*Proposed* Equity Lab Charter School

Executive Summary

*This was prepared by the Equity Lab Charter School applicant group.*

**Mission Statement**

Equity Lab Charter School partners with families and communities to provide powerful learning experiences that unleash students’ natural ability for creativity, innovation, collaboration and social responsibility. Through integrated and project-based curricula anchored in authentic experiences of social entrepreneurship, students develop the academic and social emotional competencies to complete higher education, thrive in evolving economies, and seize opportunities to be change agents in their communities. Serving as an incubator for educational and social innovation, Equity Lab works to scale equity in schools and communities.

This public school serves students in grades 5 to 12 and their families in the community of Lynn, Massachusetts. Equity Lab is an inclusive school serving all students, including English Learners, students with diverse abilities and disabilities, and at-risk youths.

**School Opening and Projected Student Enrollment**

Equity Lab Charter School will open in September of 2018 with 160 fifth and sixth graders and expand by one grade level each year until maximum enrollment of 640 students by 2024.

**Educational Approach and School Design**

Our innovative school model leverages research-based design elements that uniquely address the needs of diverse student populations in under-resourced communities. Equity Lab integrates the following five design elements: (1) Project-based Learning; (2) Community-based Learning; (3) Inclusive Learning; (4) Social Emotional Learning; and (5) Creative Learning.

**Design Element #1: Project-based Learning**

Project-based learning involves a year-round study where students work in teams to research real issues that are affecting the Lynn community and develop viable solutions. This process involves researching and analyzing the problem, designing and testing possible solutions, choosing the best design based upon the best outcome, and sharing results with civic authorities and professional experts in the fields related to projects. In the process, students discover how the academic disciplines interact along with their real-world applications.

**Design Element #2: Community-based Learning**

The community becomes the classroom for students. The community becomes a partner and teacher in their development because powerful learning extends beyond the walls of a school building. Students come to appreciate the assets of their community rather than primarily seeing the community through a deficit lens, which too often is the dominant frame in public education. When students become invested in their communities, their motivation to be change agents increases because they have taken ownership of problems that impact the community. When educators use curriculum that reflects the hopes and aspirations of a community, the material becomes authentic and relevant for students. Students can see themselves making a real impact when the curriculum is deeply connected to the community. The result is greater focus by the student and greater engagement in the community.

**Design Element #3: Inclusive Learning**

Inclusive learning honors the diversity of students’ cultural, intellectual, physical, linguistic and social emotional backgrounds. In addition to providing educational supports and opportunities that provide access to learning, enabling full participation in the school program, inclusive learning is also about providing a challenging academic environment for *all* students. Each student experiences that she/he is a valued member of the school community and is provided the resources to achieve at high levels.

**Design Element #4: Social Emotional Learning**

Social emotional learning is based on the understanding that the best learning emerges in the context of supportive relationships that make learning challenging, engaging, and meaningful. Social emotional learning programming focuses on helping students develop a strong sense of identity, set goals, build resiliency to overcome problems, and cultivate empathy to support constructive relationships with adults and peers.

**Design Element #5: Creative Learning**

Creative learning develops students’ capacities to imagine, create, and innovate. A rapidly evolving world requires students to be creative problem-solvers and collaborators. Students need to interact with ideas and concepts in multiple ways because they come to classrooms with particular gifts and learning styles (linguistic, kinesthetic, spatial, mathematical, and musical). True student-centered classrooms need to be structured to honor students’ diverse images of the world and themselves. Our education program immerses students in a *knowing-by-doing* model. Arts and movement are the most critical vehicles to support creative learning, and we refer to them as *co-academic subjects* because they are as essential as traditional academic subjects. Classrooms become working studios where students have opportunities to interact with and master essential academic concepts and skills through multi-sensory experiences.

**Lynn, Massachusetts: Challenges and Opportunities**

Lynn has a history of racism and chronic educational barriers that have kept segments of the population from economic and social advancement. Lynn’s median income is one third of the state average. Median household income has declined by five percent in the past 20 years while the median income statewide has increased by 10% (Salem, which borders Lynn, experienced an increase of 20%). Between 2001 and 2012 Lynn lost 3,159 jobs. The manufacturing sector accounted for more than half of these losses. The poverty level is almost twice that of the state average and Lynn has one of the highest foreclosure rates in the state. Lynn’s economic and social challenges are mirrored in its educational status. Only 19.3% of Lynn residents have a bachelor’s degree and only 14.2% have a graduate or professional degree. 16.2% have some college training but no degree.

**Need for Equity Lab Charter School**

A stronger educational system that offers diverse educational models and programs is essential for transforming the current educational, economic, and social barriers in Lynn. Lynn has few educational options. KIPP Academy, the sole charter school located in Lynn, has a waiting list of 477 students. The waiting list expands to 682 students when including families that have applied to charter schools outside of Lynn. Over 300 parents have requested student enrollment forms for Equity Lab Charter School.

Our school design was well received in over forty information sessions held between 2012 and 2017 where we connected with over 1,400 families. Eighty-five percent of surveyed parents expressed frustration because they felt that their children’s current schools did not adequately address their educational priorities, and they found that our school design clearly did.

The following chart shows how the Equity Lab design elements address Lynn parents’ educational priorities as collected through focus groups, individual interviews, and surveys:

| **Educational Priorities of Lynn Parents** | **How School Design Elements Address Priorities** |
| --- | --- |
| Provide the foundation for college and career readiness (economic viability) | *Community-based learning* connects students with mentors and internships linked to college and career settings. |
| Engage students with challenging and relevant curriculum | *Project-based learning* mirrors the rigors that students will experience in college and the workplace. |
| Connect student learning to the real world | *Project-based learning* (with a focus on social entrepreneurship) shows students how the academic and co-academic disciplines interact and are applied in the real world. |
| Honor students’ identities and cultures (embrace diversity) | *Inclusive and Social Emotional learning* require deep knowledge of and respect for students’ identities and cultures. |
| Support students as agents of change in their community (active citizenship) | *Project-based learning* (with a focus on social entrepreneurship) provides a clear structure for how to help students problem-solve challenges in their community. |
| Cultivate student creativity and health through regular access to art, music, and physical activity | *Creative Learning* supports intellectual, physical, emotional, and social development. |
| Provide an extended day program  | The school program is 8.5 hours per day—8:30 am to 5:00 pm |
| Support students with a range of health, cognitive, and social emotional challenges | *Inclusive* and *Social Emotional learning* provide a range of support services for diverse learners. |
| Involve parents as partners in their children’s education | The focus on public exhibitions and forums engages parents in their child’s education. |
| Provide a warm, safe, and welcoming school environment | Organizing students into small learning communities (project advisories) and the use of restorative justice as a proactive discipline system ensures a positive school environment. |

**Founding Team: Connections to Lynn Community**

Our founding team is a diverse and innovative group of professionals and parents who have strong ties to the Lynn community. The proposed Chief Executive Officer, a life-long educator, school leader, and school/district redesign consultant has children receiving Special Education services in the Lynn Public Schools. The proposed associate Board treasurer is Cambodian and serves as the assistant vice-president of Citizen’s Bank in Lynn. She has a child who attends Lynn Public Schools. Another Board member is Dominican and serves as a banker. He is raising his family in Lynn and will become Equity Lab’s Finance and Operations Director. Other proposed Board members run college and educational programs that serve Greater Lynn.

**Strategies for District Collaboration**

Unfortunately, the charter school movement is a source of deep division within Lynn, as it is in other cities/towns in the Commonwealth and around the country. The labor movement in Lynn has a rich history of advancing worker protection rights and pro-labor groups see the non-union structure of most charter schools as an affront to educational and economic equity. The Lynn Public School administration, school committee, and city council have also taken a stand against charter schools because of perceived inequities in student enrollment, retention, and funding.

As a way to bridge this divide, the founding group is proposing the creation of a *Lynn Compact* or *Educational Network*. The cities of Boston and Lawrence have successfully established an *education compact* where representatives from district, charter, and private/religious schools come together on a regular basis to set goals and regularly assess how they are working together to improve educational outcomes for all students and families. The compact provides the infrastructure for these city-wide collaborations and allows for the sharing of innovative practices and resources.