

(Subject - Students with Autism Gain New Hope)

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## **A Nationwide Network of Schools for Students With Autism Launches**

**PHOENIX, Ariz., January 24th, 2023** — [Arizona Autism Charter Schools, Inc.](#), a network of specialized charter schools serving neuro-diverse children and winner of the 2022 [Yass Prize](#) honoring transformational education, announced plans today to form The National Accelerator of Autism Charter Schools (NAACS), in partnership with the South Florida Autism Charter School, Inc., in Hialeah, (Miami) Florida with a goal of accelerating the creation of similar schools nationwide.

Diana Diaz-Harrison, founder and executive director of Arizona Autism Charter Schools, said they will use part of their \$1 million Yass Prize to jumpstart the accelerator. The ultimate goal, she said, is to open autism-focused charter schools in every major U.S. city.

“All of this is only possible, because here in Arizona we have a climate where parents are empowered to seek schools that are the best fit for their children and if those schools don’t exist we are empowered to create them if we are willing to do the hard work” said Diaz-Harrison. She continued. “It shows what’s possible in other states where there are a growing number of children on the autism spectrum.”

Plans already are underway, she said, to open schools in **Tucson**, Ariz. (Fall 2023), **Shreveport**, La. (target opening date, Fall 2024), **Tampa**, Fla. (est., Fall 2025), **Las Vegas** and **Dallas** (est., Fall 2026) and **Los Angeles** (est., Fall 2027). Additional cities

will be added. By 2030, she said, they hope to have schools operating in at least 10 cities and by 2035, twice that number.

“With one in 44 children on the autism spectrum there is a need for an autism-focused charter in every major city,” Diaz-Harrison said. “We are initially supporting founding teams who have reached out to us and have identified a need in their own cities and want support navigating the challenging process of starting a charter school.”

The new Accelerator, she said, will provide committed start-up organizers with training and residencies at the existing schools’ campuses. “Residencies will ensure that new founding teams have first-hand experience with pivotal practices that are specific to operating an autism charter,” she said, such as proper staffing ratios, embedded behavioral supports and added layers of safety practices. The purpose will be to “fully immerse” new school leaders in the day-to-day management and operation of such specialized schools. NAACS will also provide support for parent training, after-school programming and extracurricular support services.

Arizona Autism Charter Schools is the only public charter network for students with autism in Arizona and the first in the west dedicated to serving neuro-divergent learners. It was awarded the \$1 million [Yass Prize](#), education’s largest and most prestigious award, in December 2022.

During the competition, Diaz-Harrison explained why she founded the organization: “As an Autism Mom, I don’t want my kid to be seen only for his disability. I want him to be seen as a doer, intelligent, productive. These charter schools that we are starting across America will help our children be neuro-diverse, be who they are and be fulfilled, productive citizens.”

Arizona holds the top spot in the Center for Education Reform’s [Parent Power Index](#) for its charter school law. It is these policy environments that create the conditions for innovation that allow parents like Diaz-Harrison the agency in their children’s education.

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*For interviews contact the National Accelerator of Autism Charter Schools via Lorna Romero at [lorna@elevatestrategiesaz.com](mailto:lorna@elevatestrategiesaz.com)*

***About CER:*** Working to advance education innovation and opportunity for nearly 3 decades, the Center for Education Reform also today administers the \$1 Million Yass Prize for **S**ustainable, **T**ransformational, **O**utstanding and **P**ermissionless Education which celebrates the country's education provider which best demonstrates the STOP principles.