



# Indiana Department of Education

Dr. Katie Jenner, Secretary of Education

## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Indiana State Board of Education  
**FROM:** Office of School Accountability, Indiana Department of Education  
**RE:** Accreditation Petition for Geo Focus Academy (GFA)  
**DATE:** June 2, 2021

This memorandum provides a summary of the information provided by the school in the petition and in any submitted revisions, as well as the Department's comments regarding the accreditation of GFA.

### **Background & Demographic Information**

Geo Focus Academy (GFA) is a kindergarten through twelfth grade school with physical locations in Gary and Indianapolis. GFA intends to open as a fully virtual school, serving the communities of Indiana's low-income urban and rural students statewide. While GFA currently does not hold accreditation with an accreditation provider, GFA is affiliated with the GEO Foundation, which operates a network of four (4) charter schools in the State of Indiana. GFA also intends to utilize K12 for its virtual platform.

GFA describes its mission and vision as, "GEO Focus Academy seeks to provide Indiana students the opportunity to excel in K-12 studies and to accelerate through college and career preparation, certification, and degree programs. We believe ALL students can go to and complete college and/or career certification programs if provided the proper supports and provided access while in their K-12 grades. Our objective is for all students to demonstrate mastery of grade level material and to accelerate to and through college level courses while in high school."

GFA intends to serve 700 students in grades kindergarten through twelfth grade upon opening, but ultimately intends to expand to serve a target population of 1,000 students.

### **Operations**

**Facilities:** GFA currently intends to operate in buildings currently affiliated with GEO Foundation's charter school locations in both Gary and Indianapolis. While GFA has not provided documentation verifying that the facility meets Department standards for student occupancy, since the buildings GFA intends to use are already in use by GEO Foundation's other schools, the Department concludes GFA's use of the buildings likely meets Department standards for student occupancy.

**Tuition:** GFA did not provide documentation regarding their anticipated annual tuition rate. GFA has indicated that if accredited, it intends to participate in the Indiana Choice Scholarship program.

**Staffing:** GFA's current Head of School is Wendy Skibinski. GFA does not currently employ any teachers but has expressed that it intends to hire more teachers in the future, with preference given towards applicants that hold valid Indiana teaching licenses. GFA has provided assurances indicating it will utilize the services of an Indiana-licensed teacher to administer state assessments.



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## **Academic Programming**

***Curriculum and Instruction:*** GFA utilizes the Stride online curriculum for its subjects, which is "...grounded in a set of guiding principles that promote critical thinking and problem-solving skills to prepare students for the demands of the 21st Century. While maintaining alignment to Indiana Academic Standards, Stride uses 'big ideas' in every subject area to organize the explicit learning objectives for each course. This approach enables teachers to connect their instruction to both content and state standards easily."

In addition to assessments provided by Stride, GFA also utilizes several nationally recognized assessments such as NWEA, STAR360, Go Formative and others to assess student growth and mastery.

GFA has contracted with PowerSchool for its Student Information System (SIS). PowerSchool is Indiana Ed-Fi certified with Ed-Fi Data Standards, and GFA has indicated to the Department that it has capacity to produce and submit all required data reports to the state in an accurate and timely manner.

GFA's main instructional approach is stated as "The Stride curriculum uses several types of multimedia to engage different learning intelligences of students. The multimedia strategies used in the curriculum include: Audio, Photographs/illustrations, Technology-Enhanced Item (TEI) types, and Animations/Videos." GFA also adds "...due to the unique online nature of the Stride curriculum, assistive technology tools are available to all students based on their individual needs. Accessibility tools include text to speech, speech to text, lowering readability of grade level text while maintaining grade level standards, translation tools, highlighting tools, zoom text, visual dictionary, word prediction software, and visual graphs and web support."

As part of the seeking accreditation processes, GFA submitted signed assurances agreeing to comply with all applicable legal standards and required processes for nonpublic schools as part of its provisional accreditation period and understands that its accreditation may be revoked if GFA fails to meet any or all legal requirements while holding provisional accreditation.

## **Department Comments**

- GFA indicates that it has not hired any instructional staff at this time. The Department has concerns with accrediting a school that does not currently have instructional staff.
- GFA indicates that outside of a weekly session of synonymous instruction, students will spend their instructional day in asynchronous instruction unless synchronous instruction is specifically requested by the student or instructor. The Department has concerns with whether GFA has adequate supports in place to ensure students remain academically engaged during long periods of asynchronous instruction.
- GFA intends to operate as a fully virtual nonpublic school and has indicated that, if accredited, GFA intends to participate in the Choice Scholarship Program. The Board has no previous record of accrediting virtual nonpublic schools, so this would need to be considered further.
- GFA did not provide a specific cost of tuition in its application, which is a requirement to participate in the Choice Scholarship program.



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**Department Recommendation:**

The Department recommends Geo Focus Academy's petition for provisional accreditation be approved.