

Tips from Experienced Charter School Developers

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Charter only if there is a **reason** to do so. Ask:

- Can this be done without a charter school?
- Is there an un-served/under-served population?
- Is there a group of disengaged students that could be reengaged?
- Is there a specialized curriculum that would benefit/motivate a group of students? (Project based, green, Montessori, etc.)
- Are there natural partnerships that could benefit students? (Technical college, university, arts community, museum, historical society, environmental groups, etc)
- Is there a demand in the area for this curriculum/school?

Establish a **501c3 non-profit corporation** to support the school and hold the contract

- Use an attorney to complete the paperwork and process
- The 501c3 for the charter school negotiates and signs the charter/contract
- The 501c3 operates the charter school or contracts with a charter school operator
- Inform potential contributors of this status and the tax benefits it provides
- Make sure that the attorney and insurance company risk management personnel agree on liability issues covered in the charter/contract and non-profit by laws
 - ✓ Secure liability insurance for the school and governance board if the authorizer's liability insurance does not cover the charter school
 - ✓ Consider securing liability insurance for the charter school and governance board in addition to authorizer's liability policy
 - ✓ Recheck liability language if personnel at the law firms or insurance companies change

Have the right people on the **planning committee and governance board**

- The planning committee and governance board of the charter school have very different roles
 - ✓ The planning committee develops the original strategic plan for the school
 - ✓ The governance board is the board that oversees the operation of the school
 - ✓ For purposes of continuity, continue several members of the planning committee as members of the governance board
 - ✓ The governance board sets policy, develops and signs contracts, establishes and monitors the budget, approves the curriculum, approves/ hires and makes staffing decisions, evaluates the school and charter school administrator
- Include people with school, curriculum, finance, business, human resource and legal experience as well as parents as governance board members

- Include people who have a passion for the school and curriculum on the planning committee and governance board
- Develop a plan to move beyond the founders of the school - Watch for signs of “founders disease” (the inability to let go and allow others with new ideas to assume positions of leaderships)
- Avoid people who may have vested interests
- Avoid people who are divisive and/or who have past histories of financial insolvency or conviction by the courts or licensing agencies

Consider all **sources of funding**

- Per student state aid and tax levy (including : open enrollment, 2 ½ hour per day private school students, 4 K students, etc)
- Claims (such as: jail/detention, single parent, summer school)
- Entitlement funds (including: SPED, Title, etc.)
- Contracts (such as: contracts between educational agencies, contracts with partnering organizations, and contracts for services)
- Grants
 - ✓ USDE (United States Department of Education) Planning, Implementation, Implementation Renewal, Dissemination, and Dissemination Renewal grants
 1. The charter school is the recipient of and determines the use of these USDE grant funds
 2. The authorizer is the fiscal agent and processes the grant funds but does not have decision making authority over the grant funds
 - ✓ USDE McKinney Vento -Homeless Children and Youth grants
 - ✓ Alternative Education grants
 - ✓ Foundation grants
- Corporate donations
- Community donations
- Excess revenue generated by the charter school
 - ✓ Stipulate in the contract who retains any budget carry over and any excess revenues generated by the charter school
 - ✓ Stipulate in the charter/contract how the excess funds can be used

Determine **staffing** issues

- Determine in the charter/contract
 - ✓ Who will employ the staff and administrator? (charter school, authorizer, educational service agency, contractor)
 - ✓ Who will select staff? (charter school, contractor)
 - ✓ Who will supervise the staff? (charter school administrator or contractor)
 - ✓ Who will supervise the administrator? (charter school governance board or contractor)

- Recognize that sharing an administrator with a traditional school (especially in a shared building) is difficult and often creates problems
- Include in the charter/contract staffing projections that correspond with enrollment projections and negotiate amendments to these sections of the contract/charter as necessary
- Determine a method of securing and financing the training of additional and replacement staff
- If union contracts apply, develop an MOU with the unions (and authorizer, if appropriate) after plans for the school have been developed by the planning committee
 - ✓ Cover: seniority, transfer, bumping, lay off/reduction in force
 - ✓ Secure written exemptions from union contracts for issues related to working conditions unique to the charter school such as: hours, calendar, extended contract time, minutes of instruction, staff development, etc.

Determine if any **in-kind contributions or trades** are possible with collaborating partners

- Space/facilities
- Equipment
- Support services (media, custodial, security, etc.)
- “Transcribed” college credit

Consider long term growth when selecting a **location**

- Models where the charter school shares a facility with a traditional school are difficult to manage and often cause problems for one or both schools
- Charter schools must meet all local, state and federal health and safety requirements
- IDEA/ADA compliance must be assured

Develop a **revenues and expenses**

- Plan for start up costs which may exceed long term operating costs (For example: the cost per student may be higher when the school is starting and has a lower enrollment)
- Consider cost comparisons with other similar schools and other public and private schools
- Use a “buy back process” to establish the budget if securing services from the authorizer (i.e. determine a cost per student and buy back such things as business services, SPED, technology through the contract/charter and/or use a cost per square foot to determine rent)
- Record/track revenue and expenses on a spread sheets every year, beginning year one
- Include a financial sustainability plan as part of your strategic planning process

Develop/secure a **curriculum plan** that covers the state/national standards

- Implement the curriculum with integrity
- Determine if you plan to meet accreditation requirements or plan to deliver a high bred of your type of curriculum and the traditional curriculum (for example: a project based or Montessori school with a traditional/non-integrated physical education class instead of a physical education class integrated into the project based or Montessori curriculum)

Determine how the charter school will be protected if **disputes** arise or changes in the administration/board of the authorizer occur

- Create a local “arbitration committee” to resolve conflicts between the charter school and authorizer
- Find a “600 pound gorilla” to guard the door/school

Additional Lessons Learned

- Autonomy within the confines of the contract is critical to success
- Accountability is impossible without autonomy
- Quality is critical to the success of individual students and of the school
- It is the nature of institutions to attempt to pull innovators back into the system. (*The Innovator’s Dilemma* by Clayton Christianson)
 - ✓ Innovation is a messy process
 - ✓ Innovation involves disruptive not incremental change
 - ✓ Innovation cannot be fully planned up-front or standardized
 - ✓ Innovation requires risk taking
 - ✓ Innovation involves making mistakes and learning from them
 - ✓ Punishing innovators for unintentional mistakes cuts off further innovation
 - ✓ Innovators need strong support from the CEO and a significant degree of freedom to be successful
- One function of the governance board of the charter school is to protect the school from attempts to pull the school back into the traditional norms, models, culture and practices of the authorizer
- Authorizers and charter school governance boards are bound by the charter/contract
- Establishment of the charter/contract for a minimum of five years allows the school to get past the “Hawthorne Effect” and the developmental stages of form, norm, storm and perform
- Creation of a sustainability plan for the school is a vital part of the initial planning process
- Following the Best Practice Guidelines of NACSA (National Association Charter School Authorizers) (<http://www.qualitycharters.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3393>) increases the potential for long term success
 - ✓ The authorizer ensures that middle management (including central office administration and the building principals in non-LEA charter schools) are supportive of the charter school and of its autonomy
 - ✓ The administration and staff of the authorizer assist the charter school as stipulated in the contract/charter and if the charter school governance board requests assistance
- Direct report of the charter school administrator to the charter school governance board is critical to ensure autonomy
- Micro- management of the administrator (or of the teacher-led leadership team) by the governance board is never productive

- ✓ The governance board deals with the “what” is to be accomplished (Sets policy, budget, curriculum; evaluates the school and administration; develops and signs contracts and monitors contract compliance)
 - ✓ Individual governance board members (including the board president) have no authority to take any action unless that authority has been specifically delegated to them by governance board action
 - ✓ The administrator deals with the “how” things are accomplished (Implementation of governance board decisions/policies and supervision of staff)
- Contract/charter renegotiations in areas such as budget, enrollment projections, staffing, and facility needs will be necessary and may need to be completed more frequently for innovative/non-replication charter schools
 - ✓ Revise the strategic plan and contract/charter as necessary
 - ✓ Make changes to the contract through negotiations not by unilaterally making/imposing changes
 - ✓ Revise contractual items through addendums approved and signed by all parties
 - ✓ Develop and implement a contract renewal plan one year prior to the end of the contract/charter
- Start-up costs beyond the charter school grant funds should be expected
- Strengthen the school by fostering media, business, community and legislative support and association membership
- It is the responsibility of the charter school governance board and authorizer to ensure that parents understand that the charter school governance board makes policy decisions and is the legally responsible party for the charter school
- Effective communication between the charter school administrator and CEO/superintendent of the authorizer is critical
- Effective communication between the charter school governance board and authorizer’s governing board is vital
- In communities with multiple charter schools, shared training and frequent communication among the charter school governance boards is advantageous to all parties
- When selecting consultants be sure that at least one of the consultants has started and/or administered a charter school for at least three to five years prior to providing consulting services
- On-going training for the authorizer, charter school board and charter school staff is necessary for the long term success of the school