



NATIONAL  
CHARTER SCHOOL  
RESOURCE CENTER

# Charter Management Organization Grantee Overviews: Environmental Charter Schools

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The National Charter School Resource Center (NCSRC) provides technical assistance to federal grantees and resources supporting charter sector stakeholders working across the charter school life cycle. NCSRC is funded by the U.S. Department of Education and managed by Manhattan Strategy Group in partnership with WestEd.

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## Introduction

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The U.S. Department of Education awards grants to Charter Management Organizations for the replication and expansion of high-quality charter schools (CMO Grants). A charter management organization, or CMO, is defined by the U.S. Department of Education Charter School Programs (CSP) as a nonprofit organization that operates or manages a network of charter schools linked by centralized support, operations, and oversight.<sup>1</sup>

The following CSP CMO grantee overview captures key elements of a grantee's project and disseminate lessons learned and project successes. The overview includes key elements of the grantee's project, a description of major grant activities with a general timeline, highlights of project successes and lessons learned, and quotes from the grantees. Grantee overviews draw on the respective grantee's CSP application, completed project evaluation where available, public website, and interviews with leaders of the grant-funded project. Grant activities described are not exhaustive, but instead reflect the focus of project leaders at the time they were interviewed. Links to grantees' CSP applications and websites are provided throughout the document where applicable. Any data collected from external data sources is additionally cited. All statements of fact or causality are derived from grantee publications or interviews and have not been verified or vetted by NCSRC except where explicitly stated.

## Further Reading

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National Charter School Resource Center (2020). [Preparation for Replication: Case Study of AECI.](#)

National Charter School Resource Center (2020). [School Quality Assessment: Where Are You on the Pathway to Success?](#)

National Charter School Resource Center (2020). [SMART Objectives Toolkit.](#)

National Charter School Resource Center (2021). [Charter Management Organization Grantee Profiles.](#)

National Charter School Resource Center (2021). [Logic Model Toolkit: A Resource for Current and Prospective Grantees of Charter School Programs.](#)

## Environmental Charter Schools

### Grantee Overview

Environmental Charter Schools' (ECS') mission is "to reimagine public education in low-income communities of color to prepare conscious, critical thinkers who are equipped to graduate from college and create a more equitable and sustainable world."<sup>2</sup> One core value that drives the school's mission is a focus on justice, wherein ECS strives to deliver culturally responsive curricula, noting, "We succeed when students' race and class cease to predict their level of achievement."<sup>3</sup>

### The Replication and Expansion of High-Quality Charter Schools Grant

- Environmental Charter Schools
- Los Angeles, California
- CMO grant awarded in 2017
- Total expected funding over five years: \$900,000
- As of SY 2019–20, CMO served 1,225 students in grades 6–12 at three campuses

ECS has been the recipient of a number of awards<sup>6</sup> for its approach and outcomes. The U.S. Department of Education selected ECS Lawndale in 2012 as part of its first cohort of schools to receive the [Green Ribbon Schools](#) award.<sup>7</sup> As a school serving a predominantly Hispanic and Latino population,<sup>8</sup> ECS Lawndale ranked sixth among all public high schools in L.A. County for closing the opportunity gap for African American and Latino students by Innovate Schools<sup>9</sup> Top Public Schools report for 2020.<sup>10</sup>

ECS uses an innovative model to provide interdisciplinary, college preparatory instruction through experiential learning, self-empowerment, and community engagement. Their "[living campuses](#)," as they describe them, serve as a model of environmental sustainability for students and the community by showcasing best practices in environmental design, including practices around sustainability, waste reduction, water conservation, and ecosystems.<sup>11</sup> Alison Diaz, ECS' Founder and Director of Growth and Sustainability, noted, "We highlight features of environmental design in

our campuses for students to see what’s possible so that they strive to use similar strategies in the future.” ECS leverages community partnerships to provide robust programming to students. One such partnership with The Bay Foundation generated the Table to Farm Composting project wherein ECS students compost local restaurant food preparation waste to enrich their urban garden and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>12</sup>

## Grant Goals<sup>13</sup>

1. Replicate the successful program at Environmental Charter High School.
2. Respond to a growing need for additional high school options in Inglewood, Gardena, and adjacent areas .

## Grant Activities

Environmental Charter Schools is using the CMO grant funds to replicate their model by opening a second high school campus in Gardena, also in L.A. County. In early March 2020, their charter petition to open a school serving grades 9–12 was approved for a five-year term. ECS planned to open the Gardena school for the 2020–21 school year with one ninth grade class of approximately 120 students and then add an additional grade level each school year. However, with the onset of the coronavirus pandemic and the impact on school closures, ECS received approval to delay the opening for one year until the 2021–22 school year. ECS is currently hiring and onboarding new staff and recruiting students for ECS Gardena.

### Grant Timeline

**Year 1 (2018–19):** Onboarded and trained principal. Built capacity of back office to support future hiring and recruitment. Initiated community engagement activities and facility search.

**Year 3 (2019–20):** Continued community engagement. Recruited and enrolled incoming 9th grade class. Hired high school team. Negotiated facility.

2018–2019

2019–2020

2020–2021

2021–2022

2022–2023

**Year 2 (2019–20):** Continued community engagement activities and facility search. Due to pandemic, obtained a material revision to the charter term to delay opening until SY 2021–22.

**Next Steps (2021–23):** Open ECS Gardena High School for SY 2021–22 with a grade 9 class and continue to add one grade level per school year.

## Project Successes

ECS has focused the CMO grant award funds to build capacity within their team to prepare for opening an additional school. Ms. Diaz reported, “The support [of the CMO grant funds] allowed us to build out our back office, improve our HR department and accounting team, and ramp up for the amount of additional work it will take to open another school.” She emphasized that the gradual ramp up enabled ECS to identify additional support staff, such as a math specialist and a director of special populations to oversee students with disabilities and English learners, which improved staff’s ability to serve all ECS schools as they grow. Farnaz Golshani, Chief Executive Officer of ECS, noted that the additional funds also permitted ECS to hire someone with experience launching charter schools to lead the process of opening the additional school, allowing current school leaders

to remain focused on their work at the existing schools. Added Ms. Diaz, “That ramp up time really helped us. We were able to develop our talent team and finetune the ways we go about recruiting and hiring teachers.”

## Grantee Lessons Learned

*Go slow to go fast...so you can go fast together.* Careful planning has been key to ECS moving forward with opening an additional school without overburdening their current staff members. Ms. Diaz underscored that incorporating sufficient planning time into their CMO grant application timeline allowed ECS to ramp up intentionally and build capacity in staff. “Take care to ensure that you’re getting everybody on board,” she advised, continuing, “As you write your grant and think about the timeline, ensure that you have time to ramp up, create the space to build capacity, and don’t rush it.”

“*If we build campuses like they always have been built, students will graduate solving problems that have always been solved. If we build them differently, valuing sustainability, community, and innovation, then our students will begin to imagine new possibilities.*”

- Environmental Charter Schools’ website<sup>14</sup>

**Focus your resources.** During ECS’ search for a site for their fourth school campus, they pursued three locations in the communities where their middle school students live. However, Ms. Diaz noted that this unnecessarily overburdened their team and that, in the future, they would focus their time on pursuing one location. Additionally, through establishing partnerships with support organizations, such as the [California Charter Schools Association](#) and the [Charter Schools Development Center](#), ECS has greater access to resources and systems of support. Leveraging these partnerships allows ECS to focus their resources on building capacity within their team rather than reinventing work that others are doing.

<sup>1</sup> [Federal Register, Vol. 84, No. 228](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Environmental Charter Schools’ website](#)

<sup>3</sup> ECS’ five core values are justice, community, curiosity, sustainability, and leadership. [Environmental Charter Schools’ website](#)

<sup>4</sup> As of the 2019–20 school year: [California Department of Education, Data Quest](#)

<sup>5</sup> [California Department of Education, Data Quest, Four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Environmental Charter Schools’ website](#)

<sup>7</sup> Awarded to schools, districts and IHEs.

<sup>8</sup> In SY 2019–20, 85% of students were Hispanic or Latino according to the [California Department of Education, Data Quest](#)

<sup>9</sup> Innovate Schools is a nonprofit that works toward high-quality public schools to serve low-income students.

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<sup>10</sup> [2020 Top Los Angeles County Public Schools](#)

<sup>11</sup> [Environmental Charter Schools' website](#)

<sup>12</sup> [LA Weekly](#)

<sup>13</sup> Stated in [Colorado Department of Education's 2018 Grant Application](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Environmental Charter Schools' website](#)