Overview
Founded in 2006, Rocketship Education (www.rsed.org), a 501.c.3 non-profit corporation, is building a national network of high-performing urban college preparatory elementary charter schools. Rocketship’s mission is to eliminate the achievement gap in public education, by proliferating its network of K-5 elementary charter schools in high-need neighborhoods throughout the country.

Each Rocketship school has a clear and simple goal: that its students achieve grade-level proficiency by the time they graduate from elementary school. Many charter school networks focus on college preparation for middle and high school students. Rocketship’s K-5 focus is supported by evidence that the path to college must begin much earlier in a child’s life. Research has shown that achievement in third grade is highly correlated with college attendance and graduation.¹ Rocketship’s first school, Rocketship Mateo Sheedy Elementary School, opened in August 2007 in downtown San Jose. Its second school, Rocketship Rocketship Si Se Puede Academy opened in the fall of 2009, and a third school, Rocketship Los Sueños Academy, opened in the fall of 2010. Rocketship opened two additional San Jose schools, Rocketship Mosaic Academy and Rocketship Discovery Prep, in the fall of 2011, and intends for its network to expand to 30 schools by 2015. Ultimately Rocketship intends to expand into 50 different cities / regions across the U.S.

Academic performance at Rocketship schools has been exceptional, especially in comparison to overall school district performance, and to neighboring and regional schools. Rocketship currently serves 2,400 students, of whom nearly 90 percent are low-income and 75 percent are English Language Learners. With a network API of 868, Rocketship Education is the number one public school system in California serving low-income elementary students.

Rocketship attributes its success to three core values: Individualize, Lead and Empower. By individualizing instruction with tutors and technology, developing great classroom and school leaders and empowering parents to transform the political system, Rocketship will continue to drive world-class student achievement.

Individualization and the Hybrid School Model
Rocketship Education opened the nation’s first hybrid (online and classroom instruction) school in August 2007. The Rocketship Hybrid School Model combines traditional classroom teaching with individualized instruction using tutors and technology to meet the specific needs of each and every student.

Rocketship’s defining core value is that individualized instruction is essential to drive student achievement at every level. While a large part of the Rocketship day continues to be conducted in classroom settings, students have Individualized Learning Plans (ILPs) that guide teachers in lesson planning and differentiated instruction. Individualized instruction comes in two forms at Rocketship. During the school day, we provide online instruction in

Learning Lab and a Response to Intervention (RTI) program that focuses on tutor-led small-group interventions for the lowest-performing quartile of students. Online learning and tutors help to make a child’s time in the classroom more productive because he or she will have fewer gaps preventing understanding, and Rocketship teachers will have more time to focus on extending children’s critical thinking skills. The approach is working: at our first school, in each of its first two years of operation, over 90 percent of the students in RTI were able to move from the bottom two quintiles in state performance to basic and above in a single year.

Rocketship’s structure holds significant advantages in three areas: academic achievement, teaching quality/leadership, and financial sustainability. First, the Hybrid School Model enables teachers to maximize classroom time for instruction, guided practice and extending critical thinking skills, while allowing them to schedule tutors and technology for students’ basic skills acquisition, independent practice, assessment and remediation/acceleration. In addition, the Hybrid School Model creates significant cost savings, which are reinvested in programs and people to drive school quality. The four areas where significant extra resources are spent include: Academic Deans, Leadership Training, Response to Intervention, and higher teacher salaries (20 percent higher than surrounding districts). Third, by reducing teacher staffing requirements, it is easier to fill all of our classrooms with top-quality teachers. Finally, the Hybrid School Model enables Rocketship schools to operate solely and sustainably on traditional public school funding and without the need for philanthropy.

Outstanding Teachers and Academic Leaders
At Rocketship, leadership in both the classroom and the school is a crucial driver of school quality. Our success depends upon an infusion of talent to our schools and the larger organization. While all CMOs are working on professional development, Rocketship is unique in its commitment to Teach for America (TFA), to employ four first-year TFA corps members at each school every year. Our strategy is to promote from within by taking these corps members, other TFA alumni and other strong recruits and focusing significant efforts to develop them into school leaders. There are four factors that allow Rocketship to attract, retain and develop outstanding leadership talent: mission, support, pay and career path. Rocketship recruits young passionate teachers who are committed to eliminating the achievement gap for whole cities at a time, who welcome support and growth from our Academic Deans, who appreciate greater pay for better work, and who want to move into leadership positions.

Empowerment
In addition to its unique school model, Rocketship is empowering parents by building a network of thousands of parents ready to transform educational politics by campaigning and electing pro-reform school board members. The combination of the hybrid model and our grass-roots political approach makes Rocketship the first charter school network that is fully scalable with respect to finance, staffing, and politics. Revenues generated from our existing schools allow Rocketship to finance all of the start-up costs needed by new schools, including building facilities. Rocketship intends to prove that charter schools can accomplish whole-city education reform. For example, the city of San Jose serves 120,000 students in grades K-12, of which 60,000 test below grade level, as measured by API scores. Approximately 30,000 of these students are in grades K-5, and half of those students are clustered in a limited number of neighborhoods, enabling feasible access to a charter school. By the year 2020, Rocketship intends to serve 15,000 students in San Jose, proving that the highest poverty students in the city can reach grade level, and supplying an enormous influx of middle school students capable of high level academic achievement in middle and high school.

Financial Sustainability
In 2009, Rocketship received a $5M grant from Reed Hastings and the Charter School Growth Fund for creation of its first seven schools in San Jose. Rocketship opened the fourth and fifth of these seven schools in the Fall 2011. This funding enabled Rocketship to reach sustainability in San Jose, and to continue opening new schools without additional philanthropy. Given the urgency of the Obama Administration’s desire to address the education crisis, and Rocketship’s own success at demonstrating its charter school model, in 2010 Rocketship decided to accelerate its plans for expansion, and raised an additional $6 million from the Charter School Growth Fund, and $1 million from the Edythe and Eli Broad Foundation, in order to finance the national office infrastructure required for expansion.
Management Team
John Danner, co-founder and CEO
From 2001-2005, John served as the Chairman of the Charter School Resource Center of Tennessee, working for the successful passage of Tennessee’s charter school law in 2002 and assisting the subsequent establishment of 12 charter schools in Tennessee. John served as a founding director of KIPP Academy Nashville, a charter middle school in Nashville, which has ranked among the top middle schools in Nashville from inception, and is among the top in the state for low-income schools. Before founding KIPP Nashville, John served as a teacher in the Nashville public school system for three years, the last two as a second-grade teacher of students with limited English proficiency. In 2000, John co-founded Sacred Heart Nativity School, a private Catholic middle school for at-risk Latino boys in San Jose. Prior to his work in education, John was founder and CEO of NetGravity, an Internet advertising software company. John holds a Bachelor’s and Master’s Degree in Electrical Engineering from Stanford University and a Master’s Degree in Education Policy from Vanderbilt University. John is an Ashoka Fellow, a Henry Crown Fellow at the Aspen Institute, and the 2010 winner of the McNulty Prize.

Preston Smith, co-founder and Chief Achievement Officer
Before founding Rocketship, Preston was previously the founding Principal of LUCHA Elementary, the highest performing low-income elementary in San Jose before Rocketship Mateo Sheedy was created. Prior to LUCHA, Preston was a Teach For America (TFA) Sue Lehmann Award finalist, a national competition for TFA teachers with the strongest academic results. Preston was an exemplar for outstanding teaching used by Steven Farr of Teach for America in his book Teaching as Leadership. Preston is an Aspen-NewSchools Fellow, a program designed to recognize and support exceptional entrepreneurial leaders who are committed to transforming public education. Preston graduated Phi Beta Kappa from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Aylon Samouha, Chief Schools Officer
Aylon manages Rocketship’s growth strategy, the evolution of its Hybrid School model, and its leadership development programs. Before joining Rocketship, Aylon served as Senior Vice President for Teacher Preparation, Support and Development for Teach For America (TFA). At TFA, he was responsible for managing a $35 million annual budget, 350 full-time staff and 850 part-time staff, in order to provide training, development, culture and supporting operations for more than 7,000 teachers across 34 regions. Prior to TFA, Aylon held a number of senior roles at Kaplan, Inc, including Vice President East Operations and Vice President Educational Centers Strategy. Aylon holds a BA in English from Columbia University.

Richard Billings, Chief Financial Officer
Rich leads the budgeting and strategic planning process for both Rocketship and Launchpad, its real estate and facilities group and is responsible for centralizing and automating all non-academic school and organizational functions including Operations, HR, Finance, Accounting, Payroll, Compliance and Legal. Previously, Billings served as the founding Director of Finance and Strategic Planning for Envision Schools, another Bay Area Charter School Management Organization. During his time at Envision, he founded the finance and accounting department, secured $2MM in working capital financing and managed the start-up of Envision Schools Colorado, an Envision franchise in Denver which opened its first school in August 2009. Prior to joining the charter school movement, Billings was an economic consultant for Charles River Associates and PA Consulting Group and has also worked as a math teacher and soccer coach at a high school near Washington, D.C. He has a BA in mathematical economics from Haverford College, an MBA from Northwestern University’s Kellogg School of Management and is a graduate of the Education Pioneers Fellowship Program and the Broad Residency in Urban Education.