

Local Roots Take the Lead

LESSONS FROM RURAL CHARTER SCHOOLS

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Summary

- Launched in 2000
- Serves 50 students in grades K-8
- Fifty percent of students are white and 33% are Hispanic; 76% qualify for free or reduced-price lunch and 20% for special education services
- The village of Questa is on the smaller end of the rural spectrum, with just 400 K-12 students; Roots and Wings also enrolls students from the neighboring town of Taos, which is slightly larger (2,800 students) and where seven charter schools operate
- Roots and Wings has an outdoor-learning focus, filling a niche in a community with a diverse population and complex history. The community includes the longest continuously inhabited Native American communities and has been shaped by the early settlement by the Spanish in the 1500s, and the countercultural movements of the 1960s
- Model is based on 1) expeditionary learning; 2) extended outdoor learning activities; 3) multigrade classrooms; and 4) a supportive, family-like culture
- Challenges include 1) staff and teacher recruitment; 2) finances and teacher salaries; 3) transportation; and 4) authorizer requirements

Introduction

In 1995, Peg Bartlett and Todd Wynward met at an Association for Experiential Education (AEE) Conference near Santa Fe, New Mexico. Bartlett, who had spent many years as an educator in Colorado, and Wynward, a faculty member in the Department of Experiential Education at the private Albuquerque Academy, quickly realized their dual passion for engaging young people in adventurous, individualized learning opportunities deeply connected to the outdoors. It is from this meeting that the idea for Roots and Wings Community School was born.

Laying the groundwork for such a unique school would take time: For two years following their meeting at the AEE Conference, the now husband-and-wife team worked to foster relationships with local elected officials, community members, and parents to build support for a new school with an explicit focus on nature and the environment.

In 2000, after the local school district unanimously approved the school's charter, Bartlett and Wynward — along with another couple — officially launched Roots and Wings Community School. Tucked away near a farm and wilderness camp in the mountains of northern New Mexico's Taos County, Roots and Wings engages its natural surroundings, offering students an educational experience that is focused on outdoor learning. Today, the school serves 50 students in grades K through 8, inspiring its students to academic and personal excellence through innovative learning centered on classroom, farm, and wilderness adventure.

Roots and Wings offers its students and parents a unique learning experience, filling a niche in a community with a long history of counterculturalism. It enjoys broad support from community members and leaders because of its academic success, but also because the school aligns with the values of the community including family, tradition, and care for the natural environment. But the past two decades have not been easy. Financial strain, coupled with difficulty finding and retaining talent well-suited to the school's mission and model, have been key challenges for the school's founders.

Community Context

Roots and Wings is located in Taos County, New Mexico, within the boundaries of the tiny village of Questa. It is nestled in the woods, a half-mile off Route 522, which connects the center of Questa, six miles to the north, with the larger town of Taos, 20 miles to the south.

Questa was once a main center of economic opportunity for many in Taos County. For nearly a century, Questa's identity was that of a mining town, where a metal used in steel production, called molybdenum, was extracted from the Sangre de Cristo mountains. The R&S Molybdenum mine opened in 1916, operating as the village's largest private employer, and was bought by Chevron in 2005. After low market prices and the mine's increasing operating costs forced its owners to cut 54% of its staff in 2009, the mine officially closed its doors in 2014.[1]



In addition to being a large employer, Chevron was a major economic driver in the community. It established the Questa Economic Development Fund (QEDF) in 2008 to aid Questa and the surrounding communities in diversifying their economies.[2] Members of the QEDF are working to develop it as a tourist destination. Malaquais Rael, QEDF chairman and former mayor of Questa, explains, "We're surrounded by natural and cultural treasures that offer tourism opportunities, and by farmland to support a variety of industries." Yet Taos County continues to struggle economically. The median household income is \$35,314 in the county and just \$31,229 in Questa — well below the national average of \$57,652. Twenty-three percent of Taos County residents live in poverty, almost double the national average of 12%.[3]

Demographically, Taos County is a triracial community consisting mostly of the native Taos Pueblo, Hispanic descendants of Spanish colonialists, and white families. Archaeological evidence of the Taos Pueblo dates back as early as 1000 A.D., while the first colonialists from Spain arrived in Taos in 1514. Between 1514 and the mid-1800s the history of Taos was marked by periods of peace and war between the native Taos Pueblo and the Spanish settlers. White settlers, many of them artists, began to migrate to Taos in the late 1890s and laid the foundation for future artistic and countercultural movements in the region. In the 1960s and 1970s, for example, white hippies turned to New Mexico as a place to advance their ideals because of the community's close connection with nature. This blending of cultures has led to tension in the community over issues such as resource allocation, as well as created a mix of traditions and practices that is unique to Taos.[4]

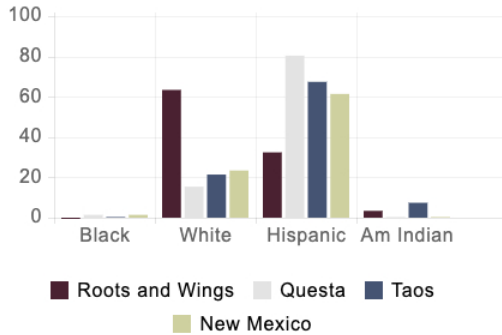
Education Context

The diversity of people in Taos County and the high cultural value placed on individualism has helped spawn a relatively large set of school options, given the community's size. Roots and Wings enrolls students from two

neighboring school districts, the Questa Independent School District (QISD) and Taos Municipal Schools (TMS). QISD serves 377 students across two elementary schools and one high school. Eighty-one percent of QISD's student body is Hispanic, and nearly all are economically disadvantaged.[5]

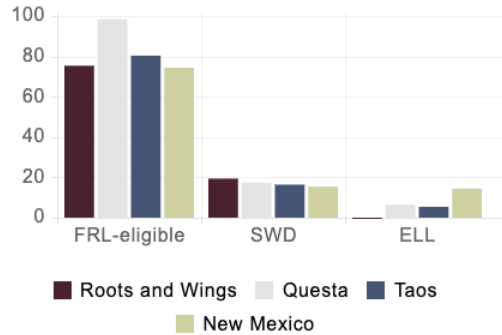
TMS, the larger school district, serves approximately 2,800 students across three elementary schools, one middle school, one high school, and one cyber magnet school. Fifty-four percent of students in TMS are Hispanic, 38% are white, and 6% are American Indian. Eighty-one percent of TMS' students are economically disadvantaged.[6]

Student Racial/Ethnic Demographics



Total enrollment: Roots and Wings = 50; Questa = 377; Taos = 2.8K; New Mexico = 336K; Source: New Mexico Public Education Department

Student Subgroup Membership



Source: New Mexico Public Education Department

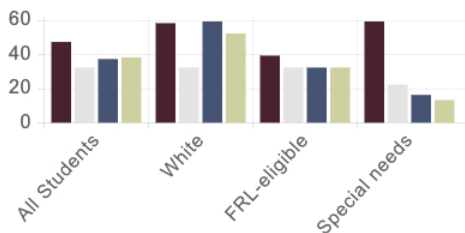
In addition to district schools, Roots and Wings is one of seven charter schools that serve the communities of Taos and Questa.[7] While the community is quite small to sustain such a large number of school options, existing charter schools have succeeded in part because they all offer something unique and different; they've identified a clear void in the educational offerings and developed school models tailored to fill those gaps. Anansi Charter School, for example, is a K-8 charter school that emphasizes students' social and emotional learning. Taos Integrated School for the Arts emphasizes the arts across its curriculum. And Roots and Wings provides students with an environmentally conscious, expeditionary approach to learning. Several charters benefit from the sponsorship and support of the local district.

School Model

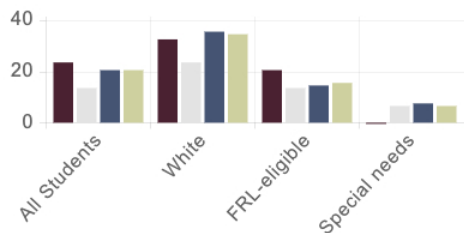
For nearly two decades, Roots and Wings has provided a small subset of Taos County's families with an educational model that fits what they want for their children. One parent explained, "I was floored by the possibility of my child attending a school with camping and expeditionary learning — I didn't even think it was an option."

But camping and expeditionary learning aren't the only things Roots and Wings has to offer. The school has developed a reputation in the community as being a truly high-quality option while being able to meet the needs of culturally, academically, and behaviorally diverse students. Community leaders say it is "one of the best schools" in the area. This reputation is merited, as students from Roots and Wings outperform local district and statewide averages in both reading and math.[8] And, with the exception of the 2015-16 school year, when the board transitioned authorizers and school staff made significant adjustments to their academic model, Roots and Wings has outperformed district and statewide averages each year since 2014.[9] Importantly, Roots and Wings' economically disadvantaged students and students with disabilities outperform district and statewide averages. Of particular note is the fact that 60 percent of students with disabilities at Roots and Wings scored proficient or higher on the most recent reading assessment (no data are available for math), well above district and statewide rates. Explains one teacher when asked about balancing school culture with high-level academic outcomes, "I'm trying to create a classroom where kids feel honored and enriched and excited to be in school — but it has to translate into standardized success. We do live or die by the test scores."

Students Scoring Proficient or Higher in ELA, by Subgroup



Students Scoring Proficient or Higher in Math, by Subgroup



Source: New Mexico Public Education Department

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The school's teachers, leaders, families, and community members attribute the school's success to four core elements of its model:

1. Expeditionary learning
2. Extended outdoor learning activities
3. Multigrade classrooms
4. Supportive culture

These core elements have helped Roots and Wings develop a strong academic program that supports all of its students to achieve academic excellence alongside a greater understanding of themselves and the environment.

1. Expeditionary learning

At its founding, Roots and Wings was an Expeditionary Learning (EL) school. EL is a national network of schools implementing a character-based learning model that "focuses on teamwork, courage, and compassion, coupled with an active approach to learning."^[10] As an official part of the EL network, Roots and Wings received training on the EL model, curricular materials, and support from EL leaders. After eight years, the membership price increased beyond what Roots and Wings could afford. EL leadership granted approval for Roots and Wings to continue to use the EL model and identify itself as an *EL-inspired* school.



Because Roots and Wings uses an expeditionary learning academic model, students spend each semester exploring one theme in depth using the natural world as a classroom. For example, fall 2018's academic theme was farming. The grades 3-5 math teacher designed an original game called "Farm Quest" in which students designed farms and chose crops and animals to raise. The teacher challenged the student farmers to assess how changes in the fictional market, such as an increase in the price of cheese, would impact their farms' profits. In English class, students read "Animal Farm," and used the novel's content to inform discussions about different forms of government in their social studies class. In science, students were pushed to think about how common science concepts apply to farming and analyze what grows best in their local environment and why. Students built an outdoor garden and planted a variety of vegetables and plants in the school's greenhouse. Throughout the semester, students visited and worked with local farmers to learn about their businesses and sustainable farming practices. The semester culminated in students working together in teams to build a website that

included a biography of each farmer, and space to advertise the farmers' products. During the school's Celebration of Learning at the local Farmhouse Café, the students presented their websites to their parents and community members.

Projects like these allow students to develop a complex, hands-on understanding of academic concepts while immersed in a particular theme, consistent with the EL model.

2. Extended outdoor learning activities

Prior to launching Roots and Wings, both Bartlett and Wynward had experience teaching outdoorsmanship. They wanted this to be a core element of their new school's model, so they developed annual camping trips that engage students in outdoor learning activities. On these trips, students learn basic survival skills like how to pitch a tent, filter their own water, hunt, and start a campfire. The length and distance of these camping trips ranges from two or three days for students in the primary grades to up to eight days for students in the upper grades. A Roots and Wings teacher said of the camping trips, "It teaches students that there is more inside of us than we think is possible. That really resonates with me, and with kids."

Roots and Wings uses these extended outdoor experiences to build on a core EL principle: solitude and reflection. The EL model encourages students to take time alone to "explore their own thoughts, make their own connections, and create their own ideas."^[11] Each May, all of Roots and Wings' students participate in a ceremony called Passage. During Passage, students spend time in solitude outdoors. Kindergarten students spend 20 minutes alone, while middle school



students spend 30 minutes alone, while middle school students spend 24 hours in solitude. During this time, students craft written reflections on what they've learned throughout the year and create artwork. They don't speak with each other or with their instructors. The purpose of these extended outdoor learning activities is to help students build an authentic relationship with the natural world around them. School leaders believe that these activities will help students become compassionate adults who are thoughtful about how they interact with the natural environment.



3. Multi-grade classrooms

Roots and Wings is at capacity, enrolling 50 students in grades K-8. The small student body combined with financial and staffing limitations (discussed below) necessitates a unique classroom model. Instead of having one class per grade, students at Roots and Wings learn in multigrade classrooms arranged in K-2, 3-5, and 6-8 cohorts. The school has a total of three full-time teachers. Each teacher is responsible for one cohort of students and must prepare lessons for all content areas. "It's like curriculum design, but cubed," said one teacher, reflecting on the work of designing engaging, rigorous curricula each semester for a multigrade classroom.

Teachers prepare lessons targeted for specific age groups, divide those students into groups of four during class, and rotate students through stations, often with the aid of a classroom volunteer. The school day is broken up into two-hour blocks for each content area. Teachers also rely on technology to differentiate content for various age groups. School leadership invested in the iStation platform, allowing students to spend 25 minutes with this technology each day. iStation is a comprehensive e-learning program that is used nationwide, but works particularly well for Roots and Wings because each lesson is customized to meet the needs of each individual student. Though multigrade classrooms pose a host of logistical and planning challenges, with the aid of volunteers and technology the staff at Roots and Wings manage to support the academic growth of their students.

4. Supportive culture

A supportive, family-like environment is one aspect of the school's culture that parents and teachers have cited as critical to the school's overall success. Parents consistently describe the school as "family-centered," explaining, "The message that the teachers are sending is that we're all in this together."

Part of the reason for this intentional focus on building a supportive environment is that many of the students at Roots and Wings haven't been successful elsewhere; for many families Roots and Wings feels like their last hope. One student recalled that she'd been teased endlessly at her previous school, and needed a new school environment in order to learn. One parent, who himself had attended public schools in Questa, didn't like how the Questa school district approached his child's special education needs and decided to take a chance on Roots and Wings. Initially a bit skeptical of the Roots and Wings model, he is now a vocal proponent for the school.

"The student has complete involvement in his education."

The school has developed processes that foster students' social and emotional success in order to foster academic success. One such process is student-led parent-teacher conferences. During these conferences, students have the opportunity to present their work to their parents, talk about what they've

learned, and identify areas where they need additional support. As one parent said, "The student has complete involvement in his education."

Roots and Wings' approach to discipline also fosters social and emotional growth among students. When conflicts happen between students, students are rarely suspended or expelled. Instead, parents, students, and teachers participate in a form of restorative justice in which students are encouraged to take accountability for their behavior, while other students offer suggestions for how they can support the student. One parent described one of these recent sessions:

There was a problem at the school between some students. All of the parents met in the library with the whole school community present and everyone had a chance to speak. The kid who was hurting others had to acknowledge what he did and how he made other students feel. The whole thing was a good experience and the whole room felt compassion for him by the end of the experience. That doesn't exist elsewhere. This shifts the whole paradigm of punishment, and shifts it to the idea of living together in one community.

Additionally, and importantly given the history and demographics of the community it serves, Roots and Wings is beginning to build a reputation as a school that is a good fit for Taos Pueblo students. There is only one elementary school located on Pueblo land, which aims to support kindergarten through sixth-grade students in preserving the Taos Pueblo language and traditions. There are no middle or high school tribal schools, however, so after completing elementary school, most Taos Pueblo students attend the local district schools. The traditional environment at these schools can be challenging for some students, explains one Taos Pueblo parent. She relays an example in which coaches told young male students from the Pueblo that they could not participate in sports unless they cut their hair, despite the fact that hair holds a special significance for Taos Pueblo men.

Roots and Wings' nontraditional structure offers a smoother transition for students coming from the Taos Pueblo elementary school. One parent and Taos Pueblo member explained, "I think indigenous students, we have a different way of learning. We're more hands-on." And the school's environmental education component more naturally lends itself to studying native Pueblo traditions and how the Pueblo people interact with the natural world. As a result, an increasing number of Taos Pueblo students attend Roots and Wings for seventh and eighth grade.

The supportive culture at Roots and Wings matches well to the needs of its students and the culture of the community.

Challenges

For nearly two decades Roots and Wings has successfully provided families in Taos with access to an outdoor, expeditionary learning-focused academic experience. But despite strong academic outcomes and dedicated families, Roots and Wings has faced its share of challenges over the years.

1. Staff and teacher recruitment

Given the unique learning approach at Roots and Wings, finding the right talent to lead and teach in the school is dependent not only on key instructional competencies, but also on the staff's alignment to the school's mission and model. It has proven to be a real challenge for the school's board of directors.

After co-founding and leading the school for eight years, Bartlett stepped aside as director. She now leads the special education and physical education programming at Roots and Wings. Since Bartlett's transition from school director, Roots and Wings has struggled to find a school leader with the right fit. A short succession of leaders who followed her lost some of the passion and vision and wanted to take the school in a more traditional direction. When the search began again for a new school leader, the board created a committee to lead the effort and focused on hiring someone who was aligned with the school's vision and was familiar with the community.

In June 2018 the board hired Mark Richert, who had taught English at nearby Taos High School for more than a decade. His background in education and passion for the outdoors make him a natural fit to lead Roots and Wings. He's also brought some much-needed structure and stability to the school. As one parent put it, "Mark has made huge changes that have been great. We are so excited about having him as director now." Other parents have noticed the changes as well, saying, "It's nice having a director able to focus on getting the school organized. There was a disorderly feeling before, but it has gotten better." Wynward, too, has noticed the difference between Richert and previous leaders, saying, "The staff feels like the true mission of our school is being honored and that they are valued as individuals working to fulfill that mission."

Leading a small, rural school like Roots and Wings comes with a unique set of challenges. Most notably, the school leader must wear many hats, taking on responsibilities that extend beyond what a school leader in a larger or more urban school would likely have. In the winter months, when snow piles up and blocks the entrance to the school's parking lot, Richert is there shoveling the snow and clearing the drive. Recently, the school's laptops were stolen from the middle school classroom, and Richert had to file the insurance claims and work with the sheriff to investigate the robbery. Richert's responsibilities also include fundraising, planning overnight outdoor learning activities, coordinating testing for state exams, hiring staff, communicating with the authorizer, overseeing the student admissions process, observing classrooms, being an instructional leader, and writing and monitoring federal and state grants — Titles I, II, IV, IDEA – B, Extended Learning Time, etc. In a school with more resources, a school leader could hire additional staff to cover some — or most — of these responsibilities. But in a tiny school like Roots and Wings, they fall to the school leader. The volume of work means that Richert has little time to focus on other priorities for Roots and Wings. As he puts it, "The part of my skill set that I value the most [teaching and instruction] is something I can't even get to [because I'm so focused on other priorities]."

Similarly, Roots and Wings struggles to recruit and retain high-quality teachers. Being a small school in a remote rural area can make it difficult to entice teachers who may prefer to live in a livelier, more active community. Moreover, though the staff is small — consisting of just seven individuals — the school's model creates additional challenges to finding staff members who are the right fit. The school's outdoors focus requires teachers to come to the school with either a background in outdoorsmanship or a strong passion to learn more about it. And the multiage structure of the school's classrooms mean that each teacher is responsible for designing lessons in all subjects that meet the needs of students in different stages of cognitive and academic development. One parent captured this challenge when she said, "Teachers have to have a different level of skill to be able to teach multiple grade levels well." The combination of these factors leaves a very small pool of individuals for whom Roots and Wings is a good fit.

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Thankfully, the school currently has a committed group of teachers who fit the mold. Two of the teachers found Roots and Wings when they were looking for an opportunity to teach in a school that focused on students and student learning, not just test scores. The school's K-2 teacher found Roots and Wings because she needed a school for her son to attend after some disappointing experiences with the local public schools. She enrolled him at Roots and Wings, and later applied to become a full-time teacher. Yet despite their commitment, current teachers make serious tradeoffs, including working longer hours and taking on additional responsibilities for less pay. The board, which invites teachers to provide updates at their meetings, recognizes that the dedication of Roots and Wings' teachers is critical to the school's success. In the past, some teachers have struggled to last at Roots and Wings because of the demanding schedule and low salary. The potential of having to recruit and hire new teachers at some point in the future is a challenge of which the school's board and leadership are keenly aware and for which there are no easy solutions.

2. Finances

Given its small student body, Roots and Wings operates on an incredibly tight budget, which has implications for its

Given its small student body, Roots and Wings operates on an incredibly tight budget, which has implications for its financial and operational sustainability. As Wynward puts it, "Financially, we're just skimming by."



One source of the school's financial instability is the cost of its expeditionary learning model and extended outdoor learning activities. For each trip, the school has to cover the cost of transportation, camping equipment, food, and safety experts. During the school's initial years of operation, parents would subsidize the cost of outdoor activities, but the school's authorizer warned the school that these fees could not be mandatory for student participation. Today, the school requests voluntary fees from parents of \$16 per day for overnight camping trips to help alleviate some overhead costs, but these fees alone don't cover the cost of the school's outdoor learning activities. Instead, school leaders apply to a patchwork of grants from large corporations like the North Face, and accept donations from philanthropic organizations to support these activities. School leaders have also negotiated

additional savings on camping equipment with manufacturers through "pro-deals," in which companies like Northwest River Supply and Marmot sell their products to nonprofit organizations at a 40% discount.

Teacher salaries represent another financial pain point for the school, and contribute to the recruitment and retention challenges discussed above. A 2018 report from New Mexico's Public Education Department (PED) ranked Roots and Wings 119th out of 142 schools and districts statewide in terms of average teacher salary, putting it among the lowest in the state. Its average teacher salary was \$47,500, compared to an average of \$50,000 in QISD and \$51,000 in TMS.[12] As a result, Roots and Wings struggles to attract top-quality teachers when there are better-paying options right around the corner.

Beyond classroom teachers, the limited budget makes it difficult to hire support staff such as the reading interventionist. In the event of a budget shortage, these positions are likely to be among the first cut — creating instability for these staff members and for the students who rely on these services.

Roots and Wings does receive some modest financial support from local organizations. The Taos Community Foundation, a local philanthropic organization, provides the school with small grants to help address recruitment and retention challenges. The school also receives some financial support from the Taos Initiative for Life Together (TILT), the social change organization founded by the school's co-founder Todd Wynward.

Even so, finances are tight. This was demonstrated most acutely in 2017, when the school's year-end cash balance was estimated at just \$500.[13] At that point, PED, the school's authorizer, feared that Roots and Wings could potentially end the year with a negative balance. PED now requires Roots and Wings to report monthly to the School Budget and Finance Analysis Bureau in order to ensure that the school will end the year with a modest operational fund cash balance.[14]

As school leader, Richert places a high priority on grant writing and finding additional pockets of money to support the school. He worked with academic leaders and former students in Taos to use Title IV funds to develop a new social-emotional learning program at the school, and in 2018 worked with state leaders to identify additional areas of instructional space on the school's campus, including the greenhouse, that resulted in additional funds for the school. The school also hosts some fundraisers with students and parents throughout the year to raise additional dollars. This patchwork of grants, fundraisers, federal dollars, and philanthropic donations keeps the school afloat from year to year, but prevents school leaders from building cash reserves to plan for future projects or investments.

The school board has also considered whether the school could increase its enrollment, but the path to doing so is unclear. Their charter constrains the number of students they can serve, though they may be able to amend it. Even so, increasing enrollment would require expanding their current facilities and the finances to do so — which was difficult enough in the first place.

3. Transportation

Though Roots and Wings is located within the boundaries of Questa, the majority of students come from the nearby town of Taos, 24 miles to its south. Given its tight budget, Roots and Wings cannot afford to offer transportation to its students, and during its first seven years of operation, there were no public transportation options available. The school relied on parents to transport students to and from school each day. The long daily commute meant that Roots and Wings simply wasn't an option for many families living in Taos.

However, in 2007, then-Governor Bill Richardson signed the Regional Transit Act into law. The law combined federal funds received through a grant from the Federal Transit Administration for rural transportation with local sales tax from Taos County and surrounding counties to create the North Central Regional Transit District (NCRTD). The NCRTD began public transportation services in Taos County in 2007.[15] Initially students had to pay \$1 to ride each way, but now the service, known as the "Blue Bus," is completely free. As one school board member put it, "Now that we have free public transportation to the school via the bus, it has transformed the school." She continued, "With the public bus now an option for transportation, this is the first time the school has had a regular waiting list and is at full capacity."

Once off the blue bus, students have a 20-minute supervised walk up a tree-lined path from the highway to the school. Richert thinks this time where students get to walk, run, and play is critical to their success, saying, "Kids have a lot of free time before sitting down and learning. The time on the bus in Taos, they're not in a car at

nave a lot of prep time before sitting down and learning. That's one of the keys. In 1A05, they get up and are at their desks 10 minutes later. They haven't giggled or thrown a ball. By the time they enter the classroom here, they are ready to settle in."

Curiously, this walk has posed some administrative challenges for the school. Early in the school's history, the state insurance company threatened to stop insuring the school out of fear that students would be attacked by mountain lions on the trail from the highway to the school. Fearing that this threat could put the school in jeopardy, Bartlett wrote to world-renowned mountain lion biologist Dr. Paul Beier, who provided the state insurance company with an extensive report on the behavior of mountain lions to assuage their concerns. The debate about this walk went on for a few weeks, but eventually the insurance company acknowledged they could not rebut the research and dropped the matter.

4. Authorizer requirements

During its first 15 years of operation, Roots and Wings was authorized by the Questa Independent School District (QISD). As an authorizer, QISD took a hands-off approach. "The district didn't really bother us. They left us to our own devices. As long as our school was doing well academically, we didn't have much interaction," says Bartlett. Without intense oversight from the district authorizer, school leaders felt free to fully pursue the school's unique mission.

More recently, however, QISD has faced some financial and political challenges. In 2012, the New Mexico PED Secretary suspended the entire school board in response to a series of high-profile, chaotic board meetings where police presence was required because of physical altercations between several board members.[16] "Things got really bad in Questa. We would hear about the fights at school board meetings. It just got out of hand over there," recalls Bartlett. Soon after, Bartlett and Wynward began hearing rumors from individuals within the district that if they applied to be reauthorized by QISD, the board would not vote to approve the school's charter. The real reasons behind the rumors remain unclear today, but the news still left Bartlett and Wynward unsettled and with a difficult decision to make. Bartlett and Wynward had few complaints about the school district as an authorizer and in fact enjoyed the relative freedom they had. But given the turbulence in the district, there was a real chance that the school board might not approve the school's charter. Rather than risk non-approval, they applied to the Public Education Commission (PEC) in 2015, which reauthorized their charter.

PEC has been far more involved with Roots and Wings than QISD ever was. This has come with a handful of benefits and challenges. One benefit is that the PEC has pushed Roots and Wings officials to strengthen the school's academic model. In 2016, while under the supervision of PEC, Roots and Wings received a "D" on the state report card. This was the first time the school received a failing grade in 15 years of operation. Reflecting on that time, one teacher explained, "The year we got a D, it was devastating. We had to reconcile how we were going to make a shift without compromising our integrity. We needed to push for academic excellence, but we also needed to stay true to our mission." In response, school leaders and staff now say they spend more time than in previous years preparing for standardized testing and the school's curriculum is more closely aligned with state standards. "They made us step up our game and we are appreciative of the push," says Bartlett. The school earned an "A" rating from the state in 2017 and a "B" rating in 2018.[17] It also outperformed the local district and statewide averages in math and reading proficiency.

In many ways, Roots and Wings has grown as a result of being authorized by the PEC. As Bartlett and several teachers voiced, it has pushed Roots and Wings to refocus on academic excellence and ensure students are growing academically. But in other ways, the standard oversight procedures are poorly adapted to the school's unique curriculum and structure. Richert is concerned that the school's increasing focus on standardized testing will negatively impact the focus on expeditionary learning, one of the school's core components. Meeting academic requirements and ensuring compliance, while preserving what makes Roots and Wings unique, is an ongoing tension.

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In addition, PEC has taken issue with some of the school's more unconventional methods, including the school's budgeting and staffing models. Some staff at the school fill both administrative and teacher roles, which doesn't fit cleanly into requirements for "teachers of record" and which PEC is pressuring school officials to change.

The school building itself has also become a point of tension with PEC. Initially, Bartlett and Wynward bought the land and built the building in which Roots and Wings operates, and the school leased the facility directly from them. But PEC raised concerns about financial conflicts of interest with this arrangement. In response, Bartlett and Wynward have created an LLC that now controls the school's facility. This arrangement has the full support of the school's board, and satisfies the concerns raised by PEC.

In two years, school leaders will have the opportunity to once again decide whether the school will continue to be authorized by the state, or if they want to return to district control. "We're thinking about applying to QISD again — but only if things are less chaotic there. We just think it's easier being a district charter instead of a state charter school," said Bartlett. And though it may seem like Roots and Wings' leaders are just looking for an "easier" authorizer, it's more complicated than that: The tiny school has limited capacity to respond to authorizer concerns, potentially making QISD a more practical choice. Moreover, given Roots and Wings' unique model and the school leaders' desire to maintain the school's mission, they need an authorizer with the flexibility to enable school leaders to be creative with their limited resources. QISD may simply be a better fit for Roots and Wings. For now, Roots and Wings' leaders will continue to monitor QISD for signs of improvement in district operations, finances, and politics before making a decision.

Conclusion

Bartlett and Wynward are proud of the school they've built over the past 20 years, but recognize that the Roots and Wings of the future may differ from their original vision. They encourage Richert and future school leaders to implement their own vision and continue to help the school evolve, while still focusing on meeting the needs of Taos families looking for a more hands-on approach to learning. Under Richert's leadership the school now has, for the first time, a regular social-emotional learning program, a healthy living program called Taos Alive, and two music classes (guitar and violin) taught by two of the school's teachers who are also local musicians. The new relationship with PEC is forcing the school to have a larger focus on standardized test scores and a long-term financial plan. But even as these things evolve and grow, what won't change at Roots and Wings is the commitment to teaching the whole child and the strong emphasis on each individual's relationship with their natural environment.

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