

QUALITY CHARTER SCHOOL DESIGN

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Quality Charter School Design

Founding a charter school requires patience, perseverance, and a sincere commitment to fulfilling the expectations of charter schools in Delaware. The task is not for the faint hearted or those with limited time to spare. However, the outcome of this dedication can result in hundreds of children's lives changed for the better. The Delaware Charter Schools Network, like state charter school organizations throughout this country, recognizes that great charter schools begin long before opening day. By providing charter school applicants with clear direction on the expectations and qualities of excellent charter schools in Delaware, new schools are more likely to meet success in the application and start-up process.

This is a workbook for those interested in founding a charter school. The information available on founding charter schools would fill hundreds of pages. This workbook is designed to help founders

- * better understand the concept of charter schools, the movement in Delaware, and best practices
- * recognize the commitment to high standards necessary for a successful school
- * develop a founding committee that can help ensure a successful application
- * develop a plan of action to bring an application to an authorizer in Delaware
- * establish relationships with other charter school supporters in Delaware

The Delaware Charter Schools Network has developed this workbook with the belief that a founding committee that follows these recommendations is likely to be successful in the application and startup process. In order to help charter school applicants meet these standards, the Network will provide support whenever possible.

The Delaware Charter Schools Network is a non-profit organization that serves as the voice of the charter school movement in Delaware. Support from foundations and members across the state allows the Network to meet its mission to provide advocacy, greater public awareness, and support of high quality schools to public charter school boards, leaders, staff, and parents. The Network serves as a facilitator for communication and collaboration among charter schools and also with educational organizations throughout the state as well as nationally.

The vision of the Delaware Charter Schools Network is to serve as a catalyst for systemic change resulting in excellence in public education throughout Delaware. As a small state, Delaware can serve as the model for excellence in public education and choice, and the Network is committed to this model.

What is a charter school?

What do you know about charter schools? Test yourself!

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)
- 5)

Charter schools are a relatively new phenomenon in the education system. The first charter schools as we know them were established in Minnesota in 1992. Since then, the charter school movement has grown to 39 states and the District of Columbia, enrolling more than 1.3 million students. While charter schools have demonstrated success repeatedly, they are not immune from detractors. Unfortunately, these detractors have forced charter schools to funnel valuable time and funding away from charter school improvement to charter school defense.

**To learn more about the national charter school movement, visit:
<http://www.publiccharters.org/aboutschools>**

In Delaware, the initial charter school statute was approved in 1995 and signed into law by then Governor Thomas R. Carper. The first charter schools in Delaware – Positive Outcomes Charter School and Charter School of Wilmington -- were opened in September 1996. Today, Delaware is home to 18 charter schools serving more than 8,600 students across the state. Three schools have been approved for operation in September 2010.

The intent of Delaware’s charter school legislation is to “to create an alternative to traditional public schools operated by school districts and improve public education overall by establishing a system of independent "charter" schools throughout the State.” In exchange for the freedom offered as a charter school, charter schools must be committed to higher levels of accountability, both educationally and financially.

**To read the entire code related to Delaware charter schools, visit:
<http://delcode.delaware.gov/title14/c005/index.shtml>**

Each charter school in the state is opened under the authority of an authorizer. The authorizer is the entity responsible for holding the charter school accountable to the performance measures outlined in the charter. All school districts in Delaware may authorize a charter school. The Delaware State Board of Education also serves as an authorizer. When authorizing through the Delaware State Board, most communication will take place with the Charter Schools Office at the Department of Education. Experts on charter schools, curriculum, and finance are available to consultation related to state programs and regulations.

**To learn more about the DOE Charter Schools Office, visit:
<http://www.doe.k12.de.us/infosuites/schools/charterschools/default.shtml>**

Delaware Charter Schools are:

- * free and public
- * open to all students through a lottery system
- * required to comply with all state testing programs
- * rated through No Child Left Behind federal expectations
- * supported through state and local taxes
- * required to meet performance goals as identified in application
- * independently managed by a governing board that must have at least one parent and one teacher representative
- * committed to continuous improvement and academic success
- * given freedom from certain state regulations allowing greater flexibility

Successful charter schools in Delaware have some common threads:

- **Strong, committed school leader**
- **Clearly defined mission and goals that identify its unique educational component**
- **Broad-based community support**
- **Understanding of education standards, curriculum content and delivery**
- **A strong business plan with a mind towards finance**
- **Board with exceptional governance and outreach skills**

Founding committees that demonstrate a commitment to understanding charter schools and pursuing best educational practices are likely to find that the work that they have completed in the application process will lead to greater success in the start-up and opening year of school operations.

How long does the process of starting a charter school take?

How many months do you think it will take to start a charter school?

- 1) Six months
- 2) 12 months
- 3) 18 months
- 4) 24 months
- 5) 36 months

The average amount of time from the initial forming of a founding committee to opening day typically takes from 30 to 40 months. This time commitment ensures that all critical aspects of school development have been addressed and the founding committee has given itself ample time to cultivate and establish the knowledge and skills essential to creating an exemplary charter school. However, the start-up time for a school that is a direct replication of an existing model that already has been approved by a Delaware authorizer should require less start-up time.

What are the stages of the charter school application process?

A founding committee can break the process down into the following development stages:

- 1) **EXPLORATION** - A founding committee is established and the preliminary qualities of the school are developed.
- 2) **SCHOOL QUALITIES IDENTIFIED** - The founding committee establishes some critical foundations of the school, gains familiarity with developing a charter school, and sets formal procedures for communication and governance.
- 3) **SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT** - The nuts and bolts of the school are explored and developed. Outreach to potential community partners is developed and school feasibility studies conducted to confirm a solid base of interested parents in the school concept.
- 4) **APPLICATION WRITING** - The concepts, research, and data identified in the prior phases are put to paper in the actual application for the charter school. While often tedious and challenging, this is the most critical aspect of the process as it will require keen attention to detail and informed responses to all issues of importance.
- 5) **APPLICATION REVIEW** - The application committee/founding board will present the charter application to the authorizer and be prepared to respond to questions and concerns from the authorizer's representatives.

*Avoid the pitfall of
procrastination!
As a founding
committee, know the
application deadline
and set a schedule
working backward
from that deadline!*

A checklist for success!

Stage 1: Exploration

Establishing a Resourceful and Dedicated Founding Committee and Board

The founding committee consists of multiple parents, community members, educators, business persons, or other stakeholders who are well-situated to successfully start a high-quality charter school. The founding board consists of a small set of highly motivated leaders from the committee who will accept legal responsibility for the school's development and application.

- The founding committee has a genuine personal interest or concern for the student population to be served. This motivation can be clearly articulated by all members of the founding committee. The founding committee is not driven to create a charter school by personal financial, political, or other counterproductive motivations.
- The founding committee consists of self-driven people who have the motivation, time, and other resources necessary to undertake the challenging task of starting a charter school.
- The founding committee places integrity and ethical practices at the forefront in all decision-making processes.
- The founding committee has designated a founding board to provide collaborative leadership, including delegating responsibilities to other members of the founding committee, keeping other members of the committee on task, and accepting legal responsibility for the application process from start to finish.
- The founding board demonstrates a willingness to consider and implement outside feedback and recommendations.
- The founding board consists of at least three individuals who have diverse skill sets (e.g. education, business, legal, fundraising, etc.).
- The founding board recognizes areas of weakness and need in its composition (e.g. absence of a business perspective, legal perspective, etc.) and actively solicits support from outside individuals/organizations in these areas.
- The members of the founding board are committed to working together collaboratively. Processes are in place to hear all opinions, to respect dissenting opinions, and to move forward with effective decision-making, e.g. through a code of conduct, decision-making process, etc

Commitment

Individual commitment to a group effort - that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work.

--Vince Lombardi

Identifying Formal Structure

The charter school founding committee recognizes that the process of application will call for a more formal organizational structure.

- The founding committee outlines the roles of founding board members, including the responsibilities, both legally and as a governor, of board membership.
- The founding committee identifies members interested in membership of the school's founding board and, through a process accepted by the committee as a whole, appoints its founding board.
- The founding board accepts legal responsibility for the school's development and authorization.
- The founding committee will communicate to the authorizer the members of the founding board through the previously identified representatives.

Researching Charter Schools and Best Practices

The charter school founding committee demonstrates a commitment to understanding charter schools and pursuing best educational practices.

- Multiple members of the founding committee have attended at least two charter school conferences or workshops prior to submittal of the charter application.
- All members of the founding board have received training in the areas of accountability and assessment planning.
- All members of the founding board of directors have received governance training as a whole.
- The founding committee is committed to understanding and implementing research-based best practices.
- Members of the founding committee have visited and informally evaluated at least three successful charter schools.
- The founding committee demonstrates a strong commitment to ongoing professional development for the board of directors, school administration, and faculty. This commitment will be reflected in the school's application and allocation of financial resources.

Understanding the State Law and Application

The charter school founding committee establishes a clear understanding of the law that governs charter schools and the application process that they must undergo.

- Members of the founding committee have read the Delaware charter school law.
- Members of the founding committee have read and understand the following: several strong sample applications from other schools; the current application for a Delaware Charter School; and the Department of Education Charter School Application Technical Assistance Manual.

- Members of the founding committee have identified a portal for centralization of information about the application and school development process that is accessible to all founding board members.

Developing a Vision for the School

The charter school founding committee demonstrates a commitment to fulfilling the impetus for the charter school movement by creating a high quality public education option in Delaware.

- The founding committee researches all available charter school options in Delaware, other unique models within Delaware public school districts, and other unique models nationwide, prior to establishing the school vision.
- The founding committee follows a process of establishing a vision for the school that encompasses the legal expectations of charter schools according to Delaware code, the accountability expectations of the Department of Education, while also presenting a unique model that will serve as the foundation of the school.

Beginning Community Outreach

The founding committee actively focuses its development efforts on effective outreach practices.

- The founding committee has adequately researched the community in which the charter school will exist and interviewed a variety of community members to verify that there is a need and desire for the charter school in the community.
- The founding committee has adequately researched the student population to be served to understand its educational needs.
- The founding committee actively networks with community leaders, local legislators, and other key figures in the community in order to understand the community and to garner support for the charter school.
- The founding committee recruits additional founding committee and prospective board members in order to broaden the pool of expertise and the skill-base of those working to start the school.
- The founding committee understands its role in representing and advocating for the charter school movement. The school makes decisions and works in such a way that the movement will be well-represented.

Recruiting a Potential School Leader

The charter school founding committee recognizes that engaging the advice and commitment of a school leader early in the development process will enhance viability of the project.

- Members of the founding committee attend at least one seminar or workshop, or access professional support, on recruiting charter school leaders.
- The founding committee articulates, in writing, the qualities that will be essential in a school leader as related to the vision of the school and the daily operations of the school.

Stage 2: School Qualities Identified

Establishing a Relationship with the Authorizer

The charter school founding committee understands the authorizer/school relationship.

- The founding committee recognizes that a good relationship with potential authorizers is critical to the founding, start-up, and operational stages of the charter school and commits to creating a positive environment for success.
- The founding committee identifies its choice of authorizer and approaches the appropriate district or state personnel regarding the development of the school.
- The founding board designates several representatives to serve as the primary contacts with the authorizer. These representatives will provide personal contact information to the authorizer, commit to regular communication regarding the school's development to the authorizer, and serve on the school's founding board.

Developing a Mission and Goals for the School

The charter school founding committee places high value on the development of mission and goals for the school that focus on student achievement and outcomes.

- The founding committee understands that the mission and goals will drive the success of the school. Charter schools with clearly articulated missions and goals have a greater likelihood of success, both academically and in their ability to attract students. The founding committee researches missions and goals of charter schools in Delaware and nation-wide.
- The founding committee communicates with local educators and the Department of Education regarding specific expectations that may be required of school goals.
- The founding committee reviews the mission and goals of highly successful charter schools nation-wide.
- The founding committee reaches out to other educational, non-profit, and business communities for an external scan of the school's mission and goals.

Recognizing Strengths and Weaknesses of the Founding Committee

The charter school founding committee understands that developing and writing a successful application is a group process requiring expertise in a number of areas.

- The founding committee establishes a relationship with at least two recently approved charter schools to gain further understanding of the school development and application writing process.
- The founding committee identifies the required skill sets that will be essential in developing and writing the charter school application.
- The founding committee identifies team weaknesses and develops planning to address those weaknesses, either through reaching out to potential supporters willing to provide services pro bono or to fee-for-service organizations with expertise in charter school application development and writing.

- ❑ The founding committee defines all necessary services it may need to purchase in the process of the charter school application development, and develops a clear plan of committee support or fundraising to help offset the application development costs.

Commitment to Accountability

The founding committee demonstrates a commitment to accountability and this commitment is reflected in the school's development process, application, and goals upon opening.

- ❑ The founding committee is committed to having the school create an annual accountability plan which includes specific performance goals. This commitment will be communicated both in the charter application and during the transition from a founding committee to a board-governed, administrator-run school.
- ❑ The founding committee is committed to creating a permanent institution that sustains the integrity of the founders' vision through written documentation and ongoing review of core values, ongoing documentation of board decisions, processes for transfer of leadership (both on the board and in administration), and effective policy making at the board level.

Change the world, start a charter school!

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world.

Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

-- Margaret Mead

Stage 3: School Development

Addressing Technical Aspects of School Development

The charter school founding committee begins crafting specific educational and organization components of the school as related to the application process.

- The founding committee has a full understanding of the application expectations and divides the responsibilities for application response among its members.
- The founding committee members are fully engaged professionally, or personally, in the specific area of the application for which they have accepted responsibility, and actively seek support in developing that knowledge base as it applies to charter schools.
- The founding committee establishes collective knowledge and on a regular basis shares its findings with the founding board.
- The founding committee develops a business plan for the school that serves as the foundation for the school's non-educational programming.

Identifying demand and impact

The charter school founding committee recognizes the essential information that will be derived from a study of demand for the school model and the impact its creation may have on other public schools as well as the new school's enrollment projections.

- The founding committee undertakes a formal study of demand to determine the likelihood of achieving full capacity. The study will demonstrate support of both parents and community leaders for the proposed charter school.
- The founding committee researches current public schools in the area. This research should reflect the ability of the proposed charter school to establish and maintain its student capacity as identified in the application.

Engaging Community Collaboration

The charter school founding committee recognizes close collaboration with organizations in the community will lead to greater success in recruiting and retaining students and establishing a place in the community.

- The founding committee understands cultural competency.
- The founding committee embraces diversity and demonstrates such with its own diversity and with clearly articulated relationships with community organizations.
- The founding committee actively researches community organizations and reaches out to those organizations that may complement the charter school's model.

Stage 4: Writing the Application

The Writing Process

The charter school founding committee understands that research and development of the application must transfer into formal responses to the specific questions outlined in the authorizer's application.

- The founding committee recognizes the deadlines set forth in the application and appoints a lead writer who will be responsible for coordinating all other writers, the final editing of the application, and the delivery of the application to the authorizer in a timely fashion.
- The founding committee researches past applications and collaborates with current charter schools to identify resources for use in writing the application.
- The founding committee establishes a formal process for approval of prepared responses to the application.
- The founding committee respects the application instructions of the authorizer and recognizes the expectations of authorizer by answering all questions posed and providing an application that is complete and error free.

Ownership of the Application

The charter school founding board takes formal ownership of the written application upon completion.

- The founding board carefully reviews the application prior to printing to ensure accuracy. The founding board is responsible for all information provided in the application and will be held to the information in the public review process.
- The founding board signs all necessary paperwork finalizing the submission.

Stage 4: Application Review

Preparing for Formal Application Review

The charter school founding board recognizes that the final stage of the application process requires preparation and training for effective response to the authorizer.

- The entire founding board commits to attend all meetings regarding the charter school application set by the authorizer.
- The founding board prepares for the actual authorizer interview process.
- The founding board maintains regular and consistent communication with the proposed authorizer and responds promptly to any questions or concerns posed.

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