Livingston Public Schools, **raises concerns about accountability**. The proposed charter school would not be directly answerable to the local elected school board, which represents the community's interests. This disconnect could lead to decisions that do not align with the needs or values of Livingston residents.

Charter schools, including YES, have the potential to **exacerbate educational inequities**. While YES emphasizes a Montessori and project-based approach, there is a risk that the school may selectively attract students who already have access to educational advantages, leaving behind those with greater needs. This could contribute to socioeconomic and educational segregation within our community.

The application process has highlighted mixed feelings within the community regarding the need and feasibility of YES. While some may support the concept, the **absence of widespread, demonstrable community backing** raises questions about the school's ability to sustain enrollment and fulfill its mission.

For these reasons, I urge the Montana Board of Public Education to reject the YES charter application. I strongly believe that our focus should remain on strengthening our existing public schools to ensure all students, regardless of background, have access to a high-quality education.

Thank you for considering my concerns. I trust the Board will carefully weigh the potential consequences of approving this application and make a decision that prioritizes the best interests of Livingston's students and communities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Megan Brenna". The signature is written in black ink and includes a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Megan Brenna

Dear esteemed members of the Montana Board of Public Education,

I am writing this letter to share my support for the creation of the Yellowstone Experience School (YES) in Livingston. This school will provide excellent opportunities for students and parents in our community.

Project-based teaching environments create unique learning experiences for students, provide individual feedback and learning plans, and a space where students can be creative, invested in their learning, and gain fundamental skills and knowledge.

As a previous teacher at a project-based learning school, run by Emily Post, I especially enjoyed the smaller classes, the ability to tailor lessons and curriculum to specific student needs, the willingness of the community to provide immersive learning opportunities for our students and a work environment that emphasized creativity and flexibility.

Project-based education promotes critical thinking skills, team work, problem solving, communication, collaboration, and working within your community to solve problems close to home. Student growth is easily witnessed because of the close connection with teachers and the small class sizes. Continual check-ins and observations ensure student engagement and development.

It was a pleasure to work with Emily Post, she values students, their education and strives to provide the best possible learning environment. Her passion for project-based learning is evident from the time she spends planning with her teachers, community outreach members and parents of her students. She continually strives to make each day full of valuable learning experiences.

I encourage you to approve the establishment of the Yellowstone Experience School, and allow students in our community a chance for another meaningful, inclusive education experience.

Thank you for your consideration,
Kelsi Fisher

315 South 8th ST
Livingston, MT 59047
January 8, 2025

Montana Board of Public Education
46 N Last Chance Gulch, Suite 2B
PO Box 200601
Helena, MT 59620

Esteemed Board Members:

I am writing to express my opinion regarding the proposed Yellowstone Experience School (YES) charter school in Livingston. I am writing as a citizen and taxpayer who lives within the Livingston School District (LSD), as a parent of a former student in the LSD, and as a current employee, as a physical therapist, in the LSD. I am in opposition to the proposed YES charter school based on concerns that I have regarding funding for the school, redundancy in programming between the charter school and public school, and lack of evidence of sustainability of the charter school.

Admittedly, I would have enjoyed having the option of a hands-on, experiential based alternative public education for my son when he was attending middle and high school in the LSD. At the time he was attending LSD, the district was just beginning to develop these types of opportunities. Currently, there is a Work-Based Learning program available at the high school which allows students to develop vocational skills and achieve credentialing in areas that are applicable to real world jobs. It seems that focusing resources on already existing programs within the LSD would be a better use of taxpayer funds.

I did review the YES Public Charter Application and noted proposed areas that already exist within the LSD. My husband is a vegetable farmer, and we have worked closely with the Farm-to-School program that serves the LSD. The current Farm-to-School program already has much of the infrastructure and connections necessary to assist students who would like to participate in farming and learn more about an agricultural lifestyle. Again, it would seem that assisting the LSD to diversify its offerings to the students enrolled in the district would be a better use of time and resources.

I have several general concerns about the YES charter school. Washington School owned by the LSD was closed partly due to the cost of facility maintenance. Reopening it to a charter school does not seem like a sound fiscal decision. The LSD can barely

find enough teachers and paraeducators to fulfill staffing needs especially in special education. How is YES going to find enough staff? There is currently a gap between salary and cost of living in Livingston which affects everyone in education. If YES had been a successfully running educational entity before its application as a charter school, and all that it needed was state support so that it could better serve all students regardless of ability to pay, then it seems like the LSD would have voted in favor of incorporating it into the district. As it was, YES was not a functioning school nor did it have a brick and mortar location of its own. At this point, it is my opinion that approving the YES charter school would only remove funds from the current LSD causing a decline in the educational services in Livingston instead of enhancing them.

Finally, it is my opinion that, instead of creating a separate entity that will draw funds away from the economically challenged Livingston School District, the proponents of the YES charter school should work with the district to enhance the experiential and hands-on learning opportunities that already exist in the LSD. Thus, truly improving the educational opportunities for all in Livingston. I envision too many negative impacts on this community's educational system for me to support the YES charter school. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Caroline Rehder

December 13, 2024

To Whom It May Concern

It has come to our attention that a character assassination has been attempted on a community member that has been crucial to our child's education and growth. Four years ago my husband and I were planning on homeschooling our child because we were completely against entering our child into the public school system for numerous reasons. We became aware of Educatio and were thoroughly aligned with the values of the school. We met with Emily Post and soon realized that Educatio's focus on building a child's love of learning and creating vast opportunities for growth and expansion while also prioritizing not only high quality education, but also emotional health wellbeing, was aligned with our family.

Over the course of the three years that we were enrolled with Educatio, our child thrived in the environment that Emily Post provided. We are certain she would have floundered in the public school system and her passion would have been watered down to match the standards required. Emily Post and Educatio provided a structured educational environment that supported a child's passion for learning and exploration. The way that Emily Post cultivated the school was exceptionally child centered. My husband and I can only wish that we had this type of education when we were younger.

During week two of our child's first grade year, her teacher told us that she was already a third of the way through the math book for first grade standards! Coincidentally, another of her teacher's explained that she was prepared to teach our child how to read and was surprised to know that she can already read and thus is able to build her education on where *she* is academically and emotionally, rather than being held back by classroom standards. Educatio also provides opportunities for extra support when a concept is not understood, rather than moving on to be aligned with standards. This level of dedication and opportunity for learning is uncommon and should not be ignored.

It should also be noted that within our community resides not only bullying, but also intense mental health needs for children, as we have suffered numerous heartbreak in our community from the impact that bullying has had on young children and suicide. To have an option like the school Emily Post created that focused on building self esteem and kindness as part of its curriculum is insurmountable. The children got to know each other on a unique level as they get to intermingle on a daily basis. Our child (who is currently 8 years old) has friends who are 3 years old and friends who are 13 years old, all because of the vision of Emily Post. This in and of itself is extraordinary.

Educatio values experiences. Our child has grown in all the ways we never imagined she could in a school environment, but Educatio was not just any school. The specialness of the vision and Emily Post's dedication is unlike anything we encountered. We are forever grateful for this school and desperately hope to see our child through her years with Educatio.

Charter status would grant this community the opportunity to continue providing the type of education that is desperately needed. With a public charter option in Livingston, children and families could thrive and continue to do what they do best-tailor the education specifically to each child's needs and interest. It should be noted that I have never encountered another adult who not only respects children, but truly views them as people-with full opinions, and celebrates each child in their unique way. It is because of Emily Post that we chose to homeschool our child following the closure of Educatio.

This closure was exceptionally difficult, as we were around during the mutiny that the teaching staff of the 2022-2023 school year attempted. It was after school ended that I received a voicemail from Sara Driscoll, telling me that she was uncertain if Educatio would be continuing for the following school year. I was informed that the teachers were unhappy and not continuing their relationship with the school. I immediately called Emily Post to confirm. It needs to be noted that Emily was traveling for a memorial service for a loved one and had no idea what was happening. As soon as she was informed, she tried communicating for resolution. The teachers had a list of demands that were given to Emily and required the demands be met before moving forward, and as time constraints would not allow everything to be fulfilled by the board, they walked. They not only left, but the impact that the teachers made on character assassinations of Emily was devastating, as our entire experience exceeded our expectations with Educatio and Emily Post.

Once we made the decision to homeschool, Emily Post chose to continue with providing our child, and other children in the community, with ongoing educational support. Our child met with Emily three times a week for two hours working on a business she had helped create with Emily. All on Emily's own time, she ensured that our child was honored and continued to receive care, guidance, and celebration, as well as education. Our child is currently above grade level and this is all due to the education she received from Educatio and the continued safe space that Emily provided.

Emily Post has demonstrated year after year a true commitment to providing not only high quality education, but honoring each child's individual needs. My child feels seen and heard with Emily Post and at Educatio and I hope that she continues to be a part of the education in this community, as the children in this community need the champion that Emily is. The other

issue I would like to speak to is the accusation that school was often cancelled. I can say with confidence that the only time school was cancelled was when the teachers all lived in Bozeman during the 2022-2023 school year, and the snow was so bad that they could not drive the pass. School cancellations actually never occurred. Our family could always depend on Education to be open and thriving.

Our family is in full support of this Charter status. We stand by the values of this school and Emily Post and know that with Charter status, more children can have the amazing opportunity our child has had and so many children in this community desperately need this level of education as an option.

Alexandria Saunders, PHD and Kevin Saunders

January 12, 2025

Dear Members of the Montana Board of Public Education,

I am writing to express my opposition to the charter application for the Yellowstone Experience School (YES) in Livingston, Montana. I am a Livingston resident with three children in the Livingston public schools, grades 1, 5, and 8. I have significant concerns regarding the potential impact the adoption of this application would have on our existing schools and on the larger community.

The Livingston public schools are already facing significant budget challenges. In recent years, our school district has been forced to make many difficult decisions due to budget shortfalls and declining enrollments. A beloved early childhood campus had to close, forcing the consolidation of pre-K and Kindergarten classes with the first and second grade school. As the parent of a Kindergartner, I can list many impacts this closure had on our family. One impact was that the afterschool program was consolidated into a third location across town, causing the youngest learners to take a bus at the end of their long day, and causing the waitlists for the afterschool program to grow. In addition to the campus closure, our high school cannot afford to purchase computers for students, all schools have cut arts programming, and last year, multiple middle school teachers' contracts were not renewed, leading to teachers instructing in subjects for which they have no specific training or expertise. Having a new charter school competing for funds, teachers, administrators, and parents will exacerbate our existing shortage of resources.

I also have concerns about the governance structure of YES. The Livingston School Board voted unanimously not to adopt their petition. This means that, should YES be allowed, it would operate with little to no local oversight. I fear that disconnect would do a disservice to our community. In a small community such as ours, public schools are one place where we are often forced to come together and overcome our differences. Our country is becoming increasingly polarized, with people retreating to their own circles of like-minded friends and family instead of discussing differences of opinions with neighbors and community members. Our community has faced many tough issues recently, and school board members have done a remarkable job of listening to all perspectives and making decisions they feel are in the best interest of our students.

I would like to note that I think the petitioners have good intentions with this application, and I am a supporter of the Montessori approach, especially individualized learning plans. If our school district were not facing declining enrollment and budget shortfalls, I would not be so strongly opposed to the formation of a new school option.

For these reasons, I urge the Montana Board of Public Education to reject the YES charter application. I believe that our focus should remain on strengthening our existing public schools to ensure all students have access to a high-quality education.

Sincerely,

Grace Stephens

Amy Zanoni, Ph.D.
225 S 9th St Livingston, MT 59047
amyzanoni@gmail.com

January 19, 2025

Montana Board of Public Education
bpe@mt.gov

Dear Members of the Montana Board of Public Education:

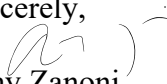
I am writing to express my opposition to the charter application for the Yellowstone Experience School (YES) in Livingston, Montana. As a Livingston resident, taxpayer, and parent, I have significant concerns regarding the impact that the adoption of this proposal would have on Livingston public schools and educational disparities in our community.

If established, YES would siphon funds from the public schools that serve the vast majority of our community's children—at a time when declining enrollments, tight budgets, and high housing costs have already undermined our district's ability to hire educators and make other financial decisions required to provide quality education.

What's more, YES would likely attract students from more educated, higher-income backgrounds and as a result, worsen educational inequalities in our community.

I admire YES's commitment to "individualized and meaningful learning opportunities." All students deserve such an approach. With that in mind, I encourage the Board to **oppose** YES's proposal. And I encourage the community members currently involved in YES to redirect their energies toward improving the quality of education offered in our existing public schools.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Amy Zanoni