



STARTING STRONG

Best Practices In Starting
A Charter School

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This report summarizes findings from a study of charter schools in three states and interviews with organizations that support new charter schools through technical assistance, training, and resources in 11 states. Funding was provided by the State Charter Schools Commission of Georgia. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the sponsor.

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INTRODUCTION

Charter schools are one of the fastest growing forms of schooling, with over 6,000 schools and 2.3 million students, and they continue to increase in number at about 6% per year. This growth is due to many factors, perhaps none more important than the desire on the part of parents for more educational options, along with bipartisan political support. Yet, maintaining the support of parents, the broader public, and their authorizing bodies requires charter schools to quickly establish a track record of strong academic achievement while simultaneously operating what is, in essence, a non-profit organization. This initial success is absolutely crucial. A national study of charter schools found that school performance in the first few years is a strong predictor of later performance.¹ In other words, early excellence leads to continued high performance, and new charter schools with weak performance in their first year are likely to continue to struggle.

Starting a new school involves many challenges—managing the budget, acquiring suitable facilities, designing the instructional program, and hiring teachers, to name a few. And though charter school founders encounter substantial autonomy in their decision-making as they operationalize their vision for a school, that autonomy brings responsibility for an overwhelming list of activities, including but certainly not limited to maintaining appropriate accounting procedures; complying with local, state, and federal policy; providing meals, security, custodians, psychological services, and bus companies; and of course, educating children.² As we have stated, successfully navigating these challenges to achieve a strong start-up is critical to new charter schools. The challenges are even greater for stand-alone charter schools that lack the support systems of established charter networks, such as KIPP or Rocketship Charter Schools, or traditional school systems that may provide vital guidance or resources during the complex process of opening a new school. With two-thirds of charter schools being non-affiliated or stand-alone schools,³ the need is great for assistance in navigating this start-up period.

This report provides guidance, along with a collection of best practices, for individuals or groups interested in petitioning for a new charter school, or for founders with a newly authorized charter so that charter schools can start strong. Despite the multitudes of books and articles describing the practices of effective charter schools, there is little rigorous empirical study of the start-up period. Much of the literature focuses on anecdotes or profiles of specific schools, often without reference to the achievement profiles of those



¹ Peltason and Raymond, "Charter School Growth and Replication."

² Griffin and Wohlstetter, "Building a Plane While Flying It."

³ National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, "The Public Charter Schools Dashboard."

schools or concrete guidance for early success. Furthermore, little research differentiates between stand-alone charters and those that belong to a management organization or network, even though the process of starting a new school is vastly different from scaling an existing school model. By focusing on the critical practices of starting new charter schools, this report aims to fill this gap and serve as a resource for charter school founders.

METHODOLOGY

This report draws on two main sources of data: interviews with experts who work for organizations that support charter schools during their start-up period through the use of technical assistance, training, and resources, and interviews with founders of successful charter schools in Georgia, Tennessee, and Florida. In addition, we draw on existing literature about best practices in charter schools, particularly in starting a charter school. Much of the literature under review speaks to charters in general. Since much of the literature does not differentiate between different types of charter schools, identifying past research on charter schools without charter management organizations proves difficult at times. Even so, many of the elements that have led to successful charters are simply best practices and are applicable to many schools, regardless of whether or not they belong to a management organization, network, or even a public school district.

INTERVIEWS WITH CHARTER SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS

The first round of data collection included phone interviews with leaders who work at Charter Support Organizations (CSOs). These organizations provide technical assistance, training, and resources to new charter schools. The goal of these interviews was to get the perspective of individuals who have worked with a broad array of new charter schools during their start-up period on what differentiates charter schools with a strong start from those that struggle to establish themselves and demonstrate high growth in student achievement. We began by focusing on 11 states: Georgia, as well as 10 states that were selected by balancing the following criteria: neighboring states, states with similar charter school laws, and states with a relatively high percentage of charter schools. The states include: Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Louisiana, Michigan, New York, Ohio, South Carolina and Tennessee, along with Washington, DC. Within those states, we used Internet searches and expert referrals to identify one to two organizations that support charter schools through technical assistance, training, and resources. This included individuals in local charter school incubators, state charter school associations, and similar organizations. In addition to the state-based organizations, we identified three organizations that operated on a national level. A total of 20 organizations were contacted for interviews, and 16 organizations participated in an hour-long interview.

INTERVIEWS WITH CHARTER SCHOOL FOUNDERS

The second round of data collection included in-person interviews with the founders of 19 charter schools that had a strong start-up period. This included 10 in Georgia, four in Florida, and five in Tennessee. Tennessee and Florida were selected as comparison states due to geographic proximity and similarities in some aspects of the charter school laws. The schools were chosen on the basis of two criteria: expert recommendations and independent verification of higher-than-average student achievement growth. Specifically, we accessed state achievement data to develop databases of charter schools that are not associated with networks or comprehensive charter management organizations, and compared the trajectory of student performance in the charter schools to both state averages and local district averages. When available, we also considered achievement indicators that accounted for the student population served (i.e., growth or value-added measures). After using publicly available test score data to identify schools that had three years of achievement results above the results for similar populations in their local

district,⁴ we used recommendations from local charter school experts to verify that the chosen schools were recognized as high performers and met the criteria of being a charter school that is not affiliated with a network or comprehensive charter management organization. The appendix includes information on the specific schools that participated in the interviews.

In conducting the interviews, we sought to interview the founder or, in the case of schools where the founder is no longer associated with the school, an individual familiar with the founding period. In a few cases we interviewed more than one person, such as a founding board member as well as the first principal/director. The interviews lasted about 90 minutes and were followed by a school tour. The schools we interviewed were diverse in many ways. Some were established by a group of individuals who saw a need for a new school, worked to develop the vision for that school, and eventually became the founding governance board and hired the first leader. Other schools were started by a single person who had a clear vision for a school, recruited a board that could help make that school a reality, and then became the school leader once the charter was approved. In other words, some school leaders developed the board while others were selected by an established board. As such, the terms leader and founder will be used interchangeably throughout this report.

As is evident in this report, every school is different in terms of culture, staff, operations, systems, and even physical space. Furthermore, charter schools are different not only from traditional public schools, but also from one another.⁵ Despite this diversity, what we present are commonalities amongst high achieving charter schools. Still, there is no checklist for how to start a successful school.

A myriad of events occur simultaneously in the birth of a charter school, and they must be expertly balanced with the school mission clearly in mind to create a successful charter school. Each school that we viewed, researched, or came to know through interviews is inherently different from any other school, and though we cannot offer a blueprint for charter school founding, we do offer established, proven practices that can be analyzed and contextualized to fit individual school needs. We present this report in the hope that future founders can achieve a strong start, laying the foundation for future success.

The report is organized around eleven domains that represent important aspects of operating a charter school. Since mission, as a crucial element of success, will be mentioned throughout the report, we begin with focusing on the school mission.

FOCUSING ON THE MISSION

Why are you starting a school? What will be the defining features of your school? While these are simple questions, they require a significant amount of unbundling. Every charter school founder must be able to answer questions such as these in a clear and concise manner via a mission statement. A mission is one of the keys to a successful charter school because it captures the very essence of a school while simultaneously manifesting itself in day-to-day activities. In a survey of 110 charter schools, charter school founders ranked “establish clear vision, mission, philosophy to which all are committed” at the top of the list of advice to someone who is trying to create a charter school.⁶ A mission should be specific. It should clearly define what will be accomplished, how the school will meet its students’ academic needs, and what differentiates this school from others. Founders must be purposeful in the process of formulating both their mission and their vision for carrying it out.

⁴ In the case of schools that were in their third year of operation, we only used two years of achievement data.

⁵ Izumi and Yan, *Free to Learn*.

⁶ Medler and Nathan, “Charter Schools.”

A CLEAR, WELL-DEFINED MISSION AND CORE VALUES SHOULD LEAD THE PROCESS.

The more concise and clear one's mission statement is, the easier the mission will be for others to understand and embrace. The schools we visited had a variety of missions and core values, but they all spent time early in the start-up process coming to shared agreement on the mission and values. One school started with the idea of "In the perfect school, we could..." and built a mission around the ideas generated. The mission should describe why the organization exists and what it does, while motivating and inspiring individuals in the organization, and helping frame evaluation of the organization's output.⁷ Many successful charter schools also included core beliefs along with their missions to help in their decision-making. Below are a few examples of missions from successful charter schools we interviewed:

- Empowering young African American men to become productive civic leaders, with a thematic approach that integrates experiences with aviation and aeronautics
- Building the scholarly habits, attitudes, and skills students need to succeed in college, in their communities, and in life
- Integrating parents into their children's learning while providing a strong academic foundation
- Creating field-based, experiential learning activities
- Revitalizing a neighborhood by providing a rigorous education that serves mixed income families and operates as a neighborhood anchor
- Developing project-based learning experiences where creativity, arts, and leadership are a focus
- Initiating the young mind into the art of thinking through the teaching of Mathematics and the Greek Language

"I think the most important thing is the mission, the vision that the founders have. You don't make a vision a reality on the opening day of school, but the commitment to making that a reality has got to be there for everybody, not just for the founders, but for the staff, the families and the kids. This is a joint effort. You can't do this kind of thing unless everyone is committed to it, and that's what I felt we had at the school." – Members of the International Community School Founding Group



⁷ Merseth and Cooper, Inside Urban Charter Schools.

EVERY DECISION SHOULD LEAD BACK TO FULFILLING THE MISSION.

“We make sure that our mission statement is not just something that’s posted to the wall, but something that we are living and practicing and modeling, and then expecting of our students.”

– Katherine Kelbaugh, Museum School of Avondale Estates

Everyone in the building should be able to not only articulate the school’s mission, but also to articulate how every action and interaction in the school relates back to that mission. As such, it is the leader’s job to be very explicit about how every decision relates to the mission, both to the staff and to the board. Eventually, mission alignment will come reflexively to a leader, but until then it is necessary to frame every thought around the mission. Leaders should also be willing to prioritize expenses based on fulfilling the mission. Hiring passionate teachers and staff who align with the mission also helps to further the cause of a charter school.⁸

GROWING SLOW HELPS TO PERFECT THE MISSION.

All of the schools we interviewed grew one grade at a time or opted to start with one class for each grade and then increase enrollment in grades over time. Many elementary schools expanded into middle and high schools as their first class of students were promoted. Some schools began K-2 so they could better prepare students for state testing in third grade. By growing the school slowly, founders were able to create a culture in the first year that

was reiterated as the school expanded. Still, growing slowly means that there will be big changes in the school for the first several years.

ESTABLISHING EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE

New charter schools rely heavily on their boards, and strong boards have the potential to offer expertise to founders and work behind the scenes to ensure that charters set and meet their goals. One key area that charter schools need to navigate during their start-up phase is the establishment of a quality board and effective procedures for how the board functions. With 27% of new charters being disrupted by internal governance conflicts,⁹ the critical role of the governing board cannot be overlooked.

SELECT BOARD MEMBERS WHO AGREE WITH THE SCHOOL’S MISSION AND HAVE TIME TO START A SCHOOL.

As with all people involved in a charter school, board members must fully understand and be committed to the mission of the school. This alignment may occur naturally as the board collectively establishes the vision for the school, but may also be intentionally developed when an



⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Betts and Hill, *Taking Measure of Charter Schools*.

individual founder recruits the board. For example, one founder vetted potential board members for mission alignment by inviting them to a meal and asking them pointed questions to reveal their values and beliefs.

All board members should be willing to invest a significant portion of their time to board participation and be willing to “roll up their sleeves.” One CSO executive said that founding board members should be prepared to devote at least 10-15 hours a month to board responsibilities during the early years of a charter school. Another founder recounted working with her board every weeknight and every weekend during the year before doors opened.

SELECT BOARD MEMBERS WHO CAN OFFER VITAL EXPERTISE AND RESOURCES ON ALL OPERATIONAL AREAS.

Per our research, the ideal governing board is comprised of 7-11 members, each of whom is able to substantively contribute to school operations. CSOs and founders repeatedly recommended having a diverse board that includes members with the following areas of expertise: finance and accounting; real estate and facilities; legal and human resource services; fundraising; marketing; community partnerships; and academic programming. While it may be unrealistic for a board to contain expertise in every area listed above, it's important for a leader to complement his or own weaknesses via a strong board. It is also imperative to include community members who are well respected and can rally the community around the school, helping to build community partnerships and connections. Board members should be expected to marshal their expertise, resources, and networks to help meet the school's needs.

“The founding board was strategic. We had our money people, our education people, a facility person, our construction person. Work, wealth, and wisdom...those are your watchwords...a school that wants to do good has to do well by guaranteeing that you have the people in place with expertise or connections to get that expertise.” – Thomas Beazley, Promise Academy

BALANCE COMMUNITY AND PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN GOVERNANCE WITH OTHER PRIORITIES.

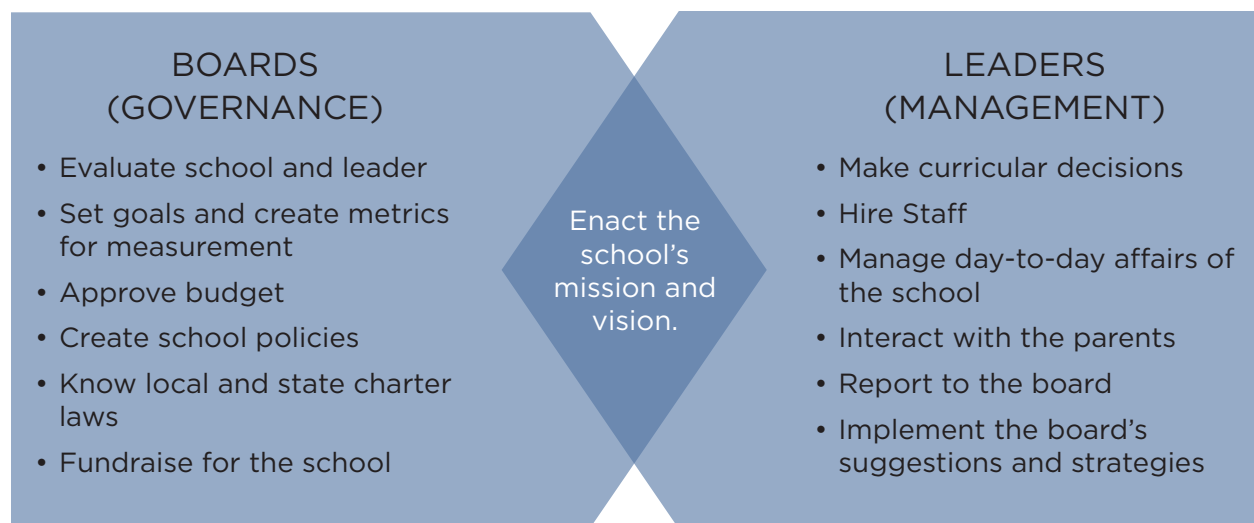
Boards are most successful when members have a connection to the school's community and are knowledgeable regarding local politics and non-profits. Many schools in our study purposefully targeted influential community members to serve on their boards, and one school was fortunate enough to persuade the city's future mayor to serve. At the same time, a board that is comprised entirely of local community members without the areas of expertise noted above will lack the capacity to effectively fulfill their critical roles.

Founders and CSOs were split on the role that parents should play on the board, as this could lead to a conflict of interests. A few strongly recommended the practice, while others advised against it or had phased parents out of the board over time. Generally, those who placed parents on the boards hand picked those parents for specific skills. Those who went the other way felt that parents were unable to put the best interest of the school before the best interest of their own child. One way to provide parent representation is to put the president of the PTO on the board and encourage parent concerns to be voiced through him or her.

There was less support for placing teachers on the board, though some schools did place teachers on board subcommittees. Some of the schools began with teachers on the board, but these teachers were phased out of the board over time. A conflict of interest can occur if teachers are both employed by the school while also helping to govern it.

CLARIFY THE BOARD'S ROLE IN GOVERNANCE—AND NOT MANAGEMENT—OF THE SCHOOL.

No matter who serves on the board, board members should receive thorough training, particularly on the distinction between school governance and school management and the respective responsibilities of the board and school leader. Governance includes supporting the school's vision while simultaneously holding the leader accountable in regards to student outcomes and complying with local laws and regulations. Boards should be comfortable making large decisions and operating behind the scenes, being careful not to fall into micromanagement of school leaders.



ESTABLISH BOARD SUBCOMMITTEES FOR EFFICIENT OPERATIONS.

Founders and CSOs frequently mentioned subcommittees for specific tasks as best practices. Subcommittees on the budget, facilities, educational programming, and governance were common, with each subcommittee chaired by an expert in that area. Subcommittees allow board members to come to a decision or examine an issue outside of the board's normal meeting time. This helps streamline meetings and increase board efficiency. Subcommittees can also serve as an influx of additional expertise, as they need not be entirely composed of sitting board members.

ESTABLISH FREQUENT AND TRANSPARENT COMMUNICATION BETWEEN THE BOARD AND SCHOOL LEADER.

Boards should meet at least once a month, with board chairs and founders meeting as often as once a week. Multiple founders recounted meeting with their boards several times a week during the start-up phase. No line of communication is more important than the one between the founder and the board chair. Transparent metrics for success and commitment to the school mission ensure effective communication between the board and school leader.

"Less successful schools have boards that are less engaged; [boards] that are not partners with the school leader on setting strategic direction, developing the metrics that hold the organization accountable for results. I think when that happens, things break down pretty fast, because when it's not clear who's responsible for what and what metrics people are being held accountable for, you see schools come off the rails quite a bit."

– Greg Thompson, Tennessee Charter School Center

The Museum School of Avondale Estates began as a grassroots effort by local community members who wanted a unique and research-based school. As the community group became committed to petitioning for a charter school, they formed a non-profit association. The founding board grew out

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of that community group. Members of the initial founding board all had young children and thought about the type of school they wanted for their children. Comprised of eight members, the founding board included a human resources professional, graphics designer, grant writer, professor, and a surgeon. The board hired consultants to assist in areas where no board member had expertise. The current governing board operates through committees, including academic excellence, personnel, governance, finance, facilities, and communication. The principal is an ex officio member of the board and serves on the personnel and academic excellence committees. There is also an elected staff representative on the board to offer a teacher perspective. Accessibility, transparency, and the clear delineation of roles have proved vital to getting the school off to a successful start.

ESTABLISHING EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP AND CULTURE

Leadership and culture are two abstract words that are often attributed to an organization's success. While the founders and experts interviewed for this study found it difficult to define leadership, they did provide insight into the characteristics of individuals who made effective start-up charter school leaders, and what these leaders did to establish the right culture in the school.

SKILLS FOR STARTING A CHARTER SCHOOL AREN'T LEARNED IN A BOOK.

Most leaders in our study had experience in the classroom, and a number had previously served as principals or assistant principals. Beyond this similarity, their paths differed greatly. Some went through formal leadership programs, while others relied on their past years in schools. Some had prior experience working in charter schools, while others had only worked in traditional schools. Two came from abroad. None felt they came in fully prepared to run a charter school. Leaders repeatedly talked of "learning on the fly" during the long days and nights leading up to opening the doors and continuing well beyond the first

"There's really nothing that can prepare you for this until you're doing it." – Kylie Holley, Pataula Charter Academy

year. The best preparation, founders said, was networking with school leaders from other high-performing charter schools—both within the community and across the country—to learn best practices and avoid having to reinvent the wheel.

IT'S NOT EASY TO DEFINE LEADERSHIP, YET WE CAME ACROSS MANY DEFINITIONS.

Leaders must wear many hats and be many things to different people. As potential leaders look to improve upon their capacity to lead, they may want to keep in mind the following characteristics that our respondents felt were most important:

- Resilience in the face of numerous obstacles and parties of opposition
- Flexibility to accommodate to the changing needs of a school and an onslaught of operational, academic, and political challenges while still holding firm to a belief in the school's mission¹⁰
- Communication skills necessary to transparently express vision and ideas to board members, teachers, students, and parents
- Humility to learn new things and recognize when something is not working
- Ambition in setting high expectations for all involved in the school and commitment to realizing those expectations
- Ability and charisma to mobilize groups inside and outside of the school

¹⁰ Frumkin, Manno, and Edgington, *The Strategic Management of Charter Schools*.

LEADERS WILL BE MEASURED AND JUDGED BY THE WORK OF THOSE THEY HIRE; SO HIRE WELL AND TREAT THEM WELL.

When asked what constitutes strong leadership, the answer that came up most often was the ability to hire well. Leaders who are able to surround themselves with quality people and create a sense of trust are the most successful. Likewise, leaders must not elevate themselves from their staff and should be actively involved in the day-to-day of the school. In a few instances, this manifested itself in leaders teaching classes during a portion of the day. It can also mean the leader picking up tiny pieces of trash without taking pause from a conversation. Finally, leaders must be wary of burnout amongst staff and make it clear to teachers that their well being is just as important as that of their students. The founders in our study were keenly aware that they asked for a large commitment of time and emotions from their teachers and thought carefully about making the work environment one where teachers could sustain energy and dedication for years. The founders recognized that long-term success required systems that sustained their effective practices.

THERE IS NOT ENOUGH TIME IN THE DAY TO RUN A CHARTER SCHOOL.

Time management is a crucial skill for leaders. First, leaders must allow one to two years of planning before opening a school. If feasible, a summer school program can serve as a trial run and help leaders identify areas that need improvement before the doors open. The schedule of a new charter leader may vary considerably by the day. Leaders in our interviews recommended scheduling time during the week to observe classrooms, coach teachers, and interact with students. In other words, leaders need to make sure they prioritize being on the “ground level” of the school and realize that the school day continues long after students leave.

“I believe in the idea of leadership in Tao Te Ching. At the end of the day the success is for the people whom you lead. The whole idea is to lead from behind and let them celebrate their success. You act as the one to cheer them on and let them know that you really [care].” – Suttiwan Cox, Dekalb PATH Academy



ESTABLISHING THE RIGHT CULTURE REQUIRES PRECISE PLANNING.

In the schools we studied, culture was no accident; it was a fine-tuned vision that required a great deal of forethought. Well before students ever entered the building, schools would outline exactly what they wanted students to accomplish by the time they left, and plan backwards from there. No detail was too minute. For example, leaders and their teams spent considerable time discussing how students would pass in homework or fine-tuning the transition from one period to the next. When students arrived, our schools were apt to

spend the first days or weeks orienting them to the school culture, planned norms, and expectations. Some schools planned thoughtfully around creating highly structured environments with silent halls and students in straight lines in order to develop a culture where students could succeed academically. Adopting another stance, one school created halls in which students could speak to each other and exercise their developing language skills. Another injected an element of socio-emotional growth into all student projects to create a culture of caring.

“We’re very intentional about creating our culture, so that it does not create itself.”

– Kylie Holley, Pataula Charter Academy

STUDENT, TEACHER, AND COMMUNITY BUY-IN COMPLETES A POSITIVE CULTURE.

“You can teach all of the academics, but are we really teaching them to be good people?” – Richardean Golden Anderson, Fulton Leadership Academy

“Buy-in” is a popular word amongst charter school leaders, and a crucial component of culture. Without buy-in, culture crumbles. Therefore, students and teachers alike must truly believe in their school’s mission, rules, and expectations. At the staff level, buy-in can be created by bringing staffers into the discussion of what a school’s culture will look like. If community support is one of the school’s goals, community members should have input in a school’s beliefs and values. When appropriate, students should also voice their opinions about rules, norms, and expectations. It is much easier to create student buy-in when teachers and leaders take the time to explain why rules and regulations are in place.

KEEP CULTURE POSITIVE.

Asking students to meet academically rigorous expectations five or six days a week is taxing, and intense academics must be balanced with a culture of joy. Positivity can and should be ingrained both within the school day and celebrated during more formal special occasions. In schools we toured, colorful posters “shouting out” students and displaying school values marked hallways, and classmates squinted their eyes and touched their temples as they sent peers silent “brain waves” while searching their heads for answers, offering synchronized cheers when those answers were correct. After recognizing that his school had rigor but lacked joy, one founder began announcing attendance and behavior achievements over the intercom, and installed weekly, whole-school meetings to present students and classrooms with creative awards such as the golden dictionary, the greatness sweater, and the leadership blazer.



DISCIPLINE.

Charters are often criticized for overly strict discipline policies and a tendency to counsel out difficult students. While founders should be aware of this trend, they should also realize that a discipline system

must be in place in any high-functioning school, regardless of the type of students it serves. One of our schools employs a full time Dean of Students who is responsible for culture as well as discipline. Another utilizes certified paraprofessionals to aid with children whose behavior is challenging. Most acknowledged that discipline became less of an issue every year as culture was built up and students who had been attending the school for some time were able to serve as role models for incoming students. Many schools in our study employed a merit/demerit system to balance punishment with rewards and urged teachers to highlight the positive publicly while privately discussing negative behavior with students.

If culture is the feeling one feels when entering a campus, then Brighten Academy's culture can be summed up with one word: warmth. Lisa McDonald, a charter founder who created Brighten with a group of fellow teachers, cares deeply for her teachers, who in turn transfer this care to their students, and this genuine care trickles down to every

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single person on campus. As Lisa puts it, "I still see myself as a teacher, I'm just teaching older people, and they have the same needs as the students, everybody needs to be treated differently, everybody is on a different learning path." Lisa

treats her staff as family, and she exudes her mantra that collaboration trumps competitiveness. She doesn't award a teacher of the year because she feels like all her teachers deserve the accolade, and she avoids letting teachers hand pick their classes. As a result, Brighten has a culture in which teachers and students interact with respect and care, and feel comfortable taking risks. To promote a culture of academic rigor and expeditionary learning, each student at Brighten has his or her own learning plan detailing specific learning goals for the year. Students track their own progress throughout the year and conference with teachers around goals. Students at Brighten are able to recite the school's mission. What's evident through students' actions and results is that they have not only memorized the mission, but internalized it as well.

DEVELOPING THE ACADEMIC PROGRAM

A strong academic program is key to the success of any school. For new charter schools, starting their academic and instructional program off on the right foot is particularly important. Indeed, a study of charter school outcomes found that the trajectory of school performance is established in the first year, with poor academic performance during the first year of operations serving as a strong indicator of continued poor performance.¹¹ There is no single route to a strong academic program, however. We saw charter schools with quite diverse curricular and instructional programs, including some that were purchased from national programs, and others that were self-created. Yet they were still successful in achieving high student outcomes. Despite the diversity in academic programs we observed, five themes were consistent across the schools we studied.

¹¹ Peltason and Raymond, "Charter School Growth and Replication."

“One of the reasons we’ve been very successful is we’ve never lost sight of our mission. [With] the teacher-directed program, you can get swallowed up in curriculum and forget who you’re teaching. There’s a human being at the end of that line, and if you’re that engrossed in subject matter you’re going to miss teaching that child.”

– Madeline O’Dea, Trinity School For Children

ACADEMIC PROGRAMS SHOULD GO HAND IN HAND WITH THE MISSION OF A CHARTER SCHOOL.

The selection of the curricular and instructional programs should begin with the mission and context of the school at the forefront. Being able to start with the end goal in mind will help founders put resources in the right places. We saw schools achieve success with both highly structured, direct instruction models and with project-based experiential learning models. What they shared was the ability to articulate how curriculum and instructional expectations contributed to the vision the school was trying to establish.

Structural decisions also impact the academic program and thus should be made intentionally to best meet the school’s mission. Examples of structural features that have been successful are smaller class sizes, extended school days and years, creating a sense of urgency and importance for productive classroom

time, common blackboard configurations in all classrooms, deliberate planning time for teachers, and team teaching.¹²

HIGH EXPECTATIONS AND RIGOROUS MATERIAL HELP CHARTERS GET OFF TO A STRONG START.

The successful charter schools we studied and the literature we reviewed all highlighted the importance of high expectations for students. While founders cited the state standards as guides in academic programming, many held themselves to higher standards by benchmarking to international standards or the highest performing states. For example, schools that deliberately prepared students for college created a culture around achievement and introduced analytical skills and problem solving early on.

BALANCE PURCHASING EXISTING PROGRAMS AND CREATING ALL MATERIALS IN-HOUSE.

Basing the academic program on the unique school mission does not mean that all materials must be developed from scratch. Though it can be challenging to integrate a pre-bought curriculum into a school’s mission, building a curriculum from scratch is a highly time-consuming pursuit.¹³ Finding the right balance between using established

“Ideally, your curriculum is really fluid and wouldn’t look the same year to year, because you’re really trying to go with what is interesting to the kids. It’s not just about worksheets or workbooks or that kind of thing.” – Michelle Blackmon, Atlanta Neighborhood Charter School

¹² Merseth and Cooper, *Inside Urban Charter Schools*; Griffin and Wohlstetter, “Building a Plane While Flying It.”

¹³ Griffin and Wohlstetter, “Building a Plane While Flying It.”

resources and adapting to your school's needs is critical, as is staying flexible and revising the academic program once initial data on student performance is available.¹⁴ As part of data driven decision-making, one must learn how to balance giving a chosen curriculum time to work while also quickly identifying when things are not working. When internal assessments showed that students were struggling with certain skills, the founders we spoke with shifted gears to try a new way of teaching the skill, even if it meant dropping or modifying a purchased curriculum.

TEACHERS NEED A VOICE AND CHOICE IN THE CURRICULUM AND SUPPORT IN THE CLASSROOM.

"A really powerful tool that we have witnessed is, during the summer or whenever you have downtime, giving teachers a voice at the table when curriculum is being developed." –David Frank, New York City Charter School Center

As charter schools grow and become more established, they hire personnel to lead teachers in further developing the curricular and instructional program. Supporting teachers effectively means providing appropriate training and giving them the autonomy necessary to make the best decisions in their classrooms. Teacher autonomy can be a positive force when teachers believe in the mission and understand the expectations of the curriculum. Many of the charters we visited had hired curriculum coaches to help teachers increase rigor or took on the role of an instructional expert themselves.

SPECIAL EDUCATION INSTRUCTION REQUIRES THOUGHTFUL ATTENTION AND RESOURCES.

Finding resources to effectively serve special education students is a particular concern for new charter schools.¹⁵ Strategies used by the successful start-up charter schools we studied include partnering with the local district to provide specialized services to special education students, using Response to Intervention or Responsible Inclusion to minimize the need for more resource-intensive services, and hiring teachers who are dually certified and can fill both special education and core subject needs.



¹⁴ Curry, Charter School Leadership Elements for School Success.

¹⁵ Rhim and McLaughlin, "Special Education in American Charter Schools"; Buddin and Zimmer, "Student Achievement in Charter Schools."

Archimedean Upper Conservatory was the highest achieving among all high schools in Florida in 2013. In addition, the school was ranked as the 19th most challenging high school in the US by the Washington Post in 2013. The mission of the Archimedean Schools is to initiate the young mind into the art of thinking through the teaching of

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Mathematics and the Greek Language. Starting at the kindergarten level, the school teaches the Florida mathematics curriculum in English for an hour each day, while teaching the Greek mathematics curriculum in the Greek language for another hour. The two different curriculums provide a balance of knowledge as the Greek curriculum is narrow and deep and the Florida standards are wider. Framed as a “conservatory of mathematics,” the school teaches a second language immersion through content in math and didactic learning. The founder of Archimedean, George Kafkoulis, has gained insight: “Teaching math in another language sharpens the mind.” By the time students reach the end of high school, seniors are learning proofs for Euclidian Geometry in Greek. Philosophy is also valued at the Archimedean schools. Ph.D. candidates are brought in to teach students the art of thinking. Further, the average student takes six to seven AP courses and Archimedean’s graduating class is often seen at the highest ranked colleges.

MANAGING BUSINESS OPERATIONS

The founders and CSO leaders we interviewed were clear: charter schools are not just educational centers—they are organizations with significant budgetary and operational needs and expectations. Managing the business side of the school is vital to its success. Unlike traditional public schools, stand-alone charter schools do not have a district or management organization to handle things like managing the budget, transportation, food service, janitorial services, payroll, etc. Overlooking this aspect of the school is dangerous as experiencing financial challenges is the most common reason for closing a charter school, with 46% of charter schools closing due to finances, possibly because most school leaders lack the necessary business acumen and financial experience.¹⁶

“Charter schools are also businesses, and they’re startup businesses, so it’s pretty volatile. You know there are a lot of days when you might be going in one direction and you have to make a 90-degree turn and go in another direction. You have to be okay with that, because it’s all about learning as we go.” –Derwin Sisnett, Power Center Academy

EFFECTIVE BUSINESS OPERATIONS ARE VITAL TO A CHARTER SCHOOL AND SHOULD BE CAREFULLY PLANNED.

Charter schools are not just educational institutions; they have the responsibility

¹⁶ Finn, Manno, and Vanourek, “Getting Charter Schools Started”; Frumkin, Manno, and Edgington, *The Strategic Management of Charter Schools*, Consoletti, “The State of Charter Schools”.

to manage all operations, including ensuring a balanced budget. While we saw many different ways to effectively organize business operations, it was clear that expecting the leader to oversee the business operations places too much work on one individual and becomes unmanageable. Hiring a good operations manager (such as someone with experience in nonprofit management), delegating operational responsibilities to other positions, or outsourcing some key operational tasks to third party vendors are ways to ensure that business operations do not interfere with academics.

VERIFICATION OF FINANCES REQUIRES MULTIPLE PEOPLE.

Accounting for the financials of a charter school can be complicated, and clear procedures need to be established. Segregating “internal control” functions, such as accounting or legal compliance, and other

fiscal responsibilities among three or more individuals (such as a business manager, board treasurer, and external auditor) is a common practice and helps ensure that no one person has the ability to authorize purchases, sign checks, and record transactions.¹⁷

In education, we truly don't understand that it is a business and you operate as a business. And so customer service, all of that is important.” –Richardean Golden Anderson, Fulton Leadership Academy

“For many years, the finance chair on the board was the leading business person for the school. Well, you can't have that, because then, they leave and you get a less experienced volunteer, your business goes to pot. You have to professionalize it.”

*–Michelle Blackmon,
Atlanta Neighborhood Charter School*

UTILIZE THE BOARD'S EXPERTISE ON OPERATIONS AND FINANCE.

Given that many charter leaders lack significant financial experience, it is imperative to include board members with financial expertise. Board members can guide school leaders on some of the operational aspects of running the school through committees and by effectively overseeing the budget. A transparent budget and a monthly financial statement can provide a snapshot of how the school is doing. Successful charter schools develop a strategic plan with financial goals and budget projections. Board members with financial expertise proved particularly helpful in coaching the school leader through this process. After the initial startup period, the budget should be self-sustaining on per pupil expenditures for core operations. Further, a finance committee can oversee the budget and work to secure additional funds if necessary.

BE STRATEGIC ABOUT CONTRACTING OUT SERVICES.

Charter schools require a variety of different services—food service, transportation, payroll and benefits, and janitorial services, to name a few. Successful schools knew how to prioritize spending for these services and which ones could be outsourced. Contracting with the district can be an option



¹⁷ Premack, *The Charter School Development Guide*.

“I have a very good understanding of the financial and business side of the school, and I think that’s crucial.” –Katherine Kelbaugh, Museum School of Avondale Estates

for some operations, but should not be a go-to method.¹⁸ Many charter schools decided to pay the district to help with operations such as food services or transportation. Others hired local caterers or declined to provide transportation at all. The charter schools that provided transportation had specific features, such as a rural location or mission that involved serving students from dispersed areas, that led them to believe that transportation was necessary to achieve their goals. Finally, the founders we spoke with were not afraid to change the service if expectations were not being met or the needs of the school changed as it grew.

Pembroke Pines High School’s mission is to prepare students to succeed in a global society by providing a personalized and rigorous curriculum through excellence in teaching. Many lessons can be taken away from how they do business. For example, when the city was debating where to locate a new public library, the charter school leaders

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were able to strategically place the library next to the charter school campus. That way, the students’ media center became the regional library, and the school didn’t have to use resources to buy books.

The same process was repeated for a community theater and public park through grants. Further, the school is conveniently located next to a community college so students can choose to be dual enrolled for college credit. Another way they partner with the community is through a newly built auditorium that doubles as a community theatre. Additionally, instead of contracting with a separate company to do payroll, the city was able to cover this operation for them. Pembroke Pines benefits from having allies in public offices directly involved with the school, much like many of the other successful charter schools we saw. Partnering with the city can help new charter schools gain resources while also taking the burden of operations off of the founder.

ACQUIRING AND ALLOCATING RESOURCES

Start-up funds are critical to the health of a new charter school, but obstacles including lack of capital financing, especially for facilities; little or no start-up money; inadequate per-pupil operating funds; and uneven cash flow can hinder a school’s growth.¹⁹ To make matters worse for founders of new charter schools, they face more financial challenges than converted charter schools.²⁰ Few states award per-pupil funding until students walk through the door, and few charters receive as much per-pupil funding as their district counterparts.²¹ Further, initial enrollment numbers are often uncertain, and costs of operating a first-year school are higher than subsequent years.²²

¹⁸ Blakemore, *A Public School of Your Own*.

¹⁹ Finn, Manno, and Vanourek, “Getting Charter Schools Started.”

²⁰ Conversion charter schools are traditional public schools which have been transformed into charter schools.

²¹ Hassel, *The Charter School Challenge*; Finn, Manno, and Vanourek, “Getting Charter Schools Started.”

²² Zimmer et al., “Charter School Operations and Performance”; Lake, Schumwinger, and Petty, *The New Schools Handbook*.

FEDERAL AND STATE GRANTS CAN BE WORTH THE TIME INVESTMENT.

One avenue for resources comes in the form of federal or state grants, including the federal Charter Schools Program, Title X Funds, HUD block grant funds, and federal tax credits.²³ Most charter schools we studied received federal or state implementation grants. National foundations, such as the Walton Foundation, were also a common source of start-up funds. Teacher- and student-focused grants are available from the Kids In Need Foundation and Donors Choose. Using limited resources for grant-writing personnel can provide dividends to schools²⁴ and many of the charter schools we studied eventually had a grant writer on staff, had a staff member double as a grant writer, or hired one as a consultant.

COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS, FUNDRAISERS AND CORPORATE SPONSORSHIP ARE ALSO WAYS TO OBTAIN RESOURCES.

Private donations, corporate support, and earned income have proven to be other means for start-up charters to acquire funding.²⁵ Once a school has a successful track record, many organizations and individuals want to support it. But obtaining those critical funds in the first year is difficult. Regular community meetings and positive press may help increase donations. Making presentations to and connections with community foundations early on allows founders to be on their radar and will benefit the school when forming partnerships and recruiting students. Additionally, corporate sponsorships are an untapped field in regards to charter school funding, and in-kind donations from small businesses or other local entities can help offset new equipment costs. Board members can help with obtaining resources through writing proposals, or helping the school make connections to others in the community.

MAINTAIN FLEXIBILITY—AND A RESERVE FUND.

Given the realities of shifting enrollment numbers and competitive grants, there is a lot of uncertainty for charter schools. Founders need to maintain financial flexibility and rainy day funds to make it through such uncertainty. Unexpected expenses ranged from legal fees for lawyers to erosion control fines from the

city. Since state funding is often unpredictable, and the economy can sometimes take an unexpected turn, increasing the revenues of the school through fundraisers and maintaining an adequate cushion in the budget is important.



²³ Betts and Hill, *Taking Measure of Charter Schools*; Frumkin, Manno, and Edgington, *The Strategic Management of Charter Schools*.

²⁴ Blakemore, *A Public School of Your Own*.

²⁵ Frumkin, Manno, and Edgington, *The Strategic Management of Charter Schools*.

PRIORITIZE SPENDING BASED ON YOUR MISSION.

Aligning the budget with the school's mission-driven priorities is key. Therefore, teacher salaries and instruction will consume a large portion of the budget. Founders recommended setting a budget that allowed for all mission-critical spending to come from the per-pupil allocation. Additional or special programs can be available if grants or fundraising prove successful. Many experts recommended putting funds into effective teaching—not only salaries and benefits, but also line items such as professional development and instructional leadership. With the tight budget in the first few years, personnel need to do more than one job. For example, the CFO can also teach a math class, and the registrar can help with lunch duty. Starting with low administrative costs also was a common theme that came up during the interviews.

“Honestly if you’re not terrified about spending too much money, there’s probably something wrong.” —Dean Leeper, The Kindezi School

Fulton Leadership Academy specializes in developing strong, moral, and talented young American males. Given that the mission and purpose of Fulton Leadership Academy is compelling and clear, the charter school has been able to acquire and allocate resources to help fulfill the mission. For a fundraiser, Fulton Leadership Academy organized

a “Walk for Excellence” and raised about \$40,000 in its first year. Further, during the founding years, Fulton Leadership Academy’s board understood the importance of fundraising and made a commitment that they would give out of their own

pockets. In fact, their board chair was able to provide an interest-free loan to them if they needed extra financials. The school has also obtained private, federal and state grants such as a Walton Foundation grant, an implementation and expansion grant, and a facilities grant.

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ACQUIRING FACILITIES

Locating and paying for facilities is a monumental obstacle for charter school founders. While our study did not reveal a strong relationship between high-achieving schools and state-of-the-art facilities, constructing a welcoming environment where staff and students feel safe is essential nonetheless—and requires a good deal of forethought and creativity.

CONSTRUCTION CHALLENGES ABOUND FOR AN UNTRAINED EYE.

Deemed the Achilles Heel of charter schools by one CSO expert, facilities present a broad and time-consuming array of obstacles for founders. New charters generally lack resources and do not receive public funding specifically for facilities. Further, banks and property owners may be hesitant to assist organizations without successful track records. Finally, charters can't begin looking for facilities until they have an accurate estimate of student enrollment. Once buildings had been paid for, founders still frequently ran into unexpected expenses such as missing ceiling tiles, roof leaks, and faulty furniture. Founders should also be familiar with building codes and know that standards for educational buildings are more stringent than commercial buildings. While a building may seem appropriate to an untrained eye, upgrading the space to meet the educational building code could be a significant cost. This is an area where having a board member with construction, project management, or real estate expertise is valuable.

FACILITIES ARE A MAJOR EXPENSE, BUT GA'S LAWS OFFER A SOLUTION.



Many experts agree that the biggest financial hurdle a stand-alone charter will encounter is the cost of a facility. While one CSO leader told us that schools should allocate no more than 15% of their budget to facilities, a national study found that buildings often account for 20-25% of a charter's operating budget.²⁶ Most of that money comes out of the classroom. That being said, Georgia's unique charter laws provide some exceptions to these rules. The LEA-authorized charter schools in our study were operating in existing buildings rent free thanks to a law that requires local boards of education to make available any vacant or otherwise unused facility to locally-authorized charters at no lease cost, with any additional terms of use to be negotiated by the parties.

LOCATION MATTERS.

Founders need to carefully consider the importance of geographic location for their population, program, and of course, mission. For instance, a school whose mission involved many field visits made sure to be near those resources or transportation corridors. Schools that were meant to serve specific communities took great care to acquire facilities in the heart of the neighborhood they wanted to serve. One school rooted itself so firmly in the community that many of its scholars were able to walk to school, allowing the school to work towards its mission of neighborhood revitalization.

"There's no such thing as a free building. Charter school leaders really need a deep understanding of what it's going to cost to operate in the building, and have good real estate, construction, and operational advice. Unfortunately, that advice is typically something that a principal and school leadership team doesn't have."

*—Carol Naughton, Charles R. Drew
Charter School*

²⁶ Zimmer et al., "Charter School Operations and Performance."

USE BOARD MEMBERS, NONPROFITS AND GRANTS TO SEARCH FOR AND ACQUIRE FACILITIES.

Boards, especially those with a member experienced in real estate, have the capacity to raise funds as well as utilize their own connections to find space and the money necessary to pay for building costs—skills that many founders will not possess. Many successful start-up boards have created a facilities committee that focuses on combing the real estate market, working with local school districts, and researching zoning laws during the early years of the school’s life. Charter leaders seeking a building should also know that organizations and grants are in place to help them. Building Hope is a national non-profit that works with schools to find and fund facilities. A handful of schools in our study acquired state grants to assist with facility costs.

“The best advice I can give is to be realistic, not to let your dream facility drive your decisions, because I can easily see a school not being able to make it financially if they jump into something that they can’t handle too soon. Sure, we would love to have a nice brick and mortar building out there, but that’s not the most important thing. We have to keep our sight on what’s important, and that’s educating kids. They can sit in a two dollar desk in a trailer and learn better here than they can in a beautiful building at a school that doesn’t have the standards that we do for academics. The facility is just the facility.” Kylie Holley,
Pataula Charter Academy

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX.

Keep in mind that schools need not look like one’s idea of a school. In our interviews and research, we came across five charters located in former or current churches, one located in a music academy, one in a former car dealership, and one in an old Catholic school.

Other examples our research encountered included strip malls, movie theaters, YMCAs, a grocery store basement, apartment buildings, college or university campuses, department stores, and a Veterans of Foreign Wars building.²⁷ Churches seemed to be particularly popular because of the outreach component within their missions, and because they often have classroom space for Sunday school that is used sporadically during the week. Our study consistently revealed that it is much easier and cheaper to find an existing space than to construct a new building. Charter leaders would also be wise to seek out existing charter schools that have outgrown their facilities and move into that space. Another common practice in charter facilities is to share space with other new charter schools or even existing public schools that leave a floor or hallway unused.



²⁷ Carpenter, *Charter School Board University*; Blakemore, *A Public School of Your Own*; Frumkin, Manno, and Edgington, *The Strategic Management of Charter Schools*; Lake, Schumwinger, and Petty, *The New Schools Handbook*.

THE FIRST BUILDING DOESN'T HAVE TO BE THE PERMANENT LOCATION.

An expensive misconception exists among charter founders that they need to open doors in a permanent location. First locations are often temporary homes, and we heard founders warn against exhausting searches for the perfect space. Keep in mind that learning can happen in many environments, and a young charter may have the flexibility to utilize multi-purpose spaces for cafeterias, physical education spaces, and assembly locations. Only when a school has been open for a number of years and has an operating history does it become easier to get loans or conduct a major capital campaign to move into a long-term location.

When Dekalb PATH Academy - a school whose mission is to develop the knowledge, skills, and character of refugee, immigrant, and local children in a safe and nurturing environment - opened its doors in 2002, scholars ate only Kosher meals. PATH's students were not Jewish, but in order to spend money on students and teachers, the school

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rented space from an orthodox Jewish high school during its first year. That year, PATH consisted of a total of four classrooms, so it was not financially prudent for the school to seek its own space. The arrangement was never meant to be long-term,

so, in year two, PATH leased an old school building, which is owned by a reputable university in an upscale area in Brookhaven. The building required a great deal of elbow grease as the founder's husband painted half of the new facility. Still, the space was too large for the young school, so the founder subleased a wing of the building to the Head Start program, covering the rent expenses, with the exception of utilities, for two years.

MANAGING TALENT

Great teaching is critical to a new charter school. Personnel will be the largest expense from the budget. This means that hiring the right people and helping them improve is one of the key levers for ensuring a strong start.

USE THE SCHOOL'S MISSION AND VALUES TO ATTRACT TEACHERS.

Charter schools are a choice for teachers, too. A new charter school should be explicit about the types of teachers they want for the school, and clear about its values, culture, and the expectations of teachers. This will help to ensure that teachers feel comfortable with the fit.²⁸ Because being part of a larger movement is attractive to high-performing people, founders should highlight the fact that candidates will have the opportunity to join a founding team. Further, the most talented teachers secure jobs early in the hiring process, so prioritize teacher hiring months in advance of the first day of school.²⁹ Establishing high expectations for teachers, and making those expectations clear from the outset, helps ensure that staff

²⁸ Merseth and Cooper, *Inside Urban Charter Schools*.

²⁹ Levin and Quinn, "Missed Opportunities: How We Keep High-Quality Teachers Out of Urban Classrooms."

members will be committed and fully informed of the hard work that lies ahead.

COMPENSATION SHOULD BE COMPETITIVE WITH THE DISTRICT.

Compensation and benefits also play a role in recruiting human capital. A charter school's pay should remain competitive to the district, but making explicit promises to be tied to the district salary can create budget inflexibility. Another way to recruit and retain teachers is to maintain some flexibility in the salary structure in order to offer bonuses to particularly effective teachers. While not specific to charter schools, a recent evaluation of an alternative compensation system found that the new pay system reduced teacher attrition, particularly among teachers who received incentives that totaled more than \$5000.³⁰

THE PROFESSIONAL CULTURE OF THE SCHOOL CAN HELP RETAIN AND RECRUIT TEACHERS.

Teacher autonomy is a huge piece that may attract teachers to a charter school, and a culture of developing and coaching people can be persuasive to new teachers trying to start a career. Relevant professional development, driven by teacher needs, as well as a leadership pipeline can retain effective teachers. Charters have the distinctive responsibility of molding teachers from many different backgrounds into a functioning team. Informal means of professional development, such as mentoring, coaching, frequent classroom observations with immediate feedback, and feedback on lesson plans, are favored by many charter schools and can help mold the team.³¹

"Teachers are your best commodity, and they have to be your students. I don't know any other way to explain it. I tell them all the time, 'You're my dinner conversation now, y'all are my family.' It's not just lip service. It's the real deal here. They take care of each other, I take care of them, and they take care of me." -Lisa McDonald, Brighten Academy



SETTING GROUND RULES FOR EFFECTIVE HIRING PRACTICES PREVENTS FUTURE HEADACHES.

Implementing a good hiring system is crucial for recruiting effective staff. Applicants should teach a sample lesson in addition to a face-to-face interview with behavior and inventory questions. To evaluate effectiveness, see how well teachers can receive and implement feedback. Spending as much time as possible inside the school building with the candidate can be helpful, but also poses a challenge if the school is not yet open. To be clear, the overall

³⁰ Fulbeck, "Teacher Mobility and Financial Incentives: A Descriptive Analysis of Denver's ProComp."

³¹ Buddin and Zimmer, "Student Achievement in Charter Schools"; Merseth and Cooper, *Inside Urban Charter Schools*.

“We really reached out to [Teach for America] and said, ‘This is the makeup of the teacher we need for this kind of school. Can you help us source that?’ And they gave us a whole list. I certainly relied on those pipeline programs, because there are a million other things to think about when you’re starting a school. I would recommend relying on alternative recruitment programs. Utilizing their expertise in recruitment and selection can take a huge load off.” –Derwin Sisnett, Power Center Academy

America alumni pipeline and similar programs as a way of hiring experienced, passionate teachers. Other places that were mentioned include career fairs; online job boards such as Craigslist.org and Idealist.org; traditional teacher preparatory colleges; retired teachers or younger teachers; TeachGA.com; and posting on the charter’s website. Good teachers are not looking at the help wanted ads; be aggressive and recruit teachers from where they currently are.

EXPECT STAFF TURNOVER.

Staff turnover frequently arose as an area of difficulty for new charters, both in our interviews and in existing literature.³² The use of at-will contracts makes it easy for schools to let go of ineffective teachers, and the highest teacher turnover generally occurs in the first year of a charter school’s operation. Successful charters have addressed retention by employing incentive programs, scaled salaries, and the option for teachers to attend graduate school free of cost.³³ Teacher appreciation, trust, and

hiring procedure and practice should be aligned with the school’s mission to ensure that selected applicants are aligned as well. Founders also recommended hiring teachers who can be flexible. With the changes that will be inevitable in the first year, a new charter school needs teachers who can pivot when needs change.

RECRUIT FROM EVERYWHERE AND THINK ABOUT ALTERNATIVE TEACHING PROGRAMS.

Recruiting from all angles and thinking outside of the box can be a useful way to find high quality teachers. For example, many participants mentioned the Teach For

“It is key to part ways with people after year one as soon as you know they are not a good fit for the mission. Don’t hesitate on this. Founders should hire slow and fire fast. Take the time on the front end to go through all the hiring processes, but don’t waste time if you know it’s not there. You’ll pay for it in the end. It will strain the organization if you wait and let people go after two or three years as opposed to after one year.” –Jim Leckrone, East End Preparatory School

³² Carter, “Lessons Learned in Dreamland”; Downing, Spencer, and Cavallaro, “The Development of an Inclusive Charter Elementary School”; Sullins and Miron, *Challenges of Starting and Operating Charter Schools*.

³³ Merseth and Cooper, *Inside Urban Charter Schools*.

recognition can go a long way in keeping effective teachers satisfied. Further, building relationships by discussing decisions with staff leads to buy-in. At the same time, new charter schools should not be afraid to dismiss teachers if they are not effective.

MULTI-TALENTED PEOPLE CAN FILL MULTIPLE ROLES.

Effectively staffing a charter school during its start-up years requires prioritizing essential roles and then finding the right people to fill those roles. Besides teachers, the schools in this study often began with an office manager and a director of operations. Finding one person to fill both roles was the ideal. During the start-up years a founder must prioritize finding highly talented people who can fill multiple roles. For example, some teachers could be dual certified in special education and a subject area. Or an academic dean could be an expert on Response to Intervention, an intervention program for students who need extra help. Prioritizing hiring an instructional specialist or curriculum coach can help fulfill multiple teacher needs and take some responsibility off the school leader. Despite the frequent expectation that staff members wear many hats, founders also made sure to recognize the demands on teachers and show their appreciation for the dedication shown by staff.

Looking back at hiring his first set of teachers for Kindezi, Dean Leeper advised, “Treat it like it’s the most important part of your job. If it ends up taking the majority of your time, you’re probably doing something right. The quality of your school is going to be dictated by who you have in it.” Kindezi literally translates as home school, and that’s

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how Leeper began working with children. In 2010 he realized his dream of opening a school of his own. One of his first orders of business was finding and molding a staff that was mission-aligned.

Due to rising unemployment, there were plenty of applicants, but few were high quality. Looking back, Leeper thinks he probably could have kept advertising limited to craigslist and idealist.org. Once candidates made it through an initial screening, Leeper took time to visit their classrooms either in person or by having them tape one of their lessons, so that he could determine if they were differentiating instruction in the classroom. Applicants also were required to write essays on the benefits of smaller class sizes and read Leeper’s manifesto, so that they would have a clear idea of what kind of school Kindezi would be. Leeper wanted his teachers to mirror his student body in terms of demographics, but always prioritized strong teaching over an applicant’s skin color. Leeper makes Kindezi a desirable place to work by giving his teachers autonomy in the classroom, ample planning time, influence on how school funds are spent, and a voice in all school-wide decisions. He also pairs each new teacher with a veteran staff member. What stood out most about Kindezi’s staff was the fact that many staff members had families of their own, a feat that is rare in a charter school world traditionally staffed by young employees who have not yet started a family. In fact, during the 2013-2014 school year, Kindezi’s staff had seven babies, and while maternity leave could be seen as an obstacle, Leeper views it as an opportunity to bring in new talent.

MANAGING EXTERNAL RELATIONS

On the road to founding a stand-alone charter school, it's important that founders identify and collaborate with two of their most vital constituents: parents and community organizations. Parents have the potential to be a new school's strongest allies or most fierce enemies. By involving parents in school culture, charter schools hope to bridge the gap between home and school, overcoming obstacles that seemed insurmountable without such a connection.³⁴ Further, the importance of community partnerships cannot be understated. Many charter schools would never make it out of the start-up phase if not for assistance from neighborhood and community groups. Indeed, developing strong community partnerships while the vision for the school is taking shape is critical to ensuring that the school meets community needs. When utilized properly, these two groups can propel a good charter school to a great charter school.

"It's a requirement. You have to build strong alliances with parents and community members and leaders."

– Nina Gilbert, Ivy Preparatory Academy

COMMUNICATE WITH PARENTS EARLY...AND OFTEN...AND IN EVERY WAY IMAGINABLE.

"[The principal], for example, lives in the neighborhood now. He goes to all the community meetings, and he is seen as the face of Drew. Parents know him, they talk to him at the community garden, or at the first tea, or at the Villages Back To School Day. He is seen all around the community as the face of the school. "

– Carol Naughton, Charles R. Drew Charter School

The charter school experts we interviewed described a multitude of ways schools tried to break down walls between the school and its parents: giving teachers' cell phone numbers to families, weekly newsletters or email updates, home visits, school dinners, demonstration nights, and regular calls home were just a few. Home visits appear to be particularly powerful in building lasting relationships with families.³⁵ Our research illustrates that establishing positive connections with families helps ease communication when a problem arises.

BE TRANSPARENT AND CLEAR WITH PARENTS AT ALL TIMES.

A charter school founder must be very clear in relationships with parents from the outset. This clarity means parents should fully understand a school's philosophy and mission, as well as the expectations for students and parents. Founders recounted that the community meetings they held in the early stages of building the vision for the school paid dividends when it was time to recruit students. Parents in their targeted community already had a sense of who they were and what the school was about. Being clear with parents from the beginning, and conveying this information via handbooks and open houses, is critical to ensuring that parents are making informed choices about whether the school is a right fit for them. It can also minimize parents being surprised or upset over uniform codes or extended school days.³⁶ Five of the founders we interviewed required or suggested that parents volunteer at the school a certain number of hours over the year, and all mentioned that they repeatedly emphasized this point before parents even enrolled their students.

³⁴ Frumkin, Manno, and Edgington, *The Strategic Management of Charter Schools*.

³⁵ Maxwell, "Opening a School Draws on All of Founders' Skills"; Mathews, *Work Hard. Be Nice*.

³⁶ Betts and Hill, *Taking Measure of Charter Schools*.

REMEMBER THAT WHEN DEALING WITH PARENTS, SCHOOLS ARE IN THE BUSINESS OF CUSTOMER SERVICE.

Founders have to remember that they are providing a service not only to children, but to their families as well. As such, successful founders in our study—not to mention the employees they hired to work the front office—repeatedly went above and beyond in their interactions with families. The schools we toured almost exclusively exercised an open-door policy in which parents were always welcome to schedule a visit to observe their child’s classroom. Schools with large non-English speaking populations provided translators at conferences, and one school gave all parents USB drives with teachers’ lesson plans. Founders can foster relationships by taking parents’ work schedules and family situations into account when scheduling

events, meetings, and conferences. One school provided transportation for parents to attend meetings, and many schools utilized surveys to gauge parental satisfaction.

GET PARENTS IN THE BUILDING.

It doesn’t take an event planner to get families in a school building and create a true sense of community in a school. Founders we interviewed put on family nights, dine outs at local restaurants, and even brought in a violinist to play in the cafeteria on a day where families were invited to have lunch with their children. Alternatively, a few schools held all-parent assemblies a few times over the course of the school year to field parents’ questions and concerns. Several schools explained their decision to not offer transportation, because they wanted a chance to connect with a parent

twice a day at drop off and pick up. Once parents are in the building, it becomes much easier to familiarize them with volunteer opportunities or roles with Parent Teacher Associations. Such involvement helps parents feel a sense of ownership over their children’s schools. One best practice we came across was posting a volunteer opportunity board in the school entrance so parents could see where their skills best matched the needs of the school.

EMPHASIZE LOCAL COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS.

Some charter schools struggle with creating a sense of community when they enroll children from across the city, but the successful schools we studied found ways to be integrated with the community. As an example,

a charter middle school in Memphis that wanted to enrich academics with a music program shared space with a museum commemorating a renowned record label. The school partnered with the museum to create a culture permeated with music (positive rewards are referred to as Grammys) and brought in the Memphis Symphony Orchestra to formally mentor students.

KEEP PARTNERSHIPS STRATEGIC, CONCRETE, AND SYMBIOTIC.

The best partnerships produce tangible results and are beneficial for both parties. This means making the effort to partner with organizations whose visions and missions are comparable to yours. In Atlanta,



“If you do not start off as a community-based school, you at least need to be community focused.”

– David Frank, New York City Charter School Center

one charter school created a partnership with the local museum, zoo, and botanical gardens and would frequently take curriculum-aligned field trips to give students a hands-on taste of what they were learning about in the classroom. These clearly defined partnerships allowed the school to base its curriculum on experiential learning and exposed numerous children and their families to local educational attractions. Above all, charter schools should be strategic in forming partnerships to ensure the partnerships help them achieve the core elements of their mission.³⁷

BE MINDFUL OF THE FUTURE - AND THE PRESENT.

Given the high number of charter schools whose mission is to see to it that their scholars attend selective high schools and colleges, it's imperative for founders to build bridges with the schools that they want their students to attend. In this vein, an Atlanta school developed partnerships with a nearby private school, three local colleges, Harvard University, and African American fraternities. Also, founders should not hesitate to reach out to other founders who have already learned some lessons the hard way and are familiar with the charter landscape. A Nashville elementary charter worked closely with other local charters, as well as the national support organization Building Excellent Schools, to share best practices during the start-up phase.

With the school year winding down, awards ceremonies at Charles R. Drew Charter School brought hordes of parents and siblings to celebrate and reward student success. A superbly designed, large glass atrium greets visitors as they enter the school, and it was clear that families are far from strangers at Drew. At the front desk, several

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staff members talked to families as if they were, well, family. This feeling of warmth and welcome at the school's entrance was no accident; Drew purposefully collaborates with families to create a culture of customer service and forges bonds

with local organizations to propel student growth inside and outside the classroom. Drew is part of a holistic neighborhood revitalization led by the East Lake Foundation, and collaborates closely with other neighborhood partners, including the East Lake Foundation; the Villages of East Lake, a mixed income rental housing community; the East Lake Family YMCA; the First Tee of East Lake; and two high quality early learning programs. The school was designed and built by the East Lake Foundation, with a bright entranceway to make families feel like they were sending their children into an environment of learning. As the core part of the cradle to college education pipeline, the school also has a staff member dedicated to enhancing family engagement. Partnerships developed by Drew and the East Lake Foundation in literacy and STEAM have helped students reach high levels of academic success. This purposeful engagement of parents and the broader community helped Drew move from having the lowest scores in the state to the highest.

³⁷ Sullins and Miron, Challenges of Starting and Operating Charter Schools.

PERFORMANCE MONITORING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

“The success comes, not from the principal and not just from the teacher, though the teacher is more important than the principal every time. It comes from the community for each child. Nobody is going to be in the back of the classroom in the traditional sense. Nobody is going to be able to escape accountability in the most positive sense of the term. Everybody is going to be a part of this community, and everybody is going to be successful.” – Members of the International Community School Founding Group

New charter schools are in a unique position to monitor their performance accurately because they have no prior record of test scores to guide them. Establishing solid internal accountability measures can help direct charters by successfully providing on-the-spot information. Interim assessments, clear goals, and authorizer accountability can help start-up charters accurately plan for strong results.

ACCOUNTABILITY TO THE CHARTER AUTHORIZERS AND STATE TESTING SET THE BAR EXTERNALLY.

External accountability, whether from standardized test scores or authorizers, plays a huge part in a new founder’s thoughts, as the authorizer can shut down a charter if results are not high enough.³⁸ Founders should use their annual charter report as a guide to help keep track of the goals. Additionally, benchmark assessments should be aligned with the state tests, because with the right frequency of data cycles, successful founders have been able to change course when they realize something is not working. Founders also mentioned focusing on higher-order thinking necessary for college and careers.

USE INTERIM ASSESSMENTS TO MONITOR PROGRESS INTERNALLY.

Although test scores have become the primary way of measuring success,³⁹ other measures can include student portfolios, parent surveys, and student demonstrations of mastery.⁴⁰ Many of the schools we interviewed cited MAP⁴¹ as an internal test, because it assesses students across the nation three times a year, allowing schools to see how they stack up to counterparts across the country. Charter schools have used formal evaluation systems, frequent assessments, data analysis,

and formal teacher meetings as a means of internal accountability.⁴² The importance of internal accountability is underscored by the fact that many charter-authorizing agencies have weak accountability systems for their schools. For that reason, schools might need to create their own accountability mechanisms.⁴³

HOLD THE SCHOOL AND ITS STAKEHOLDERS ACCOUNTABLE TO THE MISSION.

With the many demands on charter schools, it is easy to lose focus. Successful charter schools focus accountability around whether they are fulfilling their mission. When measuring mission alignment, it

³⁸ Finn, Manno, and Vanourek, “Getting Charter Schools Started.”

³⁹ Zimmer, “Getting Inside the Black Box.”

⁴⁰ Zimmer et al., “Charter School Operations and Performance.”

⁴¹ Nationally normed assessments administered by Northwest Evaluation Association.

⁴² Merseth and Cooper, *Inside Urban Charter Schools*.

⁴³ Griffin and Wohlstetter, “Building a Plane While Flying It.”

is important to have a board that is willing to develop metrics for a mission, and to measure this metric multiple times throughout the course of the year. Additionally, after creating the mission statement—preferably with the board’s active role—the existing literature recommends that parents and community members frequently assess the success of the mission.⁴⁴ This can be done through parent feedback surveys or by welcoming the parents and community through an open house.

COMMUNICATE GOALS TO ALL CONSTITUENTS SO THERE IS CLARITY AND TRANSPARENCY.

To keep stakeholders informed on the status of their schools, charter leaders should create clear goals in their initial charter and regularly update all stakeholders, including parents, students, the board, government entities, and the broader public, on progress towards those goals.⁴⁵ In fact, many of the charter schools we interviewed considered parent satisfaction and staff culture an important accountability measure. That’s consistent with broader research that charter schools feel most accountable to their local school community.⁴⁶

“I think schools that are successful in this area kind of start out with a focus on accountability from the start. You’re gaining a high level of autonomy and ability to do what you want in exchange for accountability. It’s the other half of the bargain. Accountability is how you demonstrate that you should exist.” – Anne Herr, Focus DC

Located in rural southwestern Georgia, Pataula Charter Academy was founded by a group of parents who were dissatisfied with the educational options for their children. Currently a K-10 school, Pataula is focused on providing a safe and orderly learning environment with an expeditionary learning approach, a reform model that focuses on

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active learning. The principal, Kylie Holley, was one of those founding parents and helped write the charter petition. In writing their petition, Ms. Holley recommends that founders be very clear on the charter school’s goals. Ms. Holley uses the goals

outlined in Pataula’s petition to regularly update the governing board, teachers, and other stakeholders about their progress. She strives to maintain open communication with all stakeholders that these are the goals the school is trying to meet. While the charter school is only required to make one annual report to the state commission, she keeps a draft of the report on hand to use it as her guide. Keeping the report nearby serves as a reminder of the goals the school has committed to and must report on at the end of the year.

⁴⁴ Curry, *Charter School Leadership Elements for School Success*.

⁴⁵ Lake, Schumwinger, and Petty, *The New Schools Handbook*.

⁴⁶ Griffin and Wohlstetter, “Building a Plane While Flying It.”

RECRUITING STUDENTS

Charters cannot succeed, academically or economically, unless they fill their desks with students. As mentioned earlier, financial problems is the reason two thirds of charters close their doors. Of the charters that close due to financial problems, half close due to insufficient enrollment.⁴⁷ Recruitment is an essential part of the founding process, and a challenge unique to charter schools. Past research shows that students enroll in charters for a number of reasons, including educational programming, parental involvement, safety, location, and teacher quality.⁴⁸

STAY TRUE TO THE MISSION.

As with all aspects of charter schools, the mission remains a central component of the recruitment process. Schools must be thoughtful about the types of students they want to educate—as outlined in their mission statement—and actively recruit these students. Recruiting a certain student body, however, must always be in line with state laws and requirements regarding open enrollment. Charter schools have the flexibility and autonomy to target certain populations in their recruitment efforts, but still must follow open enrollment requirements. One school in our study specifically recruited students from within the neighborhood, others sought disadvantaged students who needed better options, others looked for diversity in terms of race and economic backgrounds, while still others focused specifically on English Language Learners. In all cases, the schools' recruiting strategies traced back to their mission and their belief that they could create better life opportunities for any child they sought to serve.

POUND THE PAVEMENT.

Recruiting families is essentially a grassroots effort as most charter school parents learn about the school from family or friends.⁴⁹ Schools in our study recruited families by:

- Knocking on doors and helping families fill out applications
- Hosting town hall meetings, open houses and school tours
- Encouraging families of already-enrolled students to advocate on the school's behalf
- Broadcasting newspaper and radio ads
- Dispersing fliers in the mail and at local businesses
- Posting ads on buses, benches, and billboards
- Setting up booths at enrollment fairs, local stores, and libraries
- Leveraging any board members with marketing experience
- Creating websites
- Forging relationships with community leaders, feeder schools, and pre-k programs
- Contacting the state for a list of students in a certain age range.

"It's always actually been word of mouth." – Lisa McDonald, Brighten Academy

When recruiting in person, schools were most successful setting up in locations where entire families would be present. This allowed founders to express their passion to children and parents alike.

BE HONEST, EXPECT ATTRITION.

When recruiting, founders must take care to be extremely honest, consistent, and forthright about their vision for the school's culture and the role that parents will be required to play. This is especially true when parent contracts (agreements between the school and parents for what is expected) are involved. Founders

⁴⁷ Carpenter, *Charter School Board University*.

⁴⁸ Bulkley and Fisler, "A Decade of Charter Schools."

⁴⁹ Carpenter, *The Seven Outs*; Gifford, Keller, and Institute, *Arizona's Charter Schools*.

can also expect to encounter a good deal of attrition during the first months of a school's existence. One possible explanation for high attrition comes parents who choose the charter school because they are

dissatisfied with some aspect of their former school but don't really understand the vision or expectations of the school they are now choosing. A handful of schools in our study, even though highly successful over the years, lost around half of their original students by graduation. On the other hand, a few schools have had wait lists since before they opened. What was clear in all of our schools was that retention and recruitment came much easier only after a school's academic performance led to a strong reputation.

THE WEIGHTING GAME.

Most of the charters in our study utilized a wait list and lottery system. The lottery system ensures that enrollment procedures are fair. In addition, many of our schools created "weighted lotteries" that favored certain populations so that the school could best fulfill its mission. This meant that in a handful of schools, neighborhood children had first choice at attendance. However, charter schools must be careful to ensure that lotteries and enrollment priorities are consistent with state law as the requirements for student admission and priority differ among states and even among different types of charter schools in the same state. Schools often gave preference to siblings and children of employees, and some schools try to attract enough students to ensure that their student bodies are diverse in terms of socio-economic status.

TAKE A STANCE ON TRANSPORTATION.

Transportation proved to be a divisive issue amongst our founders. Founders who firmly believed in providing a school for the

neighborhood chose not to provide transportation. For these schools, no transportation meant more neighborhood children walking to school, more families in the building, and thus more opportunities for families to speak with teachers and administrators. Other schools took the stance that, 'You don't really have choice if you don't have transportation.' Schools in this camp, some of which were rural, acknowledged that providing transportation proved costly and logistically difficult, but was crucial for students who wanted to enroll and did not live close by. Schools that did provide transportation typically picked up students at central locations rather than making door to door stops.



The International Community School is a demographically diverse elementary school in DeKalb County. The school was formed when a veteran educator happened to sit next to a freelance writer at a lecture about refugees. The pair realized they shared a vision of a school that brought refugee and immigrant children together with native

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students for the benefit of both groups. Excited about this shared goal, they soon formed a small group of about 10-15 people to develop the vision of the school, including a larger group through community meetings. Through this process, they

formed strong partnerships with local refugee organizations and also developed an International Baccalaureate program to attract upper income families. The school also knew it needed to provide transportation for its diverse student body to come to the centralized location of the school, as well as assistants who speak the multitude of languages of the refugee families. When it opened a few years later, the school fulfilled its goal of bringing refugee and native students together. The school is currently about one-third refugee students, one-third native students from low-income families, and one-third native students from middle-income families. Walking through the school, a visitor can see students from different backgrounds interacting with each other and the intentional use of mixed ability groups in instruction, neither of which would have been possible if not for purposeful recruiting.

CONCLUSION

Starting a charter school requires a great deal of forethought and hard work before doors open on day one. That hard work continues throughout the year as the culture is established and the academic program is carried out. Consequently, there is no checklist to starting a great charter school. Instead, there is a multitude of simultaneous tasks that need to be attended to at once. Starting with the mission is critical to a new charter school. Practicing purposeful thought about how every decision can lead back to fulfilling the mission and vision of the school made successful schools stand out. All of the founders we interviewed stressed being mission-driven, and the mission was deeply ingrained into the students as well as the school building. Attending to business operations along with the academic program is also critical to starting strong. While public schools often rely on district offices to take care of operations such as transportation and school lunches, a charter school founder has the responsibility of managing the business side with accuracy. Starting a charter school is a team effort that takes a considerable amount of hard work, purposeful thought, and dedication.

APPENDIX A: PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS

State	School	First year of operation	Grades	Percent Caucasian	Percent Black	Percent Hispanic	Percent FRL	Percent female
GA	Atlanta Neighborhood Charter School	2002*	K-8	62%	28%	4%	22%	48%
GA	Brighten Academy	2006	K-8	51%	39%	5%	29.3%	54%
GA	DeKalb PATH Academy	2002	5-8	1%	10%	84%	97.5%	54%
GA	Charles R. Drew Charter School	2000	PreK-9	11%	83%	2%	58.8%	52%
GA	Fulton Leadership Academy	2010	6-9	0%	100%	0%	62.12%	0%
GA	The Kindezi School	2010	K-6	7%	88%	1%	70.53%	44%
GA	Museum School of Avondale Estates	2010	K-6	62%	22%	4%	0%	48%
GA	Pataula Charter Academy	2010	K-9	80%	12%	5%	70.57%	47%
GA	Ivy Preparatory Academy School Gwinnett	2008	6-11	3%	76%	13%	55.99%	100%
GA	International Community School**	2002	K-5	19%	41%	4%	60.8%	52%
FL	The Archimedean Academy	2002	K-5	12%	#	81%	47.5%	49.4%
FL	City of Pembroke Pines Charter School	2004	K-5	19%	23%	49%	26%	50%
FL	Terrace Community Middle School	1998	6-8	44%	10%	18%	17%	53%
FL	Trinity School for Children, Lower School	1999	K-5	42%	8%	45%	17%	51%
TN	East End Preparatory School	2011	K-1	6.2%	86%	7%	90%	54%
TN	Power Center Academy	2011	9-12	0%	99%	0%	67%	56%
TN	Promise Academy	2005	K-5	0%	94%	4%	92%	50%
TN	STEM Preparatory Academy	2011	5-8	11%	21%	66%	93%	50%
TN	Soulsville Charter School	2005	6-12	0%	98%	0%	81%	51%

*Atlanta Neighborhood Charter Schools is the result of a 2011 merger between Neighborhood Charter School and Atlanta Charter Middle School. Our interview focused on the 2002 founding of Neighborhood Charter School.

**International Community School is the only participating school with a significant portion (36%) of Asian students. Due to their focus on refugee populations, the numbers across racial and ethnic categories reflect both native-born and immigrant populations.

Note: Data for Georgia and Florida reflect the 2013-14 school year while data for Tennessee reflects the 2012-13 school year. Data for the Georgia schools came from the Georgia Department of Education's Free and Reduced Price Meal Eligibility tracker (http://app3.doe.k12.ga.us/ows-bin/owa/fte_pack_frl001_public.entry_form) and the Enrollment by Ethnicity/Race, Gender and Grade Level (PK-12) tracker (http://app3.doe.k12.ga.us/ows-bin/owa/fte_pack_ethnicsex.entry_form). Data for the Florida schools came from the Florida Department of Education Student Data Publication and Reports (<http://www.fldoe.org/eias/eiaspubs/pubstudent.asp>). Data for the Tennessee schools came from the Tennessee Department of Education School Level Profile Data Files (http://www.tn.gov/education/data/download_data.shtml).

APPENDIX B: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following resources are provided for charter school founders who want to learn more about many of the recommendations in this report. Two resources cut across the domains, while others are focused on specific domains.

<http://www.charterschoolcenter.org/> - A host of quality, online resources dedicated to creating effective charter schools. A number of the resources below are curated on this site.

Inside Urban Charter Schools by Katherine Merseth - Profile of five high-performing charter schools in Massachusetts with detailed school profiles as well as commonalities across the schools.

FOCUSING ON THE MISSION

Mission Statements.Com - An extensive list of example missions statements from all levels of school.

http://www.missionstatements.com/school_mission_statements.html

How to Help Your School Thrive Without Breaking the Bank by John Gabriel and Paul Farmer - Contains a chapter focusing on developing a vision and a mission.

<http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/107042/chapters/developing-a-vision-and-a-mission.aspx>

ESTABLISHING EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE

Charter School Board University by Brian Carpenter - An introduction to charter governance that gives detailed accounts of the roles and relationships of effective boards.

Charter School Governing Board Training Handbook - A tool for equipping board members with the knowledge they need to fulfill their duties.

<http://www.charterschoolcenter.org/resource/charter-school-governing-board-training-handbook>

Good to Govern: Evaluating Capacity of Charter School Founding Boards - Provides metrics for measuring board capacity and effectiveness.

<http://www.charterschoolcenter.org/resource/good-govern-evaluating-capacity-charter-school-founding-boards>

ESTABLISHING EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP AND CULTURE

Building Excellent Schools - A leadership pipeline program that helps potential leaders design, found, and lead urban charter schools.

<http://buildingexcellentschools.org/>

Charter School Leadership by Cameron Curry - A successful California charter school leader's book about elements for school success.

Leveraging Leadership by Paul Bambrick-Santoyo - Written by the managing director of Uncommon Schools, this book came highly recommended during a number of our interviews and was almost always found on bookshelves of leaders with whom we spoke.

The Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement offers school and district level leadership training programs. Additionally, Performance Based Modules are available to create performance leadership handbook. <http://www.glisi.org/leadershipdevelopment> -AND/OR- <http://www.glisi.org/pbm>

DEVELOPING THE ACADEMIC PROGRAM

Common Core Georgia Performance Standards - Host of resources helping Georgia schools and educators understand and execute Common Core Learning Standards.

<http://www.gadoe.org/curriculum-instruction-and-assessment/curriculum-and-instruction/pages/ccgps.aspx>

Education Plan: Mission and Purposes - presentation that assists planning teams in creating an academic program aligned to a school's mission.

<http://www.nyccharterschools.org/resources/education-plan-mission-purposes>

MANAGING BUSINESS OPERATIONS

Charter School Business Management (CSBM) - A New York City organization that aims to empower charter schools with financial education, resources, and services. CSBM offers group workshops as well as one-on-one professional development.

<http://www.csbm.com/>

New York City Charter School Center's Vendor Analysis Toolkit - a tool meant to aid and focus decision-making when schools choose vendors for supplies, services, or consultants.

<http://www.nyccharterschools.org/resources/vendor-analysis>

ACQUIRING AND ALLOCATING RESOURCES

A Cost Estimation Tool for Charter Schools - Toolkit created by the National Resource Center on Charter School Finance and Governance that provides founders with means to identify and estimate range of costs and timing of expenditures that will be encountered during start-up years. Includes templates and worksheets.

<http://www.charterschoolcenter.org/resource/cost-estimation-tool-charter-schools>

Charter School Programs Grant Competitions - A collection of eight federal, competitive grants available for charter schools.

<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oii/csp/about-cs-competitions.html>

HUD Block Grant Funds - Contact local municipal or county officials to inquire about eligibility for HUD funds.

http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/comm_planning/communitydevelopment/apply

Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation - A national philanthropic organization that has a long history of donating to educational organizations. FAQ for grantseekers below:

<http://www.gatesfoundation.org/How-We-Work/General-Information/Grantseeker-FAQ>

Walton Foundation - National foundation that dedicates a significant amount of their spending to education reform. The Public Charter Startup Grant program supports the creation of public charters.

<http://www.waltonfamilyfoundation.org/grantees/public-charter-startup-grant-program>

Donors Choose - A website where teachers post needed classroom resources and supplies. Online donations from users across the country fund the teachers' wishlists.

<http://www.donorschoose.org/>

ACQUIRING FACILITIES

Building Hope - Organization that supports high quality public schools across the country by providing technical and financial assistance for educational facilities.

<http://www.buildinghope.org/>

Charter Schools Development Corporation - A National non-profit whose mission is to focus on the facilities and finance needs of charter schools.

<http://csdc.org/>

MANAGING TALENT

Teach Georgia - Portal where schools can list hiring needs.

<https://www.teachgeorgia.org/>

Teach Like a Champion by Doug Lemov - a collection of field-tested techniques to improve teacher practice. Workshops around the techniques occur regularly.

<http://teachlikeachampion.com/>

Teach for America - National pipeline of new teachers who have been vetted by a rigorous selection process.

<http://www.teachforamerica.org/our-organization>

Georgia Teaching Fellows - Alternative teaching certification program for teachers who wish to teach in Atlanta, Augusta, and Columbus.

<http://tntp-teachingfellows.org/georgia>

The New Teacher Project - National pipeline that recruits and trains strong teachers

<http://tntp.org/what-we-do/supply-strong-new-teachers>

MANAGING EXTERNAL RELATIONS

A Resource Guide for Building Successful Partnerships between Charter Schools and School Management Organizations – This resource discusses relationships with educational service providers.

http://www.publiccharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/file_Charting_a_Clear_Course_2005_final_20110402T222339.pdf

PERFORMANCE MONITORING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Common Core Learning Standards - A set of national educational standards meant to promote higher-level thinking and college readiness. Adopted by Georgia in 2010.

<http://www.corestandards.org/>

MAP - Measures of Academic Progress test used as internal accountability tool by multiple schools in our study.

<https://www.nwea.org/assessments/map/>

Kickboard - Platform for entering and analyzing multiple types of student data, from test scores to classroom behavior to special education data management.

<http://www.kickboardforteachers.com/>

Fountas and Pinnell - Series of leveled readers so that teachers can keep running records of students' abilities and frequently assess reading level.

<http://www.fountasandpinnelleveledbooks.com/>

National Alliance for Public Charter schools provides a Charter School Accountability Checklist

<http://www.publiccharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Charter-Schools-are-Accountable.pdf>

RECRUITING STUDENTS

Rediker Software - A Computer-based admissions tool that manages enrollment and wait list data.

http://www.rediker.com/admissions/charter-school-enrollment?gclid=CjwKEAjw9-CfBRD8lt_w86zJiDUSJAADZA385tkdJMZKusP_g4tQ7jL6_y-tOyvmx0BQRlxhVlBowRoCZGbw_wcB

NYC charter schools have a tip sheet for recruiting ELL students along with other helpful resources.

<http://www.nyccharterschools.org/ellresources>

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