

New York State Education Department  
The Regents of the University of the State of New York  
Charter School Office  
89 Washington Avenue  
Albany, New York 12234

June 21, 2012

To Whom It May Concern:

We are pleased to present you with this letter of intent to apply for the Developing Innovative Rural Thinking (DIRT) Charter School, to be located in Orange County, New York. Per the Letter of Intent requirements outlined on pages 16 and 17 of the 2012 Charter School Application Kit, we have addressed all the components as requested.

### I. Applicant Information

#### a. Lead Applicant - Shannon Hockswender



Shannon is a parent, teacher, and community resident

#### b. Media Contact - Allison Berman

Phone: (646)773-4081

e-mail: [ali@withlovealib.com](mailto:ali@withlovealib.com)

#### c. Applicant Founding Group -

- **Shannon Hockswender** has over 20 years of experience in education and is certified in Elementary Education and Special Education. She has a MA in Teaching, and a BA in Speech Pathology and Audiology. Shannon is a parent of two elementary school-aged children, and is currently a preschool teacher at Kids Club House, in Warwick, N.Y. Shannon is on the Curriculum, Professional Development and Building Teams.
- **Allison Berman** is a parent of two young children. Allison has over 15 years experience revitalizing non-performing programs, exceeding sales targets, and developing new business streams in corporate America, for not-for-profits, and as an entrepreneur. Allison has a BA in Psychology. Allison is DIRT's public relations representative and on our food services team.
- **Christina Pahucki** is a parent of three young children. She has a MA in Art Education and has been an art teacher for 13 years. Her background experiences also include using Person Centered Planning to create and implement transition plans for teens with special needs. Christina is on the curriculum development team for DIRT.
- **Marlene Caraballo** is a parent of three children. Marlene has over 20 years of marketing, public relations, graphic design and fundraising experience. Marlene has owned and operated a freelance design and marketing business for the past 12 years. She has held a board position with the Warwick Valley Humane Society; the WVCSD Parent Teacher Association; and the Pine Island Chamber of Commerce, where she is currently President. Marlene is on our Community Outreach, Marketing teams and Building Team.
- **Janine Bloom** is a parent of three school-aged children. She is an active member in the Pulaski Fire Department Ladies Auxiliary and she has been a Girl Scout Leader for over three years. She has Coached Cheerleading, Tee Ball, Girls Softball and is an active PTA member. Janine is on the Community Outreach and Building teams.

- **Paul Ruskiewicz** is a parent of two school-aged children. He has a MA in Farm Management and Production Economics and currently operates a two-hundred acre vegetable farm in partnership with his father. He has been President of the Orange County Vegetable Growers Association, the New York State Vegetable Growers Association, and Orange County Farm Bureau. Paul serves on the town of Warwick Planning board as well as the Community Preservation board. Paul is on the Community Outreach and Building Teams for DIRT.
- **Olivia Keeler** is a parent of two young children. She has a MsEd in Elementary Education and holds NYS certification in Education for grades 1 - 6, and Art Education grades K-12. She has worked with children as after school care, a math teacher, a preschool teacher, and a tutor. Olivia also has experience working in Human Resources for the accounting firm KPMG. She is currently studying on how to incorporate the practice of mindfulness into education. Olivia is on the Curriculum Team.
- **Tracey Pietrzak** is a parent of two school-aged children. She is a Past President of the Pine Island Elementary School PTA and currently the Secretary of the Warwick Council of PTA's. She is the co-owner of a small business, member of two Chambers of Commerce, and a trustee of the Drowned Lands Historical Society. Tracey is on the Community Outreach, Fundraising, and Food Services team.
- **Jeanne Lancer** is a parent of three school-aged children. She has over 12 years of experience in education. She is certified in Elementary Education and has a Master's degree in Teaching. Jeanne has worked in both public and private school settings. Jeanne is on the Curriculum Development and Building Teams.
- **Noel Thompson** is a board member of Friends of Aiglon College. He has served as President of the school alumni in the United States which has raised significant funds toward the school endowment. Noel was a founding board member at All Saints Episcopal Day School in Hoboken, N.J. Noel is on our Fundraising Team.
- **Sherrie DeBergh** is an educator, professional development consultant. She earned her BA degree from Queens College, and her MS degree from SUNY New Paltz in 2002, specializing in literacy education. At Queens College, she participated in a teacher-training program called School Within a School, a student centered method of teaching utilizing learning centers and lessons guided by student interest. She has worked in preschools, supervised day care programs, and taught fourth and fifth grade. Sherrie is Orten Gillingham trained and specializes in teaching writing skills. Sherrie will be assisting with curriculum and professional development for DIRT.
- **Jane Hamburger** served as Principal of the K - 5 Pine Island Elementary School for 22 years. Jane also spent 28 years as District Coordinator of Staff Development, 22 years as District Coordinator of K-5 Art and Music, and 9 years as gifted and talented teacher for elementary students. She spent 18 years teaching elementary classroom and middle-school Visual Art teaching experiences in six U.S. and Dept. of Defense districts. She has a MA in Elementary Education. Jane is on the Curriculum Team and will be assisting with professional development for DIRT.

**d. Proposed board of trustees** - Relevant experience and skills above.

1. Shannon Hockswender
2. Allison Berman
3. Christina Pahucki
4. Marlene Caraballo
5. Janine Bloom
6. Paul Ruskiewicz
7. Olivia Keeler

**e.** DIRT Charter School is not a replication of another school model or intended to be

part of a network. No part of our applicant group sits on the board of trustees of an existing charter school.

f. No member of our founding group has ever applied to NYSED, or another charter entity, to open this or another charter school.

**II. Proposed Charter School Information**

**a. Proposed Charter School Name** - Developing Innovative Rural Thinking (DIRT) Charter School

**b. Proposed School Location** - The school’s location will be in Orange County, New York. We are currently looking at a number of available locations in the Warwick Valley, Florida, Goshen, Minisink, and Chester school districts.

**c. Planned Grades and Enrollment** -

Grades	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018
K	30	30	30	30	30
1st	30	30	30	30	30
2nd	30	30	30	30	30
3rd	30	30	30	30	30
4th	42	42	42	42	42
5th	44	44	44	44	44
6th	0	44	44	44	44
Total Enrollment	206	250	250	250	250

**d. Proposed Management and/or Partner Organizations** - None

**e. Proposed School Mission** - The DIRT Charter School will provide children with the opportunity to reach their full academic and developmental potential and become lifelong learners by fostering interdisciplinary learning, critical thinking skills, and a deep understanding of the interdependence of our local and global existence.

**f. School Overview** - DIRT Charter School will accomplish its mission by providing opportunities for rural students to achieve the skills and knowledge that they need to succeed within an academic environment, as well as, in their at-home lives. Based on DIRT’s list of prospective students, parents from twelve area school districts are interested in our school. Seven of those districts have at least one school on the NYSED “Being in Improvement Status” list, demonstrating a need for high quality public school options in Orange County. DIRT Charter School would be the first charter school in our county, and the first rural charter school in New York State. DIRT students will benefit from additional instruction through an extended school day.

DIRT will use the Environment as an Integrating Context (EIC)™ Model developed by the State Education and Environment Roundtable (SEER). The EIC Model™ is complementary with DIRT’s mission. Successful implementation of the EIC Model™ includes using local, natural and community surroundings, natural and social systems, community-based investigations, integrated and interdisciplinary instruction,

service-learning, collaborative instruction, learner-centered constructivist approaches, and cooperative and independent learning.

DIRT Charter School will provide parents/guardians with frequent communication about student performance, and will offer many in-school and out of school opportunities in which families can be involved.

**g. Target Population and Community** - The DIRT Charter School will serve students throughout Orange County. Area schools have eliminated many extra curricular programs, increased class sizes, and cut educational programs. Several area schools have considered reducing kindergarten programs to a half day, or eliminating kindergarten programs altogether.

As of the 2010 census, there were 372,813 people living in Orange County showing a 9.2% increase from 2010, and making Orange the second fastest growing county in New York. The Hispanic or Latino population had the most significant increase from 11.64% of the population in 2000, to 18% in 2010. In 2000, 9.23% of Orange County reported speaking Spanish at home.

### **III. Enrollment and retention of students with disabilities, English language learners, and students who are eligible applicants for the free and reduced price lunch program -**

DIRT will be open to all students and children of all needs will be welcomed. Our school will contract with the numerous special needs service providers available locally to hire staff and to provide the special education services needed for our students. We are conducting community outreach in both Spanish and English. DIRT will have ELL services, as well as teach Spanish as a second language. Students qualifying for free or reduced meals will be supported in food services, and in the acquisition of school supplies, uniforms, etc.

### **IV. Public Outreach and Community Support** - DIRT Charter School Applicants have completed the following:

- A press release was written that resulted in three very positive and informative articles on DIRT Charter School, and charter schools in general. They were published in the Times Herald Record, The Warwick Advertiser, and The Warwick Valley Dispatch.
- Three public informational meetings were held in three towns:
  - Warwick on March 18, 2012
  - Westtown on May 2, 2012
  - Monroe on June 4, 2012A fourth informational meeting is scheduled for Greenwood Lake parents in July.
- At all meetings, we presented general charter school information, and information specifically on our proposed curriculum, and daily schedule. Parents and community members were able to discuss and ask questions about the school, as well as, provide feedback.
- We have solicited letters of support from local organizations with missions similar to our own.
- We have met with the Warwick Valley Superintendent of Schools to discuss the charter school and to inquire about renting the Pine Island School building. We have submitted a request to rent the school, in writing, to the Board of Education.
- We created a website at [dirtcharter.com](http://dirtcharter.com) that provides ample information about DIRT Charter School and charter schools in general. The site, to date, has been visited 1,838 times by 1,253 unique visitors. The contact link on the website goes to our e-mail address at [dirtcharterschool@gmail.com](mailto:dirtcharterschool@gmail.com). The website has been greatly utilized by parents, community members and prospective staff to communicate support and ask questions.
- We started a Facebook Page at <https://www.facebook.com/dirtcharter> that provides for

community feedback, questions, and updates on upcoming charter school events or news.

- We circulated a survey via e-mail and through our website where 291 people have entered their names as supporters of DIRT Charter School. 149 of those supporters are parents or guardians interested in sending their children to DIRT Charter School, and we have a growing list of 226 students who are interested in attending. The survey also provides a space for public comment or questions, and has been well utilized.
- We have distributed double sided English/Spanish fliers that have been given out at presentations and distributed by hand to prospective applicants.
- We have written letters to the editor for our local papers in support of DIRT Charter School.
- We have made DIRT Charter School t-shirts that act as conversation starters when our applicants and supporters wear them out at community events.

As we progress through the application process, we are confident that public awareness and support of our initiative will continue to grow.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Shannon Hochswender". The signature is written in black ink on a light-colored, slightly textured paper background.

June 21, 2012

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Signature of Lead Applicant

Date