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STARTING AN INDEPENDENT CHARTER SCHOOL:

ADVICE TO CONSIDER BEFORE APPLYING

This book is dedicated to all the visionaries, the dreamers, the people who believe all children deserve the best education possible. We applaud you and are grateful for the work you do. We humbly bow to those who are successful.

Empire Charter Consultants is a national charter school services provider, comprised of veteran charter school experts providing candid guidance and expert technical support services to charter schools, charter support organizations, and authorizers seeking to make strategic changes.

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STARTING A CHARTER SCHOOL: ADVICE TO CONSIDER BEFORE APPLYING FOR A SCHOOL

INTRODUCTION

Congratulations! If you've found this how-to guide it means you are likely researching charter school design, application, or start-up. Right now, you and your team have a vision - and maybe even have made a commitment - to offer a unique educational experience to children in your community.

We applaud your intentions, ideas, and ambition! Now, how do you turn that ambition into a reality? That's where we can help.

But first, we want to make sure you know what you're getting into. We urge you to consider these insights regarding charter school start-up before you proceed any further.

1) First and foremost, it is really, *really* hard work. Very few people have what it takes to navigate the difficult processes of proposal development, application writing and submission, capacity interviews, planning years, and, last but not least – following through into a strong launch.

2) It is critical to ensure the entire charter school applicant team is committed to one goal, and one goal only - student success. Period. Everyone on the team *must* be committed to working toward achieving that one goal.

3) Blood, sweat and tears will be involved, and not always just figuratively. Did we mention the hard work? But the good news is that spearheading the critical issues up front will help ensure a smoother road to opening.

4) Applying for and securing a charter is profoundly challenging. Full disclosure: the work actually gets harder after you get the charter! We aren't being coy here. The application is hard (often blood, sweat and tears level hard), but the real challenge is establishing a school that achieves breakthrough outcomes for children. Remember number 2? It *must* be about the children.

5) The renewal of your school starts on day one. We have presented on and discussed this concept at large conferences and small strategic planning sessions across the country, and we tell this to the professionals we consult with each day. This is simply the most rational way to look at chartering. Once you are through the application phase, every subsequent action taken must be with

renewal in mind. If you plan that way from the start, you will thank yourselves later!

If you are still reading after considering the above, you probably are serious about starting a charter school. We officially invite you to keep on reading!

Our goal is to share the practical tips, observations, and advice we've acquired and strategically developed in our combined forty+ years of experience working with charter schools. Collectively, (and at various times) our team has been an authorizer or a consultant to authorizers, founding team member (this means a member of an applicant group), charter school board secretary, start-up coach, application writer, interview preparation coach, and strategic planner. We are charter school accountability and policy experts. We have reviewed literally hundreds (maybe thousands) of charter school applications. Throughout the years and these many roles, we've learned firsthand what it takes to make a written proposal stand out and what a high-capacity founding team needs to succeed.

In addition to documenting some of the nuts-and-bolts advice we dole out to school founders on a regular basis, we also want to offer you a look behind the curtain into what an authorizing entity might be thinking during the proposal vetting process. During our combined years we've known and worked with quite a few authorizers. We are proud to actively talk, collaborate, and commiserate with many outstanding authorizers from different states. We also don't hesitate to question or critique authorizers when warranted. We are going to try and explain the "why" behind the rigor and review that most authorizers apply to the new schools process.

So, sit back with a cup of coffee - or tea if that tickles your fancy - take a few hours to read this short book and let us be the first to wish you the best of luck on this challenging, yet rewarding, endeavor. Keep in mind, our clients and colleagues never have to ask for our opinion. Simply tell us your thoughts and we'll give you our opinion for free (or maybe for a great low rate). Our style is direct, and we hope it helps you.

This guide is organized into the following major sections:

FIRST THINGS FIRST – WHERE TO START?
ALL ABOUT AUTHORIZERS
WHAT TO EXPECT WHILE YOU'RE APPLYING
MISSION AND VISION
GOVERNANCE AND THE FOUNDING TEAM
COMMUNITY OUTREACH, ENGAGEMENT, AND DEMAND

CRITICAL DESIGN FEATURES
ACADEMIC PROGRAM
SCHOOL CULTURE
ACCOUNTABILITY
BUDGET
CONFIDENTIALITY

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Step 0:

This is your baseline, your true starting point. The very first decision that is made is choosing a location for your school. You should know the state where the school is to be located and ideally, the city or town and school district. Deciding on your location is crucial to your proposal, as that must be specifically crafted around what is often referred to as a "target community" - the children and families you wish to serve. Once the decision on geography has been made, you're ready for the next step.

Keep in mind that in many places, authorizers want to see proposals developed by people who live and work in the community they seek to serve. It will be in your interest to consider this when you are deciding upon your location. It isn't universal, but many proposals fail in part because a group from outside of a district or neighborhood has decided to establish a school within a community they aren't truly connected with.

Step 1:

Establish your founding team! The founding team also may be referred to by other names such as a founding group, applicant team, or committee to form. It is the group of people who will submit the application, and it can include both proposed board members, proposed school employees, and members of the community who ultimately do not have a formal role with the school once approved.

It probably goes without saying, but the creation of the founding team is a very important step. The founding team should have authentic connections to the location of the school – ideally, the majority of the team will be locals. The founding team members typically will transition to become members of the board of trustees or school employees once the charter application is approved, although it doesn't have to be the case that every person joins the board or staff. However, keep in mind that you likely do need a full proposed board for the application, and those folks should be ready to commit to at

least a year or two of board service, so keep that in mind as you recruit. It takes a significant commitment of time to be a contributing member of a founding team, both in the short-term and long-term, which is something to be aware of and honest about.

In many cases the initial visionary founder asks friends and professional peers to join their team, leaning hard on those personal relationships and calling in favors. The truth is, the process of applying for a charter is so arduous that it can impact friendships and business relationships alike, so choose carefully and be mindful of whether or not the team and its relationships will be able to stand up to intense scrutiny and stress. It is also always really obvious when a team is full of friends, which almost always leads to questions about whether they'll be able to truly hold each other accountable.

Additionally, you need to find people who bring a range of skills and talent to the endeavor – you can't just put together a team of people with one area of expertise. We ask very probing questions regarding the skills and relationships among members of the team, including what their specific contributions will be. We then break down to each group exactly the problems they'll run into based on that team profile. We have been doing this so long we can spot the missteps before they happen. Unfortunately, the mindset of many new applicants is: "It won't happen to us." Do not let this be your downfall, as it has been for many potential applicants.

Our suggestions for a solid founding team (and it is worth noting this is based on advice many authorizers dole out as well) are as follows: We suggest recruiting a lawyer, a person with a background in finance and/or accounting, an educator with charter school experience (if possible) but at the very least experience in K-12 education, parents of children who would be eligible to attend the school, someone with facilities expertise, community members, and someone with a profound sense of humor. We often kid (but it's not really a joke) that you have to be on just this side of crazy to want to start a charter school, so recruit with that in mind too. Also keep in mind that in some states there are specific requirements that must be met for the composition of the founding team, and if this is the case you must comply without exception.

Step 2:

Research and read the charter school law in your state. You need to know what you are getting into. Additionally, make sure to research any applicable regulations that are relevant to the jurisdiction chosen. Even if you aren't a lawyer and may find the technical language a challenge you should give it a shot, as it is absolutely necessary to have a basic grasp of the law. You should be able to find summary information and FAQs online as well. The entire founding team should understand the basics of

chartering. Sometimes people end up in a capacity interview and it becomes apparent they don't truly understand what a charter school is and how it operates. Don't let this happen within your team. Charter application templates (also often referred to as Requests for Proposals or application toolkits) issued by the authorizers are usually full of legal notes, footnotes, and explanations of the law and regulations as well, and these may be a useful source of information.

The bottom line is that you should do your best to absorb and understand the rules and regulations applicable to chartering – in most places there are many, contrary to popular myth. Typically the law itself is where the major state requirements are found and it provides crucial details into the authorizing environment. If it sounds tedious to read these types of documents, ask yourself this: If the authorizer asks me whether I've read the law, do I want the answer to be "no?" (Spoiler alert: you do not want the answer to be no, and you may be asked. These types of basic questions are often used to develop quick initial assessments of capacity, commitment, and readiness to apply and open.)

You should also read the law because it is the starting point for much of the critical information that ends up in the application and the oversight policies and procedures developed by the authorizers. You'll get an initial feel for whether charters are granted a good deal of autonomy and independence, or if they are subject to most of the same rules and regulations as traditional district schools. The law should tell you if charters are granted for four years, five years, six years, or ten years. It will also outline which entities are established for oversight and monitoring - and thus whether you have any choices in where you apply. In some circumstances you'll apply to a state education board. In other areas, local districts or universities may be able to issue charters. The more authorizers there are in a state, the more work you must do to identify which is right for your team. It is important to try and be mindful about finding the best match for your school.

In addition to the original charter school law in your state, it is interesting to understand the subsequent amendments. This will let you know what substantial changes have been made to the law itself and also serves as an indicator of the politics in your state. Consider what unique quirks of the law might be a challenge or opportunity relative to your specific founding team and your idea for the school's design.

In general, we will not engage with a group that hasn't done their homework about the charter school law. This is based on our experiences and time management practices. We certainly answer general questions and share global advice for people at the earliest stage, but we then ask the individual or team to do some work to understand the law and reach back out to us if they are still interested in pursuing a school. This step is

an indicator to us whether an applicant is willing and committed to finding, reading, and trying to absorb technical documents with a willingness to learn more, and it serves as a proxy for whether or not the applicant is willing to put in the extremely hard work it takes to complete the entire process. In some cases, reading the law is enough to make the potential applicant re-think their project entirely. This isn't a bad thing! Sometimes the design concept and goals might work better as an after-school program or a private school. Sometimes people don't understand just how much oversight is required of charters and that - contrary to what many headlines and opponents claim - there are strict rules that must be followed. Bottom line: reading the charter law and regulations is a good investment of your time.

It is also often helpful to read comparisons between the various laws in order to develop an understanding about the overall strengths or weaknesses inherent in the process. The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools publishes a model law with an analysis of how each state stacks up against their favored components. It isn't necessary to agree with every aspect of their model law in order to gain useful context and insight from the information. The Center for Education Reform also publishes a model law and similar law analyses. Check them both out if you are so inclined.

Step 3:

Educate yourself on the charter environment for your location, including the political and public relations issues that charters face. This step and Step 4 are interchangeable. It can be really helpful to search the news media in order to gain insight regarding the current context and climate where you want to locate. Namely, you'll want to know if the local environment is receptive to charter schools, or if there is a lot of push-back or hostility. It could be somewhere in between.

Sadly, in some areas charter growth is basically impossible. Sometimes a state might generally be considered "friendly", but the local politics might make it particularly challenging to get a new school approved or open, especially in a specific location. Sometimes one authorizer is more friendly and open to chartering new schools and another is not. In other locations, there may be an incredible appetite for new charter schools. Talk with others who are knowledgeable about the geographic location (again, state and city) and read, read, read to become familiar with trends and current issues.

Step 4:

Decide on which authorizing entity the team will choose to apply with, assuming there is a choice, and do research on that organization. In instances where there will only be

one option, it is still a good idea to be educated regarding the authorizer. If there is a choice, this is an incredibly important decision. You are entering a long-term relationship with the authorizer, so **do not choose lightly**. Do not base your decision on hearsay that one is better than the other or because you think one has an "easier" application. Over the years we've seen these top the charts as the two biggest deciding factors and that approach is an oversimplification of a complex, vital decision. Try to get a feel for the differences in the process, both in terms of the application requirements, but more importantly the ongoing oversight and monitoring policies. Also, try to identify the power players and then discuss them with your team to see if you have any relationships to lean on - sometimes this advice surprises people, but it shouldn't. For better or worse, sometimes who you know is really helpful (even in public education). You may be able to identify people who will have insights to share with you.

Go to the website of each authorizer you are choosing from and review their policies. Their monitoring and oversight policies should be online and easy to find – it is a red flag if they aren't. Check out how many other schools are in their portfolio (again, this should be easy to find) and try to determine whether other schools like yours have been approved. Talk with officials at currently open schools and see what their experiences have been. Usually schools will share (with assurances of discretion) what the process was like and whether they have had issues that might be relevant to the decision-making process. Sometimes a local support organization is present in the community and has a point person that can talk through your options as well, or consultants who will share basic, candid advice without charging a fee. In a few cities there are even start-up classes offered by support organizations that may be informative (be wary of high fees though - vet the provider before spending a ton of money on a start-up class or program).

In addition to researching the options online and talking with other schools, each authorizer typically has a point person tasked with communicating with potential new applicants. You don't want to call this person too early in the process, as they will have questions about your team and proposal and will start to judge you upon initial contact. So don't call unless you're prepared to answer the basic questions they may ask. Once you have a fairly well-developed founding team, design, and plan, go ahead and reach out. At a certain point it is appropriate to begin a dialogue with the folks who run the authorizing shop. Just be wary of calling too early and inadvertently leaving the impression that you don't really have capacity. Be prepared!

Step 5:

Once you've identified your authorizer, take a look at the most recent application for new schools. This will give you fantastic insight into the questions that you must answer (sometimes the applications don't change, or only change minimally from cycle to cycle) and it will be a window into the rigor and intensity of the process.

Use the application as an outline for yourself and your team regarding the questions that will need to be answered. (A bit later this guide will cover the basic sections and the pitfalls that often arise in new school applications and will delve into how your proposal may be evaluated from the point of view of the authorizer.) Don't underestimate how much work will be involved in each section. Use the application as your roadmap to identify each of the tasks involved in the submission process.

After you identify the tasks, create a timeline for your team to follow. Project management is a critical - and challenging - consideration. We can't tell you how many teams pull all-nighters as the deadline approaches because of a lack of time and task management. (Full disclosure: Sometimes we work with clients at all hours of the night on last-minute items because project and task management got out of hand). It could happen no matter how great your planning is but try to get ahead of this problem by identifying key dates and developing a realistic plan as soon as possible. Also remember: this process is challenging and depending on whether the school design is already firm, some groups will need more time than others. When we are writing applications we always aim, at a bare minimum, to have the application in final draft form a week before it is due.

If multiple people are writing different sections of the application, it's important to have a gatekeeper of the proposal who will ensure a continuity of tone and writing style. Simply dropping sections into an application is not enough - consistency and flow of content are crucial. Time for editing and section alignment needs to be worked into your timeline and list of project tasks. Here is a concrete example of what we mean by section alignment: sometimes a proposal will be submitted and the titles for the key staff in the narrative don't match the titles in the staffing charts and budget, and those also don't match the job descriptions submitted. This will confuse the reader and reflect poorly on your team. You also may need to develop policies, consult with legal counsel, and contact real estate professionals during the proposal development stage, all tasks which also must be in the project plan.

Please, do not rush the application writing. If you think your plan is to write an application in three weeks, you don't have enough time and you likely will not be authorized. It easily takes *months*, and sometimes *a full year or longer,* to really pull together a high-quality application, especially if this is not your full-time occupation.

Don't submit something you know is insufficient just to gather feedback from the authorizer (we always recommend against this). The authorizer will remember you and judge accordingly in every subsequent application cycle. If you apply multiple times with a weak proposal, you're at risk of being identified as someone who does not have the capacity and skill to run a school because of the repeated rejections. If you earn that label, it will be very difficult to ever get approved, even under a different authorizer (remember what we just said, sometimes it's about who you know, and authorizers know and talk amongst each other).

Speaking of authorizers….

ALL ABOUT AUTHORIZERS

One thing we often encounter with applicant teams is that they lack information and understanding of what it means to be an authorizer. Charter school authorizers are unique entities in some ways, and in others they are predictable and typical when compared to other public oversight and compliance entities. We've learned a lot over the years from working in multiple states and one of us was even an authorizer for a long stretch of time, but don't hold it against her. Below are some of the most important lessons we've learned.

Your Authorizer is Not Your Friend

This is the first authorizer lesson. The authorizer is not your friend! This is one of our more popular (and controversial) lessons, but we stand by this statement. While the authorizer usually loudly protests otherwise, the basic concept that you have to remember is that your authorizer is not your friend.

It is the job of the authorizer to vet, monitor, and regulate schools. This does not mean that you will not have a friendly relationship with your authorizing team or that you can't actually become personal friends with someone in their office. It means that their job is to hold the school accountable - to very high standards - regardless of that personal friendship. They are the ones who decide if your school is approved and if it remains open. Always keep in mind that this is, first and foremost, a professional relationship between the school and an oversight entity.

It also means that you shouldn't share every detail of every struggle with the authorizer. You are *always* on the record with them, meaning anything and everything you say can be used for you or against you during the approval, oversight, and renewal process.

This wisdom is often more relevant to operating schools, but sometimes comes up with new school teams as well.

Each interaction you have is fair game for the authorizer to use to judge the school's capacity - whether or not they are supposed to review you that way – so avoid complaining about teammates or insinuating that there's a problem or shortcoming with the proposal or school design. Keep the conversations about the proposed school on-topic and professional. And remember, sometimes an authorizer won't ask for more information from you, but if you volunteer it, you can be sure they're making mental or physical notes!

Important aside: This is not to be conflated with lying to an authorizer or withholding important information that must legally be disclosed. It means that you approach disclosure with intentionality, a strategy, and solutions. Again, this is more relevant to operating schools, but is worth noting here. We are not suggesting that any school should violate any rule, policy, or law. However, we do advise you not to volunteer information they don't need or did not ask for, especially if it is information that will reflect poorly on the applicant team.

Authorizing is both Art and Science

When done well, authorizing is not only a science but also an art. Done poorly, authorizing is a very frustrating hot mess.

Hopefully you are in a state with strong chartering laws, strong authorizers, and a clear set of policies and procedures to be followed.

To understand your authorizer, it is important to keep in mind what a charter school is, and what role the authorizing staff plays in the hierarchy established to structure and implement the chartering process.

As you hopefully know, charter schools are public, tuition-free schools of choice that typically operate outside of the already-established school districts' jurisdiction and control (unless the district was the authorizer). A charter agreement (contract) is established to document the details. Charter schools have an independent board of trustees tasked with fulfilling the mission of the school and ensuring proper oversight of public tax dollars. The board of trustees is held accountable by the authorizer for realizing and executing the plans made in the charter application, which usually becomes part of the charter agreement. The school's board is granted the charter. The "charter" is quite literally the legal agreement that lays out the terms for the

implementation of the school between the board of trustees and the oversight body - the authorizer. The charter itself is usually comprised of both a standard contract, and the charter application, which will be specific to the school.

The authorizer is usually a public body such as a state department/board of education, a local school district, a college or university, or sometimes a political office such as a mayoral commission.

The oversight body is responsible for voting to approve schools, award renewal terms, and force revocation or non-renewal. In some cases, the authorizer also discusses and votes on actions such as to require a corrective plan or delay an opening. It is standard that the daily tasks and ongoing monitoring necessary to make these decisions is delegated to a set of staff. Sometimes there is a dedicated office with many people charged with the many tasks associated with ongoing oversight and monitoring. Other times, the staff will be extremely lean. Regardless of size, if the system is functioning properly the staff is entrusted with a high-degree of autonomy to make recommendations, and the recommendations are typically followed - but not always.

There is an interesting ideological question that often comes up when people talk about the size of an authorizing entity's staff and the number of routine functions carried out as part of the oversight process. Some old-school charter purists argue that a few simple, important systems and results should be monitored, and that the authorizing staff should largely be hands off outside of those few basic functions. This approach aligns with the view that chartering is best driven by parent demand and that forces not dissimilar to an invisible hand will take care of the rest. This means that the authorizers should have a very limited role, as parent choice and demand will take care of the consequences, good or bad.

Some very smart charter folks will also argue that the traditional methods of evaluating schools fail to properly account for what makes one "good" or "bad" and that for this reason the authorizing staff should be largely hands off.

On the flip side, an increasing number of people are in favor of continually ramping up oversight and monitoring, pointing back to the responsibilities of public accountability and compliance (remember, charters are public schools). The result is the layering of more and more requirements and reporting rules on schools that are meant to be freed up from bureaucracy and red tape. This is regulatory creep.

Regardless of where anyone falls on this ideological debate, the thing you need to care about is whether the authorizer you work with is highly bureaucratic, whether there are

stringent accountability and transparency standards applied with consistency across schools, and whether there is a degree of autonomy and independence granted to schools. (Full disclosure: we land somewhere in the middle of this discourse. We believe results and academic data must matter, but also that many authorizers are overly bureaucratic and inconsistent and that schools are constantly losing the autonomy and independence that are supposed to be central to the charter concept). As an applicant, the first reason this issue matters is that you may get a choice in who you apply to, and you may want an authorizer who is more or less hands-on and compliance oriented versus outcomes oriented. The second reason it matters is that you'll want to have your eyes wide open regarding how much compliance and regulatory creep is in play, as you'll need to remain in good standing as an operating school.

There is also marked deviation across states and authorizers in how much quantitative evidence is used in the various stages of authorizing. Worst-case scenario is that the authorizer treats different schools in different ways and there is no clear logic or system guiding their actions, which is patently unfair and should upset everyone involved with chartering.

We say that authorizing is both a science and an art because doing it well requires making recommendations based on a balance of measurable evidence (provided by data) against evidence that is not as easily defined, such as evaluations of leadership capacity and the strength of the future plans. For an independent new school start-up, the evaluation process is inherently challenging because there often isn't much hard evidence that can be provided to make the case for future success. As authorizers increasingly become more data-driven, the conundrum snowballs until you have some environments that feel geared toward only replicating high-performers with authorizers who less frequently take risks on new teams with new ideas.

This leads into another important lesson: learn about how both Education Management Organizations (EMOs)/Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) and independent schools are viewed and treated in your state. When we say "independent" we are referring to schools that do not contract with a Charter Management Organization (CMO) or Education Management Organization (EMO). CMOs have non-profit tax designations and EMOs have for-profit tax designations. However, any charter school contracting with an EMO is still legally a public, non-profit school. Some large CMO networks with names you might recognize include IDEA Public Schools, KIPP, or BASIS Charter Schools. Examples of EMOs are National Heritage Academies or EdisonLearning. In some places the emphasis has shifted dramatically - along with funding - to replicating schools that have already proven results. That doesn't mean an

independent start-up won't be chartered, but this information is relevant to understanding the full authorizing environment.

At the end of the day, it is important to remember that the authorizer has a profound and difficult job to do - approving high-quality schools that deliver tangible results for children (Remember, it's all about the children!).

Fun fact: authorizers have an association to support them and share or promote best practices. It is called the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA). It wouldn't hurt to learn about this organization and browse the materials available on their site (even if you or we don't always agree with them).

WHAT TO EXPECT WHILE YOU'RE APPLYING

How the Process of Applying *Usually* Works

The "usually" is important, as there is variation from place to place, but let's try to break down how the process often works.

The authorizing staff follows a specific set of policies and procedures for the approval and oversight of charter schools. In terms of approval, there should be specific information requested, usually through a Request for Proposal (RFP)/application process, and a publicly accessible rubric that outlines how reviewers will evaluate the application against the approval standards. The authorizing staff is responsible for implementing the charter review and approval process, determining scores or ratings for each applicant, and either advancing or rejecting a proposal through a formal recommendation for final approval or rejection by the oversight body. There is another path between approval and rejection though - many authorizers will ask or "offer the opportunity to" withdraw and try again another time rather than face a public rejection. If your team is offered the opportunity to withdraw you need to carefully consider taking it, as it usually means they are not planning to recommend your proposal for approval. An authorizing staff will often use consultant reviewers to support the evaluation and scoring of each proposal. Sometimes consultants help with capacity interviews; sometimes, they do not.

To be explicit, the basic steps in most processes are:

1) Proposal review, sometimes including consultant reviewers. You'll be happy to know someone really does read the 500+ pages you just submitted.

2) Capacity interviews, sometimes including consultant reviewers (not all applicant groups will be asked to interview in most instances).
3) Requests for additional information/clarification/amendments.
4) Opportunity to withdraw.
5) Recommendations developed and advanced for final approval or rejection.

Generally, there are defined timelines for when new school proposals will be accepted, clear criteria to be used to rate the proposals, and a transparent process to be followed to communicate with the applicant teams. It is imperative to make yourselves familiar with how the process will run. Typically, this information can be found in the RFP/application materials provided online. Some authorizers offer in-person information sessions (possibly even *mandatory* information sessions) to further share rules and procedures and answer questions. If the authorizer has a mandatory information session take it very seriously and attend.

More on Consultants

For a variety of reasons, some authorizers will use the assistance of outside consultants to read applications and apply the standard criteria for approval against the written plans in the proposal. In some cases, the outside consultants even participate in the capacity interview process. (Capacity interviews follow the initial vetting of the written proposal; the proposed leaders and board of trustee members are called in to chat in person with the review team and answer questions and more clearly articulate plans for the school. More on this process will be shared below.)

The merits of having consultants involved in the process can vary. On one hand, the quality and breadth of a consultant's skill and experience varies. Also, the consistency in applying the evaluation criteria is possibly more uneven in a consultant-heavy process and there may or may not be transparency about who is reviewing your application. On the other hand, there are some extremely knowledgeable consultants who have invaluable insight and enjoy being a part of the process to establish new schools. Additionally, some authorizers are very transparent about who the consultants are and make sure they are well trained in the local standards and criteria used to score applications. Having those reviewers could be very beneficial. Don't panic if there are consultants involved in the process – there isn't anything you can do to change it anyway.

A Few More Details on Process

An authorizer is supposed to follow a set of documented and public standard policies and procedures to evaluate capacity and drive decision-making about charter approval and other high-stakes decisions such as renewal.

Below are some key highlights consistent across many processes, although we have to remind you again that the specifics may vary depending on the state and authorizer. Here is a closer look at how it generally works, building on the basic process described above:

1) A Request for Proposals (RFP) or application package to establish a new charter school is released, with timelines and expectations for the proposal submission, interviews, and follow-up requests. Most will have very detailed instructions about formatting and file names, as well as how to submit the application itself. Sometimes you need to gain access to a special portal to upload the files, sometimes not. Sometimes you need to print and submit hard copies to multiple offices. Read the entire RFP carefully – at least twice before you even start!

2) Information sessions are offered or required; Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) documents may be shared. Do not miss required sessions.

3) Upon timely submission (which means that the proposal absolutely **CANNOT BE LATE**), a completion check is conducted by the authorizer. If all instructions weren't followed and all information is not provided, some authorizers will simply toss your application out. This seems harsh, but it is a way to weed out who is paying attention to details. On the other hand, sometimes the directions are frustratingly unclear and therefore difficult to follow. If you have questions about the RFP, call the authorizer or another expert; don't guess at the answers to your questions if you don't have to.

4) The written proposal is vetted by a team, sometimes via in-house staff and sometimes with the help of consultant reviewers. If the review substantiates that the proposal has potential, the applicant typically advances to a capacity interview. More information may or may not be requested in writing at this time as well. The vetting process may mean an actual numeric score is developed and the team must score above a certain threshold to move forward. Other times the review team gets on the phone and basically does a "thumbs up, thumbs down" conversation to decide. Sometimes each applicant team will be interviewed even if the proposal wasn't particularly strong.

5) The capacity interview is exactly what it sounds like. The applicant team faces a panel of staff and/or consultants who pepper the group with questions, usually for 60-90 minutes, to drill down further into the plan. It is pretty challenging (painful), so we prep our clients extremely carefully for this. Occasionally there will be two

interviews, and occasionally an interview will be public, which always raises the stress level for the applicant.

6) After the interview stage, there is another possible window where the team may be asked to supply more information, via amendments or through clarifications and edits to previously submitted plans.

7) The review team submits their final feedback and ratings or scores, a team leader(s) works to develop final recommendations and the final recommendation is shared with the applicant group. Often this is done verbally and reinforced in writing. This stage may include an opportunity for the team to withdraw if the proposal will not be advanced with a recommendation for approval. Written memos, if provided, will vary a great deal in how much detail is shared regarding why an application was denied.

8) Recommendations are sent for an ultimate vote on whether to award the charter. The expectation is that the final vote, either to approve or reject, will align with the recommendation. However, chartering can be very political, so there are times when this isn't the case going both ways (again, know your local politics).

Capacity Interview

We spend extensive time and energy preparing the teams we work with for the capacity interview. Its importance cannot be overstated.

The capacity interview experience is intense. There are varying degrees of warmth, friendliness and/or encouragement involved, depending on the personalities of the interviewers and the applicants. Sometimes (hopefully, rarely) one or more people on either side of the table become outwardly hostile, frustrated, or impatient. It isn't uncommon for an interview to conclude with applicant team members in tears the moment the authorizer leaves the room.

When an interview goes well, it provides evidence to support approval or advancement to the next stage. We have personally seen teams who submitted pedestrian (at best) written applications gain approval because of the strength and thoughtfulness demonstrated at the capacity interview. Conversely, you can have a perfect application on paper, but with a disastrous interview, your charter application may be denied.

The bottom line is that your team must prepare thoroughly and talk with experts prior to walking into a capacity interview. Also, please conduct practice interviews – practice really helps. You won't be sorry you spent the time and effort!

It is challenging to write about capacity interviews, sufficiently summarize all of the best tips, and offer specific advice about the process and preparation in a book because we prefer to personally tailor advice and help create a specific strategy based on the strengths and weaknesses of the individual applicant team, the authorizer, the politics of the area, and the proposal itself. That being said, there are some universal lessons that usually translate well across geographies, authorizers, and school models, and there are some pitfalls we can point out that will hopefully help keep your team out of trouble.

Before we get to the advice, let's start here: Why does the capacity interview serve as a standard part of the process and why does it carry so much weight? Ask a variety of authorizers and you will get a variety of answers. (Most of them are helpful.)

First and foremost, all the plans and details that are put into the written application showcase what you want to do or what you think you'll do to accomplish your goal of student achievement. But it is extremely hard to demonstrate competence in some key areas in the written application and it is even more difficult to gauge two key things: 1) How well the names and proposed team members on paper really know and understand the educational plan being proposed and 2) Whether the proposed leadership team and board of trustees truly understand what it takes to launch a school that will result in a positive environment yielding a quality education for children. You'll see the phrase "high-quality" hammered over and over and over and over again by authorizers. The capacity interview helps to determine if a "high-quality" school is likely to emerge under the guidance of the proposed board of trustees and proposed leaders. It also is a time when reviewers can ask questions about specific areas of the written application, including about things they found to be incomplete, confusing, or interesting.

This means everyone must know what is included the application. It isn't the case that every member of the team needs to know every tiny detail of every section, but everyone should have a basic grasp of the school model, the plans for addressing common hurdles such as finding a suitable building, and why the community and school are right for each other and how the team knows genuine demand exists. In addition to understanding the proposal at a high level, we strongly suggest each proposed board member *masters* at least one section of the application and that they understand how each section connects in creating the school.

As mentioned, the interview offers a formal opportunity for the review team to probe deeper into any questions they have about the application. The authorizing team will rely on the dialogue to establish and/or support conclusions about the proposal, so if you're wondering why people seem so serious, that is probably the reason. Sometimes

the interviews are recorded for reference. Often, reviewers will take notes on a computer and therefore won't make a lot of eye contact, leading to a less conversational experience. Other times, it will feel much more comfortable with free-flowing dialogue and maybe even some laughter, and you almost won't feel like you're under the microscope; it can vary that much.

Additionally, the interview gives the review team a chance to get to know you and get a sense of your competence, skills, motivations, and talents - and how you work together. They evaluate whether there is a genuine rapport between members (no clear definition exists for this of course) and try to determine your motivations. It sounds hokey but having and demonstrating genuine respect and appreciation for one another is helpful.

Now the advice: Support each other, let each other talk, split up the topics you talk about so that no one single personality dominates the conversation, fill in the gaps when your colleagues don't fully answer questions (but do so tastefully and subtly), be on time, don't look at your phone or otherwise be distracted, make sure the entire team prioritizes attendance and remember that there is a lot at stake - under no circumstances should you feel that being handed a school that will impact the lives of children and use millions of taxpayer dollars is going to be an easy, breezy experience. Be ready to answer challenging questions.

Yup, all that, in 60 to 90 minutes. The pressure is high, but so are the stakes.

Common Mistakes:

1) Not knowing. Not knowing the educational plan. Not knowing the budget. Not knowing how the budget supports the educational plan. Every member of the proposed founding team should be familiar with the written application. Each person should read it – and understand it. Each member of the founding team doesn't need to be an in-the-weeds expert on every piece of the application, but there does need to be basic familiarity with what was written. If you are asked whether you read it, you want the answer to be a truthful "yes." This is non-negotiable and hopefully you're thinking "well, duh, that is obvious." Trust us, every authorizer across the country could tell you stories about teams who showed up to interview and did not have a basic grasp of the plan that was put on paper.
2) Budget and financial management plans matter. Yes, we mentioned the budget above and how it supports the educational plan, but it is also worth a separate note. Remember, as a school you'll be responsible for properly stewarding taxpayer money. That is a huge responsibility. The budget needs to be realistic,

needs to match the circumstances on the ground and needs to be firm and logical in assumptions. A specific example: Do not say you'll get a facility for $4 per square foot if a simple internet search shows there are no buildings available for under $10 per square foot in the community you are seeking to serve. We know an application budget rarely reflects the exact reality of a start-up budget, and the reviewers know this, but it still needs to be taken seriously and completed thoughtfully. Also, there will be specific directions in most cases on how to deal with things like philanthropy or how to set revenue assumptions, and you have to follow those directions.

3) Everyone should talk! Don't allow just one strong personality to shine. The strengths and skills of the entire team need to be showcased. This interview is about the capacity of the entire team, not just the proposed leader. If one person carries the team through most of the questions, you can be almost guaranteed that regardless of how much the authorizer likes the application and likes the people involved, they will hesitate to recommend approval. What happens if that person quits? If the only person who knows the plan is the leader, how will the prospective board hold the leader accountable? You need checks and balances and different perspectives and an engaged team of folks who will push back on each other and lift each other up when times get hard. Everyone should feel comfortable answering questions in at least one or two areas (such as curriculum, community engagement, budget – the main topics in the application). Even if you get nervous, be prepared to talk - and if this is too hard for you, *do not join the founding team*. Find another way to be supportive and involved but know your limits.

4) Do not fight with, or roll your eyes at, other members of the team or the professionals asking you questions. If a review team observes negative body language or senses tension amongst the group, it will be a problem. It may sound crazy, but it happens - make sure everyone understands the importance of being respectful and working together! As we noted above, it helps if you have a genuine amicable relationship with each other and a relaxed rapport, but it isn't critical to be best friends. It is*,* however*,* absolutely critical that you do not undermine each other. If someone makes a mistake or otherwise has not fully captured the information you think needs to be shared, then you absolutely can and should add on to the answer or offer clarification. Just be mindful of tone and don't work against each other. Remember you are on the same team and should have the same end goal in mind! Also, respect the interviewers. When asked a pointed and difficult question, don't get defensive or reactionary. Stay calm, answer the questions to the best of your ability and don't take it personally.

5) Do not be late! The interviews are often tightly scheduled, sometimes back-to-back. The interview will not and should not be delayed because someone is late,

regardless of that person's importance to the proposal. We always say you should try to arrive early, and not just five minutes early. You truly want to work in time for unexpected delays. Also, be prepared to remain for the entirety of the interview. Finally, in today's world, the capacity interviews are sometimes conducted via video. If this is the case, log on early! You don't want to be having a tech meltdown and be unable to join because the app isn't loading properly, or your camera won't connect. Test your tech first, and then arrive early to be safe.

6) Don't get distracted. Put all phones and other distractions away and commit to not checking them for the duration of the full interview. Don't get up to take a phone call, don't document each step of the process on Twitter, Instagram or even on TikTok. Be focused and be present. And don't think you can discreetly look at texts on your watch because you can't.

7) Don't miss the interview. Authorizers understand that life happens, but they also expect that this school and the approval process is a huge priority and that you've planned accordingly. If you have a genuine emergency or a veritably unique situation, then of course, most reasonable people will make an exception to the rule. Failing to make your train or needing to go to the dentist is not a legitimate reason to miss the interview. The authorizer has an expectation that the entire founding applicant team will attend – make it happen. The one absence in recent memory with our clients that stands out as one that was truly universally forgiven was because a woman was in active labor. True story. The reason needs to be at that level to justify missing the interview.

8) Don't bring in a consultant and then rely on that person to answer the questions. And know the rules - many authorizers won't want you to bring any consultants at all. An exception here is sometimes made in particular for what people refer to as a "back office" provider that may have developed the budget and has plans to contract with the proposed school. To be honest, we recommend against it no matter what. We always think the proposed board and leadership team should be able to handle all questions. If a consultant is in the room, do not let them dominate the process. (CMO representatives also often attend, but we are focusing here on applicants who don't plan on partnering with an entity in this way).

9) Both governance and leadership capacity matters. Depending on the authorizer, the focus of the interview may be on the potential school leader(s), while other times it's focused on the board and its oversight of the proposed school. Be prepared for both.

10) Remember why you are there. When possible, tie your answers and discussion to the mission, vision, and community need.

Final thoughts on Capacity Interviews

Let's address a few more pitfalls.

Try not come across as arrogant, annoyed, all-knowing, or condescending. We've seen some really brilliant people answer questions thoroughly, clearly, and in a way that conveys respect and appreciation. That is the goal.

Do not assume the review team is ignorant. The review team is intentionally asking open-ended questions and probing to see what YOU know. Always assume the reviewers have been vetted and trained or they wouldn't be part of the process. Sometimes the interviewee becomes annoyed by a question and assumes an attitude of believing the interviewer is unintelligent or misinformed. This mistake is avoidable because almost all interviews start off with an explanation that the interview panel is full of experts who are familiar with the application. We know it is a tedious process and some of the questions are frustrating. Take a deep breath and answer calmly and without a negative attitude. It is also worth remembering that being humble is appropriate. Sometimes people enter an interview and project an attitude that they deserve a charter because of their past successes. It doesn't play well. You may be an impressive person, but the chartering process is a huge responsibility – act accordingly. Similarly, huge amounts of taxpayer dollars are at stake, so recognize the enormity of the task of properly stewarding public funds.

Again, don't assume you are ever off the record. We've said this before, but it applies here explicitly. Don't even make a joke at the start of the interview that it is the first time your applicant team has ever started a meeting on time. The reviewers are listening carefully to what you are saying and are forming opinions and taking notes, at least mentally, before the official interview begins and after it ends. This is not the place for irreverence.

Try not to signal each other with "hidden" or discreet hand gestures, nods, winks, or other body language. Trust us when we say the interviewers notice this every single time - it is never as discreet as you think it is. If you want someone specific to answer and they didn't jump right in, it is fine to say, "I think XYZ should take the lead on this question." Or, "I'll get us started, and then invite XYZ to chime in as this is their area of expertise." One of the most avoidable interview mistakes is to have someone gesticulating like an air traffic controller to signal who should answer each question.

You also shouldn't read directly from the application or use it as a crutch. Most authorizers will allow you to bring the budget and/or application with you for reference, and they may even encourage it or refer to it themselves. Try not to rely upon these

materials beyond a quick glance or to read something the interviewer has specifically referenced in a question. This means we do recommend you bring your materials, and reference them if you need to, but don't bury your head in the text.

Finally, remember that the interview can be very collegial, conversational, and positive. *It isn't always scary.* But do your homework so you know what to expect and be prepared to stay calm and handle anything that gets thrown your way. Even the most positive capacity interviews are usually described as intense. There is simply a lot at stake and the time goes quickly.

Next, we are going to turn to some of the major sections required in a charter application so we can share advice we have developed after reading and helping to write literally hundreds of applications.

MISSION AND VISION

When it comes to establishing a charter school, the mission and vision are critical foundational elements that should be woven throughout the entire proposal and should be consistent and authentic.

What will the school do and why does it matter? The mission statement answers this and explains the school and captures the important elements in a succinct way; it conveys the major reasons, values, and goals behind the school's creation. Why does this school need to exist? How will it benefit students? In chartering, the mission establishes the reason for the school in a values-based statement. Keep in mind that many charter school laws use the word "innovative" so try to craft your statement accordingly and focus on the standout features if appropriate. Rarely there are limits on the length of the mission (as short as one sentence) so check those local rules.

A strong mission statement will clearly define what the school will do and often will include the major programmatic design foundation(s) and/or the outcomes-oriented results that will be accomplished. Remember, because chartering is about establishing time-limited performance contracts that allow independence for performance, there often is an emphasis on results and outcomes. Depending on the authorizer, some prefer the mission to be clearly measurable and others like to see more of an aspirational emphasis. As you design your mission it is important to capture values, end goals and unique features - and it shouldn't be too long or too difficult to remember. It is imperative to get the mission statement right for your team as it also aligns with and drives all the other aspects of the application and school design.

Where do you start? We recommend thinking about the major elements of the educational program and design, the core values of the team, and what aspirational success looks like (in broad terms). You don't need to say in a mission statement that "all students on average will exceed the SAT scores of the local district each year" but you might say "to prepare students for enrollment and success in college." Some teams like to capture their specific location and/or student population in the mission. We want to stress that there is flexibility here. The mission should be compelling and reflect your team and school but there really isn't one "right" way to write the mission statement. And importantly, the mission must be reflected throughout the application with the design and programming to support it.

Right after saying there is no "right" way to do it, we are going to give you some advice on how to do it – we can't help ourselves. In our opinion, the mission shouldn't be too "fluffy." Yes, we know fluffy isn't a technical term, but it gets the point across. The reason for this is simple: you want to be able to set goals based on the mission. So, in the example above, if the mission includes preparing students for college, you can set goals for SATs, any required high school exit exams, college acceptance rates, scholarships awarded, how many students enroll and attend college after graduation, how many students finish Advanced Placement or other college credit bearing courses before graduation, and so on. Then these data help prove the school is successful in accomplishing the mission. On the other hand, if the mission only says something along the lines of "students will love learning and appreciate the world" you'll very likely struggle to find ways to evaluate and prove success aligned to the school's mission. We aren't saying you cannot use emotion-based concepts like "joy" or "love of learning" in a mission but think about how you would create goals and collect information to determine if the school is appropriately and consistently fostering joy and therefore fulfilling this part of the mission. How will the school leaders know, how will the board know, how will families know, that you've fostered joy, and how will you prove it to an authorizer? There very well may be ways to make it work. Depending on the authorizing context and specific environment in which you're applying, it may prove difficult to have a mission hold up unless there are clearly defined quantitative ways to measure success.

Where should you start? Great question. Many people will recommend that as a team you develop core values first and then use those to create the mission. Core values are those that are so foundational, so non-negotiable, that they define the reasons this team must exist. This is a worthy exercise, but the core values usually do not explicitly define the model in its totality, and the model can also inform the mission statement in very useful ways. So yes, go ahead and work up your core values, but remember the mission isn't just those values. A simple exercise to help your team come to a consensus on core values and begin the process of developing the mission is to have

each member start by reflecting upon their values. Then have the group share and discuss and try to find agreement on a set of core values. Also, think about the outcomes you'd like to achieve and see how those align with the core values and whether they are appropriate for inclusion in the mission at a high level.

Another pro tip: You want the mission to be engaging and compelling. People should be excited about its potential when they read it – and more importantly, families should feel excited about enrolling. Further, in some places, extra scrutiny is placed on whether the proposed school is offering something new and unique. If the local district has many operating STEM models and you propose an arts-themed school, it may be viewed as a more compelling option than a school designed around something more STEM-based like computer programming. Obviously, a reviewer's reaction in terms of whether the mission is interesting or compelling is subjective and there is no real measurement to use. Just remember that reviewers are human (pretty much all the time), and you want them to like your proposal, and it helps if the school design you are proposing isn't already available down the street. You'll also be happy to have a unique offering when it comes time to recruit students and families.

Another common-sense tip that is often overlooked: examine other schools' mission statements. This is such a helpful exercise. Look at recently approved schools in the authorizer's portfolio, other successful schools in the area, and other schools across the country that are similar (if any exist) to what your team is trying to accomplish. Don't copy verbatim, but there is nothing wrong with using the ideas and adapting things to work for what your team is doing.

As the application is developed, remember that the mission must be evident throughout all sections and plans. For example, if you are proposing an arts-themed school with dance, music, and theater productions, most reviewers will scrutinize facility plans to ascertain that there is space for rehearsals and performances. If "tech" is put in the mission, make sure there is specific technology programming - and we don't mean the use of white boards in a classroom (that's standard technology available at most schools, charter or otherwise.) If the focus is on the environment and biology, consider how students will regularly get outside and observe the natural world.

It should go without saying, but intelligent groups sometimes make sizeable mistakes by putting something in their mission (maybe project-based learning or language immersion) but then never talk about it again with any breadth or substance anywhere else in the application. Sometimes buzzwords get thrown around because they're trendy now or maybe they are incentivized through additional priority points in the scoring

rubric, but the proposal doesn't truly embody those elements. It always is apparent to an experienced reviewer when this happens.

Many applications will also ask the team to describe their vision. The vision describes the conditions that will be in place to ensure the school meets the mission. The vision reinforces and connects to the mission and clearly describes what the school will do, look and feel like on a regular basis. There are different ways to approach a vision statement, but a sentence that says, in effect, "We will work every day to meet the mission," is not one of those ways (yes, we've seen this). Sometimes the application itself or the scoring rubric will shine light on exactly what the authorizer is looking for with a vision statement. Always follow those local instructions!

In many cases, the authorizers will specifically ask reviewers to read and evaluate the mission and vision as an individual section of the application. This emphasizes how important these two components are.

Additionally, there is another way the mission and vision are evaluated which we alluded to above. This is an insider tip that sometimes authorizers are transparent about and sometimes they are not. Any reviewer worth their salt will be reading each individual section to specifically ensure the mission and vision are consistent in each one and that the plans being presented align with both. So don't propose project-based learning in the mission and vision and then put forward a curriculum or instructional design that is grounded in something else entirely. Don't say the school will feature two-way, dual-language immersion and then fail to have a plan to hire appropriately certified and fluent bilingual teachers and operations staff. You get the idea – the entire application must be consistent with the stated mission and vision. One thing always ties into and aligns with the next. We emphasize this with new school clients in the application stage, with schools early in their tenure working to get through the start-up years, and with schools that are 20 years old. Everything is connected and the entire team (staff and board) must acknowledge these interwoven relationships. It begins with the mission and vision and then flows throughout the rest of the proposal.

As the school opens and operates, the mission and vision will be the north star for the board, staff, families, and community so each is able to stay aligned and working in the same direction. Getting it right matters!

GOVERNANCE AND THE FOUNDING TEAM

The founding team matters a great deal – on paper and in the interview, but also as you actually launch your school. The members of the founding team usually become the

initial board and school leaders. For this reason alone, is important to put together a solid founding team, and for those folks to be prepared to discuss future governance and accountability.

Participating in the work of a founding team can be hard. It takes a lot of effort to navigate approval and launch a strong school. Additionally, the founding team is the group who will take the "lumps" from the anti-charter school people who may surface during this time. Sometimes the anti-charter push-back comes from important people in the lives of the founders, which can be a surprise and disappointment. The founding team will take lumps from strangers, too. In the purest, most altruistic circumstances, the founding team gives their blood, sweat, and tears for other people's children to have a new school and there is no guarantee of success at the end. There is usually no pay involved. And there are often few real thanks from others.

We have a friend who joined a founding board and their friends and neighbors actually dumped trash on their lawn and decided they were now lifelong enemies. These folks had lived alongside each other for years. We live in a polarized world and charters are polarizing entities. This experience isn't typical of course, and maybe we shouldn't even share it – but it seems important to stress that being a part of a founding team isn't always easy.

The fact is that founding team members must have a very thick skin, a sincere dedication to the cause, and a whole lot of patience. The challenge for those of you putting together your founding team is finding volunteers who won't drop out due to the workload or these other potential difficulties. It's easier said than done.

Recruitment

So, what do you do when you must put together an entire founding team to navigate the application process, *and* eventually provide a combination of governance and leadership to the proposed school? And who is supposed to recruit whom – does the board recruit the leader or vice-versa?

The second question is a bit easier to answer than the first. The team can be recruited by one person with an idea who intends to become the eventual leader, or it can be recruited by someone (or a combination of people) who want to start a school, have a vision, and can provide governance but need to find a leader. It works either way, but in the best-case scenarios, it is either a proposed board trustee, or trustees, or a proposed leader putting the team together. What sometimes happens is an existing school or management company will decide to open a new location and then a governance team

is recruited. This book is really geared toward the former rather than the latter - meaning individuals seeking to start independent schools, rather than management companies or existing schools looking to replicate. We do work with many such clients, but those circumstances and experiences are very different from new, independent start-ups.

For this discussion let's assume you are not replicating an already existing school. You may be modeled on an existing school, which is very different from a replication. Here is some recruitment advice that is relevant in almost all geographical locations:

1) The team of people needs to represent a variety of areas of expertise. The team should have skills and experience in areas like: K-12 education, including curriculum, instruction, and academic interventions (it is a school after all); law and policy; finance and budgeting; community and social services; and backgrounds and skills unique to the model, such as a doctor or nurse for a school with a health science focus or a musician or professional dancer for a performing arts school. It is also important to have a minimum of one parent representative. Some scoring rubrics will include a formal metric to rate how well-rounded the team is, and experienced reviewers have an eye on the particular skill sets of the team even if it isn't required. Some laws even have specific criteria that must be met.

2) Each person must be fully educated on the school's model, mission, and vision and must be aware of what will be required from each of them before they say yes to joining. Please, be honest and upfront about how much time, effort, and energy this will take (and if you aren't sure, call others who can guide you). People need to be available to attend meetings, prepare for interviews, fundraise, serve as community ambassadors, and volunteer in a variety of other ways to help the school launch and succeed. It creates challenges for everyone when someone joins the effort but then cannot show up and honor their commitment. In fact, it can hurt the team. So be clear and firm to all candidates that the decision to join the founding team carries an obligation and will require time and attention.

3) Finding candidates can be challenging. Be careful not to draw too heavily on your immediate close circle of friends. We can't stress this one enough. First, it can be tough to work on such a project with friends, even though it might sound easy and maybe even fun at the start. You want and need people who will challenge you, disagree with you and push you to do your best work. Surrounding yourself with only people who will say "yes" and won't challenge you when it's necessary is ultimately a mistake. If a review team determines that the proposed board is full of the founding leader's personal friends - which can be uncovered pretty easily either through the application review or intentional questioning during an interview - then it will count against the proposal. It is important for authorizers to

know that there will be accountability and that the proposed board is not a "figurehead" group that allows one strong personality to do whatever they want.

4) We recommend that you take the time to talk with a wide variety of people about your ideas and plans as you recruit and listen to their feedback and reactions. Don't hesitate to ask others to make introductions if they know people who might be a good fit for your team. Identify key community groups and stakeholders in the location you seek to serve and do it early in the process of seeking a founding team. You'll need to engage the community and stakeholders anyway; you should do it from the beginning and potentially make important connections to potential trustees or advisors. Hopefully this will also help get buy-in from the community early on. It is Networking 101 at its most basic, combined with persuasive recruiting, and it isn't easy. Carve out time for it; don't wait until a few weeks before the application is due to find a board.

5) It is always viewed as a positive when you have a founding team with deep and authentic roots to the community to be served. In fact, in some places it is hard to gain approval if it appears you have a group of outsiders swooping into someone else's community without invitation or welcome. Keep this in mind.

Recruiting Firms

When recruiting a board, or more often a leader, it can be tempting to use consultants or other "sourcing organizations," whether for-profit or non-profit, to find smart, talented, and mission-aligned potential candidates. Please be cautious about this.

We know how this sounds coming from consultants. Sometimes we think we are the world's worst consultancy because we often find ourselves warning against using consultant service providers. But here is the thing: candidates must truly be well-matched for the school and sometimes you pay a lot of money for a handful of mediocre resumes or a few leads that are lukewarm at best. In our experience this happens with both those well-intentioned non-profit groups and with the paid firms. ECC does work to find both staff and board candidates for our clients on occasion, but we do it based specifically on their model, their authorizer, their strengths and needs - and only in geographic areas where we know quality candidates to connect with the schools. Our approach is always tailored to exactly what that school needs most at that time. Most service providers simply don't work this way. So be cautious when approaching this type of relationship, see if the fee can be negotiated to only be paid if you are happy with the candidate(s) secured, and ask questions to see how well the specifics of your situation will be considered when going through the process.

Be Honest about Roles and Plans

There needs to be clarity about the roles and connections between all members of the founding team both among the group itself and in the written application and during conversations with the authorizer. It is critical to be transparent about how relationships work and who is planning on being a member of the board versus a school employee if the application is approved. It isn't always necessary for a proposed leader to be identified at the earliest stage, but it often is viewed as a positive if this person has been identified. In some places, having a strong proposed leader is viewed as extremely important; in other places having a very strong proposed board is a bigger deal. Our advice is to have both a strong proposed leader identified and a strong proposed board!

It is acceptable for someone to be a part of the initial effort with plans to step away once the school launches; just be clear about that internally and decide whether and how to message and communicate it during the application stages. It is also fine to know who on the team will apply to be the finance director or the principal or a teacher. You definitely don't want the entire founding team to be people who want a job but having a few potential employees as part of the founding team is not a bad thing. What you can't do is have too many people planning on working at the school or stepping away once the application is approved. Some of the people involved need to stay on the board, at least through the first charter term.

Things to keep in mind:

Jobs cannot and should not be "guaranteed" for anyone, not even for a proposed leader putting together the founding team and writing the application. Once a school is approved, the board holds the charter as a collective governance entity. One individual person does not have the authority to make unilateral decisions. And when it comes to a public school, no one has a right to the job. If the school is approved, it will be up to the board to hire the best leader. That often is the person who applied for and launched the school, but technically, the board should make the best decision about hiring a leader when that moment comes. Every once in a while, the person who did the work on the application is actually not able to run the school or decides they don't want to do it anymore. It is rare but it happens. Therefore, the board must have a job description and a set of criteria to be used for identifying the characteristics desired in the leader. Then the board will decide to appoint the best candidate after approval. It usually is the founder, which is understood, but due diligence matters too.

Bear in mind that the usual practice is for the board to appoint the leader - whether you call it principal, CEO, or superintendent - and then that person is responsible for other

hiring decisions. However, sometimes a school will have a dual reporting structure to the board, and the board hires for two positions directly (typically the second is a director of finance role).

Finally, keep in mind what we mentioned above regarding rules that put guardrails around how many people on the initial board or the founding team can pivot to be a school employee. It also occasionally surprises people that in some places, you can't be a school employee and a voting member of the board of trustees. Make sure your plans fit within all applicable laws, regulations, and authorizer policies.

Governance! Governance! Governance!

We can't stress often enough how important it is to have a highly functioning board.

One statement we make frequently that often results in a surprise reaction is this: governance on most charter school boards is NOT the same as governance on other nonprofit boards. There is some variation within the charter school sector of course, and we definitely see some really successful schools with higher functioning boards that have the luxury of focusing on fundraising and relationship management like traditional nonprofit boards. Most often, we work with smaller schools that have either a start-up board, a start-up board pivoting into being a working board, or a low-functioning working board (which means not a lot of work is actually done).

The roles and responsibilities of a charter school board member and the "work" of the board are different than the work that happens when you serve on a local or national nonprofit board. With a charter school, the board must be laser-focused on accountability outcomes. Performance must be monitored in alignment with the way the authorizer measures and evaluates success, or the board may be very surprised come renewal. What does that mean? It means that sometimes a board thinks they're overseeing a well-functioning school, but test scores show children aren't reading well and teacher retention is terrible. The data show the school is not functioning well, and this will be a problem at renewal. If the board is properly overseeing the school, they'll be aware of these issues and will be allocating resources to ensure the school's outcomes improve and align with the performance expectations.

Remember, the board is the charter holder, and the board therefore is the entity responsible for fulfilling the promises made in the contract which is what renewal is based upon. Almost every authorizer has a published set of renewal benchmarks – the board must know these. Why?

BECAUSE RENEWAL STARTS DAY ONE.

Typically, when a team gets a new charter approval, everyone takes this deep collective breath and celebrates. The cheering and crying are cathartic, and people see relaxation ahead. In reality, there can be no relaxation. This is when the hard part starts.

The secret to being a successful board, whether during the start-up phase or year 17 of the school's life is this: know what the charter agreement (which includes the plans in the application) requires, know what the charter school accountability/performance framework requires, and hold people accountable to ensuring those things are done. It is that simple, and that complicated.

Don't make excuses. Don't get distracted. Don't think about anything other than whether the school is doing what it takes to meet the legal requirements agreed to in the charter and the accountability/performance framework, and about how outcome data prove this to be true. Hold everyone accountable for meeting those standards. If you can do that, you'll be a high functioning board.

Why are we writing about this now? Because during the application phase, it is critical that the team can articulate how the board will accomplish this hard work of holding everyone accountable for the high standards being set in the chartering documents. The application will require the team to address this, and you likely will be asked about it in a capacity interview.

Governing for the Future

A common challenge many charter school boards face after initially launching a school is the timely and effective recruitment of new board trustees. We have broken this up into three major phases for a proposed board to consider and plan around (track vacancies, conduct a needs assessment, and recruit). Each of these should be tailored to meet the exact needs of each unique charter school.

The single most important thing for a board to remember is that they are holders of the school's charter. Not the employees of the school, not the school leader, but the board. With this distinction comes great responsibility. Nobody should join the board unless they are willing and able to give their time and attention to the school's success, which includes proper succession planning.

First, it is important to track term limits and plan for future vacancies to the maximum extent possible.

This means someone will properly track the board terms that are in their charter school's by-laws. In addition to the end-of-term dates that could sneak up on even the most active boards, there are also questions regarding technical tracking decisions. For example: if one trustee steps down prior to their term ending and a replacement is identified and seated, is the new board trustee member seated for a full term or for the remainder of the prior member's term? The by-laws should provide guidance on such questions. If they don't, edit them now for clarity.

It is imperative that the governance committee or an individual member (possibly the Secretary) is responsible for tracking terms and identifying upcoming future vacancies well in advance to avoid long-term vacancies. **This job is not to be delegated to the charter school's staff**. Copies of the by-laws should be readily available to all trustees for review and the by-laws should indicate who will be responsible for fulfilling this task.

Next, and equally as important as tracking the terms, is the process of conducting a needs assessment each year to identify the necessary skills for recruitment. Ideally, a needs assessment is done as part of strategic planning, so skills and needs are identified in alignment with the school's most significant priorities. Some schools use simple matrix charts to keep an ongoing track of skills as trustees join and step down, and these can prove very useful.

Here are some possible questions to consider when conducting a needs assessment focused on seating board members:

- Does the school have a facility or construction project on the horizon? If so, consider finding a member with facility, renovation/construction, or real estate experience.
- Is there a big push to improve academics? Perhaps the board needs trustees with direct experience analyzing academic data or experience with curriculum.
- Has the authorizer had major policy changes or have there been many state law changes? Then someone with a legal or policy background would be a value-add.

At least once a year at the annual meeting (and more frequently is preferred), the full board should discuss upcoming vacancies, recruitment efforts, and challenges or successes in identifying and recruiting candidates. This conversation should be led by the committee or individual trustee tasked with monitoring and oversight in this area.

Finally, after the needs assessment comes recruitment. Many communities are full of talented individuals with the appropriate skills and desires to donate time and energy to volunteer activities. However, many boards struggle with finding these potential board members.

It is important to acknowledge that while recruitment challenges are common, it is also a red flag for the authorizer when schools have empty seats and no clear process to identify future board candidates. An inability to fill seats is a common feature of disengaged or dysfunctional boards.

The following ideas and suggestions may help your team. It should go without saying that the obligations of a charter school board are many and unique from school to school. Understand this and make sure to tailor your plans to fit your circumstances.

- Examine existing relationships with, and geographical proximity to, community-based organizations, institutions of higher education, and non-profit organizations. Often there are engaged community stakeholders in the school's immediate vicinity willing to donate their time, energy, and skills. Be mindful of conflicts of interest but understand the board often may seat people from local organizations the school is affiliated with and still remain compliant with all applicable rules.
- Make sure recruitment conversations are organized, scheduled, tracked, and shared with other members. The board or a subset of the board may need to have twenty conversations to find one great board trustee; part of the responsibility of the current board is to cultivate relationships and a succession plan for all its members. It is time-consuming work, but it is rewarding.
- If the person you initially talk with isn't interested, they may be willing to help brainstorm ideas for possible candidates within their networks and make introductions. Consider talking with representatives from organizations such as:

  - Colleges and universities, especially within departments that align with key design elements or unique features.
  - Refugee or immigrant services organizations.
  - The parent community.
  - Social services agencies.
  - Daycares or preschools.
  - Local businesses such as banks, restaurants, law firms, accounting or financial services firms.
  - Faith-based organizations.

- ○ Find out who sponsors local little league teams and community events. Talk to those local sponsors.
- ○ Local elected officials and their staff members. Again, the public servant network can be a great place to develop leads and can help in important advocacy work for your school.
- ○ Other charter schools! Sometimes a very talented board member will "term out" based on one school's by-laws but would share their skills with another charter school.

Engaging potential board members - Now and in the future

You've identified some leads. Great! Now what?

- Invite potential board members to the next board meeting.
- Provide potential board members with a school handbook that includes: the full name and address of the school, grades served, by-laws, mission statement and key design elements, board obligations, calendar of meetings, board evaluation from prior year, leadership team information that includes a brief bio for each leadership team member, dates of charter term and a list of current board members and their bios. If all of these aren't developed yet, provide what you can and put each item on the list for development.
- Invite potential board members to visit and tour the school. If there is no facility to tour yet, be creative. Be aware of the fact that that recruitment is sometimes harder before there is a physical building. People like to see a physical brick-and-mortar school building.
- Have potential board members meet with small groups of students, teachers, and the school leadership team. Again, this is harder to do if you're in the early founding stages. But still try to have candidates meet with as many stakeholders as possible. It could be the case that partner organizations will be more relevant at the beginning, for example.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH, ENGAGEMENT AND DEMAND

The community outreach and demand section (almost all applications have one) is always an interesting application section to review. There are a variety of approaches and efforts that may be employed by the founding team, ranging from doing almost next-to-nothing in terms of meaningful engagement all the way to showcasing an application process driven by grassroots demand and local organizing. In some places, community outreach and engagement carry a lot more weight with the authorizers than it does in others, but no matter your location it is almost always given points in a scoring

rubric. Most importantly, authentic community engagement can ensure the school will be able to fill seats and it lays a foundation for healthy community and family relationships.

Depending on the authorizer and geographic area, vetting in this area of an application may be rigorous or it may be superficial.

The overarching trend we see is that *rigorous* community outreach and *genuine* engagement really matters. From a practical standpoint, forming these relationships with the community pays off when it comes to long-term community support and acceptance. In some places it used to be considered little more than a box to check in the application process, but we're convinced that even if you *can* get away with doing this work half-heartedly, you shouldn't. We've seen many schools with otherwise solid proposals get chartered and then really struggle when it came time to actually fill their seats. That, obviously, is a huge problem that can be mitigated with strong community outreach.

Starting from the 10,000-foot view, there are more angles than you might think under the umbrella of community outreach. The specific topics we typically highlight with clients include:

- Engaging potential families in order to share information about the proposed school and gather evidence of interest or demand.
- Establishing meaningful feedback loops, which means gathering feedback and letting potential families influence the model or the implementation plans as they are developed and refined.
- Establishing relationships with local community organizations and/or local influencers.
- Organizing effective communications strategies (brochures or flyers, website, social media, etc.).
- Utilizing effective strategies to welcome all students and also ensure the targeted student population has access to information.

Community Outreach to Families of Potential Students

Communicating with families of potential students and developing their support will pay dividends when it comes time to enroll children in the school. This is a key reason community outreach deserves scrutiny. The last thing anyone wants is to approve a school that flounders because no one enrolls their children in it. This can happen to small independent schools and large networks alike. We've seen it result in closures as

the worst-case scenario and have worked with many schools who have dealt with this problem and survived, but after enduring unanticipated growing pains. Beyond the ultimate consequence of closure, under-enrollment lead to negative consequences on the budget, staffing, resources and stability – challenges that can lead to failure.

This isn't *Field of Dreams* and you aren't Kevin Costner, so if you're thinking,: "If we build it, people will come," you're already in the wrong mindset. Stop this line of thinking immediately and do not ever, under any circumstances, say something like this in a capacity interview. Each founding team must take seriously the importance of developing true community buy-in for the school.

So what should you do? Get out there and talk to people. Talk to people with children, especially those who have a child who will be the right age and grade for the school when the doors open. This can occur during formal, public meetings, it can happen during kitchen table chats with families one-on-one, it can be shared during a service at a faith institution, or it can be through presentations at local daycare providers. It is important to talk to people and very thoroughly document everything you do. The information will be helpful in the application, as well as for future communications (you can build email and mailing lists through this process) and to analyze what strategies worked and what didn't work.

For formal meetings, make sure to save all proof of outreach efforts, including a copy of the flyers distributed and any local ads that run. Some authorizers require evidence that you have held at least one public meeting. Others will want to see multiple meetings. A good rule of thumb often used in the charter community is to be able to prove that you've engaged with - and hopefully have evidence of support from - at least 50 percent of the number of students you'll need to enroll by day one. We personally view this as a *bare minimum.* Ideally, we think you should aim for being able to prove support from more families with students than seats available. The reality is that all of the people who say they intend to enroll will not enroll. Period. No exceptions.

Strategies like door-knocking campaigns or standing out in front of a grocery store to hand out flyers are often utilized as well. The effectiveness depends a great deal on the specific community and the level of effort involved. The more people that know about the potential school the better and these can be fine strategies to employ, just think about who is going to be out there having the conversations on your behalf and find ways to maintain contact with people after this initial interaction. For example, if handing out flyers outside of a store, also have a clipboard where you can write down email and mailing addresses of those interested in the school.

Many people wonder how they can show community support in the application itself. Not all authorizers will accept basic meeting sign-in sheets or petitions as evidence (although some certainly will!), so check whether these are acceptable to be provided as evidence and be sure to follow all the rules in the application package. Surveys and intent to enroll forms are also often used to demonstrate support. Whether or not you can submit copies of such documents, they should still be collected. This allows you to follow up with families who may be interested in enrolling and additionally can build the foundation for your mailing lists. (Note: If you use intent to enroll forms, clearly communicate on the form the fact that submission does not guarantee a seat in the school or obligate the family in any way to enroll.)

The effectiveness of your outreach efforts will in part be determined by your level of preparation. It is a good idea to develop basic materials that explain the school - the mission, the program and why the team is excited to present this option to the community. Be ready to explain the process for getting a charter approved, with clarity on how the application phase works and how people should stay informed, specifically about when this particular school might open and what grades will be served.

It is a good idea to have the infrastructure in place to run a basic website and be able to email updates to those who are interested before you start the public outreach process. The second you start sharing information, people will be Googling the names of the people on the founding team, as well as the school itself. Make sure you know what will come up in those searches, and creating a web presence is a great first step in controlling that part of the process. You should start to form social media accounts to advertise your proposed school as well and have a generic email address that is monitored by someone who answers questions and logs feedback or interest.

Be sure to advertise and hold meetings in all of the relevant neighborhoods and hold them in easily accessible spaces. During a recent new school review we conducted, a member of the review team pointed out an applicant held multiple meetings, but all were concentrated in three of six total ZIP codes included in the identified target area. It made her - and thus everyone else - stop to question the reason why. There may be a very valid reason for an occurrence such as this. On the other hand, it may have been a simple oversight or worse, an intentional effort to avoid a certain area. Don't take this type of risk. Be inclusive! And be ready to explain why you chose to hold meetings in the locations that you did.

Remember, the applicant must convince the reviewer that there is demand for the program and that each and every seat will be filled by a child on the first day of school.

If it feels tedious, just keep reminding your team of the fact that someday soon the school has to fill each seat, because the budget won't work out and you can't start strong if you don't. Aim to have multiple candidates for each seat. ***Aim to need a lottery***. This, unlike nearly every other problem we've mentioned, is a good one to have.

Authentic Opportunities for Input - "Feedback Loops"

Authorizers love to ask about "feedback loops." In laymen's terms this means they want to know what formal mechanisms are in place for the families who might enroll in the school to communicate their thoughts and opinions with the founders. Knowing what they are is merely the first step, however.

The second step to this is whether the founding team has *responded* to the opinions shared. Have you made any adjustments to plans in response to community feedback? "No" is the wrong answer. Adjusting plans doesn't mean you have to change the entire model or add a full high school to a K-8 plan just to appease community input requirements. It does mean that you've collected and critically considered the opinions of the families in the community.

Here are a few examples:

Sometimes schools decide they must add transportation to the budget because families say they will not be able to drive students every day. Other times an elementary school team might add a pre-kindergarten program because so many potential families have age-eligible children and requested early childhood education with a pipeline into kindergarten. Perhaps the community demands sports programs, or a playground and the start-up team/budget simply cannot deliver - yet. But these features can be added for consideration to future plans. You get the idea.

Reviewers truly dislike it when the application asks, "How did the founding team respond to local input?" and the answer is something along the lines of, "We held many meetings to share our plans and we also know that local schools are over-enrolled." That doesn't answer the question and worse, not answering shows there was no consideration of local input. If this kind of question is in the application you are writing, please have a real answer. First, explain how you gathered input and second, explain how you synthesized it and responded. This gives insight into things such as how the school might also respond to families once the school is open and whether the founding team truly cares about what the community needs versus simply having a plan that refuses to yield to valid feedback.

Community Organizations and Local Influencers

We are often asked whether it matters to have politically connected folks in your corner. Some teams have such individuals on the founding team in the hopes it paves the way to chartering. The honest answer is that having allies with community standing will only help you launch a school - but it should not be the only reason to grant a charter and it is important to make the proposal as strong as possible regardless of who is backing your team.

Sometimes groups choose to go at it alone without making or relying upon political connections, and that can work too. We stand by our opinion that the most successful schools are the ones with deep and meaningful connections to the community at multiple levels, and the work of establishing all such relationships can start right out of the gate. Identifying community organizations for potential partnerships and sources of support in the beginning design phase will lead to more work during the already busy application process, but most groups find it is well worth the effort. Local community organizations, especially those with close ties to the families you seek to serve, can help you establish credibility and be a great source for potential board members or opportunities for community engagement.

What kinds of partnership groups or individuals are we talking about here? That can range from faith institutions to county health services, non-profit services providers, colleges and universities and local businesses that give back to the community. Some groups try to get elected officials on board as well.

Figure out who matters in the community and substantively engage with them. Find your angles and opportunities.

With that in mind, we want to emphasize an important point regarding how partnerships are framed and presented in the application from a construction and writing standpoint. In some applications, there is space to discuss partnerships. When documenting a community partnership to the review team, it is important to have a letter of commitment of draft Memorandums of Understanding to document the relationship and expectations. Don't put forward an application that says a group has committed to providing specific services if this isn't backed-up in writing. There is almost always an attachment or other place where partnership letters can and should be inserted. If you've had conversations about the possibility of forming a partnership and these have been promising, but not finalized, don't present it as a done deal. Simply say there are ongoing conversations and an expectation the partnership will develop. Generic support letters (a template

letter is the least effective) may only go so far depending on the authorizer, but an MOU or commitment letter for a critical service usually carries a lot of weight.

Speaking of support letters, people often ask us if letters from politicians or other community influencers are significant. The answer is that it really depends, but it can be. The actual value can vary a great deal by location, the person involved and the relationships between the public entity authorizing schools and the official or influencer. It is impossible to answer this question without more specifics other than to say it likely won't hurt and might really help.

Pro tip: Many groups find it beneficial to "power map," which basically means you lay out the relationships between influencers and public officials and others in the community in order to identify where it is best to invest time and energy to develop relationships and pursue commitments of support. This can help you organize your founding team's connections, identify areas of need, and generate conversations and creative brainstorming.

We mentioned template letters a moment ago. Letters will be much stronger, and the support will seem more authentic to reviewers, if the person signing it uses their own words. We understand it is often easier to write a generic form letter for people to use and sign, as it gives you some control over ensuring the facts are correct and we understand many people will ask for one because it makes it easier for them to fulfill your request. If you must do this, please encourage them to use the template only as a starting point which they will then modify to fit their own voice, tone, organizational perspective, etc. Any form or template letter should be the starting point, not simply copied, signed, and delivered as-is.

Communication Strategies

There are entire books, college courses and advanced degrees dedicated to communication and communication strategies. There are myriad public relations consultants, experts and personal gurus offering advice and setting expectations everywhere you turn. It can be a bit overwhelming, but you've got this.

There are a few key things to consider and a few tools you'll need to have handy. The considerations are actually pretty simple. 1) You need to share the mission and vision and develop buy-in from families and partners as described above and 2) You need to ensure you have ways to continue engaging with your audience. All of your communication tools must help you achieve these two goals.

To meet the first goal, most schools find they need (at a minimum):

- brochures (or at least flyers);
- a basic website;
- one or two social media accounts that are consistently monitored, active, and updated; and
- an email address that is monitored with a reasonable response time to inquiries.

Written materials need to clearly communicate the proposed school's mission and vision, as well as the basics of the program design, the location, and the fact that it is a proposed school that is not yet open but hopefully will be soon! Even better is to describe the "why" behind the school - why does the team want to start a school in this location at this time? Make it personal. Make sure to include the grades to be served and the planned opening year, as well as the grades to be served at full capacity. If you know the location, add it! If not, add the neighborhood or at least the city or town.

All written materials and the website should clearly display the email address where people can submit questions, provide comments for consideration (remember feedback loops) and where media inquiries can be submitted. It is fine if this isn't a personal account. You can use something like info@AmazingNewCharter.com. If you have a lead applicant who doesn't mind getting personal inquiries that is fine too, although we recommend against using a personal account that you also use for your day-to-day life; it is just easier to have a dedicated school account. There are many services that will allow you to set up an initial account for either a minimal fee or even for free. Try to keep school emails in one place during the planning and application stages. You won't regret it.

Social media is how many people get their information these days. According to the Pew Research Center in 2018, more than two-thirds of adults self-reported getting their news from social media at least some of the time.[1] You don't need to be on every social media platform, but it is a good idea to pick one or two and use them regularly to share information about the proposed school; be especially sure to include public meetings or other opportunities to learn more or provide feedback. You want to try, to utilize the platforms most popular in your area - many schools use Facebook and Instagram, but others have good luck with Twitter. There are many to choose from and your comfort level using each is also something to take into consideration.

Ideally, social media accounts should be updated at least once daily, and interactive content such as pictures and videos are proven to keep users engaged. It is often

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[1] https://www.journalism.org/2018/09/10/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2018/

possible to schedule posts in advance, which is a great way to both manage time and ensure a consistent level of activity. You also need to monitor and respond when necessary; you don't want your pages to look stale. It's good for people to know a real human is behind the accounts. If you have a few extra dollars, spending a little money for help on a website and/or social media can be a real value-add, but we encourage you to find pro-bono support or add a proposed board member who can help with this. People will often help out a new school they believe in.

One of the things a reviewer will do upon getting assigned an application is search the school online and most will spend time looking around on the proposed school's website and any discoverable social media feeds. You definitely don't want to submit a proposal prior to having these in place.

Similarly, once a member of an authorizing team hears from a potential new applicant (before the application is submitted), they'll often search the proposed school name as well as the person who called and anyone else prominently associated with the effort. We often advise folks not to reach out to authorizers at all unless you've reviewed your digital profile/footprint and are comfortable with what comes up during an internet search. If your social media accounts are public, you'll want to make sure you're comfortable with everything you've posted or change your privacy settings. At the very least, you and your team should search yourselves and see what pops up.

When you receive a media inquiry - and it is almost guaranteed you will at some point in the process - don't panic! Before you talk to any reporter, draft notes you can have ready to direct the conversation toward the points you want to make. In the context of a new school and the stories written about them, these notes likely will be to describe the mission and design of the proposed school and respond to either local opposition or discuss a possible facility. Of course, tailor your notes to the specific press inquiry and topic but remember to get your positive notes in about the school and its plans. It is always helpful to search the reporter if it isn't someone you are familiar with and to do some research on the paper or the station. This can give you an idea of how they have covered charter schools in the past.

We've done a fair amount of media interaction in our careers and know it isn't easy or natural for everybody, but it also doesn't need to be intimidating. Stay calm and remember you are the expert. The reporter needs the information you have to generate a balanced and interesting story, and most reporters are professional and understanding.

Access Matters

As you think about the program design, application, and communication materials, remember to constantly think about how you'll ensure access to this information for students and families from historically underserved or disadvantaged backgrounds. Depending on the state and its laws and regulations, as well as the priorities of the specific authorizer, this can be a critical requirement. If not, it is still a good idea to keep in mind.

In written materials, on the website and social media feeds, think about the community you seek to serve and ensure you are reaching those families. Ask some key questions, such as are you describing how the school will serve students with disabilities? Are you welcoming students with disabilities and those learning English? Are you clearly committed to providing transportation? If not, what kinds of plans or suggestions do you have to help students enroll if parents cannot drive them to school every day? It is also important to consider which languages you translate materials into and whether you can make translation services available during public meetings or one-on-one conferences.

Depending on the school design, these efforts can make or break the impression a reviewer has about whether the founding team truly intends to serve historically underserved and/or at-risk children. If you say you welcome English language learners but have zero plans to provide staff who are fluent in the prominent home languages of students likely to enroll, it calls your claim into question. Don't say you intend to enroll students who are from economically disadvantaged households if you are planning to locate in a wealthy neighborhood, won't offer transportation and say you'll interview families before accepting their enrollment forms and will have volunteer service expectations for families. Always be honest about what you seek to do and who you seek to serve, and then think about how you will explain your program and offerings and how you will share those materials.

Another example on the topic of access would be recruitment strategies. Using "word of mouth" as a foundational aspect of the recruitment campaign and relying on the website and targeted social media advertising is usually viewed as being passive. It can be very helpful to use grassroots methods to complement these efforts.

Tying this all together, we'll repeat a favorite mantra: everything must align. The academic program to be offered should make sense for the student population you seek to serve and should align with your identified targeted community and location. Communications strategies (for both outreach and recruitment campaigns) and all written and social media materials should be designed to reach those families. There should also be appropriate support services in the application to meet the needs of

those you intend to enroll, and those also can and should be described on websites and in written materials to give families confidence their children will be properly served. It sounds like a lot, but when you just keep asking yourself to ensure the mission and target community are reflected in every section of the application and every strategy, it will flow.

CRITICAL DESIGN FEATURES

Not all applications or authorizers use terms such as "critical design features," "key design features" or "key design elements" but we find these terms are the most descriptive and appropriate way to talk about the main programmatic features of the proposed school. When you think about the elements that are most important to the proposal, what things come to mind? What features would you highlight when pitching the proposal to prospective families? What would you say is most important to a potential funder? These are your critical design features.

There is some flexibility in how these are framed, presented and discussed from application to application. Just remember that anything highlighted as a key design feature must be clearly explained throughout the rest of the application and the founding team needs to be prepared to discuss each one with depth and clarity. It is important to ensure the key features don't contradict each other and it is imperative that you are prepared to explain how things will be implemented.

From the actual writing and application construction standpoint, a major issue is when an application was cobbled together using a variety of other applications for the source materials, which can create extreme inconsistencies. We've even reviewed applications where the person putting it together forgot to replace the name of the original school. This is just one reason why the copy-and-paste approach is one to avoid. The application should be original work, not copied. There is a fine line between using an example to help with your thinking and design development and copying it.

If you are replicating an existing model, there is more leeway, especially when it comes to using your own materials. Still, be sure to know all the expectations and closely read everything to ensure that existing materials are appropriate for use and appropriately modified for the new school.

Not copying other applications is simply the right thing to do, but if you need more convincing, you should know that authorizers will sometimes do an internet search on sentences or paragraphs to see if the application has been plagiarized. This is most likely to occur in the sections related to the key design, the ones most important to the

foundation of the proposal. Our advice is don't plagiarize or work with anyone who you suspect may not take a highly ethical stance on this; have a conversation with any consultant to ensure you are on the same page. Authorizers review a high volume of applications, but still have a long memory. We even know of one authorizer who caught a plagiarized application from memory alone.

Developing Critical Design Features

This exercise shouldn't be challenging for a team, but some questions do arise frequently that we will discuss here.

Taking a step back, let's remember that one of the main focuses for the authorizer during proposal review is to determine whether the proposed plan is educationally sound and will likely lead to student success. The other main tasks are to determine if the plan is fiscally responsible, if the team has the skills to responsibly steward public funds and whether operational plans are reasonable and detailed enough to give confidence that implementation will be successful.

Key design features typically address the academic plan and program first and foremost. This can encompass school culture design attributes and/or family or community relationships as well. For example, you might highlight dual enrollment opportunities offered by a local college or you might explain a deep commitment to using restorative justice practices.

Here's a simple exercise for your team – have each individual member distill and list on paper the primary qualities that make the school important, unique and likely to succeed. Next, bring the lists together to discuss and find commonalities and areas of difference. This sounds simple, but doing something like this up front can really help teams avoid having competing priorities surface down the road, along with the frustrations that these bring. If you can agree and get them down in the charter, it gives everyone a shared roadmap to use during implementation.

Sometimes we get asked whether a group should include a longer school day/year and uniforms to the key design elements. In the earlier days of chartering, we saw this all the time. It was common for new proposals to highlight those features because they were starkly different compared to most district schools and there simply weren't many other charter schools. They are less exciting now and no longer novel, as so many charters now have these elements. Thus, it isn't necessary to add them as a key design feature. You still will include those in the appropriate place in the application, but it doesn't really set you apart. If you decide to include those items as part of the key

design, it will most likely be a net neutral that doesn't elicit a response from an authorizer either way. You're better off delving into more substantive design features.

It is a good idea to ask whether each of the critical features your team is discussing are highly relevant and if they connect to and through the application. Or, is a feature nice to have but not critical to the school and its success. For example, you can't have a school without an educational vision and academic philosophy; those are almost always going to be key features. Other things are nice to have but not directly and intimately connected. Think of it this way: offering an after-school music club or chess team would be nice, but in most cases whether or not they are offered isn't critical to the overall success of the program. You might ask, "But wait, what if it is a performing arts school?" In that case, music is probably worked directly into the school day. You might say that having a robust after-school program is a key design feature and you will offer a handful of options for students to choose from; in that case, you aren't talking about these clubs in silos, but a comprehensive offering that is part of why a parent or student might choose the school. The chess team alone probably isn't a key design feature unless you've built an extensive amount of programming around chess and the mission is focused on chess.

Remember, the key design features are the handful of things that make the proposal special and explain the critical elements of the school.

It also is usually not necessary to address financial or operational components as key design elements. The authorizer expects that the budget will balance. The authorizer expects the operations will be contemplative, legal and effective.

ACADEMIC PROGRAM

The academic program design is a critical aspect of the application. If there isn't someone on the founding team who really understands schools and schooling and has expertise in academics and curriculum and instruction, it is highly, *highly* recommended you recruit someone to join the founding team who is an expert. Even a great consultant isn't likely to be part of your team long-term, probably isn't going to want to design your program for you and isn't going to be participating in the capacity interview. A good consultant can help you bring the vision to life on paper and can make sure you address all the critical elements of the application. Hire the consultant to help write and sometimes help design, but don't have a consultant lead this work with zero input and support from the founding team. It just isn't a good idea.

A few things to consider when drafting this section of an application are noted below. These are based on the challenges we've seen many applicant groups face over the course of the last 20 years. Keep in mind that there are many different requirements from authorizer to authorizer and so many different types of school design, which makes it impossible to address all the possibilities in one place. With that being said, here are some of the common questions and mistakes we have seen that are applicable in almost all situations.

As you read this section, keep in mind that the mission and vision simply must be evident throughout the program design. Reviewers are looking to see if the mission is apparent throughout all sections of the application and if the academic program design "lives and breathes" this mission. Remember that everything has to connect and flow seamlessly from start to finish in an application. The program has to make sense in alignment with the mission statement and vision.

Learning and Performance Standards

We aren't talking about the charter school performance standards or accountability framework here - there will be more on that later. This is a reminder that authorizers are going to expect that the team explicitly understands the learning standards that must be met by public schools in order to ensure students are appropriately proficient and college/career ready. Sometimes you'll be working to meet Common Core standards, but in many places those standards have been modified and re-named or have additional standards are layered onto them. In some places Common Core was never adopted. We know of one state where the reviewers feel rage if you mistakenly reference Common Core rather than the state specific standards (well, maybe we don't know if they feel rage but they explicitly warn applicants not to make this mistake under any circumstance). Do your homework and avoid this unforced error.

Be clear about what standards you intend to meet and ensure the team is paying attention to updates to the standards. Sometimes proposal development can take 18-24 months; make sure you're up to date on citing the requirements prior to submission. Then make sure the team is ready to assure reviewers that the school's proposed curriculum aligns. This goes back to the advice we shared earlier: a good consultant can help here, but it is best to have a member of the founding team and a member of the proposed board of trustees who are intimately familiar with the learning standards.

Curriculum Adoption, Adaption, or Development

Curriculum is also important and should be appropriate in meeting the learning standards. The curriculum outlines should also align with the mission and vision and be well-positioned to ensure success in meeting the learning standards. In many schools, the curriculum will be either solely or partially based on existing materials. These schools plan to adopt or adapt boxed curriculum as appropriate to meet the needs of the students they enroll. Other schools plan to write their own curriculum and this, frankly, is more high risk from the application review standpoint. Reviewers will say things like, "This places a future burden on a not-yet-hired staff and we don't know what the quality will be" if the curriculum hasn't already been developed. If the school founders are able to create a high-quality curriculum, we recommend having examples to share for at least one or two subjects or grades, even if this isn't required by the application. Being able to show that you've got it handled is potentially powerful. There is variation between authorizers regarding whether the application will ask for detailed curriculum or scope and sequence.

Consideration should go into the rationale for the curricular programs you've chosen. View the selection in light of the mission and vision and ensure it makes sense. The application may not ask for the rationale, but it is fair game during an interview and the written proposal usually benefits from proffering context about the rationale, even if it isn't explicitly requested in the prompts. Being able to talk through and concisely write the "why" for the choices is important.

Assessments

Assessments (formative, summative, diagnostic, benchmark): know the difference and know how and why the assessments the proposed school will use align well to demonstrate performance against the learning standards and the curriculum pacing. You have to be able to articulate this clearly, both in writing and in an interview.

This is a bit of a mouthful, so let's break it down. The assessments have to appropriately reflect whether children are successful against the performance standards. This is more important for charters than other schools because charters are designed to be judged based on academic outcomes. They need to be successful to keep their doors open, unlike traditional public schools. Therefore, it is essential that the staff can determine on an ongoing basis how well the enrolled students are learning the skills that will enable them to demonstrate proficiency when they take state tests. This is an area where many schools fall short. It seems easy in concept, but for some reason many teams don't thoughtfully plan for it or implement it well. So think long and hard about how the school will gather and measure data in multiple ways throughout the years, even if you start K-1 and won't have state-tested grades for a while.

Make sure the assessments also align with the curriculum pacing and instructional plans. It makes no sense to measure student success against content that has yet to be taught. This sounds simple, but many schools struggle in this area. The more thought you can give it up front during design, the better. During both application review and interviews, the use of assessments and data is a common area for questioning.

In many applications, the team will be asked about promotion standards and this doesn't just apply to high schools in terms of graduation. Promotion and/or retention policies from grade to grade need to be clear and reasonable. Without a doubt they'll be important once the school is operating. Think carefully about the standards that will be set, the metrics that will be used and when that will be communicated to families.

When it comes to assessments it is important to think about the processes for collecting, analyzing, communicating, using and storing data. All of these might be topics in an interview. How will leaders use data? What about teachers? The board? Most charter founders say they are committed to the concept of using data to drive instruction, but what does that really mean for your plans? Who decides when class-wide reteach is necessary and how is it measured by new data to determine success? How do leaders determine if academic issues are rooted in the curriculum versus the skill of the teachers with that standard? What if it is a combination of both?

We tried helping a new school founder on this very topic. When pushed to think about and answer questions regarding data, he freaked out. He thought it was completely unreasonable to dictate the process for data collection and its uses. He was a non-educator and wedded to the idea that he should not dictate to professional educators who would presumably know how to best utilize this information. Guess what? The school did get chartered, but the scores were abysmal and the academic program fell apart before it even really got started. Our sometimes-unpopular opinion is that when a founder doesn't want to think through these details, they aren't actually prepared to run a successful school. If you can't objectively measure how teachers and students perform, then you really can't prove that you are committed to accountability.

Staffing, staffing, staffing!

This sounds basic, but how the staffing structure is designed is another area of focus for reviewers, especially if the school plans to serve children with significant needs. This means students that may struggle academically, but also face social and emotional concerns. Think about how the staff will support economically disadvantaged students, students receiving special educational services, students who struggle academically

and need multi-tiered supports, students who are English language learners, homeless students or those who face housing insecurity to name several. Do not say the anticipated student population will be English learners at a rate of 30 percent and then have a single certified teacher of English as a new/second language start in year two. Do not say the school will support children with academic difficulties (based on the performance of local schools) and then propose 35 student classrooms with limited interventionists. This is an area where we've seen significant deficiencies arise in several locations over time.

The budget for a start-up school is limited, which is one factor that holds teams back from their ideal staffing design. A challenge is that many schools have a robust administrative structure up front. That can be fine, but if those administrators come with high salaries and benefits packages, it limits the number of teachers that can be hired. Some schools rely on volunteer or lower-wage assistance to provide support to students and teachers; this can work, but it also can be a disaster.

Many schools seem to misunderstand how a reviewer will look at the needs for the anticipated student population. Under no circumstances should a person say the teachers dedicated to English as a second language or special education teachers will handle social emotional needs for the whole school in an interview - something that happens with surprising frequency. Those teachers will have their hands full teaching. The staffing structure perhaps can include a social worker, counselor, or administrative position dedicated to providing support.

Another thing reviewers will do is look at the job descriptions and the staffing and organizational charts provided, which generally appear as attachments to applications. The job descriptions need to match the titles used in the narrative portion. The staffing charts need to reflect the correct number of staff in the correct year, in alignment with the budget, financial plan, and academic narrative. The organizational chart needs be in alignment as well. This is an area where teams make major mistakes. Some tips to consider:

- Agree to be judicious in how much borrowing the team does from previously used or approved applications; it can be fine to use examples to inform the current proposal and help you think things through, but don't copy
- If you work with a consultant, ensure they're doing a start-to-finish review to look critically across sections and fix mistakes - pay them extra to do so if you have to (such as if multiple authors have been involved).

- If you're working independently, consider finding a consultant to do it. This doesn't have to cost a fortune and can be well worth the money (hint hint: we provide this service, and we are very good at it!).
- Assign a member of the proposed founding team to do this as well, even if a consultant is doing it. Again, we guarantee any reviewer worth their paycheck is checking for alignment between sections!

Inevitably, most applications have a mistake here and there – these are huge documents that are very detail oriented and technical, and typically the authorizer will overlook a few issues. They may ask for those to be cleaned up or may ask questions about them, but a few small errors shouldn't tank the application. However, too many mistakes and not only does the application suddenly seem sloppy, but it also becomes really truly difficult to ascertain what the plan is trying to say.

SCHOOL CULTURE

This point really matters. The school culture needs to be consistent with the mission and vision. The school culture portions of an application often are structured like this: "Tell us about how you'll build a positive and safe school environment". But also remember the reviewers will look at any draft disciplinary policies that are also requested. Make sure those two things work well together.

The school culture can cover a wide range of topics. It could include classroom naming and organization (like when you see classes named after colleges), the number of planned assemblies celebrating student achievement, the daily routines or rituals used to keep children focused, how staff is enculturated into the school model, disciplinary structure, social justice practices, if apps will be used to track off-task and on-task behavior, and how families engage in the school community. School culture includes everything and it is up to you as an applicant to closely scrutinize the prompts in the application and be clear and specific in answering them.

Sometimes an application will ask for assurances about how the school will ensure discipline doesn't unfairly or disproportionately impact students in historically disadvantaged subpopulations, which includes students with disabilities. There are some specific standards that at least one member of your founding team should be aware of concerning federal education laws and expectations for how those are implemented at the school level. It also may be wise to consult an attorney on this point. Make sure to explicitly address the prompt if the application includes one along these lines. It is an automatic way to lose points if it isn't clearly and fully understood that the applicant team is prepared in this area.

These are the basics. What the school culture looks and feels like is dependent on the model and design of the school. This variety is one of the reasons charters exist – to be alternative types of schools that serve and offer choices to children and families.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Charter renewal starts day one. You may have heard that before.

This is the most important tip we ever give to clients - and it's one we proffer frequently. The initial approval is the comparatively easy part. The day the charter is awarded is when the hard work starts, which is implementing the program with fidelity and in such a way that it will be unequivocally clear after the initial term that a second full-term charter should be awarded. This all ties together under the umbrella topic of accountability.

We want to remind you that charter schools are decidedly political in nature – a creation of state lawmakers, with oversight and authorizing decisions controlled by public bodies such as state education departments, university boards, gubernatorial or mayoral commissions or individual school districts. Fairly or not, subjective decisions are often made about whether a school is "good" and warrants a full-term renewal or a shorter term, needs to be put on a mid-term corrective action plan or other improvement protocol or some other action. Charters are built on the idea that these subjective decisions should be rooted in outcome data as often as possible. In a perfect world, it means that subjectivity is vastly minimized and clear outcome data is gathered in alignment with a clear set of performance criteria. These criteria are typically a combination of the authorizer's required "performance framework" or "accountability template" and the specific charter agreement with individual performance goals. These are two different things and each needs to be considered at the application and planning stages.

Performance Goals and Performance Frameworks

Again, there are two different, inter-related concepts at work when it comes to performance criteria: 1) The school's individual performance goals, which often are documented in the charter agreement and should be used by leaders and boards to monitor progress and performance and report on such indicators during annual reporting and 2) The specific set of policy goals the authorizer applies to schools; this is often called the Performance Framework but sometimes will be referred to as an Accountability Template or Accountability Plan.

Depending on the authorizer, a proposal might require the development of a unique set of internal performance goals in addition to demonstrating an understanding of the formal performance framework. For some authorizers, they essentially say, "Here is the set of goals (found in the accountability template) and you can add other goals if you want to." The specifics will vary from state-to-state and authorizer-to-authorizer.

Among prominent authorizers these days there is more dynamic discussion than ever about what constitutes success, especially for schools serving student populations that might not be positioned to meet traditionally used goals (for example, a school designed to serve only autistic students or a school for those with dyslexia probably should not be held to a traditional measure for literacy standards). Other times a school might approach renewal without all the data being available to measure performance against the framework (perhaps it's a school that intends to serve high schoolers and graduate students but hasn't had its first graduating class, meaning there is no graduation rate). In these cases, it is imperative that teams plan for goals and indicators that can be monitored starting day one so that there is evidence to present to the authorizer and make the case for success - or document challenges and plans to address them if the school hasn't started out strong.

Also keep in mind that highly successful boards are almost always in some stage of executing strategic priorities or plans and those should align with performance expectations. These strategic priorities will include and are not limited to metrics that are fiscal, sometimes related to facilities challenges or growth, recruitment and retention of high-quality staff, healthy operations and student enrollment; these should always be examined and developed within the context of academic indicators. Academic indicators should always be foundational to the priorities established at any given time. Remember: everything connects!

Here is our best accountability suggestion for how to prepare in this area, even if you are only dreaming about a school: work hard to understand the authorizer's renewal policy and pay attention to authorizing trends.

- Read and work to understand the authorizer's renewal policy. It is fair game in the application and interview. Being prepared in this area will pay off once the school is launching.
- Understand how renewal recommendations align with the authorizer's performance framework.
- Keep in mind that how you draft the individual charter application/agreement, mission and/or accountability goals are part of the long-term accountability

conversation – be prepared to set up systems and protocols to track unique data from the start.
- Read renewal reports for other schools, especially those similarly situated to yours. Again, keep track of trends. We recommend a committee of the board pays attention to such information throughout the life of the charter.
- Find out if any local or state charter support organizations track authorizing trends, talk with other schools and talk with authorizing staffers. Educate yourselves as much as possible in this area.

Ongoing analysis

Once you've understood and developed the goals for the school - both the required goals included in any relevant performance framework *and* those that are internal and reflect the program and personality of your institution - it is time to give some thought to tracking progress and documenting evidence.

Most schools choose to develop formal data dashboards (a set of metrics presented monthly to inform the board and leaders regarding key academic, financial, and operational indicators) later on, after the charter is awarded and often not until year one or two of operations. It is simply a challenge for many teams, which tend to be small and overwhelmed with initial start-up tasks in to think about this prior to opening the doors. However, we feel strongly that the development of a comprehensive data dashboard must be a conversation at the board level immediately after the charter has been awarded. It really is never too early to be thinking about these.

Most schools see the value of having a formal data dashboard system that is used to track progress and document success against fixed goals. The data presented with each dashboard update should be monitored monthly by the board of trustees, often by committees of the board and in close collaboration with leadership. There are metrics that should be tracked for academic dashboards, operational dashboards and fiscal dashboards. Sometimes they're as simple as excel spreadsheets that get updated and other times they are done in different types of software programs that produce more sophisticated graphics and analytics. Either way, the fact that you are tracking is key.

The dashboards should align with the performance framework, all relevant accountability goals and strategic priorities. If a school is put on any sort of correction plan, those metrics and timelines should also be used to inform tracking. Sometimes it will be appropriate to create a specific dashboard to monitor the corrective plan; other times, an existing plan can be modified to accomplish the goal.

Evaluation

The job of the leader - whether the title is superintendent, CEO, executive director, or Principal - is to monitor progress and lead the school to success. The leader has to have a high-quality staff that is effectively teaching children, running operations and finances appropriately and ensuring parents are satisfied with the program. The leader must have information to help determine strengths, weaknesses and challenges or opportunities. There are a slew of different ways to gather and document information. But no matter what, the school is going to need to have ways to evaluate itself and make positive strategic changes - before being sanctioned by an authorizer if it runs into challenges, and before growing if it is a success and looking to expand.

There are things that need to be constantly evaluated, namely but not limited to: student achievement, program strengths and weaknesses (such as curricular effectiveness and the quality of interventions), operational gaps or needs, individual staff effectiveness and strengths/weaknesses, and family satisfaction. An application will usually ask basic questions about how each of these will be evaluated, with a specific request (in many cases, but not all) for a draft of evaluation tools or a description of specific evaluation plans to be provided for these various evaluation scenarios. The data dashboards are a large part of the answer – the board can and should use high-quality dashboards to constantly evaluate the school. Annual or semi-annual surveys are often used to evaluate family satisfaction. Another part of the puzzle is to have formal evaluation processes for the leader, for the board (which is typically a self-assessment), for instructional staff, and for any major partners or a CMO/EMO.

Let's dig in a little more on leadership evaluation. A main job of the board is to monitor the leader as he or she manages the school to success, which is why the leadership evaluation process and draft tools are fair game for submission in the application itself and for an interview. We see constant struggles in this area. Sometimes leaders resist genuine evaluation, particularly if the leader perceives the board to be either disengaged or otherwise ill-informed. Other times a board doesn't feel truly qualified to conduct an evaluation, which we would say suggests the board needs more expertise and probably should recruit some new members. A great deal of our coaching work is focused on helping schools through contentious situations such as this and getting everyone to a healthy place with fair, clear evaluation tools and processes for completion. In order to remove emotion from the equation and help everyone get and stay on the same page, we always refer to the performance framework and/or charter accountability goals and the expectations that must be met to earn a full-term renewal. It sounds simple, but it is easy to get lost along the way when dealing with the pressures of running the school and navigating the mentally and emotionally taxing start-up years.

Have these conversations as a founding team, identify the protocols and draft tools that will satisfy everyone's goals and also will align well to the school's goals Then make sure to put the plans into action early in the life of the school - during the incubation year, if possible, when the goals can more easily be tweaked, with the performance framework and goals serving as a guiding beacon.

Let's also dig in a little more on self-evaluation for the board, which also should connect to and align with the performance framework and individual school goals. Best practice in charter school governance is to conduct an annual self-evaluation. As with everything charter related there are a variety of ways to do this and many different evaluation tools that can be used. Ideally the tool and process will be personalized to meet the specific circumstances of each unique school. Progress against strategic priorities and plans should be included, and if done properly those will align with charter goals and accountability expectations – remember everything connects so this isn't hard! Do it this way from the start, with annual evaluation at the end of the school year. You will be happy you did.

For both the board and leadership evaluations, set the dates on the shared calendars for when all key milestones in the evaluation processes will be completed, who is responsible for each and how they are going to be shared and discussed. For instructional staff evaluations and family satisfaction surveys, let the leader handle those. The board should receive an update about the process and results but does not need to be involved in conducting the evaluations.

Looking toward renewal

This section is less about the application phase and more about the first and subsequent charter terms, so we will keep it brief.

Identify political pressures that may potentially impact renewal decisions. What conversations in your state or city might impact renewal recommendations and votes? Don't be caught by surprise by these.

Be an active and relentless ambassador! Advocacy is necessary to the future of your school and the charter school community.

● Invite decisionmakers to visit your school at times other than during high stakes renewal. Invite local elected leaders – those who are supportive of charters, and

those who perhaps aren't as publicly supportive. Cultivating strong relationships is critical.
- Showcase students, teachers and families on social media, in traditional media like TV news and newspapers, and throughout the community. Increase public awareness regarding the great work you do any way that you can.
- Control your brand and messaging - others will try to tell your story; don't make it easy and never surrender your narrative.
- Keep in mind pipelines of future candidates and identify influencers at multiple levels; figure out what motivates or moves people.
- Remember: relationships matter!

BUDGET

The budget is one of those areas where many applicants choose to use a consultant. We have mixed emotions on this, as we know how easily a capacity interview can fall apart if the founding team isn't intimately familiar with the budget construction. It will become apparent immediately to a seasoned authorizer if a consultant has done the work for you. Remember, in most instances (not all, but most) the consultant will not be allowed in the room with you while you interview.

On the other hand, budget construction is a particularly specific detail-oriented task and can be tricky. Using an experienced charter school consultant can be a smart way to ensure the proposed school has a smart plan to move forward with upon chartering. If you do this, make sure the person is able to spend ample time digging into and explaining the details and the "whys" so that the proposed founding team is able to successfully and coherently field questions during an interview. Identify someone on the founding team who can work closely with the consultant to become an expert regarding the proposed budget and financial plan narrative.

Whether or not you use a consultant, the founding team absolutely must have a finance and budgeting expert, and ideally, multiple candidates. Most authorizers will want to know who the proposed Treasurer of the board is. If awarded a charter, this is the team that will be trusted with millions of dollars in taxpayer money. **It is a critical responsibility and financial mismanagement is one of the most common reasons schools are closed!**

A quick pitfall to avoid: ensure you know whether funds will be available if they're written into the budget and have a contingency plan if those funds don't appear. For example, many schools can apply for federal Charter School Program grant funding to support start-up. In some places the funds are automatically awarded upon approval and in

others, the funds are competitive. If the school isn't guaranteed funding, it is probably not a good idea to put it in the budget, or at least have a contingency strategy showing the budget can still work if those funds aren't awarded.

If the budget relies on philanthropy, be prepared to show evidence with commitment letters. Again, expect a reviewer to ask what happens if those funds also don't flow; providing supporting evidence such as a commitment letter or award letter ensures this will likely not happen. But you never know if a foundation will close or an individual donor will have a change of circumstances, so just be cautious. Always be able to talk about how the school will remain stable if philanthropy stops.

The same caution applies to the per pupil funding provided to public schools. We often advise founding teams to be very conservative and construct the budget with minimal increases to uncertain funding. In fact, we can easily make the case for doing the initial budget on flat funding. The specific approach will vary by location and circumstances; just make sure to give this some serious thought. It is never a bad thing to be prepared for the unknown and unexpected.

Applications generally ask for a budget narrative along with the budget, and sometimes an entire "financial plan" section as well. These all need to align. And the budget narrative simply must make sense in the context of the environment. For example, we've reviewed applications where a member of the team searched real estate listings to prove that the assumption per square foot for the building cost was widely out of line with the reality of the real estate market in the proposed location. We've also seen budget assumptions with teacher salaries wildly out of line with other schools in the area and neither the narrative nor information shared in the capacity interview could justify how the school would find high-quality staff at such a reduced salary rate. Be logical and thoughtful about these things.

Resource Allocation

The board and leaders have to allocate resources and have to be ready to explain why funds have been prioritized the way they appear in the budget.

There are no hard-and-fast rules here, but there are some general thresholds most reviewers hold in their heads regarding how they expect costs to shake-out across the budget - exceed them and you run the risk of red flags. These thresholds will vary by location and some other factors, so we hesitate to cite any firm figures as concrete rules. With that said, the two most common areas we've seen scrutinized have been when a proposal exceeds 15-20 percent of the budget on facilities or if a proposal

pitches a relationship with a management company taking above 10 percent of revenue, but without providing support to the actual academic program (i.e. taking 10+ percent solely for back-office functions). Again, use these thresholds with a grain of salt and do the homework needed to see if the proposed budget is in line with other start-up budgets in the same geographic area. It is always wise to check out the budgets of some previously approved schools. Also, the authorizer you apply to may be very willing to have such conversations and may have even added some guidelines in the application for you to use.

Once the budget is submitted and a school makes it through approval, it will be necessary to modify it to ensure it best fits the new start-up reality and is constantly monitored through budget-to-actual reconciliation.

One of the main functions of the board of trustees over the course of the school's life is to enact budgets that allocate resources to best support students and teachers. This is something many authorizers will ask about during monitoring and oversight visits and in annual reports.

It all boils down to this simple question, especially if the school has faced difficulties: how do you decide where to invest resources, especially given many competing interests and a tighter budget than is ideal? Our best advice is to document all conversations, especially those held during board meetings or sub-committee meetings focused on finances and/or program investments and always be ready to explain to the school community or to the authorizer the reasoning behind the decisions made. Use the mission as your North Star to guide the conversations, use the performance goals and frameworks to ensure everyone keeps the academic outcomes required in mind and communicate effectively to ensure the board and leadership are on the same page.

One final mistake we want to mention: schools tend to save for the ideal facility. Sometimes this is done at the expense of investing in the current academic program. Don't risk being shut down with money in the bank because the board relentlessly looks toward a dream building rather than ensuring children have what they need to be educated *right now*.

CONFIDENTIALITY

We've referenced consultants throughout this manual and are, of course, consultants ourselves, but we think it is important to offer a word of caution when it comes to using people like us.

We've observed that the line between consultants and authorizers can get blurry. Many consultants rely on the authorizer to recommend their services as a way to get clients. This can lead to conflicts of interest in the effort of maintaining those relationships. It's a two-way street; just as consultants rely on the referrals of authorizers, the latter may solicit "off the record" information on an applicant to garner extra information. Remember, authorizers are free to accept information about the school from any source.

We recommend you get an iron-clad confidentiality agreement in the contract with a consultant – and verbally set the expectation that the confidentiality agreement must be honored, just to ensure you're on the same page and feel comfortable that everyone is upholding the same high standards.

We also recommend you conduct some due diligence before engaging any consultant. It is acceptable to try to get and check references. Feel comfortable asking the consultant to describe their relationship with the authorizer and interview them about their approach to these topics.

This goes for all types of consultants, such as those who support writing, are involved with finances, provide board coaching or strategic planning, provide "turnaround" types academic or organizational supports, to name many.

There are many fantastic service providers who will not let you down in this area, so don't be scared of entering these relationships. Just do so with your eyes wide open, knowing the risk and having all the applicable and appropriate conversations.

CONCLUSION

It is our hope that this manual provided a starting point for you on your path to starting a charter school by offering insights into the lessons learned, coaching provided at hundreds of schools nationwide and experiences with authorizers over our combined 40-plus years in the charter school movement and environment. It is not an easy space in which to exist, let alone thrive, but when you get it right, you're positively changing the lives of so many children. And as you remember from page one, it must always be about the children!

Absolutely call us for a free consultation if you've made it this far and want to hear from us personally about everything you're already doing wrong!

In all seriousness, we hope this read has been helpful and hope if you pursue this endeavor, that you will succeed.