

THE Center for Education Reform



HOW TO START A CHARTER SCHOOL

*Cultivating the Seeds
of Educational Success*



To be a founder of a charter school is to accept the role the bit of sand must play to the oyster of public education.



You have the right mindset to start a charter school if you think reinventing the bathtub could have some interesting possibilities.



We aren't saying you will have to break any rules. We are saying you will probably have to create some.



You have the mindset of a “charter starter” if you look at a mountain and wonder if it might work better just a bit to the left.



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BEFORE LAUNCHING INTO BUILDING SUPPORT FOR STARTING A CHARTER SCHOOL OR PASSING A CHARTER SCHOOL LAW IN YOUR STATE IT IS

important to ask yourself “Why do I want to start a charter school or pass a charter school law in my community/state?” If this is not an easy answer, then you may not be up to the task, because starting a school or changing perceptions about education law can sometimes be difficult. However, if you have a clear answer and are dedicated to improving the educational environment for kids in your community, then this toolkit is meant for you.

In this toolkit you will find:

- ✧ Information about bringing a charter school law to your state
- ✧ Tips on “Starting Up,” that help you develop a concept into a master plan
- ✧ Guidance on the importance of building support for your school early on
- ✧ A roadmap for the application and approval process
- ✧ Advice about putting your plan into action: gearing up for the first day of school

There Ought to Be a Law

Before you can have charter schools, you must have a state law. Forty states and the District of Columbia have enacted charter school laws.

Like most education initiatives, charter school laws are born at the state level. Typically a group of concerned lawmakers drafts a bill that allows the creation of any number of charter schools throughout a state. The content of the charter law plays a large role in the relative success or failure of the charter schools that open within that state. CER has identified a number of factors that work together to create an environment that promotes the growth and expansion of charter schools. Some of them are identified below.

✧ **NUMBER OF SCHOOLS & APPLICATIONS:** The best charter laws do not limit the total number of charter schools that can operate throughout the state. They also do not restrict the number of the brand new schools that may be started. More poorly written laws allow public schools to convert into charters, but restrict the creation of entirely new schools. This hinders parents' ability to choose from among numerous public schools. These laws also should allow many different types of groups to apply to open schools.

✧ **MULTIPLE CHARTER AUTHORIZERS:** States that permit a number of entities to authorize charter schools, or that provide applicants with a binding appeals process, encourage more activity than those that vest authorizing power in a single entity, particularly if that entity is the local school board. The goal is to give parents the most options. Having multiple sponsors helps reach this goal.

✧ **WAIVERS & LEGAL AUTONOMY:** A good charter law is one that automatically exempts charter schools from most of the school district’s laws and regulations. Of course no charter school is exempt from the most fundamental laws concerning civil rights. Waivers also should exempt a charter school from adhering to the district’s collective bargaining agreement. This gives a principal more flexibility to hire the best staff for a given school. A state law should allow a charter school to be its own legal entity. This lets a charter school buy property, enter into contracts, and control staffing.

✧ **FULL FUNDING & FISCAL AUTONOMY:** A charter school needs to have control of its own finances to run efficiently. The charter school’s operators know the best way to spend funds and the charter law should reflect this. Charter schools are entitled to receive the same amount of per pupil funding as conventional public schools. Many states and districts withhold money from individual charter schools to cover fees and “administrative costs,” but the best laws provide full funding for all public schools.

To ensure that your state has a strong charter law, become involved in the legislative process. Identify one person that is your ambassador, or lead man in this process. This person needs to be committed to the adoption of a charter school law, and have a good relationship with those responsible for passing such a law.

The legislative process also offers the ideal time to begin spreading the charter concept, informing parents, educators and communities about the benefits, and working to allay fears and nip misinformation campaigns in the bud. Often, this is when the state charter association is born. Such associations are dedicated to promoting quality charter schools that foster student achievement.

Need more information on your state’s law? CER has compiled a detailed state-by-state analysis of each charter school law – http://www.edreform.com/charter_schools/laws/

Starting Up

What is the concept of your charter school?

It is important to have an idea of the type of school you think will best benefit your community. One of the great gifts a charter law gives us is the opportunity to ask the question, “if we could have the best public school we can imagine for our children, what would it look like? How would it operate? What would be the defining characteristic of our school?” Once you have that basic idea in place, talk with your friends and others in your community about their own educational concerns. Some of these people may in fact become part of your planning and governance team, and their input will prove to be a valuable resource going forward.

Governance

The launching of a charter school starts with an idea for building a better school, shared by a group of dedicated individuals. They may already be education providers who seek more freedom to innovate, entrepreneurs who see a way to create an education delivery system that runs more efficiently and provides more options, community organizers who seek to serve children who are falling through the cracks, or any combination of these (parents, teachers, businesses, non-profits, social service agencies, etc.) who share a vision for educational quality.

The process begins with passion and commitment, but must be tempered and guided by a strong and focused organization. It is important to develop a sound governance structure and process, to ensure that the initial vision is correctly executed and to avoid problems down the road. Governance is one of the most critical issues charter developers must address.

The charter development team should be composed of people who share a common vision for a better school, but can offer expertise in a variety of areas. Team members must understand that consensus is not the ultimate goal. Rather, they must focus on turning their shared vision into a schoolhouse full of learning students.

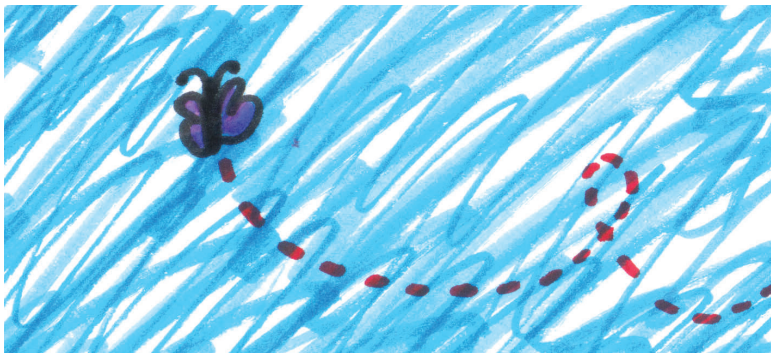
Planning Tip: Divide members of your team into sub-committees that will be responsible for different aspects of research. For example, one group can look into facilities, one can focus on building initial community support, while another is in charge of developing a business plan.

The process can be long and arduous, and every advantage should be sought. Recognize the skills and expertise already assembled, and try to involve community members and organizations that can bring the expertise still needed. Legal issues, compliance with state and federal safety and civil rights codes, fiscal management, staffing, curriculum development, support services such as food and transportation, and other administrative details large and small must all be addressed.

Still not sure how to gather a team together?

CER's *Building Community Support For Education Reform Toolkit* can help! Visit <http://www.edreform.com/toolkit/grassroots.pdf> for more details.

Try contacting your state and local resources, as they may have connections with other individuals already on board. Visit CER's National and State Groups and Contacts at http://www.edreform.com/charter_schools/groups.htm



The Master Plan

Now that you have your team and some preliminary research has been performed, it is time to get down to business and develop your charter school plan. Don't go running for the nearest exit yet; there are many tools and organizations out there that can help guide you through this process. But first things first. . . .

The Mission

It is important to develop a strong mission statement for your school. In this statement you will define your "reason for being" as an organization. A well-thought-out mission statement will provide the base upon which to build a solid and successful application. It will inform your school community of your foundational beliefs, out of which your curriculum, assessment, and governance design will flow. Be sure that your governance team agrees with its message.

A Public Trust

Draw on the expertise of your assembled team to address the particulars and consult outside experts where necessary. As an early RAND Institute for Education and Training report points out, charter schools are a public trust granted to "private citizens and groups to carry out the state's constitutional obligation to provide public education. Charter school applicants should honor this public trust and recognize its special burdens. One of your great challenges is to always be thinking beyond the current moment and into the future. As the founder of a charter school, you need to follow the best practices of any great organization, with student achievement as your 'profit' or goal. Following the Open Meeting Law, decisions should be made in the open, records should be open to the public, and members of the applicant group should recognize and avoid potential conflicts of interest. Policy decisions should always be made in the best interests of the students and the future of the school, not the adults

participating in the applicant group.” This will prove difficult at times, as you strive to face the obstacles that start up groups must face. But always look toward building an organization that will thrive long after you and your children are no longer involved.

Curriculum Focus and Accountability Plan

There are many wonderful options when it comes to choosing a curriculum. Start with the ideals you have stated for your school, and research the curriculum that resonates with those ideals. The curriculum you chose must be aligned with the mission you have embraced. For example, if your mission states that you will differentiate instruction and embrace the multiple intelligences of each unique student, then a curriculum that asks everyone to be instructed in the same way, on the same page, on the same day, does not resonate with that mission statement. Be sure you have educators in your founding group who will take on the challenge of asking the question, “If we could design the very best curriculum we could imagine, what would it be?”

If your charter school will be required to take the State mandated tests, then it is essential that you align your curriculum with the State standards. Using the State standards as a foundation for your curriculum does not necessarily dictate how and what you teach, but it does give your faculty an outline, or foundation, on which to build a strong program.

You will need to decide on some programs as you create your school. Create a strong Reading, Math, Science, Social Studies, Art, Music, and P.E. program, and anything else that goes along with your vision. Don't feel you have to choose a pre-packaged curriculum for each subject area. This is your chance to be responsive to the needs of the students you will serve. Look at other schools, public and private, that you admire. What reading program are they using and why?

Tip: Leave some room for your faculty to create some of the curriculum, once they have assembled, and you will have allowed a chance for the faculty to put their creative imaginations to work on behalf of your school. The effects of this opportunity will give you a faculty that feels passionate ownership of your school and its success.

Accountability Plan

Your accountability plan is simply a document that communicates to the students, authorizer, and parents the goals you have chosen to measure your success as a school. A good accountability plan is usually created after the first year of operations, when there is baseline data from which to work. In general the plan is a formalized method for establishing your school's performance objectives for measuring the progress and success of your school in these areas:

- ✧ Raising student achievement
- ✧ Establishing a viable organization (this includes financial stability)
- ✧ Fulfilling the terms of the charter

Be sure the goals are measurable and realistic as this plan is often used in the charter renewal process. Consider whether it will benefit your school to have unique goals aligned with your design. This is an opportunity to write a plan that will communicate your school's top priorities and guide the allocation of resources as well.

Tip: Create an Accountability Committee, and make sure the members represent the entire school community. The Principal, a teacher, a board member, a parent, and a student will all contribute greatly to the committee, guiding the use of policy and data in your decisions.

Figure Out The Finances

As a charter school you have received the great gift of autonomy over curriculum, program, and governance. You also have the gift of autonomy over the finances for your school. Now it is your responsibility to establish fiscal policies and procedures that are consistent with State law, and sound organizational practices. The number one reason charter schools close is because of fiscal mismanagement. Don't let your school fall prey to this weakness! The Board of Trustees is responsible for management of the school. This includes developing and adopting fiscal policies and procedures.

Budget

To get off to a strong start you will need to create a budget. Based on the per-pupil allotment, design your budget around the core values of your mission and vision. Most authorizers will require a board-approved budget proposal for the first year of operation. In addition, create a long-range budget plan for the first three years of operation. Most importantly for a start up school, create a detailed cash-flow projection for the first year of operation and continue this practice in subsequent years. These budgets and projections are reviewed and approved by the Board of Trustees at the annual meeting and modified as necessary.

Tip: *Include your principal and a teacher on the finance committee. Ask the principal, "What do you need in order for our vision and mission to be realized?" Then design your budget so it ensures that your faculty can achieve the goals you have set. If that means committing a large sum of money to professional development, now is the time to do it.*

Facilities

Facilities may be one of the areas where charter applicants and operators can best test their ability to be creative, flexible and visionary. Ideally, one would look for a facility in a convenient and central location, with a healthy physical plant suitable for or readily and cheaply adaptable to the most conducive classroom setting, and available and affordable. Such is rarely the case. Rather, charter school operators have had to improvise and compromise in securing a location for their school. Some “borrow” or share available facilities with another organization. Others convert unused retail space in strip malls. Some are fortunate to have access to available district facilities already designed on a classroom model. One charter rented space in a local restaurant, clearing out the “classrooms” every Friday so it could conduct its weekend business. Another provides its students’ physical education classes at the local Y. Yet another contracts with a local restaurant to provide its students with their daily lunch. Another rents out a church basement for the annual fee of \$1.

Facilities offer one more area in which to involve the community and call on local organizations to contribute to the education of the next generation. Enlist the expertise of realtors, architects, businesses, etc. in efforts to find and prepare a facility for opening day. Approach organizations to donate or lease their available facilities. Consider making use of spaces that are in use but vacant during the school day. “Borrow” community resources already available nearby, rather than providing them directly.

Facilities present many charter applicants with a difficult dilemma: some sponsors make approval contingent on the applicant’s having already secured an appropriate site, yet applicants can’t enter into a lease agreement unless they have the approved charter in hand. Again, flexibility and creativity are required — applicants may try to secure a provisional agreement with the landlord or a waiver from the sponsor.

Charter school funding has always been a hotbed of discussion. Check out CER’s report *Solving the Charter School Funding Gap: The Seven Major Causes and What to Do About Them* at www.edreform.com.

Have you Thought About Fundraising

When you realize that you want to raise revenue beyond the per-pupil, you must create a fundraising plan. There are many ways to raise money. Private individuals, federal grants, and local and national foundations all are possible sources of funds. Your objective is to give others the opportunity to help you succeed.

Your group will need a leader devoted to fundraising. Your fundraising chair will create a plan, do the research needed, write the grants, and most importantly, build the relationships necessary to raise additional funds for your school. The best targets for charter schools are local family or community foundations that stress education and direct their giving to particular communities. You can find out about such organizations from numerous publications at libraries, or local philanthropy offices.

A good fundraising plan will also include the business community. Many companies, large and small, have charitable giving arms that contribute heavily to schools and school programs. What you must do, however, to separate your request from the hoards of similar requests they receive is to differentiate your program from the others. What makes your school special? Build your credibility and inspire confidence by building relationships with local businesses and foundations.



The Application & Approval Process

All states that permit charter schools require an application and have an approval process. The charter school law in your state will identify the authorized charter-granting agencies that will be responsible for charter school approval, development and oversight. Your team will need to be familiar with the application and approval process. Often, charter schools will meet great resistance, especially when your state's charter law is first adopted. Be prepared for a battle if necessary. Consider it your responsibility to know the charter school law intimately, as the authorizer may or may not be interpreting its contents with your success in mind.



CASE STUDY OF A CHARTER SCHOOL IN BALTIMORE, MD

“Beginning in October 2003, City Neighbors Charter School began holding monthly General Information Meetings, visiting monthly meetings at the area neighborhood associations, and distributing market surveys (forms for interested families to fill out, stating their interest in enrollment at City Neighbors Charter School (CNCS). In March of 2004, market surveys were placed in local churches in an attempt to announce CNCS to students in the private school market. In April of 2004, 900 market surveys were distributed in our three local BCPSS schools: Glenmount, Woodhome and Hazelwood. Of these surveys, 600 were pre-addressed and stamped for easy return to CNCS. These efforts have netted CNCS over 120 forms from interested families in the area.

Current marketing efforts include mailing announcements inviting parents to attend our Open House and informing parents of how to obtain an enrollment package. These announcements will go to 1,312 homes with children aged 0-12 in our zone. We are also mailing applications to the 120 families who filled out a market survey, as well as sending email notification to families for whom we do not have addresses. An enrollment area is set up on our website with a downloadable application form. An Open House will be held on January 29th. Enrollment will occur from January 31st to February 6th over scattered times in order to be accessible to all parents.”

Careful, thoughtful planning is the key to the success of any enterprise. Charter schools are no exception. The payoff, however, will be well worth the effort in creating the vision and educational mission conceived by the organizers. Maintaining optimism and a commitment to involving other people in meaningful ways will be important ingredients for success.

Moving Forward:

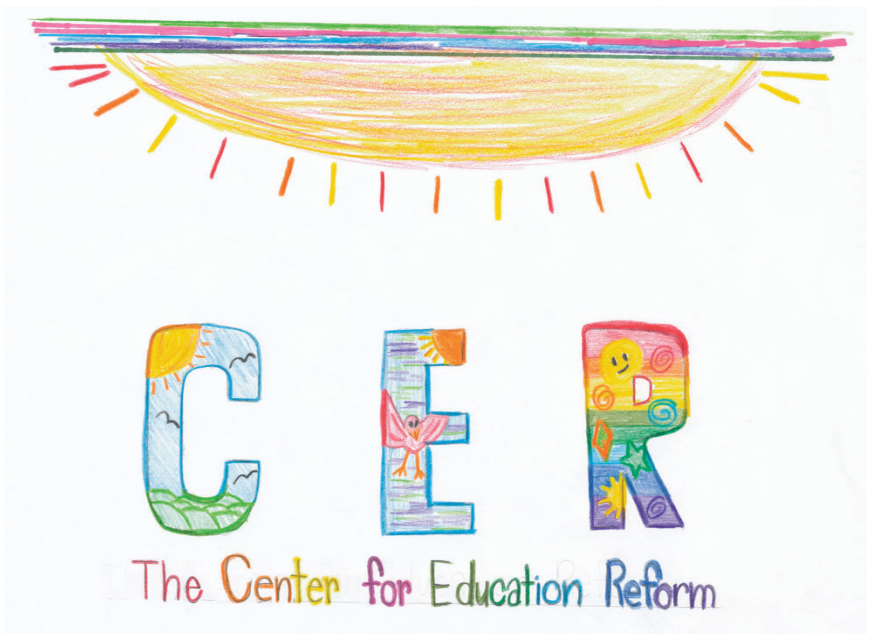
Once you receive your charter, it is time to gear up for the first day of school. There are dozens of organizations in cities and states ready to help you move forward at this point.

Contact us when you are ready:

The Center for Education Reform

800-521-2118

www.edreform.com



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TOOLKIT

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The Center for Education Reform drives the creation of better educational opportunities for all children by leading parents, policymakers and the media in boldly advocating for school choice, advancing the charter school movement, and challenging the education establishment.

The Center for Education Reform changes laws, minds and cultures to allow good schools to flourish.