*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. Equity Lab works to scale equity in schools and communities by serving as an incubator for educational and social innovation.

This public school serves students in grades 5 to 12 and their families for the community of Lawrence and beyond. Equity Lab will be an inclusive school serving all students, including English Learners, students with diverse abilities and disabilities, and high need students.

**SCHOOL OPENING AND PROJECTED STUDENT ENROLLMENT**

Equity Lab Charter School will open in September of 2019 with 160 students in grades 5 and 6 and will expand by one grade level each year until the maximum enrollment of 640 students is achieved by 2025.

**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**

In project-based learning, students work in teams throughout the year to research real issues that are affecting the Lawrence 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 the 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 resilience 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.

**COMMUNITY CHALLENGES IN LAWRENCE**

When looking at economic trends, Lawrence has a poverty rate that is over twice the state average and significantly lower median household income and owner-occupied housing rate. Lawrence has significantly lower percentages of residents who have graduated high school compared to the state average. When taking a closer look at the graduation and dropout rates among subgroups (ELs, students with disabilities, low-income, and Latinos), subgroups are performing significantly lower than the general population.

Lawrence has limited educational options at the middle and high school levels. In Lawrence, Community Day Charter Public School offers grades Pre-K to 6, and Lawrence Family Development Charter School serves students in grades Pre-K to 8. Phoenix Charter Academy Lawrence serves Lawrence, Haverhill, and Methuen students in grades 9 to 12. 2,124 students are on charter school waiting lists (ESE, 2017). Based upon conversations with community leaders and families with ELs and students with disabilities, we learned that families are looking for more education options.

In July of 2018, we began to host a series of 12 bi-weekly Family Information sessions. We chose popular local hangouts such as El Taller in Lawrence to host these sessions. The following chart shows how the design elements address educational priorities of Lawrence parents:

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| **Educational Priorities of**  **Lawrence Parents** | **How School Design Elements Address Priorities** |
| Support students with disabilities | *Inclusive* and *Social Emotional learning* ensures that students with disabilities have full participation and access to the education program. |
| Support English Learners | *Inclusive* and *Social Emotional learning* ensures that English Learners have full participation and access to the education program. |
| Build student agency through social change projects that improve their communities | *Project-based learning* (with a focus on social entrepreneurship) provides a clear structure for how to help student problem-solve challenges in their community. |
| Provide a warm, safe, and welcoming school environment | *Inclusive and Social Emotional learning* require deep knowledge of and respect for students’ identities and cultures. |
| Provide opportunities to learn new cultures and languages | *Community-based learning* provides students with opportunities to do deep dives into local cultures and to take advantage of community-based opportunities to learn languages. |
| Connect students with mentors and tutors | *Community-based learning* connects students with mentors, tutors, and internships linked to college and career settings. |
| Use art and music to support youth development | *Creative Learning* supports intellectual, physical, emotional, and social development through daily access to art and music. |
| Provide an extended day program | The school program is 8.5 hours per day—8:30 am to 5:00 pm. |
| Use positive rather than punitive approaches for student discipline | Organizing students into small learning communities (project advisories) and the use of restorative justice as a proactive discipline system ensures a positive school environment. |
| Give students opportunities to move every day | *Creative Learning* supports intellectual, physical, emotional, and social development through daily movement. |

Parents were also impressed with the student outcome data from Big Picture Learning (our school support partner), which revealed that students who attended schools that used similar program practices as those proposed for Equity Lab consistently scored higher than their peers in standardized state assessments, had higher college enrollment and completion rates, and had higher reports of career/job satisfaction.

**FOUNDING TEAM: CONNECTIONS TO LAWRENCE**

We are a diverse and innovative group of professionals and parents who either have or have begun to develop strong ties to Lawrence, and we are deeply committed to educational equity and social change. The proposed Executive Director, Frank DeVito, is a second-generation Honduran and Italian American. Frank has children receiving Special Education services in the Lynn Public Schools and understands the challenges that diverse families face daily in gateway communities. Ramon Tejada, the proposed Community Learning Director, is Dominican and is currently raising his family in Lawrence. Natalia Matias, a founding board member, is Dominican and serves a high number of Lawrence families in her professional capacity as a family and immigration lawyer.

**STRATEGIES FOR DISTRICT COLLABORATIONS**

Our goal is to create a hub for Lawrence that supports collaborations for educational equity and innovation. Our plan is to use the following strategies:

***Equitable and Sustainable Working Conditions.*** This ensures that innovative practices are sustainable and transferable to district schools.

***Equity Lab staff unionize.*** We are exploring being one of the few Commonwealth Charter Schools to unionize in Massachusetts in order to pioneer a model that integrates worker protection rights with educational innovation.

***Implement systematic scaling of effective practices across Lawrence.*** The proposed Executive Director, Frank DeVito, recently collaborated with Lawrence Public Schools in an initiative sponsored by the Nellie Mae Foundation—Preparing All Learners (PAL). The focus of the PAL initiative focused upon supporting Lawrence High School and the district office in cultivating a culture of continuous improvement that supported home-grown educational innovation. The lessons of PAL in scaling educational innovation can be applied to Lawrence.

***Establish a Lawrence Educational Network of Schools (LENS).*** The cities of Boston and Lawrence have successfully established an *Compact Partnership* (Lawrence Compact Partnership, 2014) where representatives from district, charter, and/or independent schools come together on a regular basis to set goals and regularly assess how they are working together to improve the 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. Our plan is to build upon this model and establish a Lawrence Educational Network of Schools.