



# **CHARTER RENEWAL APPLICATION**

**MAY 26, 2025**

**Hereby submitted to:**

**WOODLAND PARK SCHOOL DISTRICT, AUTHORIZER**

Updated Aug, 2025 for school use



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## INTRODUCTION

This Charter School renewal application is submitted with the intent to continue providing high-quality educational opportunities to our students beyond the initial charter term. Charter schools play a crucial role in providing diverse educational opportunities within Colorado school districts. They are designed to foster innovation, build on proven and researched methods, and meet the unique needs of students who might benefit from those educational offerings at the charter school. Just as we hold all public schools to high standards of accountability and performance, it is essential to ensure that charter schools are evaluated on a level playing field. By maintaining consistent standards across all schools, we can ensure that every student in our district has access to a high-quality education, regardless of the type of school they attend.

Charter schools, like all public schools, are dedicated to continuous improvement and meeting the needs of our learners. We welcome the opportunity to demonstrate our effectiveness through fair and equitable evaluation processes. By supporting charter schools and ensuring we are held to the same standards as other public schools, the district can foster a diverse and dynamic educational ecosystem that benefits all students and families.


We look forward to continuing our partnership with the district to ensure that all schools, including charter schools, are held to high standards towards distinction. We are committed to meeting those high standards and continue our charge of serving our students and families through educational excellence. Together, we can create a thriving scholastic community for many more years to come.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Merit Academy, a classical charter school authorized by the Woodland Park School District, submits this renewal application for the 2025-2055 term, demonstrating strong alignment with Colorado's charter school renewal requirements as outlined in C.R.S. § 22-30.5-110. The application highlights the school's academic excellence, financial stability, and robust governance under the leadership of its Headmaster, whose expertise in Industrial/Organizational Psychology drives organizational health and team cohesion. With 34% of its teaching staff holding advanced degrees, Merit Academy ensures high-quality instruction, positioning it as a vital educational option for the community.

### Academic Excellence

Merit Academy's 2024 School Performance Framework (SPF) rating of "Performance Plan" with 86.7% points earned places it in the top 21% of Colorado schools. The school's CMAS scores show 60% of students meeting or exceeding expectations in ELA, 50% in Math, and 60%



in Science, surpassing state averages. PSAT9 scores exceed national benchmarks, and 60% of juniors earn college credits, reflecting strong academic growth and alignment with charter goals.

### **Financial Stewardship**

The school maintains a positive general fund balance of \$252,331 and has reduced debt from \$442,000 to \$77,000, despite a 10% revenue loss. Transparent financial statements, compliant with state requirements, and an unqualified 2024 audit affirm Merit Academy's fiscal responsibility.

### **Leadership and Staffing**

Headmaster Gwynne Pekron's extensive experience as an educator, university professor, counselor, coach, Board member, parent, and co-founder, combined with her PhD, fosters a cohesive and innovative educational environment. The school's staffing model, with 34% of teachers holding Master's or Doctorate degrees, ensures expertise in delivering a classical curriculum.

### **Community and Operational Strength**

Serving 505 students, Merit Academy supports a diverse student body with equitable services, including Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). High attendance (94.7%) and strong community engagement underscore its impact. The school currently operates under a Facility Use Agreement, and is in discussion to further ensure operational stability.

Merit Academy's application meets all statutory requirements, making a compelling case for renewal to continue its mission of providing exceptional education as a choice among WPSD's high quality schools.

## **ENROLLMENT**

Merit Academy has established itself as a significant educational option Teller County since its founding. The school's enrollment trends, comparison to other area schools, and transparent lottery process showcase its growing appeal and commitment to equitable access. This section provides a detailed analysis of Merit Academy's enrollment data, its position within the district, and the mechanisms governing its admissions process.

## Current and Forecasted Enrollment

As of the 2024-25 school year, Merit Academy enrolls 505 students across preschool through eleventh grade, including our part-time students. The student body is diverse in its grade distribution, with enrollment by grade as follows:

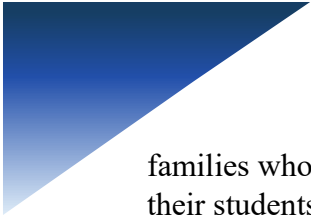
Grade	2024-25	2025-26 forecast
<b>Preschool</b>	25	25
<b>Kindergarten</b>	50	50
<b>1<sup>st</sup></b>	43	52
<b>2<sup>nd</sup></b>	41	51
<b>3<sup>rd</sup></b>	50	42
<b>4<sup>th</sup></b>	59	51
<b>5<sup>th</sup></b>	49	61
<b>6<sup>th</sup></b>	35	53
<b>7<sup>th</sup></b>	47	42
<b>8<sup>th</sup></b>	33	41
<b>9<sup>th</sup></b>	24	30
<b>10<sup>th</sup></b>	29	27
<b>11<sup>th</sup></b>	19	26
<b>12<sup>th</sup></b>	1 (homeschool)	16

The student population reflects the demographic profile of the Woodland Park area, with 15% of the student population registering within one of the identifying racial categories as non-white. Additionally, 129 of the 446 full-time PK-11 students (approximately 29%) are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, indicating a portion of the student body comes from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

## Enrollment Trends

Merit Academy has experienced steady enrollment growth since its establishment. The school opened its doors in August 2021 to 187 full time students and over 80 part time/homeschool learners. The number of scholars attending year 2, the 22-23 school year, grew to 331. From there, the enrollment continued a steady and robust growth, with 436 students in year three (2023-24) and 505 students in year four (2024-25). It appears that Merit Academy's student population will increase to over 620 students for year five (2025-26).

The school's investment into additional academic offerings and programs, providing PK, and expanding upper grades as students matriculate into the next level has opened the doors for more



families who have been on the waitlist or who have been anticipating these changes to enroll their students.

### **Comparison to Woodland Park School District**

During the 2024-25 school year, the Woodland Park School District Re-2 served a total of 1,844 students across five schools. Merit Academy's 505 students represent approximately 27.4% of the district's total enrollment, a significant share for a charter school in its early years. For comparison, Woodland Park's Jr/Sr High School, enrolled 688 students in grades 7-12 for the 2024-25 school year. Other schools in the district include Columbine Elementary School, which served 321 students, and Summit Elementary School, which served 331 students. Both elementary schools' enrollment included students PK-6<sup>th</sup> grades.

With enrollment driving building consolidation, the students within Gateway Elementary have been consolidated into the other District elementary schools. Columbine and Summit added 6<sup>th</sup> grade, leaving Woodland Park Middle School to serve the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades. These adjustments in grades are reflected within the graph below.

While the 2025-26 enrollment is not yet clear, as forecasting is often more of an art than a science, it seems likely that the Merit Academy will serve at least 600 students. From the preliminary budget presentation in May, 2025, it appears the District is forecasting a total student enrollment of 1,847 (with 1,777 being the funded count). With these early predictions, Merit Academy may exceed 32% of the District's student population for the 25-26 school year.

These trends are noted on the following graph, with abbreviations noted herein:

WPHS: Woodland Park High School;

WPMS: Woodland Park Middle School;

MA: Merit Academy;

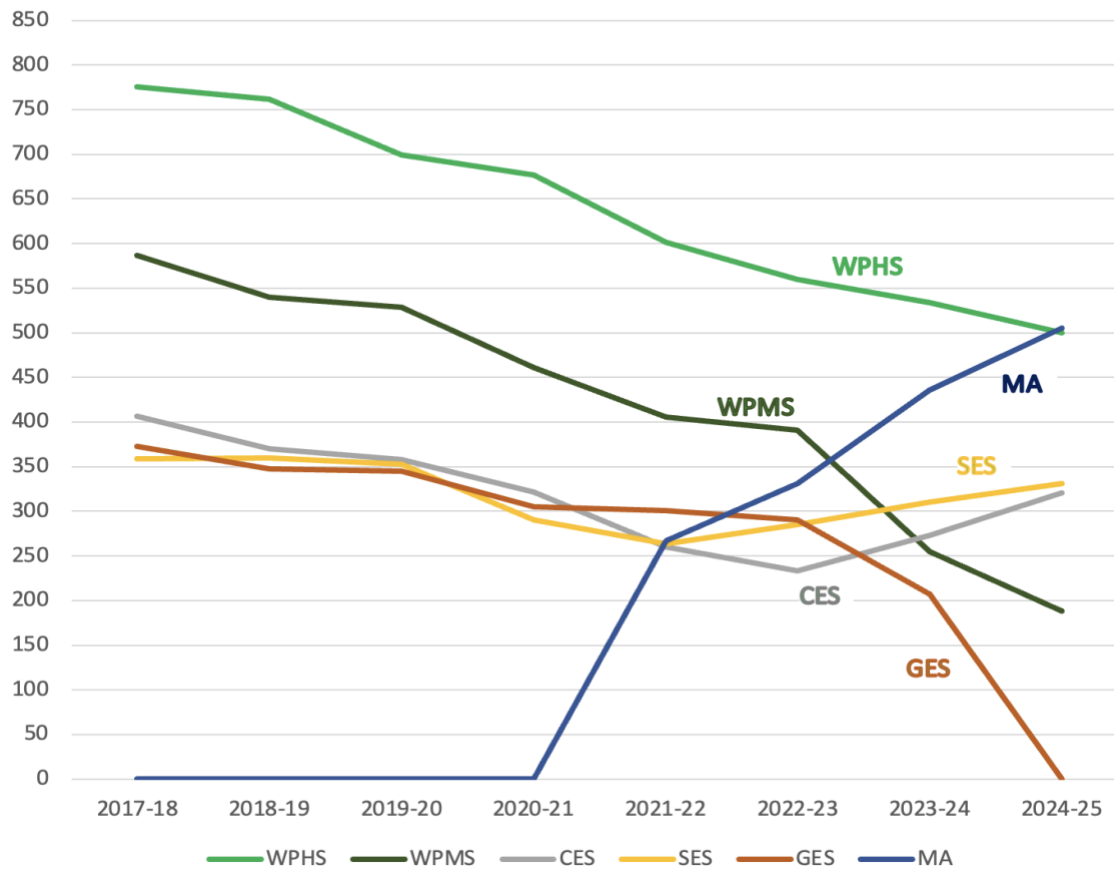
CES: Columbine Elementary School;

GES: Gateway Elementary School;

SES: Summit Elementary School).



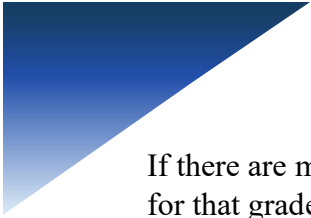
## WPSD School Enrollment Trends



Statewide trends indicate a slight decline in public school enrollment, with Colorado's PK-12 enrollment dropping to 881,065 in 2024-2025, the lowest in a decade. Merit Academy's growth contrasts with this trend, suggesting that its classical education model and community engagement efforts are attracting families, including those families moving to the area, in part, because of Merit Academy, and those students who attend from neighboring districts.

### Enrollment Lottery Process

Vacancies exist whenever the number of students enrolled in class is below that class' capacity. As vacancies occur, those vacancies are filled using a lottery system. Students are eligible to fill a vacancy after parents submit an Intent to Enroll and are placed on a list for that particular grade. Within the Intent to Enroll, parents acknowledge an understanding of the expectations of curriculum, required levels of performance, code of conduct, uniform requirements, rules, and other expectations. The Intent to Enroll form also includes child's name, birthdate, upcoming grade Parents have noted that this has been very helpful for them to be prepared for the type of education to expect and they have appreciated the onset of transparency.



If there are more openings than students, every student who has completed the Intent to Enroll for that grade for the following school year are then offered an opportunity to register. If that particular grade is oversubscribed, then the lottery process kicks in. The lottery is generally held during the last week of February or the first week of March.

The following categories of applicants are exempt from the lottery-enrollment procedure in the following order of precedence:


- Currently enrolled students
- Total of the following two groups not to exceed 20% of total enrollment:
  - Children of Founders as defined in the charter contract with Woodland Park School District
  - Children of full-time staff

The lottery-enrollment procedure is a blind process, where students are assigned a particular number that represents grade, whether they are siblings or have attended the homeschool program, if they reside in the District, or if parents attended one of the parent informational meetings. From there, these numbers are listed by weight and those students with the higher weights first fill in the vacancies. The order of preferences within the lottery include:

- Siblings of currently enrolled students; Homeschoolers currently enrolled in Merit Academy's Homeschool or Falcon Aerolab enrichment program.
- Students on the lottery list residing within the Woodland Park School District whose parent or guardian has attended a public information night.
- Students on the lottery list residing within the Woodland Park School District whose parent or guardian has not attended a public information night.
- Students on the lottery list residing outside the Woodland Park School District whose parent or guardian has attended a public information night.
- Students on the lottery list residing outside the Woodland Park School District whose parent or guardian has not attended a public information night.
- All other students on the lottery list

Enrollment requires full completion of the registration process. A seat offer is not a final confirmation of enrollment.

*Merit Academy is a WPSD choice-in charter school and part of the UP BOCES special education services network for services provided and determination of Free Appropriate Public Education within the network of programs.*



Merit Academy operates as a school of choice within the Woodland Park School District, adhering to a structured enrollment process to manage high demand. When the number of applicants exceeds the school's capacity, a lottery system is employed to allocate available seats. For example, if the school sets a cap for a grade of 60 students and receives 70 applications (including returning students who are guaranteed a seat), a lottery is conducted for the excess applicants, on a per-grade basis for the particular grades that are oversubscribed.

The lottery process prioritizes specific groups to ensure fairness and continuity:


- **Returning Students:** Automatically granted seats.
- **Siblings:** Siblings of currently enrolled students receive priority.
- **Homeschoolers:** Students enrolled in Merit Academy's homeschool or Falcon Aerolab enrichment programs are prioritized.
- **Long-term Waitlisted Students:** Students on the waitlist for a year or more receive higher priority.
- **Residents and Information Session Attendees:** Students residing within the Woodland Park School District, particularly those whose parents have attended a public information night, are prioritized over non-residents.

Families selected through the lottery are notified and have three days to confirm their enrollment. If a family does not respond to multiple emails and phone calls, the seat is offered to the next student on the waitlist, ensuring efficient allocation of available spots. If a family declines the seat, they are removed from the list and the seat is then offered to the next student. If two students have identical weights, then whomever completed the Intent to Enroll first is the student who is offered the seat.

This process is transparent and aligns with state requirements for charter schools, fostering equitable access while accommodating the school's growth.

## Enrollment Summary

Merit Academy's enrollment of 505 students in the 2024-2025 school year underscores its role as a significant educational institution within the Woodland Park School District Re-2. Its growth from approximately 187 full-time and 80 part-time students in its first year to over 500 in this fourth year reflects strong community support for its classical education model. Compared to the district's total enrollment of 1,844 students, Merit Academy serves a substantial portion of local students. If current enrollment trends continue throughout the District schools, Merit Academy may be poised to become the largest school in the district at maturation. The school's lottery system ensures fair access to its programs, prioritizing returning students and specific groups while accommodating new applicants. As Merit Academy continues to expand its grade



offerings and academic programs, its enrollment trends suggest a strong and long-term future within the district.

## EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS


Merit Academy is deeply committed to fostering an inclusive educational environment where every student has the opportunity to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally. The robust Student Support program is designed to meet the diverse needs of our student body, ensuring that learners, particularly those requiring additional services, receive the individualized attention and resources necessary to thrive. With a dedicated team of professionals and evidence-based intervention programs, Merit Academy addresses the academic and behavioral needs of students while dispelling misconceptions about the capacity to serve students with special needs. This section outlines the exceptional work of our Student Support team, the targeted interventions the school employs, and the commitment to providing a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to all students.

### The Student Support Team

Merit Academy's Student Support team comprises two licensed Special Education teachers, two Special Education paraprofessionals, and three interventionists, all working collaboratively to deliver comprehensive support to students with diverse learning needs. This team plays a pivotal role in ensuring that students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), 504 plans, READ plans, Advanced Learning Plans (ALPs), and English Language Learner (ELL) plans receive tailored instruction and accommodations.

#### *Roles and Responsibilities*

- Two licensed Special Education teachers are certified professionals who design and implement IEPs for students with disabilities. Future budget includes hiring a third licensed SPED teacher to coincide with Merit Academy's growing population and path to maturation of approximately 700 students.
- Working closely with the UP BOCES, these licensed professionals collaborate with general education teachers to adapt curricula and instructional strategies, ensuring accessibility and alignment with each student's unique needs. These teachers provide direct instruction in both inclusive classrooms and specialized settings, monitor student progress, and ensure compliance with federal and state special education regulations.
- The two paraprofessionals assist teachers in delivering support to students with special needs. They provide one-on-one or small group assistance, help with classroom management, and facilitate the integration of students into the broader school community.



Their support ensures that students can fully participate in academic and extracurricular activities.

- Three interventionists specialize in delivering targeted interventions in reading and mathematics. They work with students who are below grade level or struggling in specific areas, using evidence-based programs to address learning gaps. Interventionists conduct assessments, monitor progress, and adjust strategies to ensure measurable academic gains.

This collaborative team approach ensures that students receive individualized support tailored to their academic, social, and emotional needs, fostering an environment where all learners can achieve their full potential.

## Reading Intervention Programs

Merit Academy employs two highly effective, Orton-Gillingham-based reading intervention programs—Take Flight and Spire—to support students with reading challenges. These programs are delivered by trained interventionists in small group or one-on-one settings, ensuring personalized instruction that addresses specific learning needs.


### *Take Flight*

Take Flight: A Comprehensive Intervention, developed by the Luke Waites Center for Dyslexia and Learning Disorders at Scottish Rite for Children, is a two-year, evidence-based curriculum designed for students ages seven and older with developmental dyslexia. Rooted in the Orton-Gillingham approach, Take Flight uses multisensory techniques to teach reading, writing, and spelling. The program is structured and sequential, beginning with basic language concepts and progressing to more complex components while incorporating continual repetition to reinforce learning. Key features include:

- **Focus Areas:** Phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension.
- **Implementation:** Delivered in small groups (two to six students) for a minimum of 45 minutes per day, five days a week, ensuring intensive and consistent support.
- **Outcomes:** Research indicates significant growth in all areas of reading skills for students who complete the program, enabling better word recognition and a smoother transition to real-world learning.

### *Spire*

Spire (Specialized Program Individualizing Reading Excellence) is another Orton-Gillingham-based reading intervention program designed for struggling readers. It provides systematic,



explicit instruction in phonological awareness, phonics, decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Spire's 10-step, teacher-led lessons are designed to be engaging and interactive, incorporating multisensory activities to reinforce learning. Key features include:

- **Structure:** Lessons are delivered in small groups or one-on-one, typically lasting 50 minutes, with a focus on rapid progression through concepts to maintain student engagement.
- **Assessment:** Students are assessed at the end of each lesson and level to ensure concept mastery, with data-driven instruction targeting specific weaknesses.
- **Effectiveness:** Spire is highly respected among educators for its ability to support struggling readers, with research supporting its efficacy in building foundational reading skills (Spire Reading Program).

Both Take Flight and Spire are integral to Merit Academy's reading intervention strategy, enabling students to overcome reading challenges and achieve grade-level proficiency.

### **Math Intervention: Math and Movement**

To support students in developing number sense and numeric fluency, Merit Academy implements small group tutoring and the Math and Movement program, a kinesthetic, multisensory approach to teaching mathematics. This innovative program harnesses students' natural energy and desire to move, integrating physical activities such as hopping, skipping, and cross-body movements into math instruction. Key features include:

- **Methodology:** Math and Movement uses movement-based activities to teach concepts like skip counting, addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. These activities are designed to be fun and engaging, fostering a positive attitude toward math.
- **Benefits:** Research suggests that physical activity enhances cognitive function and memory, leading to improved academic outcomes. A study by the University of Copenhagen found that students engaging in whole-body movement saw an 8% increase in math skills (Math & Movement).
- **Implementation:** The program is used in both classroom and intervention settings, with interventionists incorporating Math and Movement activities into targeted sessions for students needing additional support.

By making math interactive and enjoyable, Math and Movement helps students build a strong mathematical foundation and boosts their confidence in the subject.



## Addressing Misperceptions

Merit Academy is aware of misperceptions among a few community members who believe that, as a classical charter school, Merit Academy does not provide Special Education or intervention supports or serve students requiring additional interventions. These claims are not only inaccurate, but are blatantly false and do not reflect the reality of the school's educational practices and policies.

## Commitment to Special Education

Merit Academy is fully committed to providing a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to students, including those with special needs. The school adheres to all federal and state regulations, including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), ensuring that students with IEPs, 504 plans, READ plans, ALPs, and ELL plans receive the accommodations and services they are entitled to. The partnership with UP BOCES (Ute Pass Board of Cooperative Educational Services) enhances Merit Academy's ability to provide specialized services, while ensuring FAPE within the UP BOCES network of services (which includes schools in the Woodland Park and Cripple Creek/Victor School Districts). If a student's needs exceed the resources available at Merit Academy, they are served through programs provided by UP BOCES, which may be located in other district or non-district schools.

## Serving a Diverse Student Population

Contrary to claims that Merit Academy does not serve students requiring interventions, over 50% of Merit Academy students benefit from some form of intervention or support plan. This significant proportion underscores the importance of the Student Support team and the effectiveness of the intervention programs. Merit Academy's classical education model is designed to provide intensive academics alongside tailored supports to meet students' needs, regardless of their economic or academic background.

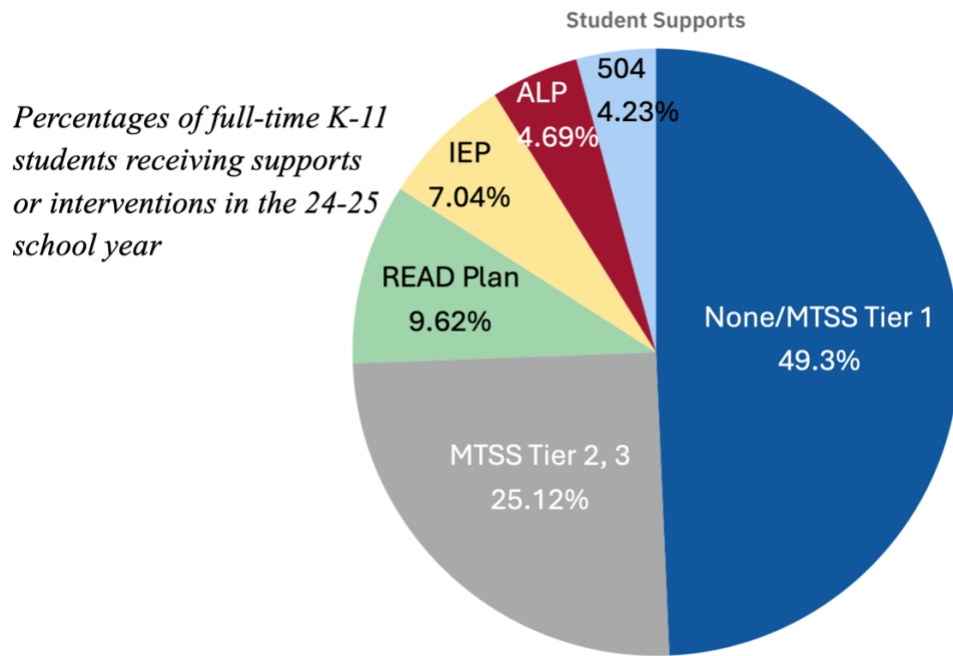
## Supports/Interventions

Of the 505 students served by Merit Academy in the 2024-25 school year, 426 were full-time K-11 grades; 26 were PK, and 53 were part-time students.

Of the 426 full-time students, 50.7% of the students received some sort of intervention and/or accommodation to support their learning.

- 41 of the 179 K-3<sup>rd</sup> graders were on READ plans (nearly 23%),
- 107 students received Tier 2 or Tier 3 supports from the MTSS intervention plan (25% of the full-time K-11 student body),
- 30 students were in IEP's (7%) ,

- 20 students were on ALP's (4%), and
- 18 students were on 504 plans (4%).



### Fee Waivers/FRL

Of the 505 PK-11<sup>th</sup> graders served at Merit Academy, over 25% (129 students) qualify for fee waivers and the Free/Reduced Lunch program.

### 2023-2024 Achievements

- **READ Plans:** Reduced by 3.3% with MTSS interventions key to progress.
- **Literacy:** Exceeded 50% mastery goal in most grades (e.g., 1st: 74.5%, 3rd: 73%).
- **Math:** 45%+ above 50th percentile in 4 of 6 grades (e.g., 3rd: 60%, 8th: 54.5%).

### 2024-2025 Progress

- **READ Plans:** Projected graduation of 5% to 20.4% of the K-3 population on READ plans.
- **Language & Conventions:** Expected CMAS gains with the implementation of the Shurley grammar program and additional interventions provided.
- **Math:** NWEA growth in most grades (e.g., 8th: 83rd to 91st percentile).





## READ Plan Impact

- 41 students were on READ plans; 17% of those students have met or exceeded the standards set to exit plans, driven by 50-min/day, 4-day/week interventions.

## MTSS Triumphs


- Of the original 107 students needing Tier 2 or 3 supports in the 2024-25 school year, 56 students achieved substantial growth and no longer needed the intensive interventions from the MTSS programs. 51 students continue to need the Tier 2 or Tier 3 supports.
- Approximately 60 reading students and 50 math students were supported weekly.
- 3rd-grade fluency push for 17 students who needed additional intensive interventions.

## Summary

MTSS and targeted programs have significantly advanced literacy and math outcomes, reducing intervention needs and meeting UIP goals. Merit Academy's Student Support program is a cornerstone of our mission to provide a high-quality, classical education to all students. Through the dedicated efforts of our two licensed Special Education teachers, two paraprofessionals, three interventionists, and an incredible number of teachers and administrators, Merit Academy delivers individualized support to over 50% of the student body. The use of evidence-based programs like Take Flight, Spire, and Math and Movement ensures that students with reading and math challenges receive targeted, effective interventions. By addressing community misperceptions and maintaining a strong partnership with UP BOCES, Merit Academy upholds the commitment to excellence in academics and in conduct for every student that Merit Academy serves. As a result, the MTSS, IEP, 504, ALP, READ, and other targeted programs have significantly advanced literacy and math outcomes, reducing intervention needs for several individuals and meeting UIP goals.

## CURRICULUM

Merit Academy is dedicated to providing a classical education that emphasizes intellectual growth, civic responsibility, and character development. The curriculum is structured to align with the classical education model, which follows the trivium stages of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, corresponding to the developmental stages of students from kindergarten through high school. This approach ensures that students develop a strong foundation of knowledge, critical thinking skills, and the ability to articulate ideas effectively. The curriculum integrates research-based programs and innovative offerings to prepare students for academic excellence and meaningful contributions to society. Below is a detailed overview of the key components of



Merit Academy's curriculum, highlighting how each program supports the school's mission and educational goals.

### **Classical Education Philosophy**

Merit Academy's curriculum is rooted in the principles of classical education, which seeks to teach students how to think critically and engage thoughtfully, rather than merely relying on digital resources. The school organizes its educational approach around the trivium, which includes:

- **Grammar Stage (K-5):** Focuses on foundational knowledge and skills, emphasizing memorization and mastery of core concepts.
- **Logic Stage (6-8):** Encourages analytical thinking, where students learn to question, reason, and understand cause-and-effect relationships.
- **Rhetoric Stage (9-12):** Develops students' abilities to express ideas persuasively and engage in advanced discourse.

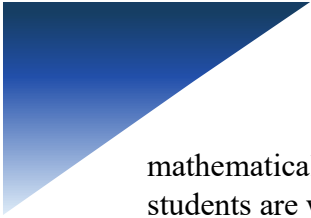
This framework is evident across all subjects and is supported by the school's commitment to fostering core virtues such as valor, goodness, perseverance, responsibility, and friendship. The curriculum is designed to be knowledge-rich and intensive.

### **Mathematics: Singapore Math (Math in Focus)**

Merit Academy employs the Singapore Math curriculum, specifically the Math in Focus program, to deliver a rigorous and effective mathematics education. Singapore Math, developed based on Singapore's national curriculum, is renowned for its emphasis on deep conceptual understanding, problem-solving, and mastery of mathematical skills. The Math in Focus program adapts this approach for American students, using a concrete-pictorial-abstract progression to ensure students grasp concepts thoroughly.

- **Concrete Stage:** Students use physical manipulatives to explore mathematical concepts, building a tangible understanding of numbers and operations.
- **Pictorial Stage:** Visual models, such as bar diagrams, help students visualize problems and develop problem-solving strategies.
- **Abstract Stage:** Students apply their understanding to solve complex problems using abstract symbols and equations.

This approach fosters strong number sense, pattern recognition, and the ability to tackle challenging mathematical problems with confidence. In the context of a classical education, Singapore Math aligns with the trivium by providing a structured foundation in the grammar stage, encouraging logical reasoning in the logic stage, and preparing students for advanced



mathematical discourse in the rhetoric stage. The program's focus on mastery ensures that students are well-prepared for higher-level mathematics.

### **Core Knowledge Sequence (K-8)**

For grades K-8, Merit Academy utilizes the Core Knowledge Sequence, developed by E.D. Hirsch, to provide a coherent and cumulative curriculum across multiple disciplines. The Core Knowledge framework is designed to ensure that students acquire a broad base of knowledge in subjects such as history, science, literature, and the arts, which is essential for a well-rounded education. The sequence is structured to build upon knowledge from previous years, creating a seamless progression of learning that supports long-term retention and understanding.

Key features of the Core Knowledge Sequence include:

- **Comprehensive Content:** Covers essential topics in history, geography, science, literature, and the arts, ensuring students gain a deep understanding of the world.
- **Cumulative Learning:** Each grade level builds on the previous year's content, reinforcing and expanding knowledge.
- **Cultural Literacy:** Emphasizes shared knowledge that enables students to engage meaningfully with their cultural and historical heritage.


In the grammar stage (K-5), students focus on foundational knowledge in subjects like mathematics, history, reading, writing, composition, classical literature, science, Latin, art, music, and physical education. In the logic stage (6-8), the curriculum shifts to encourage analytical thinking, aligning with the classical model's emphasis on reasoning and inquiry.

### **Literature and Language Arts**

Merit Academy's language arts curriculum is designed to cultivate strong reading, writing, and communication skills through engagement with classical literature and structured grammar instruction. Students read classical novels that are central to the Western literary canon, exposing them to timeless works that explore universal themes, human experiences, and historical contexts. This approach not only enhances reading comprehension and critical thinking but also fosters an in-depth exploration of character development and cultural awareness.

The Shurley Grammar program is a cornerstone of the language arts curriculum, providing a systematic, multisensory approach to teaching English grammar. Key components include:

- **Jingles and Chants:** Help students memorize grammar rules in an engaging way.
- **Question-and-Answer Flow:** Teaches students to analyze sentence structure systematically.

- 
- **Writing Integration:** Connects grammar instruction to writing, enabling students to apply their knowledge in practical contexts.

Shurley Grammar supports the classical education model by providing a strong foundation in the grammar stage, which is essential for effective communication and further language studies. The program's structured approach ensures that students develop the skills needed to write clearly and persuasively.

## Latin Studies


The study of Latin is a hallmark of Merit Academy's classical curriculum, reflecting the school's commitment to intellectual rigor and linguistic depth. Latin instruction enhances students' understanding of English vocabulary, as many English words derive from Latin roots. It also sharpens analytical thinking through the study of complex grammar and syntax. In the grammar stage, students learn basic Latin vocabulary and grammar, while in the logic and rhetoric stages, they engage with more advanced texts and translations, fostering a deeper appreciation for classical literature and history.

Latin aligns with the classical education model by training students in disciplined thinking and providing a foundation for studying other languages. It also connects students to the cultural and intellectual heritage of Western civilization, supporting Merit Academy's mission to prepare thoughtful, virtuous citizens.

## Upper School Programs

Merit Academy's upper school (grades 9-12) offers a robust array of academic and vocational programs designed to prepare students for diverse post-secondary pathways. The curriculum includes:

- **Advanced Placement (AP) Courses:** These college-level courses allow students to engage with challenging material and earn college credit by passing AP exams. AP courses align with the rhetoric stage of the trivium, encouraging students to synthesize knowledge and articulate complex ideas.
- **Concurrent Enrollment:** Through partnerships with local colleges, students can enroll in college courses while still in high school, earning credits that count toward both high school graduation and college degrees. This program has enabled nearly 60% of juniors and over 33% of sophomores to earn college credits.
- **Vocational Courses:** Merit Academy offers hands-on courses in welding, smithing, construction, and culinary arts, providing students with practical skills and career exploration opportunities. These programs cater to students interested in trades and technical fields, ensuring a well-rounded education that values both academic and practical pursuits.



The inclusion of vocational courses reflects Merit Academy’s commitment to meeting the diverse needs of its students, as noted on the Merit Academy Upper School page. These offerings prepare students for immediate workforce entry or further technical training, complementing the academic rigor of AP and concurrent enrollment programs.

### **Pedagogical Approach**

Merit Academy employs Socratic inquiry and application-based teaching methods, particularly in the grammar stage, to engage students actively in their learning. This approach encourages students to question, discuss, and apply their knowledge, fostering critical thinking and intellectual curiosity. The school’s emphasis on core virtues—valor, goodness, perseverance, responsibility, and friendship—integrates character development into the curriculum, ensuring that students grow into responsible, ethical citizens.

### **Alignment with Mission and Outcomes**

Merit Academy’s curriculum is designed to fulfill its mission of fostering civic responsibility, intellectual growth, and a desire for good. The school’s focus on a classical, knowledge-rich curriculum prepares students to be thoughtful, virtuous contributors to a free society. Academic outcomes, such as top regional CMAS scores and a ranking in the top 21% of Colorado schools, demonstrate the effectiveness of this approach. Additionally, the success of upper school students in earning college credits and engaging in vocational training highlights the curriculum’s ability to prepare students for diverse futures.

### **Summary**

Merit Academy’s curriculum combines time-tested educational programs with innovative offerings to provide a comprehensive, classical education. By integrating Singapore Math, Core Knowledge, classical literature, Shurley Grammar, Latin, and advanced and vocational programs, the school ensures that students develop the knowledge, skills, and character needed for success in higher education and beyond. This curriculum not only meets the needs of students at various developmental stages but also upholds the school’s commitment to excellence, it is another example of why Merit Academy is a valuable asset to the Teller County community and a strong candidate for charter renewal.

## **STUDENT PERFORMANCE INDICATORS**

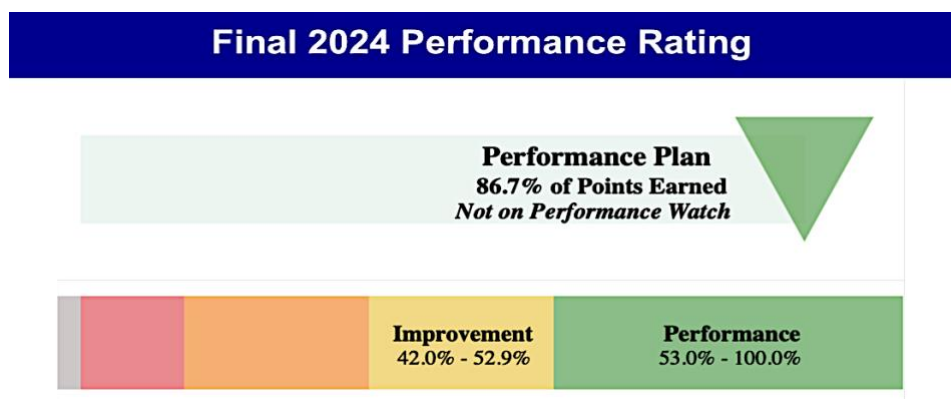
Merit Academy has established itself as a shining example of academic excellence within the Woodland Park School District and among neighboring districts, demonstrating exceptional performance and growth since its founding. The school’s commitment to intensive academics,

student growth, and college readiness is evident in its School Performance Framework (SPF) ratings, standardized test scores, and significant improvements in state rankings.

This section compares Merit Academy's test scores and SPF ratings with other schools in the Woodland Park School District, the district's overall performance, and the Manitou Springs, Cripple Creek, and Colorado Springs D11 school districts, highlighting the charter school's contributions to the district's educational landscape and its compelling case for charter renewal.

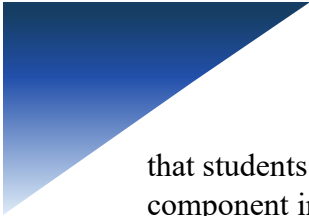
### Performance Standards

Merit Academy's 2024 SPF rating of "Performance Plan" with 86.7% points earned places it in the top 21% of Colorado schools, reflecting excellence in academic achievement and growth. The assessment results, ratings, and rankings are testament to the incredible professional experts on staff, the intensive classical curriculum, and the commitment to student success. The SPF, administered by the Colorado Department of Education (CDE), evaluates schools based on three key performance indicators: Academic Achievement, Academic Growth, and Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness (although, Merit Academy – not having seniors or graduates until 2026 – is not assessed based on the postsecondary and workforce readiness component yet). Merit Academy's strong performance across these metrics reflects the school's ability to meet or exceed state expectations across key performance indicators and positions Merit Academy as a top-performing school in the state.



To further illustrate Merit Academy's commitment to excellence, nearly 60% of juniors (the highest grade until 2025-26) and over 33% of sophomores earning or pursuing college credits, and 28% of high school students are involved in CTE programs that may lead to industry standard certifications, positioning students for post-secondary success.

The school has been recognized for achieving some of the highest Colorado Measures of Academic Success (CMAS) scores in the region, covering English Language Arts (ELA), Mathematics, and Science for grades 3-8. Additionally, its PSAT9 scores for ninth graders averaged 906, surpassing Colorado's average of 879 and the national average of 861, indicating



that students are well-prepared for future academic challenges. These scores are a critical component in the SPF, along with student growth. Because of this, the discussion of assessments will focus primarily on the SPF ratings provided by the CDE, culminated from CMAS, PSAT, and SAT achievement and growth scores. These state assessments also evaluate each student’s knowledge and mastery of the standards set forth by the State of CO, and thereby ensure each school is meeting or exceeding state expectations of those standards.

**Growth and Trends for Excellence**

Merit Academy has shown significant growth over recent years, demonstrating a clear trend toward academic excellence. The following table summarizes SPF performance from 2022 to 2024:

Year	SPF Rating	Points Earned	State Rank
2022	Insufficient State Data	0%	Not Ranked
2023	Improvement Plan: Decreased due to Participation	76.3%	313
2024	Performance Plan	86.7%	116

This data highlights a remarkable improvement, with SPF points earned increasing from 76.3% in 2023 to 86.7% in 2024, and the school’s state ranking advancing from 313 to 116, placing it in the top 7% of Colorado’s 1,842 public schools. The jump in participation rates, meeting 95% in 2024, further underscores the school’s commitment to robust assessment practices.


**Comparison with Woodland Park School District**

Merit Academy operates within the Woodland Park School District Re-2, which received an "Accredited" rating with 73.8% points earned in 2024. While the district’s performance is solid, Merit Academy’s 86.7% points earned exceeds the district average (which includes Merit Academy’s performance and growth data), indicating that the charter school is a standout performer.

The Woodland Park School District included six schools in the 2023-24 Performance Framework ratings: Merit Academy, Columbine Elementary, Gateway Elementary, Summit Elementary, Woodland Park Middle School, and Woodland Park High School. The following table compares their 2024 SPF points earned:

School	SPF Rating	Points Earned
Merit Academy	Performance Plan	86.7%
Summit Elementary	Performance Plan	89.5%





Woodland Park Middle School	Performance Plan	81.7%
Columbine Elementary	Performance Plan	78%
Woodland Park High School	Performance Plan	67%
Gateway Elementary	Performance Plan	64.2%

Merit Academy's 86.7% points earned is competitive within the district, surpassed only by Summit Elementary's 89.5%. However, as a K-12 institution, Merit Academy's performance across a broader grade range is particularly notable compared to elementary or secondary-only schools. Its high CMAS scores and PSAT9 performance further distinguish it as a leader in the district.

### Comparison with Neighboring Districts

Merit Academy's performance also shines when compared to neighboring school districts, many of which have historically struggled with mediocre SPF ratings. The following table summarizes the 2024 District Performance Framework (DPF) ratings for the relevant districts:

District	DPF Rating	Points Earned
Woodland Park Re-2	Accredited	73.8%
Manitou Springs 14	Accredited	72.2%
Cripple Creek-Victor RE-1	Accredited with Improvement Plan	44.3%
Colorado Springs D11	Accredited with Improvement Plan	51.4%

#### ***Woodland Park School District Re-2***

The Woodland Park School District's healthy 73.8% points earned in 2024 reflects steady improvement from 66.8% in 2023 and 65.2% in 2022. However, its historical ratings, often marked by "Low Participation" qualifiers, indicate past challenges in meeting state assessment standards. Merit Academy's 86.7% points earned outpaces the district average, highlighting its role as a high-performing charter school within the district.

#### ***Manitou Springs School District 14***

Manitou Springs School District earned 72.2% points in 2024, maintaining an "Accredited" rating. While it achieved an "Accredited with Distinction" rating in 2018 with 74.6% points, its performance has generally hovered around the "Accredited" level with occasional low



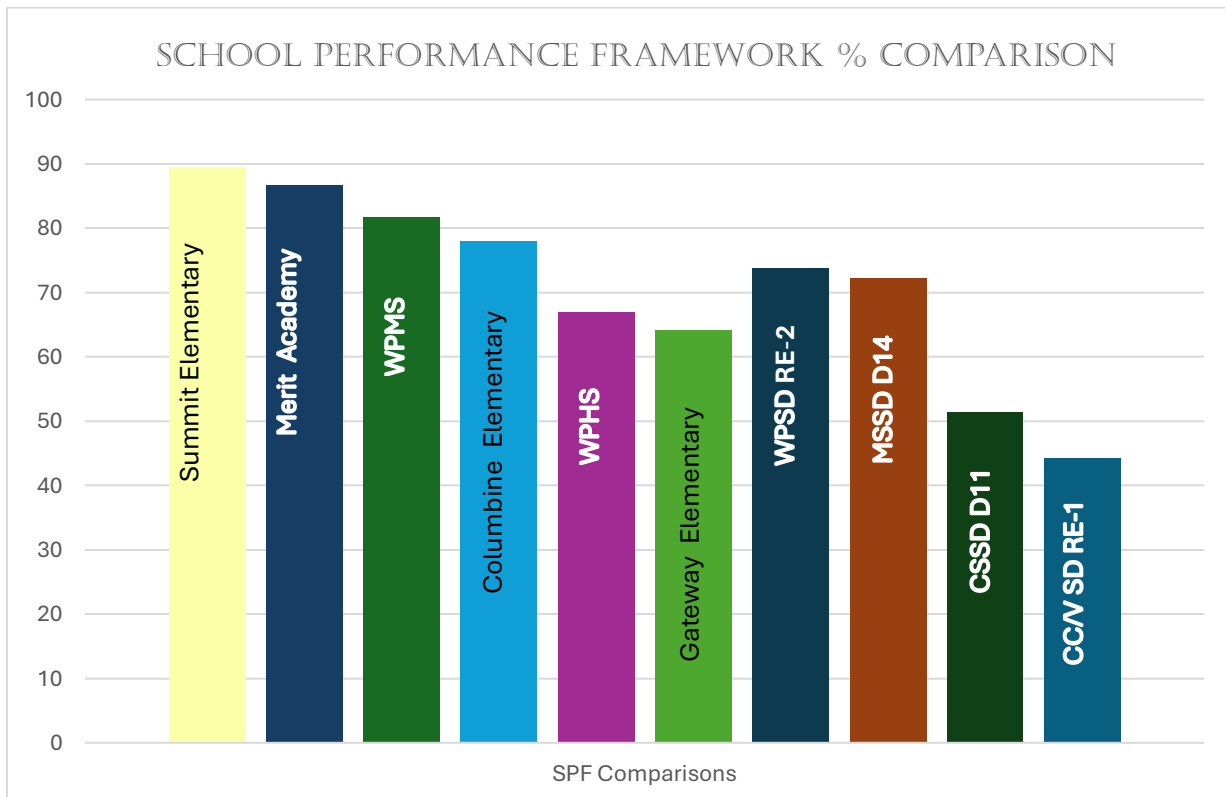
participation issues. Merit Academy's higher points earned and top regional CMAS scores suggest it outperforms the average school in this district.

### ***Cripple Creek-Victor School District RE-1***

Cripple Creek School District has consistently faced challenges, with a 2024 rating of "Accredited with Improvement Plan" and only 44.3% points earned. Its historical ratings, including "Priority Improvement Plan" in 2022 with 38.7% points, reflect ongoing struggles. Merit Academy's superior performance and regional ranking underscore its strength relative to this district.

### ***Colorado Springs School District 11***

Colorado Springs D11, with 51.4% points earned in 2024 and an "Accredited with Improvement Plan" rating, has a history of mediocre performance, with ratings often requiring improvement plans. Merit Academy's 86.7% points and top 21% state ranking far exceed the performance of schools in this larger district, which serves over 22,000 students.





## *Historical Context of Neighboring Districts*

The neighboring districts have faced challenges in achieving consistently high SPF ratings. These historical trends of mediocre performance contrast sharply with Merit Academy's rapid improvement and catapulting rankings, reinforcing its position as a regional leader in academic achievement.

### **Attendance**

School attendance is a cornerstone of student success, particularly at Merit Academy, where our classical education model relies on consistent engagement with a rigorous, cumulative curriculum. Students who attend school regularly are better positioned to participate in Socratic discussions, master the Core Knowledge sequence, and develop the habits of discipline and responsibility that align with our mission. Research consistently demonstrates that high attendance rates correlate with improved academic performance, higher graduation rates, and stronger social outcomes. At Merit Academy, we view attendance as a key measure of our students' commitment to their education and our community's dedication to fostering an environment of excellence.

For the 2023-24 school year, Merit Academy achieved an attendance rate of 94.7%, compared to the district's average of 92.4% and a State average of 91.5%. This strong performance highlights our ability to sustain student participation despite various challenges. By fostering a supportive and engaging school culture, Merit Academy ensures that students are motivated to attend and take full advantage of the unique opportunities we offer.

Our high attendance rates are supported by intentional strategies designed to address barriers and promote a positive learning environment. These efforts include proactive communication with families and a commitment to creating a community where students feel valued and want to learn. Our staff collaborates with parents and students to resolve attendance challenges, ensuring that every scholar can fully engage in their education. Furthermore, our classical approach—emphasizing character development and civic responsibility—reinforces the value of regular attendance as a vital component of personal and academic growth.

The table below compares Merit Academy's attendance and truancy rates with the District (which includes Merit Academy's data) and the State.

## Attendance, Truancy, and Absenteeism Rate

### Attendance Rate

Attendance Rate (School)	Attendance Rate (District)	Attendance Rate (Statewide)
<b>94.7%</b>	<b>92.4%</b>	<b>91.5%</b>
School Year: 2023-2024	School Year: 2023-2024	School Year: 2023-2024

### Truancy Rate

Truancy Rate (School)	Truancy Rate (District)	Truancy Rate (Statewide)
<b>0.9%</b>	<b>2.3%</b>	<b>3.4%</b>
School Year: 2023-2024	School Year: 2023-2024	School Year: 2023-2024


### Chronically Absent Rate

Chronically Absent (School)	Chronically Absent Rate (District)	Chronically Absent Rate (Statewide)
<b>18%</b>	<b>22.7%</b>	<b>27.7%</b>
School Year: 2023-2024	School Year: 2023-2024	School Year: 2023-2024

## Summary

Merit Academy's 2024 SPF rating of "Performance Plan" with 86.7% points earned, combined with its top CMAS scores, above-average PSAT9 performance, and internal assessments of student growth and achievement demonstrate its commitment to academic excellence. Merit Academy's significant growth from 76.3% points in 2023 to 86.7% in 2024, and its state ranking improvement from 313 to 116, highlight a clear trend toward excellence. Compared to the strong rating of Woodland Park School District's 73.8% points and the lower ratings of Manitou Springs (72.2%), Cripple Creek (44.3%), and Colorado Springs D11 (51.4%), Merit Academy has proven itself as a high-performing institution.

Merit Academy's solid attendance record and outstanding performance enhances the Woodland Park School District's educational offerings, providing families with a high-quality, classical charter school option that aligns with the district's goals of parental choice and academic rigor. The school's ability to achieve top-tier SPF ratings and test scores and offer concurrent enrollment and CTE industry courses, despite being a relatively new institution, demonstrates its effectiveness and potential for continued growth. These achievements, set against the backdrop



of historically mediocre ratings in neighboring districts, affirm Merit Academy's role as an institution of educational excellence in the region.

Given the outcomes thus far presented, it seems undeniable that Merit Academy's charter be renewed, further supporting the authorizer's best practices to assume responsibility not for the success or failure of individual schools but for holding schools accountable for their performance and outcomes rather than their processes.


## STAFFING

Merit Academy's staffing model is a cornerstone of the commitment to academic excellence, fostering a culture of leadership, collaboration, and continuous improvement. At the heart of this leadership is Headmaster Gwynne Pekron, whose extensive experience and unique qualifications set a strong foundation for the school's success. With a PhD in Industrial/Organizational Psychology, Dr. Pekron brings unparalleled expertise in leadership, change management, organizational health, communication, and team cohesion. Her academic and professional background equips her to cultivate a thriving educational environment where staff and students alike are empowered to excel. Dr. Pekron's diverse experience as a consultant, university instructor for doctoral programs, former counselor at Woodland Park High School, coach, WPSD Board member, parent, and co-founder of Merit Academy underscores her deep understanding of educational systems and community dynamics. As Headmaster, she leverages this multifaceted perspective to guide Merit Academy with vision and integrity.

Merit Academy's commitment to excellence extends to the teaching staff, 34% of whom hold either a Master's or Doctorate degree, reflecting the deliberate strategy to hire educators who are experts in their fields. By recruiting and retaining world class professionals, Merit Academy ensures that students receive instruction from individuals who are not only passionate about teaching but also deeply knowledgeable in their subject areas. This approach strengthens academic programs and fosters a culture of intellectual distinction and innovation, aligning with the mission to provide an exceptional classical education.

### Recruitment

Merit Academy's staff recruitment strategy is a testament to its stellar reputation within the educational community, which drives a robust pipeline of high-quality, in-field applicants primarily through word-of-mouth and professional referrals. The school's commitment to academic excellence, supportive culture, and classical teaching environment has cultivated a strong network of educators and professionals who actively recommend Merit Academy as a premier destination for passionate and qualified educators. This organic recruitment channel reflects the trust and admiration the school has earned, as current staff, alumni, and community



stakeholders consistently refer exceptional candidates who align with the school’s mission and values.

While Merit Academy benefits significantly from these referrals, the school ensures accessibility and transparency in its hiring process by posting open positions on its website and on Indeed, a widely recognized job platform. These postings provide clear job descriptions, qualifications, and application instructions, allowing the school to reach a broader audience when needed. However, the need for extensive advertising is minimal due to the steady influx of applications generated through the school’s reputation and referral network. This combination of targeted digital postings and organic candidate pipelines ensures that Merit Academy attracts and retains top-tier educators who are dedicated to fostering student success and upholding the school’s high standards.

## **Professional Development**


Merit Academy is committed to delivering an exceptional education rooted in the trivium—grammar, logic, and rhetoric. The success of this mission hinges on the expertise, dedication, and continuous growth of our teaching staff. To ensure educators are equipped to deliver an intensive, knowledge-rich curriculum and foster critical thinking and virtuous character in students, Merit Academy incorporates professional development, mentorship, and the incorporation of collaboration through professional learning communities (PLCs). Whether new teachers engage in our state approved induction program, or staff is involved in school-wide trainings, investing in the professionalism and skill of employees is a primary tenet of Merit Academy. These strategies address training in specific curricula, professionalism, communication and opportunities for teachers to deepen their subject matter expertise through workshops, conferences, and scholarly activities. This concept does not exclude support staff, the opportunity for mastery in Infinite Campus, finance, or records is also highly emphasized and prioritized. By investing in staff, Merit Academy upholds the deepest commitment to academic excellence and civic responsibility, as outlined in the school’s mission.

### ***Training in Specific Curricula***

Merit Academy’s curriculum, which includes Singapore Math, Core Knowledge, classical novels, Shurley Grammar, and Latin, requires specialized training to ensure effective implementation. The school’s professional development provides targeted support for these programs, aligning with the classical education model’s emphasis on foundational knowledge, logical reasoning, and rhetorical expression.

### ***Singapore Math***

Singapore Math is a cornerstone of our mathematics curriculum, emphasizing deep conceptual understanding and problem-solving through a concrete-pictorial-abstract (CPA) progression. To support teachers in mastering this approach, Merit Academy partners with leading providers such



as Singapore Math Inc and expert consultants in the Singapore Math curriculum. These organizations offer comprehensive workshops and online seminars that cover essential topics like number sense, bar modeling, and fractions. For example, Math In Focus' training includes interactive videos and activities that help teachers create engaging lessons tailored to diverse learners. Similarly, Singapore Math Inc. provides customized workshops, demonstration lessons, and teacher observations to ensure fidelity to the curriculum. These programs enable our educators to deliver math instruction that fosters critical thinking and procedural fluency, aligning with the classical emphasis on logical reasoning.

### ***Core Knowledge***

The Core Knowledge Sequence, used in grades K-8, provides a coherent, cumulative framework for teaching history, geography, science, literature, and the arts. To support its implementation, Merit Academy leverages professional learning opportunities from the Core Knowledge Foundation and attend state conferences with other Core Knowledge charter schools. These opportunities provide detailed guidance on curriculum delivery and alignment with state standards, answering teachers' specific questions for best practice, and support a partnership across schools. Additionally, on-site support from Core Knowledge specialists offers tailored coaching to address specific classroom needs. This training ensures that teachers can effectively build students' foundational knowledge, preparing them for the analytical and rhetorical stages of the trivium.

### ***Socratic Method***

The Socratic Method, a hallmark of classical education, fosters critical thinking through thought-provoking dialogue. To equip teachers with the skills to lead effective Socratic discussions, Merit Academy provides opportunity for our internal experts to deliver practical strategies for crafting probing questions and facilitating student-led discussions. These workshops help teachers guide students through complex ideas, encouraging them to question assumptions and articulate reasoned arguments, which aligns with the logic and rhetoric stages of the trivium.

### ***Professionalism and Communication***

A large basis of organizational strife and poor morale stem from issues founded in communication. In a classical school, professionalism and communication are critical for creating a learning environment that reflects the school's mission and values. Merit Academy's professional development plan includes targeted training to enhance these skills, ensuring teachers serve as role models for students and effective communicators with the broader school community.



## ***Effective Communication & Professionalism***

Regular workshops focus on developing teachers' abilities to communicate clearly and effectively with others. These sessions cover essential skills such as active listening, conflict resolution, and managing difficult conversations. Staff reflect on the connection between communication and professionalism, what trends generally lead to poor impressions, and communication tips to enhance the professional workforce. Creating a workplace where staff are joyful, team-oriented, and satisfied is a result of the mantra, "I won't allow my bad day to make your day bad" and how staff can support one another through challenges.

## ***Professional Learning Communities***

Merit Academy fosters a culture of collaboration and improvement through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Research supports PLCs and the many benefits; specifically with student outcomes, staff morale, and positive relationships within the school community. Merit Academy has adopted the use of PLCs, as a best practices in education. The model that has been adopted is a four pillar approach from authors Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, Thomas Many, and Mike Mattos in Learning by Doing/A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work.

### **The First Two Pillars: Mission and Vision**

Staff work collaboratively to uphold the mission and vision, which are the cornerstone to Merit Academy's decisions and forward focus. The students, staff, and greater school community benefit from the critical and common purpose of working together to uphold the Mission/Vision.

*Mission: Merit Academy will cultivate the minds and nurture the hearts of Pre K-12 youth in the Ute Pass/Woodland Park region with instruction in the principles of moral character and civic virtue, employing honored foundations of classical education and Core Knowledge®.*

*Vision: Students prepared for success in a free society, promoting civic responsibility and contributing their talents in a flourishing republic by pursuing beauty, truth, and good.*

### **The Third Pillar: Values**

Merit Academy's values are founded by the five core virtues: Responsibility, Perseverance, Valor, Friendship, and Goodness. The House system and the positive behavior strategies are built upon these virtues, with the high expectation of conduct as a result.

The first three pillars center around the culture at Merit Academy – what is the essence one may experience when they walk through the halls or observe the students and teachers in this environment? These three pillars are crucial to the structure of the PLC model, but it is not enough for a highly effective school of excellence. The fourth pillar is also necessary to pull both teaching and learning to a caliber of distinction.





### **The Fourth Pillar: Goals**

PLC meetings are organized by grade for the Kindergarten through 5th grade teachers and by subject/content area for the 6th-12th grade teachers. Although goals amongst grade levels are the primary focus in the beginning phases of this PLC model, there is value in periodically holding vertical meetings across Kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grades. For example, 2nd and 3rd grade teachers collaborate together to establish a scaffolding system of support for students and a level of understanding of what was taught in the previous year or what students should know in the grade ahead. In the upper school, these periodic meetings occur for 6th-12th grade content teachers who work with a particular group of students (as opposed to meeting within their subject/content department).

Key elements of a PLC model is that teachers:

- Know what students need to know (the bar/the standard),

- Know how to teach it and know how to supplement,

- Know how to get their students to the bar/standard, and

- Know what to do if their student(s) are struggling to meet the bar/standard.

PLCs provide a forum for teachers to discuss, explore, and to learn about best practices to ensure they know all of the aforementioned.

Teachers work collaboratively to share tips and insights. Math teachers collaborate to refine their use of bar modeling in Singapore Math, while Core Knowledge teachers align lesson plans to ensure cumulative learning across grades. Teachers review curriculum materials, develop interdisciplinary projects and events, address challenges in classroom instruction, etc. These rich discussions are the foundation for goal setting. Setting goals (clearly identifying a need, agreeing upon the need/goal and articulating goals) are critical aspects of improving student outcomes. Goal cycles may differ in length, but a six week timeline is standard. Reflecting on progress during check-ins and at the closing of a goal cycle is important. Check-ins allow time for reflection/adjustment. The end-of-cycle-meeting provides opportunity to assess the practices, refine, or readdress, if necessary.


Oftentimes, goal setting conversations are focused on curriculum. When 1st grade teachers struggled with a Singapore Math method vs a traditional way of teaching subtraction, they wrote the following goal: In 6 weeks, 85% of the 1st graders will be able to use the part-part-whole model for subtraction in 4 out of 5 problems given. The academic goals center around DIBELS and NWEA data, but can be set for Shurley Grammar studies, Latin, or other subjects.

Within the PLC's, teachers come together to collaborate, discuss best practices, analyze student performance data, and create goals to improve student outcomes.

### **Integration of a Classical Method**

PLCs at Merit Academy also focus on integrating classical education principles across subjects; ensuring that teaching methods align with the trivium. Teachers explore ways to incorporate





Socratic questioning, logical analysis, and rhetorical expression into their lessons. These practices help to create a cohesive educational experience that reflects Merit Academy's philosophy. For instance, a PLC might develop strategies for using Socratic seminars to teach classical novels, encouraging students to engage deeply with literary themes and historical contexts.

Professional Learning Communities are much more than a meeting once a week to talk about data and set goals. By fostering data-driven decision-making and support for colleagues, PLCs enhance the effectiveness of the curriculum delivery and student success. Teachers work together to enhance their practice and improve student outcomes. Staff members at Merit Academy are given meaningful feedback not only from administration, but also from their teammates. PLC culture supports teachers, students, and the entire school community.

### ***Conference Opportunities***


Teachers are supported to attend conferences in their areas of interest or expertise, such as music, mathematics, finance, or classical education. These opportunities allow educators to stay current with developments in their fields, network with peers, and bring innovative ideas back to the classroom. For example, a math teacher might attend a conference specifically for teachers of middle school math, while a music teacher could explore new pedagogical approaches at a national music education conference. Merit Academy allocates a budget for professional development to ensure teachers have access to these opportunities, reinforcing our commitment to continuous growth.

### ***Alignment with Classical Education Expectations***

Classical education requires teachers who are not only skilled educators but also subject matter experts who can inspire intellectual curiosity and model lifelong learning. This expectation is particularly pronounced in the upper school, where instructors are experts in their field and lead advanced courses, concurrent enrollment programs, and vocational classes with experience and confidence. That's not to say our School of Grammar educators aren't experts, they are. They are well versed in their grade level, subjects taught, and specific classroom management for those age levels.

### **Evaluations**

The Board of Directors evaluates the Headmaster. At the start of each school year, the Headmaster will set personal and professional goals aligned with the school's charter. At the end of the year, the review will assess the completion of goals and the school's performance framework and year's achievements. This process will recognize exemplary performance and address any areas of improvement, providing constructive feedback and support.



The Headmaster conducts annual evaluations of the Deans (principals), fostering professional growth through individualized development plans aligned with the school's mission. These evaluations incorporate achievement of professional goals, delivery of development programs for educators, and assessment of leadership skills, among other concepts determined early in the year. Throughout this system, the Deans and Headmaster discuss the excellence of leadership, along with areas that may need improvement or growth.

The Deans evaluate teachers based on professional development, peer and coaching observations, and mentoring initiatives. Deans identify strengths and areas for improvement, and provide ongoing feedback, including constructive remediation, problem-solving support, and recognition of outstanding performance. The Deans conduct ongoing formal and informal observations of teachers and TA's. Staff will receive at least one formal observation and multiple informal observations annually, each including a post-observation feedback session to support continuous improvement.


### Summary

Merit Academy's professional development plan is designed to empower our teachers to deliver an exceptional classical education that prepares students for academic success and virtuous citizenship. By providing targeted training in Singapore Math, Core Knowledge, and the Socratic Method, fostering professionalism and communication skills, supporting collaboration through PLCs, and encouraging ongoing learning through conferences and scholarly activities, we ensure that our educators are well-equipped to meet the demands of our curriculum and mission. This comprehensive approach not only enhances teacher effectiveness but also contributes to the overall success of our students, making Merit Academy a worthy candidate for charter renewal.

## CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

At Merit Academy, character development is a foundational pillar of our classical education model. Far from being an ancillary component, it is seamlessly integrated into the curriculum, culture, and daily life of the school. As a classical charter school, we believe that true education extends beyond intellectual mastery to the cultivation of moral character, preparing students to lead lives of virtue, responsibility, and service. Our character development program reflects the classical tradition's emphasis on forming thoughtful, ethical citizens and underscores our commitment to excellence.

Central to this mission are the school's five core virtues—valor, goodness, perseverance, responsibility, and friendship. These virtues guide students in developing moral character, preparing them to be thoughtful, virtuous, and responsible citizens in a free society. By integrating these virtues into the curriculum, extracurricular activities, and school culture, Merit



Academy not only shapes students into ethical individuals but also cultivates a cohesive and supportive school community, making a compelling case for charter renewal.

### The Five Core Virtues


Merit Academy's educational philosophy emphasizes that moral character is essential for sound reasoning and decision-making. The five core virtues are designed to unite a trained mind with a benevolent heart, enabling students to discern what is good, beautiful, and true. Each virtue contributes uniquely to character development:

Virtue	Definition	Impact on Character
<b>Valor</b>	Courage, strength, and bravery; choosing what is right despite challenges.	Builds resilience and moral conviction, empowering students to stand for ethical principles.
<b>Goodness</b>	Kindness, beauty, and generosity; acting with compassion and integrity.	Fosters empathy and excellence in character, promoting respectful and ethical interactions.
<b>Perseverance</b>	Commitment, grit, and determination; overcoming obstacles with persistence.	Instills resilience and a growth mindset, preparing students for long-term success.
<b>Responsibility</b>	Accountability and duty; fulfilling obligations to self and community.	Encourages accountability, preparing students to be dependable and civic-minded citizens.
<b>Friendship</b>	Building deep, positive relationships through interaction and service.	Promotes collaboration and community, fostering a sense of belonging and mutual support.

These virtues, rooted in the school's classical education model, align with its mission to prepare students for success in a free society by promoting civic responsibility and the pursuit of beauty, truth, and goodness.

### *Integration into School Life*

Merit Academy embeds its core virtues into every facet of the educational experience, ensuring that character development is a lived practice rather than a theoretical concept. The school's classical curriculum, which emphasizes the liberal arts and sciences, challenges students to engage deeply with concepts and ideas, fostering critical thinking and ethical discernment. This academic intensity is complemented by intentional efforts to instill virtues through various programs and activities.



One key mechanism is the House System, inspired by British educational traditions. Students are organized into houses that compete in academics, athletics, service, and school spirit, with points awarded for demonstrating the five core virtues. For example:

- **Valor** is displayed when students present projects, try new skills, or compete for their house.
- **Goodness** shines through in civic efforts and acts of kindness toward peers.
- **Perseverance** is evident as students overcome challenges, supported by house members' encouragement.
- **Responsibility** is reinforced through meeting expectations and contributing to house goals.
- **Friendship** is fostered through collaboration, service, and communication within and among houses.

This system promotes positive peer accountability and motivation, creating opportunities for students to practice virtues in real-world contexts. Additionally, classroom activities, such as discussions on historical figures or literary characters who exemplify these virtues, reinforce their importance. Extracurricular programs, including service projects, clubs, and athletics, further provide practical applications, allowing students to live out these values daily.


### ***Impact on Student Character Development***

The virtues cultivate a moral framework that prepares students for both personal and societal success. By emphasizing valor, students learn to make courageous decisions, standing firm in their principles even when faced with peer pressure or adversity. Goodness encourages them to act with kindness and integrity, fostering empathy and ethical behavior in their interactions. Perseverance equips students with the resilience to tackle academic and personal challenges, while responsibility instills a sense of duty to themselves and their community. Friendship builds strong, supportive relationships, teaching students the value of collaboration and mutual respect.

Through intensive academics and character-focused activities, students develop the ability to reason critically and make decisions that reflect what is good, beautiful, and true. This holistic approach ensures that graduates are not only academically proficient but also equipped with the character traits necessary to lead ethical and fulfilling lives.

### ***Benefits to the School Community***

The impact of Merit Academy's virtues within character development extends beyond students to encompass the entire school community, including teachers, staff, parents, and families. Educators model these virtues in their interactions, creating a positive and supportive environment that reinforces learning and personal growth.



Parents and families are also integral to this virtuous community. The virtues resonate with the values many families hold dear, fostering a strong partnership between home and school. This alignment is particularly significant given Merit Academy's grassroots origins as a school of choice, founded by local families seeking a classical, virtues-based education. The shared commitment to these values strengthens community trust and engagement, creating a cohesive culture where stakeholders work toward common goals of excellence and integrity.

The virtues also contribute to a school culture of transparency and accountability. For instance, the emphasis on responsibility ensures that all members of the community—students, staff, and parents—take ownership of their roles, while goodness and friendship promote kindness and collaboration. This creates a supportive environment where students thrive academically and socially, and families feel confident in the school's mission.

### *Alignment with Classical Education Mission*


Merit Academy's virtues are deeply tied to its classical education model, which emphasizes civic responsibility, intellectual growth, and the pursuit of goodness. The school's focus on the U.S. Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the liberal arts and sciences provides a framework for students to explore concepts of virtue in historical and philosophical contexts. By connecting these virtues to a classical curriculum, Merit Academy ensures that character development is not an add-on but an integral part of the educational experience.

This approach distinguishes Merit Academy as a leader in character education, addressing the community's desire for a school that prioritizes both knowledge-rich content and moral growth. The virtues reinforce the school's mission to prepare students for success in a free society, equipping them to contribute their talents to a flourishing republic.

### **Expectations of Conduct: Building a Culture of Excellence**

Merit Academy maintains high expectations of conduct, reflecting our belief that a structured and respectful environment is essential for student success. These standards are communicated clearly to students and families and upheld consistently across the school:

- **Dress Code:** A uniform policy promotes parity, professionalism, and focus on learning.
- **Attendance and Punctuality:** Timeliness and regular attendance demonstrate respect for the educational process and personal responsibility.
- **Classroom Behavior:** Students are expected to participate actively, listen attentively, and treat others with courtesy, creating a productive and non-disruptive learning atmosphere.
- **Community Involvement:** Participation in school events and service projects reinforces a sense of belonging and civic duty.



These expectations are designed to instill self-discipline and a strong work ethic, equipping students with the habits necessary for academic achievement and personal maturity.

### Supporting Programs and Initiatives

Merit Academy enhances its character development efforts through targeted programs that bring our values to life:

- **Mentorship Program:** Upperclassmen mentor and tutor younger students, exemplifying virtues and the Code of Honor while building cross-grade relationships.
- **Socratic Seminars:** These discussions deepen students' engagement with ethical dilemmas, drawing from classical texts and historical events.
- **Character Recognition:** Quarterly and semester awards celebrate students who embody our virtues, reinforcing positive behavior and inspiring others.

Together, these initiatives ensure that character education is dynamic and experiential, woven into the fabric of student life at Merit Academy.


### Alignment with Our Mission

Our character development program directly supports Merit Academy's mission to deliver a classical education that prepares students for lives of civic responsibility and excellence. By cultivating virtues, upholding a code of honor, and enforcing high standards of conduct, we equip students with the moral foundation necessary to thrive in college, career, and community. This focus not only enhances academic outcomes but also creates a supportive, values-driven school culture—a hallmark of classical education.

As we seek charter renewal, Merit Academy's character development program stands as evidence of our dedication to a holistic education. It reflects our roots in Woodland Park as a school committed to raising not just scholars, but virtuous citizens ready to contribute meaningfully to society.

## BOARD GOVERNANCE

One of the key components for charter renewal is for the Authorizer to ensure there is a healthy and effectual governance within the Charter School. In this, the practices and standards of the Board in terms of governance is reviewed to confirm a stabilized leadership team of the Charter School.



Merit Academy's Board of Directors exemplifies effective governance through its unwavering commitment to professional development, legal compliance, and alignment with the school's vision, mission, and grassroots origins as a classical school dedicated to excellence in academics and conduct. The Board's diligent oversight ensures that Merit Academy remains true to its founding principles while meeting all regulatory requirements and fostering a culture of transparency and accountability.

### **Completion of Required Board Training**

The Board of Directors at Merit Academy prioritizes continuous learning to enhance its governance capabilities. Each Board member has successfully completed the mandatory training provided by the Colorado League of Charter Schools (formerly housed with CDE), as required for charter school board members. Topics discussed in depth with these trainings include governance best practices, financial oversight, legal responsibilities, board meetings, effective board leadership, and strategic board goals. This commitment to professional development equips the Board to make informed decisions that advance Merit Academy's mission and ensure long-term success.

### **Compliance with Legal Obligations**

Merit Academy's Board operates in full compliance with applicable legal obligations, ensuring that its governance practices meet or exceed state and federal requirements. The Board is not in violation of any legal obligations, including those related to charter school operations, financial management, or educational standards. The Board reviews policies and procedures to confirm adherence to state and federal laws.

### **Adherence to Colorado's Open Meeting/Sunshine Laws**

Transparency is a cornerstone of Merit Academy's governance philosophy. The Board strictly adheres to Colorado's Open Meeting/Sunshine Laws (C.R.S. § 24-6-401 et seq.) and the Colorado Open Records Act (C.R.S. § 24-72-201 et seq.), ensuring that all governance activities are conducted openly and accessibly. To meet these requirements:

- Board meeting agendas, dates, times, and locations are posted in advance on the school's website, providing ample notice to the public.
- All Board meetings are open to the public, except for legally permitted executive sessions addressing sensitive matters such as personnel or legal issues.
- Detailed minutes of Board meetings are recorded, approved, and published on the school's website, ensuring accessibility to parents, staff, and community members.
- Public records requests are handled in accordance with the Open Records Act, with timely and transparent responses.





## **Commitment to Vision, Mission, Origins**

Merit Academy was founded as a grassroots effort to provide a classical education emphasizing academic intensity and solid character development. The Board of Directors remains steadfast in its commitment to this vision and mission, which guide every decision and policy. The Board's governance is rooted in preserving the school's classical model, which prioritizes a content-rich curriculum, critical thinking, and virtuous behavior. The Board members were involved in the school's founding, giving them a deep connection to its origins and a personal stake in its success. This shared history fuels their dedication to ensuring that Merit Academy continues to deliver on its promise of preparing students for lives of citizenship and service through a transformative educational experience.

The Board actively aligns its governance practices with Merit Academy's mission by:

- Setting policies that reinforce the classical curriculum and high scholastic and comportment standards.
- Monitoring academic and operational performance to ensure alignment with the school's goals.
- Engaging with various entities to secure additional resources that support the school's purpose, curriculum, vision, and mission.


By staying true to these principles, the Board ensures that Merit Academy continues to thrive as a school of excellence within the Woodland Park School District.

## **The Importance of Governance vs. Management**

Commonplace with highly successful charter schools, the Board of Directors is deeply committed to the principle that effective charter school leadership requires a clear distinction between governance and management. This requires a strong, collaborative relationship between the Board and the Headmaster. The Board views the Headmaster as a key partner in achieving the school's mission and works closely with her to provide strategic direction while respecting the Headmaster's role in day-to-day operations. The Board's role is to govern -- upholding the founding vision, mission, and strategic plan as it guides the school's long-term direction -- while entrusting the Headmaster with the responsibility of leading the school to achieve the founding vision, mission, and strategic plan. This separation is not only a best practice in charter school governance but also a foundational element of Merit Academy's success.

Governance is the Board's responsibility to provide strategic oversight, ensuring that Merit Academy remains true to its mission, is financially healthy, and is focused on its long-term goals. This includes approving budgets, setting policies, and monitoring the school's performance against established benchmarks. Management, on the other hand, is the Headmaster's domain—





implementing necessary processes to achieve the founding vision, overseeing staff, and handling the operational details that bring the school's purpose to life.

This distinction is critical for several reasons:

- **Clarity of Roles:** When the Board focuses on governance and the Headmaster on management, it creates a clear chain of command and accountability. Staff and stakeholders know who is responsible for what, reducing confusion and fostering a more efficient school environment.
- **Strategic Focus:** By concentrating on governance, the Board can dedicate its time and energy to high-level planning, such as sculpting the school's future from the casts of its founding, ensuring financial sustainability, and advocating for the school's mission in the broader community.
- **Empowerment of Leadership:** Entrusting the Headmaster with management empowers the Headmaster to lead the school with confidence, knowing she has the Board's support to make operational decisions that accomplish the forward vision of the school.

### *Pitfalls of Board Overreach*

It is critical that the Authorizer realize the importance of a strong, stable board/leadership operation and to recognize signs of a struggling governance within the Charter organization. When a Board attempts to manage the school rather than govern, or when a leader refuses open communication with the Board, it can lead to significant challenges that undermine the school's effectiveness.

Merit Academy's Board is proactive in avoiding the common pitfalls that hinders effective school governance. The Board has adopted a code of ethics and holds Board retreats to review its practices to ensure healthy Board governance. Key strategies include:

- Maintaining a clear distinction between the Board's role in policy-setting and oversight and the Headmaster's role in school management.
- Fostering open communication and constructive dialogue among Board members, school leadership, and the community.
- Ensure Board decisions center around the school's vision, mission, and founding constructs.
- Assess Board and Leader performance and seek feedback to identify areas for improvement.

By adhering to these principles, the Board will ensure that governance at Merit Academy is ethical, transparent, and focused on long-term sustainability and success.



## ***A Strong Partnership Built on Trust***

At Merit Academy, the Board and the Headmaster share a unique and powerful bond—they founded the school together. This shared history fosters a deep understanding of the school’s mission, culture, and long-term vision. The Board’s trust in the Headmaster to manage the school is not only a reflection of this shared commitment but also a key factor in the school’s success.

The Board recognizes that the Headmaster is best positioned to lead the school’s daily operations, given her expertise and proximity to the school’s staff, students, and families. By empowering the Headmaster to manage the school, the Board ensures that decisions are made efficiently and in alignment with the school’s founding principles. This trust allows the Headmaster to innovate, respond to challenges, and lead the school with confidence, knowing she has the Board’s full support.

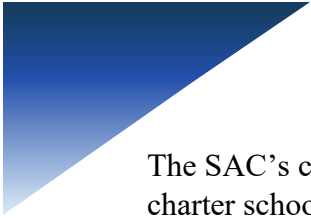
In return, the Headmaster provides the Board with regular updates on the school’s performance, ensuring transparency and accountability. This collaborative relationship, rooted in mutual respect and a shared vision, has been instrumental in Merit Academy’s ability to achieve its goals and maintain a strong, vibrant, and positive culture.

### **School Accountability Committee**

The School Accountability Committee (SAC) at Merit Academy plays a vital role in ensuring the school’s success and accountability. Composed of parents, teachers, administrators, a Merit Academy Board Director, a student representative, and community members, the SAC is responsible for monitoring the school’s performance, engaging stakeholders, and supporting improvement efforts. The SAC’s contributions to Merit Academy are significant, as it provides a platform for collaborative decision-making and ensures that the school remains focused on its mission and goals.

One of the key functions of the SAC is to review and analyze school data, including academic performance, student growth, and other relevant metrics. This analysis helps the SAC identify areas of strength and weakness, which in turn informs the development of the school’s improvement plan. The SAC also plays a critical role in engaging stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and community members, in the school improvement process. Through regular meetings, surveys, and other communication channels, the SAC ensures that all voices are heard and that the school remains responsive to the needs of its community.

The SAC has been instrumental in several key initiatives at Merit Academy. For example, the SAC led the development of a comprehensive parent engagement plan, which has resulted in increased parent involvement and support for the school. The SAC has also been actively involved in the school’s budgeting process, ensuring that resources are allocated in a way that supports the school’s mission and goals.



The SAC's contributions to Merit Academy are particularly important in the context of the charter school renewal process. The SAC's work in monitoring school performance, contributing to the School's Unified Improvement Plan, and supporting improvement efforts demonstrates the school's commitment to accountability and continuous improvement. Conversations within the SAC have helped to ensure that Merit Academy remains a high-performing school that meets the needs of its students and community.

Furthermore, the SAC's activities align closely with Merit Academy's mission and goals. By focusing on data-driven decision-making and continuous improvement, the SAC helps to ensure that the school remains true to its vision and provides a high-quality education to its students. The SAC also plays a crucial role in the school's accountability to its authorizer, as it provides a transparent and collaborative process for monitoring and improving school performance.


### Summary

Merit Academy's Board of Directors demonstrates exemplary governance through its completion of required training, legal compliance, collaborative partnership with school leadership, and adherence to Colorado's Open Meeting/Sunshine Laws. Merit Academy's governance model is a testament to the power of organizational roles, trust, and collaboration. Above all, the Board's steadfast commitment to the school's vision, mission, and founding constructs ensures that Merit Academy thrives in academic and character education. This robust governance framework, including the School Accountability Committee, supports the school's case for charter renewal, affirming its ability to sustain a high-quality educational program for years to come.

## FINANCIAL STANDARDS

Merit Academy's financial health is a cornerstone of its case for charter renewal with the Woodland Park School District. The school's financial audits, robust financial management practices, and positive financial forecast demonstrate its fiscal responsibility and sustainability. This section details Merit Academy's financial strengths, compares them with other districts, and emphasizes the contributions of its finance team, Headmaster, and Board of Directors.

Merit Academy has provided timely submissions of required financial reports, including prior audits, approved budgets, sales tax reports, and quarterly reports. It should also be noted that Merit Academy's CFO has collaborated with the District finance team regarding any questions or reports needed. She also volunteered as a school finance liaison regarding the city's education tax, particularly while the District was in transition between finance officers.



The Appendix holds the 2024-25 audit, most recently approved FY25 budget, most recent quarterly financials, and five year forecast. Additional financial documents for prior years are available on Merit Academy’s financial transparency page of their website.

### Audit Results

Merit Academy’s 2024 financial audit, conducted by independent auditors, received an unqualified opinion, indicating that its financial statements present fairly, in all material respects, the financial position as of June 30, 2024, in accordance with Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAP). This clean audit opinion reflects the school’s commitment to transparency and accuracy in financial reporting.

#### *Key Financial Metrics*

The following table summarizes key financial indicators from Merit Academy’s 2023-24 audit:

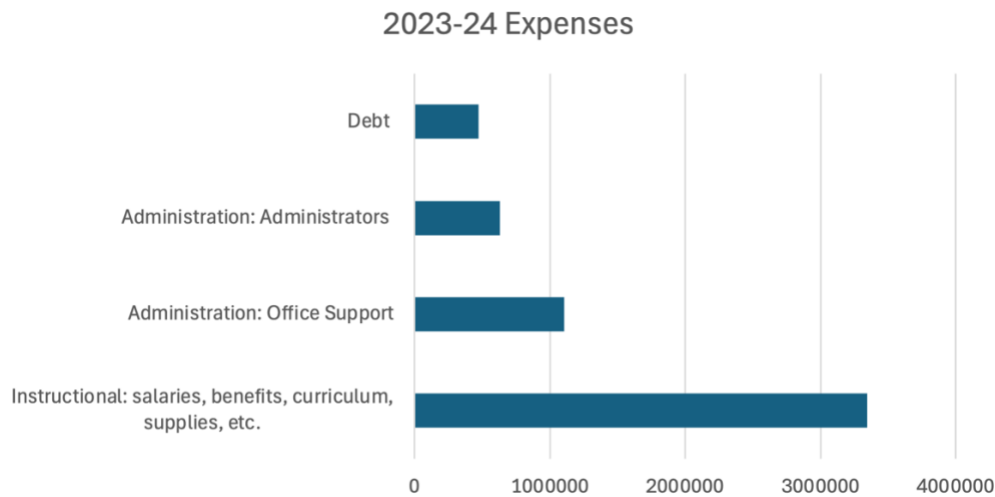
Metric	Details
<b>Total Revenues</b>	Increased by \$980,963, from \$4,400,236 to \$5,381,199, due to enrollment growth from 297.5 to 398.5 funded pupils and addition of 10th grade.
<b>General Fund Balance</b>	Decreased by \$175,903 to \$252,331, primarily due to payoff of long-term debt.
<b>Cash and Investments</b>	Increased by \$165,235, from \$516,059 to \$681,294, reflecting prudent cash management.
<b>Long-term Liabilities</b>	Decreased by \$450,521, from \$474,521 to \$24,000, mainly from debt payoff.
<b>Debt Outstanding</b>	Reduced by \$442,000 to \$77,000.
<b>Delinquent</b>	There were no late/delinquent payments on loans or outstanding debt. On the contrary, debt was paid-off early.
<b>Net Position</b>	Deficit of \$2,695,611, primarily due to PERA pension and OPEB liabilities; without these, net position would be \$84,877 positive.

These metrics demonstrate Merit Academy’s ability to grow revenue, manage debt effectively, and maintain liquidity, all of which contribute to a stable financial position.

### ***Positive Auditor Notes***

The auditors noted no significant deficiencies or material weaknesses in Merit Academy's internal controls, affirming the reliability of its financial processes. Notes to the financial statements, starting on page 7, provide comprehensive details on accounting policies, deposits, investments, long-term liabilities, pension plans, OPEB plans, risk management, commitments, and compliance with Colorado's TABOR Amendment, with \$152,000 restricted for emergency reserves.

The following graph depicts the audited expenses in these categories. Given that the 2024-25 fiscal year has not yet come to a close, the last available audited financial expenditures are for the FY24. The expenses for Debt highlight the payment to reduce outstanding by \$442,000 to \$77,000 (due to ER BOCES, with approximately three years remaining on said principle).




### **Comparison with Other Districts**

While comprehensive audit reports for Lake George Charter School was not publicly accessible, the Woodland Park School District's 2024 audit, the Cripple Creek/Victor 2024 audit, and the UP BOCES 2024 audit provide a contrast to Merit Academy's financial health.

#### ***Woodland Park School District***

Given the importance for a charter school to be held to standards equivalent to those of neighboring schools in the same authorizing unit, it is a general practice to compare the financial audits of the charter school (Merit Academy) to that of the authorizing unit (Woodland Park School District). The District received a qualified audit opinion for fiscal year 2024, indicating areas of improvement in its financial statements. The audit, conducted by Hoelting and Co.,



identified issues, including: significant deficiencies in internal controls, reconciliation timeline issues, accounting errors and misstatements, and staff shortage within the business department.

### ***Other Districts***

It is important to understand the state of financial health of Merit Academy and Woodland Park School District, and one of the recommendations for doing so is to compare to other regional districts.

Efforts to obtain recent financial audits for Lake George Charter School were unsuccessful, as these reports were not publicly available on their website. However, we were able to review the most recent audits of Manitou Springs and Cripple Creek/Victor School Districts. Based on available data, Manitou Springs District 14 have not reported significant financial distress. However, UP BOCES, whose finances are overseen and managed by Manitou Springs School District, had a number of concerns noted within their audit. The auditors noted both material weaknesses and significant deficiencies, misstatements, issues with segregation of duties, internal controls and year-end closing procedures. Many of these were also noted in the FY23 audit and had also not been cured as of the FY24 audit.


Similarly, Cripple Creek/Victor School District's audit noted material weaknesses within internal controls, basis of accounting with grants, bank reconciliation, and the need to segregate duties. After reviewing several district and charter school audits, it is noted that Merit Academy's transparent posting of its audit reports on its website, clean audit findings, and proactive financial strategies highlight its fiscal responsibility, which not only meet, but exceed, a high standard for accountability.

## **Financial Forecast**

### ***Loss of Education Tax Revenues***

When the City Council of Woodland Park revoked the education tax, despite a strong voter support of the tax for the schools just months prior, Merit Academy then saw a nearly 10% decline in revenues. Immediately, Merit Academy took steps to counter the negative impacts of this reckless action.

- Purchases were paused,
- Teacher salaries for the 25-26 school year have been frozen,
- Facility improvements and maintenance have been placed on hold,
- Parent and community volunteers have donated time for subbing and grounds maintenance,
- Launched a local business sponsorship fundraiser, and

- 
- Adjusted the hiring plans for several new positions.

Also assisting in the efforts to counter the loss of revenues is a Statewide increase in PPR based on a transitional “hold harmless” bridge between the prior formula and new formula for PPR funding calculations, as well as a significant increase in our student population, thus increasing our funded student count.

### ***Forecast***


Merit Academy’s financial forecast is favorable, driven by several key factors:

- **Steadfast Budget Oversight:** The school maintains strict control over expenditures, ensuring alignment with its mission and strategic goals. The general fund balance, though reduced due to debt repayment, remains positive at \$252,331, providing a buffer for operational needs.
- **Increasing Enrollment:** Enrollment grew from 267 to 505 pupils in four years. This growth has boosted per-pupil funding, a primary revenue source. Forecasted enrollment for the 25-26 school year and beyond continues this trend, as the school further expands to serve grades PK-12, with additional classes in highly populated grades.
- **Fiscal Prudence:** The significant reduction in long-term liabilities and outstanding debt reflects a conservative approach to borrowing and a focus on long-term sustainability. The increase in cash and investments further enhances liquidity, enabling the school to address unforeseen expenses with minimal financial strain.
- **Emergency Freeze:** Freezing salaries, tightening the cost of purchased curriculum and supplies, and minimizing new hire positions to match the budget constraints from the loss of sales tax has been successful in closing the gap. Couple this with a business and donor fundraising effort, and the forecast for Merit Academy’s FY26, while tight, remains positive.

Despite a significant decline in revenues from the recent loss of sales tax funding, these factors position Merit Academy to sustain its operations and navigate potential economic uncertainties, proving it to be a financially viable institution for charter renewal.

### ***Sales Tax/Soft-Tax***

As a District charter school, Merit Academy is extremely mindful of taxpayer funds, emphasizing accountability and conservative taxation. Soft taxes have been a great solution to support the District students, as nearly 33% of the sales tax revenues are paid by tourists, and a sales tax is a consumer tax, not a harsh property tax that does not consider one’s ability to spend but only considers how much their property is valued. Also considering the State’s push for local support to offset the State’s contribution requirements, it is not surprising that District



stakeholders may be required to deliberate a local revenue stream. Given this soft tax/sales tax option may be an alternative for a property tax and a solution to that issue, Merit Academy recognizes the important task of addressing this possibility.

## **Strong Financial Leadership**

Merit Academy's financial health is underpinned by the expertise and dedication of its finance team, Headmaster, and Board of Directors.

### ***Finance Team***

The school's Chief Financial Officer (CFO) and finance team have participated in numerous CDE School Finance trainings, equipping them with the knowledge to navigate Colorado's complex school finance regulations. Additionally, they have consulted with one of the state's leading school finance experts, ensuring best practices in budgeting, forecasting, and compliance. Their deep commitment to Merit Academy's mission drives their focus on maintaining a strong financial position and upholding fiscal responsibility.

### ***Headmaster's Expertise***

The Headmaster brings experience in school finance and responsible budgeting, enabling informed decision-making that balances educational priorities with financial constraints. This expertise has been instrumental in guiding the school through enrollment growth and debt reduction while maintaining high academic standards.

### ***Board of Directors' Oversight***

The Board of Directors provides steadfast oversight, reviewing financial reports, approving budgets, and ensuring alignment with the school's vision and mission. Their governance practices, informed by Colorado League of Charter Schools training, emphasize strategic planning, organizational health, and focus on the vision and mission. This robust governance structure has fostered a culture of fiscal discipline and transparency.

## **Summary**

Merit Academy's financial health, as evidenced by its clean 2024 audit, revenue growth, debt reduction, and prudent cash management, makes a compelling case for charter renewal. The School's positive financial forecast, driven by increasing enrollment, tight budget oversight, and fiscal prudence, ensures its long-term sustainability. The expertise of a properly-staffed finance team, the Headmaster's financial acumen, and the Charter Board's diligent oversight collectively position Merit Academy as a model of financial responsibility, warranting continued authorization to serve its students and community.





## INSURANCE

Since its charter, Merit Academy has held true to the insurance requirements. However, upon comparison to other school's minimum requirements and the District's certificates, it is apparent that some of the insurance coverage that Merit Academy holds is higher than what is standard. In this, Merit Academy's plan as outlined in this charter renewal is to adjust the insurance coverage to match the levels typical with schools:

- A. ***Commercial General Liability.*** School will maintain commercial general liability insurance covering all operations by or on behalf of the School, including operations of any subcontractor. on an occurrence basis against claims for personal injury (including bodily injury or death) and property damage (including loss of use). Such insurance will have the following limits and coverages:
- |     |   |             |
|-----|---|-------------|
| (1) | Each Occurrence: Bodily Injury & Property Damage  | \$2,000,000 |
| (2) | Each Event: Personal Injury   | \$2,000,000 |
| (3) | General Aggregate   | \$3,000,000 |
| (4) | Products & Completed Operations Aggregate   | \$3,000,000 |
| (5) | Coverages:  |             |
| a.  | Occurrence form   |             |
| b.  | Products and completed operations coverage  |             |
| c.  | Personal injury   |             |
| d.  | Contractual liability   |             |
| e.  | Defense in addition to the limits of liability  |             |
| f.  | Sexual abuse and misconduct coverage (full limits of general liability policy)  |             |
| g.  | Coverage for athletic activities, if the School participates in athletic programs   |             |
| h.  | Special events coverage   |             |
| i.  | Cyber incident coverage   |             |
| j.  | Severability of interests provision   |             |
| k.  | District to be added as an Additional Insured onto both the School's and EMP's (if applicable) policies. The School and EMP (if applicable) are to provide the Additional Insured endorsement to the District |             |
- B. ***Automobile Insurance:*** School will maintain business auto liability coverage covering liability arising out of any auto (including owned, hired. and non- owned



autos):

- (1) Combined Single Limit Each Accident \$1,000,000
- (2) District to be added as an Additional insured onto both the School's and EMP's (if applicable) policies. The School and EMP (if applicable) are to provide the Additional Insured endorsement to the District
- (3) Excess coverage for employees as insured using personal vehicles on School business

C. ***Educator's Legal Liability:***

- (1) Limit of Liability: Each Occurrence or Wrongful Act Limit \$1,000,000
- (2) Aggregate Limit \$3,000,000
- (3) Coverage shall include enhanced employment liability


D. ***Worker's Compensation:*** As required by the State with the following minimum coverages:

- (1) Per Occurrence Limit \$ 250,000
- (2) Disease Policy Limit \$ 500,000
- (3) Disease Each Employee \$ 100,000
- (4) Must include blanket waiver of subrogation endorsement.

E. ***Employee Dishonesty (Crime) Coverage:*** School or its EMP will maintain employee theft, fraud and dishonesty coverage to protect it from theft of money and securities by employees. Coverage must also include volunteers as employees. \$ 300,000

F. ***Excess Umbrella/Liability:*** School shall maintain umbrella/excess liability on an occurrence basis in excess of general liability, auto liability, employer's liability insurance described above, and excess of the Educators' Legal Liability and Directors and Officers Liability coverages: \$5,000,000

G. ***Directors and Officers Liability.*** During the term of the Charter Contract, School and its EMP shall maintain Directors and Officers Liability Insurance covering the wrongful acts, errors and omissions of its governing Board arising out of the administration of the School. This coverage may be included in the Educators' Legal Liability coverage. Coverage shall also include Employment Practices Liability. If coverage is purchased on a "Claims Made" basis, coverage must be endorsed to cover acts of the entity from the first date of operation. In addition, if operations of the entity cease, an extended reporting period of at least ten years must be



purchased.

Per Occurrence	\$2,000,000
Annual Aggregate	\$3,000,000

### **Food Service**

As a District school, since the passing of Proposition FF, which provides free breakfast and lunch for all public school students, Merit Academy is currently served under the District's contract with Chartwells. The food service program brings a positive net position, with revenues disbursed to further advance the system through investments like equipment purchases. Given Merit Academy is the largest school of revenues for this program and has thus exemplified a strong record for services, Merit Academy may continue to remain under the umbrella within WPSD's contract, seek an independent contract, or develop an onsite food service program.

### **Transportation**

Similarly to the food service agreement, Merit Academy's transportation falls under the umbrella of WPSD's current bus service. In contrast to the positive revenue stream for food service, transportation costs have been paid by the District's Central Services. However, the State is reformulating the School Finance Act, which may impact the revenues the District has used for central services. With this in mind, Merit Academy may review options for continued transportation services, including remaining under the umbrella within WPSD's contract as a purchased District service or seeking an independent contract. Discussions will explore current cost of transportation services, overall student needs, route efficiency, commitment to taxpayer funds, and cost savings.


On a cursory view, seems as if the positive funding from food service, at Merit Academy specifically, is parallel to a significant portion of the percentage of transportation fees for bus riders who attend Merit Academy.

### **Facility**

Merit Academy is currently in agreement with Woodland Park School District through a Facility Use Agreement to use the facility at 500 (600) E. Kelley's Rd, Woodland Park. However, with the immense cost of deferred maintenance that has become overwhelming for the District, Merit Academy has had a public meeting with WPSD to explore options regarding the facility, including all deferred, current, and future maintenance, and the liability to Merit Academy in exchange for long term use. As of the writing of this renewal proposal, no decisions have been made and further conversations will likely be scheduled.

## **NO DISTRICT NOTICES OF CONCERN**

Merit Academy and Woodland Park School District have shared a strong, collaborative effort since the charter authorization. Throughout the years, Merit Academy leadership and District leadership have met regarding topics including, but certainly not limited to:

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- Financials,
  - Required CDE Reporting,
  - Testing Schedules,
  - CDE Performance Frameworks,
  - Overall Charter School Performance,
  - District-wide Special Education/BOCES Professional Development,
  - Safety/Security/Drills,
  - Facility Matters, and
  - District Centralized Services.

Throughout the charter term, including the conversations of Merit Academy's performance, milestones, and expectations, there have been no District Notices of Concern issued to Merit Academy.


## CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORIZER'S BEST PRACTICES

Merit Academy submits this charter renewal application to the Woodland Park School District with a shared commitment to educational excellence. The renewal review offers an opportunity to reinforce the authorizer's role as a supportive partner, fostering accountability rather than adopting a stance of hostility or politically seeking to close a successful school. Guided by best practices, Merit Academy's charter should be renewed in a way that preserves the school's strengths, ensures accountability, protects Statutory autonomy, adds stability to the District's educational landscape, and benefits the students and families.

### Preserving Autonomy and Innovation

Charter schools thrive when their unique approaches are honored. Merit Academy's classical education model—emphasizing academic intensity, character development, and a content-rich curriculum—has driven our success. The authorizer's best practice is to preserve the School's core sovereignty, including but not limited to:

- **Governing board independence** from the authorizer, allowing our leadership to steer the school's mission.
- **Personnel** decisions that align with our educational philosophy.
- **School vision and culture**, rooted in classical principles and high standards.

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- **Instructional programming, design, and use of time**, enabling our distinctive curriculum.
  - **Budgeting** independence to prioritize student needs.

Hostility toward these Statutory autonomies or a desire to close a thriving school would undermine CO law and the charter school model, depriving families of a proven educational choice.

### **Accountability for Outcomes, Not Processes**

The authorizer's role is not to manage Merit Academy's daily operations but to hold the school accountable for results. Best practices include:

- **Assuming responsibility for performance oversight**, not the school's success or failure.
- **Focusing on outcomes**—like academic achievement and growth—rather than dictating processes.
- **Minimizing administrative and compliance burdens**, freeing the school to prioritize student learning.

This approach empowers Merit Academy to innovate while ensuring high standards are met. The school has already consistently delivered strong results.

### **Upholding Public Obligations**


Merit Academy is committed to its public responsibilities, and the authorizer ensures these are met:

- **Sound governance, management, and stewardship of public funds**, reflected in our clean audits.
- **Public information and operational transparency**, compliant with Colorado's Open Meeting and Open Records laws.

### **Fostering Quality and High Standards**

The authorizer's duty is to cultivate quality schools (charter and non-charter) that meet community needs. Merit Academy has proven to be one of the District's high quality schools. Merit Academy's strong School Performance Framework ratings, test scores, and post-secondary readiness components demonstrate alignment with this duty. Authorizer best practices include:

- **Maintain high standards** for all schools within the District.
- **Cultivate quality charter schools**, like Merit Academy, that address educational demands.

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- **Oversee performance** of charter and non-charter District schools to ensure targets and goals are met over time.

Renewing this charter supports one of the District's high-performing schools.

## **A PARTNERSHIP FOR EXCELLENCE**

Renewing Merit Academy's charter aligns with the District's mission to support quality education. By preserving the charter school's autonomy, focusing on outcomes, and maintaining high standards, the Board of Education can ensure long-term success in Woodland Park School District. Together, we can build on Merit Academy's achievements and continue to offer students an exceptional education option, providing both stabilization and security to a strong educational choice among WPSD's quality schools.

Despite the vocal opposition from a small group of school choice detractors, the benefits of extending Merit Academy's charter far outweigh the concerns raised. By renewing the charter contract through 2055, and providing reviews - similar to this - every five years, the Board of Education secures multiple review cycles, ensuring long-term stability for this high-performing school. This renewal extension not only reinforces Merit Academy's role as a vital option for families in the Woodland Park School District but also upholds the rights of parents to choose the best educational path for their, strengthening school choice in our community.



# APPENDIX A

## BYLAWS



# APPENDIX B

## STAKEHOLDERS' REPORT





# APPENDIX C

## COURSE DESCRIPTION GUIDES



# APPENDIX D

## SCOPE & SEQUENCE



# APPENDIX E

## STAFF HANDBOOK



# APPENDIX F

## PARENT HANDBOOK



# APPENDIX G

## DISCIPLINE MATRIX



# APPENDIX H

## FY 24 AUDIT



# APPENDIX I

## QUARTERLY REPORTS



# APPENDIX J

## BUDGETS





# APPENDIX K

## WAIVERS

