

Expanding Anansi Charter School to Meet Growing Demand from its Rural Community

This case study explores the phased development of the facility and campus of Anansi Charter School, a public community school founded in 2001 in Taos, New Mexico.

Starting Point

Anansi Day School opened in 1993 in the community of Taos, New Mexico to offer programs for children from birth through eight years old. After seven years, Anansi Day School closed and re-opened in 2001 as Anansi Charter School ("Anansi").

The mission of Anansi Charter School is to develop the academic potential and emotional intelligence of each learner. Anansi believes that when children have a firm foundation of emotional intelligence, they are available to learn. Anansi offers a high-quality education aligned to New Mexico's Common Core standards alongside a social emotional learning curriculum.

Anansi students are known in their greater community for their strong academic writing skills; their ability to communicate clearly and respectfully; and their perseverance, stamina, and leadership skills. In 1998 Anansi received the National Blue Ribbon Schools Award from the U.S. Department of Education in recognition of excellence in student achievement and closing achievement gaps among student groups.²

SCHOOL PROFILE (2020-21 SCHOOL YEAR) ¹	
Anansi Charter School www.anansicharterschool.org	
Grades Served	K-8
Enrollment and Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ 196 students ❖ Opened in 2001 with 50 students in K-2; grew to 120 in K-5 by Year 9 and 181 students in K-8 by Year 15
Student Demographics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ 58% White, 34% Hispanic, 4% Asian, 3% Native American, 1% Black ❖ No specific Tribal affiliation ❖ 53% low-income families
School Type	Charter School authorized by Local Education Agency (LEA)
Location	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Taos, New Mexico ❖ Rural setting (non-Tribal land) ❖ Single location

Local Context

Anansi is located in north-central New Mexico, in the town and county of Taos. The county is also home to two of the Eight Northern Pueblos of New Mexico: Taos Pueblo, which borders the town of Taos to the north, and Picuris Pueblo, located 18 miles south. Taos Pueblo has been occupied for nearly a millennium and was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1992. It is considered one of the oldest continuously inhabited communities in the United States.³

Taos has a countywide population of more than 34,000 and 57% of the population is Hispanic, 35% White non-Hispanic, and 8% Native American. Median household income is \$38,329 and 18% of the population in

About this Document

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the county lives below the federal poverty level.^{4,5} Taos is served by the Taos Municipal Schools District. The Bureau of Indian Affairs also runs an elementary school for the children of Taos Pueblo. While Anansi is open to all children in the Taos community, including the children of Taos Pueblo, transportation from the pueblo to the school remains a barrier for the residents of the pueblo.

Meeting Community and Growth Needs

Anansi first opened as a private provider of early childhood care and education in 1993. In that same year New Mexico passed its first charter school legislation, which paved the way for the first charter schools in the state.⁶ At that time only conversions of existing schools were allowed (start-up charter schools were not permitted until 1999). Anansi converted to a public charter school in 2001 to improve community access, as many local families could not afford private tuition. At that time Anansi became the sole publicly available program with a student-centered pedagogy that focuses on the unique needs of each child. The school's name - Anansi - was selected to reflect the richness of folklore common throughout the Taos community.

When Anansi re-opened as a charter it occupied the same 10,000-square-foot hacienda-style house built in the 1960s where the Anansi Day School served approximately 75 children. At the time, Anansi leased the property from a local benefactor who had purchased it with the intention of selling it to the school. As detailed in the following sections, Anansi managed six phases of facility development projects to improve and expand its campus over the next 20 years. Each phase involved detailed planning, budgeting, fundraising, and construction efforts.

Today the five-acre campus, owned by the school's affiliated foundation, includes three buildings, totaling 18,414 square feet, plus an 1,800-square-foot building leased to a public pre-K. The campus features outdoor walkways and spaces including a playground, hard surface play area, track, soccer field, and parking lot with 72 spaces (including 5 reserved for accessible parking).

"Anansi is a popular folkloric character of African origin often depicted as a spider. He is known for his ability to outsmart and triumph over more powerful opponents using cunning, creativity and wit. In one tale he tricked the Sky God, who had stolen the children's magic. Anansi brought the magic and stories back to the children, which is what we strive to do at our school."

- Michele Hunt, Co-Founder & School Director,
Anansi Charter School

Early Renovations for K-2 (Phases 1, 2, and 3)

The first two phases of facility development occurred in the school's first four years. Anansi renovated their daycare/after-school facility to meet local requirements for educational occupancy. That involved interior upgrades, including new flooring and improvements to ceilings, lighting, painting, doorways, electricity, and hardware. In 2004 the school added an addition to the original building for a second-grade classroom, additional restrooms, and importantly, a space for a library. These early renovation projects were funded by Federal, state and county pools of facilities funding available to charter schools at that time, in addition to parent and community fundraising efforts.



Kindergarten building today

Expanding to K-6 (Phase 4)

Soon students and families at Anansi suggested the school expand again, so they did not have to leave after second grade. Around the same time, charter school legislation in New Mexico was developing requirements for new facilities, specifically that charters either operate out of public facilities or meet



Courtyard bridging intermediate grades to middle school, including special education labyrinth and prayer flags created by the students each year

public facility standards.⁷ These factors, combined with consistent and growing waitlists of new students, led Anansi's co-founder and School Director Michelle Hunt to develop a new five-year business plan that included an expansion of the school's curriculum together with its facility. This coincided with the first renewal of the school's charter with Taos Municipal Schools. Anansi included new enrollment projections in its renewal application, which was approved in 2006.

Director Hunt worked closely with her architect to develop detailed plans and a construction budget for a new modular building on the campus to house grades 3-6. School leaders

decided to use pre-manufactured portables to save on building, maintenance, and repair costs. The plans also included outdoor playgrounds and a gym, athletic track, sidewalks, and plans to eventually add on to the main building for a new kindergarten classroom. Parents, teachers, and students all gave input as the plans came together. Director Hunt relied heavily on support from the school's Finance Manager and an outside attorney in budgeting and fundraising for the project. With a total construction budget exceeding \$5 million, Director Hunt and her team realized they would need to finance part of their capital project with a loan.


After inquiring with local banks about construction loans, Anansi applied for a loan from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development Community Facilities Program (CFP), which offered long-term financing at lower interest rates. The USDA underwriting process required the school to submit extensive documentation, including project plans, project budgets, and school documents such as audited financials and financial projections. As part of the loan structure, the school also established a 501(c)(3) foundation entity - Friends of Anansi - which has the sole purpose of providing Anansi with a facility.

Friends of Anansi took out the USDA loan then entered into a lease purchase agreement with the school. This met the state's requirements and restrictions on public entities incurring debt.

"We were very excited when Anansi approached us for their first facility loan. The school was offering great programs and there was strong demand from the local community. Michelle's excellent planning, budgeting and project management helped secure the loan the school needed to make its facility projects happen."

- Terry Brunner, former State Director for New Mexico,
US Department of Agriculture Rural Development

In the end, funds for the expansion project were raised from four different sources: a \$1.8 million loan from the USDA CFP, over \$1 million in state grants from the New Mexico Public School Capital Outlay Council, over \$500,000 in guarantee funds from Taos County, and additional guarantee funding collateralized by Anansi's after-school program revenues. It took nearly three years to plan and one year to construct, but by 2010 the phase three and four additions of Anansi's school campus were complete.

FACILITIES PROJECT SUMMARY	
Anansi Charter School	
	
Total Cost	\$8 million since inception
Project Dates	Phase 1: 2001; Phase 2: 2004; Phase 3: 2009; Phase 4: 2010; Phase 5: 2015; Phase 6: 2021
Financial Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ New Mexico state funds (grants, Public School Capital Outlay Council, Public School Facilities Authority lease support) ❖ Taos County (bond issuance) ❖ USDA Rural Development Community Facilities Program ❖ School revenue (afterschool programs) ❖ Private donors
Project Summary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Phase 1: Original building renovations ❖ Phase 2: Grade 2 main building addition ❖ Phase 3: New building for grades 3-6; outdoor areas ❖ Phase 4: Kindergarten main building addition ❖ Phase 5: New building for middle school ❖ Phase 6: Office and administrative spaces; air ventilation upgrades
Design Highlights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Integration with outdoor spaces as much as possible including "outdoor gym" ❖ Traditional New Mexican <i>portales</i> ❖ Roofs are south-facing for thaw ❖ <i>Latilla</i> (peeled wood branch) fences in lieu of wire fencing ❖ No paving on campus; all traditional dirt gravel except for handicapped parking ❖ Irrigation of soccer field with rain run-off ❖ Dry bed lazy river where students can design their own rock formations ❖ Native plants and garden near outdoor eating area ❖ Walking labyrinth designed for special needs students ❖ Well-insulated and efficient building that uses very little heat ❖ Collaborated with local foundation and Colorado College on outdoor features

Adding a Middle School (Phase 5)

Soon after the elementary school and outdoor spaces were finished, Anansi started planning to add grades 6-8 to accommodate organic growth and meet demand from existing families and students. An expanded curriculum and enrollment projections were again included in Anansi's charter renewal application, which was approved in 2011.

By this point Director Hunt and her team had formed a Facility Committee, which supports facility maintenance and development and includes local community members who have relevant expertise in construction, landscaping, and finance.

Director Hunt budgeted for and hired a dedicated Project Manager to oversee contractors and construction of the new middle school building. This person also coordinated planning with Taos Municipal Schools, as district approval was required for facilities projects that draw on public district funds.

Funding for the fifth facility development phase came primarily from state facility funds and was driven by Anansi's growing enrollment. Completed in 2015, this phase included a new middle school building, outdoor *portales* (covered walkways and entrances), and security enhancements.

Latest Additions (Phase 6)

Most recently, Anansi undertook another phase of campus build-out focused on non-classroom spaces and health and safety upgrades related to the Covid-19 pandemic. The project added administrative offices, in addition to spaces for multi-purpose group meetings, counseling, and other student support services.

As this last phase occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic, the school also upgraded all air purifiers throughout the facility from HVAC to hospital grade. It also added more outdoor sheltered spaces, which allows for indoor/outdoor instruction since all classrooms have outdoor exits.

Project Learnings

- When planning for your facility, top priorities should be (1) space requirements for your students and program and (2) life, health, and safety. Use these elements to drive your budget and understand what base level you will need financially to sustain your core program.
- Be modest in what you plan. Always try to be smart with your dollars and make every dollar count. Don't forget that rooms can have multiple functions! Always start knowing what you can afford, and then design and plan from there.
- Staying well-organized with planning documents and budgets is important to effectively coordinate facility projects and raise funding from multiple sources.
- Facility Committees help bring outside expertise to the school and can take some of the load off school leaders when it comes to planning and tracking facility maintenance and development.
- It is important to collaborate well with your local district, for example, when it comes to transportation services for rural students, working with your local district may be imperative.
- Establishing a foundation can help schools qualify for funding and offers workarounds for issues like a school's ability to take on debt.
- USDA Rural Development offers flexible and attractive financing for up to 40 years, plus project support and planning grants when you are working with them.
- It is important to have school and project advocates who can speak to the school's vision with passion and articulate the details.
- Where possible, hire local contractors that are familiar with the local factors (e.g., climate) that should be considered during design and construction.

Conclusion

Today's students of Anansi benefit tremendously from the school's spacious and outdoor-oriented campus. The development of the school's facility into what it is today occurred over many phases, each one planned in step with demand from the local community and the school's growth in enrollment. Anansi's facility success can be attributed to the school's leadership team and effective collaboration with the local district and other partners.

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