

***Charter School Governing Board  
Training Handbook***



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## Forward

***By Randy DeHoff, Executive Director, Colorado Charter School Institute and member of the Colorado State Board of Education, representing the 6<sup>th</sup> Congressional District***

Colorado charter schools have come a long way since Governor Roy Romer signed the Colorado Charter Schools Act of 1993. As of spring 2007, there were 133 charter schools serving 52,352 students. The combined total of the charter school population equals the third largest school district in the state. Even at that number, the demand outpaces the supply; approximately 30,000 children are wait listed.

Long wait lists are not the only indicator of success; charter schools fare considerably better on state academic standards compared to traditional public schools. Overall, charter schools have higher scores on the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP). Charter schools take proportionally more state “Accomplished” and “Gain-Maker” awards, are more likely to make Adequate Yearly Progress, and receive proportionally more “excellent” and “high” ratings on the School Accountability Reports than traditional public schools.

Charter school founders, board members, administrators, teachers, staff, parents, and students have reason to celebrate the success of these schools and their contribution to our state’s education system. There is, however, room to improve. Not all charter schools are successful. Some struggle financially. Others are unable to meet the needs of all of their students. Some will not have their charters renewed and their doors will close for good.

While school closure is an integral part of accountability, it is in the best interest of students that schools improve—even better that they start off right and continue to improve—rather than fail. Charter school boards can make that happen. From the time the school is still just a bright idea to when the first student crosses the threshold to when the first graduation caps hurtle skyward, the board has the opportunity to lead the school to excellence as a learning community, business, employer, and neighborhood partner. In the same span, there is equally an opportunity for failure. A lot is at stake.

Unfortunately, board members, many of whom have never served on a board before, do not always have the knowledge and skills to be effective school leaders. For this reason, the Colorado Charter School Institute, Colorado Department of Education and the Colorado League of Charter Schools recognized the need to provide new and current board members with a comprehensive handbook. The *Charter School Governing Board Training Handbook* provides indispensable training in legal, financial, educational, and relational aspects of charter schooling. It is a must read for all aspiring, new, and seasoned board members. Leaders are not born, but made, by their determination to be the best they can be.

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## Introduction

Effective leadership is the most important determinant of success of any enterprise. This is especially true for charter schools, the success of which hinges on the daily leadership capabilities of the administrator and the “big picture” direction of the governing board. Even before the school doors open, board members must begin building a strong foundation that will support the school through the trials of the startup years and as the school grows and strives to meet its potential. To build a solid foundation, school boards must be effective in promoting the school’s vision and mission; planning for the future; setting sound policy; modeling professionalism; overseeing finances, evaluation, and other key operational aspects; and building relationships.

The purpose of this guide is to equip present and future board members with the knowledge they need to fulfill their duties. The handbook was developed through the combined efforts of the Colorado Charter School Institute, the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) Schools of Choice Unit, and the Colorado League of Charter Schools with guidance from charter school founders, board members, and administration.

None of the information included in this guidebook is meant to represent legal advice or lessen the need for charter school leaders to seek legal counsel.

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## 1. Board Structure and Responsibilities

*“Productivity is never an accident. It is always the result of a commitment to excellence, intelligent planning, and focused effort.”*

Paul J. Meyer

Before a school opens, the steering committee should determine how the initial board will be selected, how subsequent members will be added (by appointment or election), the length of term, required training, expectations for conduct, conflict of interest guidelines, individual roles and responsibilities, emergency protocols, procedures for meetings, workshops, and committees, and board evaluation. Founding board members should also establish policies for handling conflict and working with board members who are no longer productive or are struggling to keep their commitment. Board member agreements contain these types of expectations and are signed by all seated board members on an annual basis. In addition, many of these decisions should be written into the bylaws of the school and/or board policy manual. The bylaws should also include any board requirements required by the school’s authorizer.

Sample board member agreements are available at:  
[www.nps.gov/partnerships/model\\_board\\_member\\_agreement.htm](http://www.nps.gov/partnerships/model_board_member_agreement.htm) or  
[www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/guidebook/gov/index.htm](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/guidebook/gov/index.htm)

### **Board Composition**

**Appointed or elected board members:** The founders should determine whether board members are appointed or whether they are elected and if so, by whom.

**Size of the board:** A board should be large enough to provide good oversight for school committees. Often boards place at least one board member on each committee. A very large board, however, can be unproductive. Most charter school boards have between seven and 11 members. An odd number of directors reduces the likelihood of tied votes.

**Candidates for the board:** Diversity is the hallmark of an effective board. Boards benefit from having members with varied expertise in education, human resources, personnel management, finance, law, marketing, strategic planning, or fundraising, as well as individuals with connections to the community, local businesses, and political leaders. Depending on the stage of development, the school may benefit from having board members with specific skills. Expertise in real estate, code compliance, or contracting, for example, is valuable during facility expansion. Diversity of perspective is also important. Boards composed of only “insiders” tend to miss early signs of problems in the operation of the board and the school.

Another consideration is whether staff and administrators may serve as board members. Many charter schools and charter school authorizers consider it a best practice to bar employees and their immediate family members from serving on the governing board. If

the board chooses to place an employee on the board, it needs to establish rules for voting when there is a conflict of interest. Many schools that have employee board members avoid conflicts of interest by designating employees as non-voting members.

### **Characteristics of an Effective Charter School Governing Board**

- Passionate, unwavering belief in the charter school’s mission and core values
- A firm understanding of the charter promises and a clear, consistent way to measure them
- Clarity of collective vision—where the school is and where it wants to be in the future
- Focus on results
- Clarity of roles and responsibilities of the full board, individual trustees and committees
- The right structure in terms of board size, composition, committees and officers
- Board meetings focused on strategic issues, not just reporting
- Clear understanding of the difference between governance and management
- A school leader who has the time to assist in the creation of effective governance
- A strong partnership between the board and the school leader which is built on mutual trust and respect

Source: Authorizer Issue Brief, National Association of Charter School Authorizers, September 2005

### **Board Offices**

**President:** The president establishes the meeting’s agenda and ensures members have all the information they need in their packets. The president is usually the chief liaison to the administrator, acts as the primary signing agent for official board documents, and is responsible for ensuring the board is in compliance with the charter contract, board manual, and bylaws.

**Chairperson:** Some boards have a chairperson in addition to a board president. The chairperson leads the meetings and ensures the board follows appropriate parliamentary procedures.

**Vice-President:** The vice-president serves when the president is absent.

**Secretary:** The secretary records minutes for the meetings and keeps copies of agendas and minutes, correspondence between the board and other parties, committee reports, articles of incorporation, charter contracts, and the bylaws.

**Treasurer:** The treasurer keeps financial records and inventory lists, tracks and records deposits to school accounts, provides assistance during financial audits, and interacts with the business manager for the school. When a school does not have a business manager, the treasurer generally assists with approval of payments.

### **New Board Member Recruitment**

The founders should establish a policy for replacing retiring board members. Many boards form a committee to assist in member development. The process begins by developing a profile of the present board and determining the types of expertise needed at the stage of school development. The committee then recruits individuals who can commit sufficient time to serve and who are internally motivated, reliable, and dedicated to the school and its mission and vision.

Recruits should be given enough information about the expectations of the board to determine whether they should make the commitment. If he or she consents, the new member should be selected (by vote) or appointed to the board according to the bylaws.

Once on the board, new members receive a current copy of the board manual. Board manuals contain the vision and mission statements; the school's strategic plan; a list of the year's scheduled board meetings; agenda items routinely addressed, listed under each month; a roster of all board members and their contact information; the current year's operating budget; tabs for monthly board packets (agenda, previous meeting's minutes, financial statements, reports, background information or other materials); and other important documents (e.g. Educational Improvement Plan, state testing data, staff list). New board members should also receive training in strategic planning, finance management, and program evaluation as needed.

### **Term Limits**

To maintain a level of continuity, institutional memory, and expertise, it is important to stagger the terms of the first board. For example, a founding board could have two members with a four-year term limit, two members with a three-year term limit, and three members with a two-year term limit. As the original board members retire, replacement board members serve three-year terms.

### **Governance Structure/Model**

According to the most recent survey of Colorado charter schools, one-quarter of schools had a "shared" governing board comprised of parents, school staff, and community members; a third had a board comprised of parents and community members; 16% had a

board comprised of parents only; and the remainder had other combinations of parents, community members, and school personnel<sup>1</sup>.

The most common model for school governance in Colorado charter schools is the shared board model. In these schools, parent representation on the board is substantial. Frequently, administrators serve on the board as ex officio (non-voting) members. This model gives parents, teachers, and administrators a sense of ownership in the school.

Some schools have boards that are largely composed of professionals who are not parents of students in the school. These schools generally serve at-risk youth who may be disconnected from their families.

### **Board Committees**

Committees comprise between five and eight members headed by a chairperson with relevant expertise. Committees assist the board by conducting research on critical issues enabling the whole board to focus on the big picture (i.e. strategic planning, policy development, and financial management). Committees increase member buy-in and ensure work is fairly distributed.

The board should set clear expectations and policies for committee operation, this includes whether committees are empowered to make decisions or just provide information to the whole board, when committees should report findings/decisions, and how long the committees stand. There are two types of committees – standing and ad hoc. Standing committees are part of the permanent structure of the school. Their function is described in board policy and generally related to the governance of the school. Committees on finance, board development, and accountability are of this type. Ad hoc committees focus on specific, timely issues and are dissolved upon their resolution.

More information on committee formation is available in Chapter 10 of the Charter Starter Handbook at [www.uscharterschools.org/gb/governance/contents.htm](http://www.uscharterschools.org/gb/governance/contents.htm).

### **Board Assessment**

Effective boards regularly evaluate their effectiveness. Evaluations should include self-assessment and assessment from parents, staff, administration, and even students regarding the board's communication, support, finance management, policy development, dedication to the mission and vision, and relationship building. Some boards may wish to include individual board member self-evaluations regarding their contribution and

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<sup>1</sup> DeSchryver, K. (2006). *The State of Charter Schools in Colorado 2004-2005*. Denver, CO: Colorado Department of Education.



expectations. The board should also evaluate the effectiveness of its standing and ad hoc committees.

Sample board assessments are available at:  
[www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/guidebook/gov/pdf/P2PSelf-Assessment.pdf](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/guidebook/gov/pdf/P2PSelf-Assessment.pdf).

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## 2. Holding Productive Board Meetings

*"I've never seen anything good come out of a five hour board meeting."*

B. Kowalski

### **Regular Board Meetings**

Board meetings are usually scheduled once a month to discuss emerging issues and to obtain reports on ongoing committee work. Working meetings are generally longer and are focused on a single topic (e.g. facility expansion, budget development, or strategic planning). Boards may also attend workshops. Members vote at regular and working meetings, but not at workshops.

Most board meetings are scheduled in the evening in an environment that can comfortably seat board members and guests. Regular meetings consist of an examination of unfinished business from previous meetings, reports from committees, and new business. The board president sets the agenda and assembles appropriate materials for board packets. The president should distribute these well ahead of the meeting so that board members have ample time to review the documents under consideration. Board guests should also receive a packet.

### **Sunshine Law**

Charter school board meetings must comply with Colorado's Sunshine Law. The Sunshine Law requires that the public receive 24-hour notice of meetings and minutes be taken when three or more members of the board meet together and discuss school matters. The law dictates how and under what circumstances members may meet in executive session.

More information on Colorado's Sunshine Law is available at [www.colorado.gov/dpa/doit/archives/open/00openmeet.htm](http://www.colorado.gov/dpa/doit/archives/open/00openmeet.htm).

### **Meeting Organization**

**Developing an agenda:** On the agenda the president notes the action expected for each item such as "consider for approval" or "up for discussion." He or she should consider time when drawing up the list of agenda items so as not to overload the meeting. For example, items that can wait for consideration may be moved to the next month; or topics that take considerable time to discuss may be delegated to a small group in order to investigate and summarize findings to the whole board. Items that have largely been decided and are up for a second reading may be placed on a consent agenda to be accepted in one motion. The board may discuss the items but the process of voting is shortened into one step.

**Beginning the meeting:** The chairperson (or president when there is a single, unified role) plays an important role in keeping meetings moving, following rules of order, and maintaining decorum. The chair opens the meeting by greeting all members, directors, and guests. He or she may set the tone of the meeting by reading the mission and vision statements or saying the Pledge of Allegiance. The chair should note whether a quorum is present according to the school bylaws. A quorum is required in order to vote.

**Maintaining the pace:** The chair should make every effort to stick to the agenda and keep the conversation focused. *Roberts Rules of Order* provides a helpful guide to maintaining an effective pace while enabling everyone to be heard. The chair may set limits on time used for less important issues, request that in-depth issues be assigned to committees for outside work, or tactfully end discussions that are unproductive. The chair ensures all board members and guests have an opportunity to speak and to take breaks as needed. Board meetings that run late into the night are often a sign of poor preparation or poor time management.

#### **General Rules for Good Meetings**

- Be prepared
- Use board notebooks that include past minutes, etc.
- Use Roberts Rules of Order
- Reach a conclusion/resolution and move on
- Record the minutes
- Schedule workshops for larger issues
- Have a policy handbook to reference
- Use the mission and vision to guide decision making
- Focus on solutions, not problems
- Don't try to solve everything
- Remain respectful - don't personalize issues
- Praise twice as much as criticize

**Considering the issues:** Weighty and emotional issues require especially thoughtful consideration. The following steps can help boards address problems systematically:

1. Describe the problem
2. Brainstorm potential solutions
3. Establish a fact-finding committee to pursue additional information, as needed.
4. Cull the list to the most viable choices
5. Evaluate the choices in light of the mission and vision statements.
6. Evaluate the costs and benefits
7. Make the decision
8. Evaluate the impact

**Executive session:** Executive Session may be held in regular or working meetings when the proceedings are confidential (e.g. contract negotiations, agreements, personnel

matters, security agreements, property negotiations, obtaining legal advice, individual student discussions, executive searches). Executive sessions should be audio-recorded and kept on file for 90 days.

**Keeping minutes:** The minutes should provide a clear, accessible record of the decisions made and actions taken by the board during a meeting.

**Ending the meeting:** When drawing the meeting to a close, the chair should review individual assignments to clarify the tasks and to establish topics for the next meeting.

**After the meeting:** The secretary should distribute the minutes as soon as possible so that they can be checked for accuracy. Minutes may not be released to the general public until they have been approved by the board at the next meeting. The president should place unfinished business on the agenda for the next meeting.

**Interaction with parents:** A board should establish a grievance process for bringing a concern to the board. Board policy should also explain to parents how they can provide input to the board during the Public Comment portion of the agenda. Public input during the board meeting is generally not permitted.

### **Board Member Conduct**

**Code of conduct:** Within the board member agreement, the code of conduct statement includes such topics as confidentiality, treatment of sensitive information, and placing the best interests of the school ahead of the best interests of any individual child.

**Conflict of interest:** Board members who may benefit from an action of the board must recuse themselves from any vote regarding that action.

**Board member responsibilities:** These responsibilities may include regular attendance at board meetings and special school events; taking training courses; engaging in respectful discourse during periods of conflict; or providing support for administration and faculty in the performance of their jobs. Board members may not abstain from a vote simply because they do not want to vote on a particular decision.

**Overcoming indecision and conflict:** Indecision often occurs when members avoid making unpopular or difficult decisions. To delay decisions, boards may request additional reports when the facts conflict with their intentions. Discussions may degenerate in unproductive, hostile interactions. The potential for conflict increases when schools undergo significant growth and development, experience a change in leadership (administration or board), fail to achieve goals, or are under pressure from the authorizer or parents to change. It can also arise from poor communication, inadequate leadership, unaddressed issues, lack of information, or unmet expectations.

When ignored or handled poorly, conflict can have negative consequences including explosive meetings, loss of respect, bad decisions, low morale, loss of board members,

employees, parents and students, and the decline of the school. When handled correctly, conflict can lead to greater clarity over the nature of the problem, better communication leading to mutual understanding, and ultimately a wider range of potential solutions.

Boards should establish procedures that will help them to manage conflict in a productive way including norms for interaction that stress respect, openness, honesty, and commitment. They can receive training in conflict resolution techniques and if necessary, mediation.

More information on overcoming conflict and indecision is available at [www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/guidebook/gov/pdf/Top%2010%20Mistakes-Best%20Practices.pdf](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/guidebook/gov/pdf/Top%2010%20Mistakes-Best%20Practices.pdf) and [www.nationalcharterschools.org/uploads/pdf/resource\\_20060308114658\\_Five%20Dysfunctions%20of%20School%20Boards--v6%20as%20of%201-30-06.pdf](http://www.nationalcharterschools.org/uploads/pdf/resource_20060308114658_Five%20Dysfunctions%20of%20School%20Boards--v6%20as%20of%201-30-06.pdf).

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### 3. Promoting the Mission and Vision of the School

*“A leader's role is to raise people's aspirations for what they can become and to release their energies so they will try to get there.”*

David R. Gergen

An effective school board is committed to promoting the mission and vision of the school. These statements define the institution's goals and philosophy and are foundational to the school's culture and direction. Board members should be able to clearly state the mission and vision of the school and describe how the school is working toward meeting these objectives. They should also regularly use these guiding documents in planning, budgeting, marketing, evaluation, and other essential activities. By clearly articulating the mission and vision and visibly using it to guide decision making, board members provide a model for teachers as they incorporate the school's philosophy and goals into their classrooms.

#### **Purpose of Vision and Mission Statements**

The vision and mission of a school clearly defines for students, parents, teachers, administrators, board members, and the outside community the school's unique character, values, priorities, educational program, target population, and goals. Before a school opens, the process of developing these statements forges consensus among the founders around core goals. Once the school is open, the statements guide the school's daily decisions and future direction while inspiring all within the school to work toward common goals. Such statements also provide potential students and their families a sense of what they will experience at the school and the skills and knowledge they will attain if enrolled. The statements, however, are not set in stone. Vision and mission statements can be revisited, refined, and enhanced as the school grows and circumstances change.

#### **Structure of Vision and Mission Statements**

**Vision statements:** The vision statement paints a picture of the end goals of the school. In preparation for writing or refining an existing vision statement, board members should consider the following questions: What kind of school do you want the school to be? In what direction do you want to go? Where do you see the school in five to ten years? They should distill these answers into a concise, inspirational, and realistic vision statement.

#### **Example of a vision statement:**

Colorado Virtual Academy (COVA) will serve as an example of how a school's parents, students, and teachers can reach their goal of achieving an excellent education through the effective use of technology. In concept, design, and delivery, the school will be a model of innovation and excellence. The Colorado Virtual Academy envisions a school in which the administration, faculty, staff and parents will:

- Provide a complete education foundation based on proven methods of instruction and rich, challenging content;
- Have high academic, social, and moral expectations for all students; and
- Foster mastery of both knowledge and skills between teachers and parents, combining forces to ensure children receive individual attention and achieve academic excellence.

**Mission statements:** The mission statement defines the school’s purpose and character. In preparation for writing or rewriting a mission statement, the board should consider these questions: What distinctive programs and curricula will the school offer? What is our education philosophy? What is our target population? What are our values? Again, it is important to be concise, inspirational, and realistic.

**Example of a mission statement:**

The mission of Colorado Charter School is realized when every student performs academically at proficient or advanced levels. The governing board, faculty, staff, and parents will focus on helping all students to achieve their highest academic and character potential resulting in responsible, productive citizens.

**Promoting the Vision and Mission Statement**

Statements should be prominently displayed at the entrance to the school, in each classroom, and on all communication from the school. Letterhead, advertising pamphlets, and flyers provide other opportunities to promote the message. The vision and mission statements should be referenced in all trainings, faculty meetings, and board meetings to remind everyone of the purpose and goals for the school. Primary stakeholders (board, administrator, and teachers) should be able to clearly state the vision and mission and explain what it means for students.

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## 4. Engaging in Strategic Planning

*“Good plans shape good decisions. That’s why good planning helps to make elusive dreams come true.”*

Lester R. Bittel

An effective school board develops a strategic long-term plan to ensure the school stays on a path toward fulfilling its mission and vision. While it is the responsibility of the administrator to manage the day-to-day operations, the board establishes the school’s direction in its long-range strategic plan. A well-crafted strategic plan helps guide evaluation and school improvement, provides continuity from year-to-year and as staff and boards change, ensures consensus and buy-in, and assists in outreach and grant writing. The process articulates the mission/vision into clear goals and behaviors that can be followed by the board, staff, parents, and other stakeholders. Each goal set in the strategic planning session includes outcome data, which is used in internal and state/district-required reports and community outreach (e.g. press releases, parent meetings, grant writing, community presentations). More importantly, the data is used to evaluate progress toward the goals and formulate school improvement strategies. Because the strategic planning process includes representatives from all stakeholder groups, it encourages consensus building and mutual ownership of the plan. Proper planning ultimately saves time and resources because it enables the school to be proactive and intentional rather than reactive.

### **The Strategic Planning Team**

The team should be small and manageable, and include individuals with a variety of backgrounds, personalities and thinking styles. At a minimum, the team should include the board, administrator, and other key people such as a lead teacher or founder. Some schools that have experienced a complete turnover of administration and board may ask a member from the original board or steering committee to attend the strategic planning session to share the original vision of the school.

### **Process of Strategic Planning**

A strategic plan is typically developed during a board retreat or workshop. One board member from the strategic planning committee reports quarterly to the board on the team’s progress. The administrator communicates progress to parents and staff.

The purpose of the strategic planning process is to produce a four to five page document that can be understood by all stakeholders including parents and community members. The completed plan should contain the vision and mission statements, the school’s Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT analysis), annual and long-term objectives, functional strategies, individual responsibilities, and status toward meeting goals.



There are three steps in strategic planning:

**Asking strategic questions:** The committee starts by discussing the following questions:

1. What are the goals described in the mission and vision statements? Is the school in line with the founding statements? Does the school or do the statements need to change?
2. What external factors impact the school? What are the social factors impacting the school and its enrollment such as dissatisfaction with local school achievement or safety? How is the legislative or regulatory environment affecting the school? With which public (traditional and charter) and private schools is the school in competition? What are the demographics of the students enrolled? What are the employment needs?
3. What are the school's Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT analysis)? What are the strengths (e.g. quality staff, dedicated parents, strong financial plan)? What are the weaknesses (e.g. size of the facility, lower than expected student achievement)? What are the opportunities (e.g. collaboration with YMCA for after-school activities program, strong relationship with neighboring businesses)? What are the threats (e.g. strained district relationship, unfriendly political environment)?

The committee will then use the answers and discussion notes to produce the goals and an implementation plan.

**Setting goals:** Using the vision and mission statements and the answers to the strategic questions, the strategic planning committee should create long-term goals that are:

- Understandable: Goals state what will be achieved and when it will be achieved
- Acceptable: Goals reflect consensus of all stakeholders
- Flexible: Goals may be adjusted over time
- Measurable: Goals can be tracked by data
- Inspirational: Goals are challenging, but not frustrating
- Suitable: Goals reflect vision and mission
- Achievable: Goals are realistic

At a minimum, goals should cover student achievement, professional development for the board, administration, and staff, educational program objectives, facility development or improvements, financial stability, and external (parents, authorizer, community) and internal (staff and board) relationships. The plan should include short-term (annual) and long-range (5-10 years) objectives.

Examples of goals:

1. Board of Directors development and strengthening: 100% of the Board of Directors will receive training on running effective meetings by March 2008.
2. Educational program objectives: The Core Knowledge program will be fully implemented by the end of the third year.

3. Staff growth and professional development: Staff will follow a professional development plan covering school policy, classroom management, curriculum, etc.

**Implementing strategy:** After setting goals, the strategic planning committee focuses on implementation. Long-range goals are broken down into annual objectives. The committee then selects the functional strategies the school will employ to reach the objectives. These steps may include training, new policies, new instructional materials and other purchases, or staff changes. The committee should also note how and by whom progress will be tracked and reported.

Examples of strategic plans are available at  
[www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/guidebook/gov/index.htm](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/guidebook/gov/index.htm).

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## 5. Developing Sound Policy

*“Managers think about today. Leaders think about tomorrow.”*

Dan McCreary

Guided by the school’s mission and vision, an effective board sets policies regarding finances, enrollment, program evaluation, and other operational aspects. Written policies have two purposes: they provide direction to the board and staff in implementing the school’s goals; and they ensure the school meets legal requirements. A written copy of school policies should be available to anyone who requests it. Copies should be kept in the school office and on the school’s website.

### **Types of Policies**

In general, the board writes policies and the administrator creates procedures. Policies indicate *what* should be done whereas procedures indicate *how* something should be done. The governing board has little role in developing administrative procedures, other than the option to negate them if they choose.

Some authorizers require specific governing board policies be developed before they will grant school waivers from state statutes or district policies. Governing board policies are also the foundation for the employee and parent/student handbooks.

There are four types of policies a charter school governing board should consider:

- Policies required by law (e.g. nondiscrimination, sexual harassment)
- Policies required by the contract or charter application (e.g. lottery/enrollment, uniforms)
- Policies that give broader definition to the vision/mission (e.g. educational program philosophy, administrative structure, dress code)
- Policies that communicate board decisions (e.g. facility use, withholding diplomas/transcripts/grades)

### **Establishing a Policy**

Generally, a charter school board takes one year of diligent work to draft and adopt all of the necessary policies. The board’s first priority is to adopt those policies that are required by the articles of incorporation, charter school application, charter contract, and Colorado law. The second priority is to establish policies that will further the vision and mission of the school.

For example, if the charter school application states that the school will have a “disciplined environment,” the board will need to define as an official policy who decides when a student should be suspended or expelled, whether the authorizer will have a role in expulsions, and what parents should do to provide a disciplined environment at the

school. Once the policy is established, the administrator creates procedures for when students should be sent to the office and other consequences for misbehavior.

The board may also adopt policies throughout the year to address situations and crises. For example, the parent-teacher organization may ask to raffle a quilt at the annual spaghetti dinner. Rather than the board responding with a “yes” or “no” answer, the board may adopt or amend their facility use policy to address this particular situation. Having the response in policy ensures future decisions will be handled in a like manner.

To adopt proven practices and avoid adopting unsound or illegal policies, the board should research policies established at other schools. Guided by research, the board then crafts policy language, considers the first draft on first reading, incorporates amendments and edits, and produces a second draft. Typically, another type of font is used to show changes from the first reading draft. If the policy references or relates to a state statute or district policy, this should be noted at the end of the policy. Once a policy has been adopted by the board, the board should note the date it was adopted. Periodic changes to federal and state law, State Board of Education rules, or district policies may require the charter school governing board to update their policies. If the policy is later amended, this date should be noted as well. These steps maintain a written history of the policy.

### **Planning for Emergencies**

Boards should establish policies for managing school emergencies before they occur. Policies should cover such issues as accidents, bullying, natural disasters, ordered lockdowns, acts of violence, loss of an administrator, mismanagement of funds, employee conflict, and disagreement with the district. The board should also inquire what policies the district and state require.

CDE’s online Best Practices Guidebook provides policies and forms used by successful Colorado charter schools at [www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/guidebook/index.htm](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/guidebook/index.htm).

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## 6. Providing Guidance on Legislative and Legal Issues

An effective board identifies legal and regulatory changes that impact the school and communicates these changes to school personnel as applicable. Charter schools function under the authority of local, state and federal laws and regulations. These laws govern contracts, employment, building safety, finances, discrimination, and other educational and operational aspects of schooling. The board, administration, and school personnel should know legal requirements and remain in compliance with them. It is often prudent to seek legal consultation when negotiating the charter contract, requesting waivers, leasing a building, filing bylaws, hiring and firing employees, or confronting other liability issues.

### **Federal Laws Governing Charter Schools**

Federal laws that impact charter schools include civil rights laws, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

More information on federal NCLB programs is available at [www.cde.state.co.us/fedprograms/nclb/index.asp](http://www.cde.state.co.us/fedprograms/nclb/index.asp); the Charter Schools Grant Program at [www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/cchgrn00.htm](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/cchgrn00.htm); and [www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/cspguidance03.pdf](http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/cspguidance03.pdf); civil rights at [www.uscharterschools.org/pdf/fr/civil\\_rights.pdf](http://www.uscharterschools.org/pdf/fr/civil_rights.pdf); and IDEA at [www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/guidebook/sped/index.htm](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/guidebook/sped/index.htm).

### **State Laws Governing Charter Schools**

Colorado charter schools are governed under the Colorado Charter Schools Act and other education, labor, and finance laws.

More information on the Colorado Charter Schools Act is available at [www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/csact.htm](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/csact.htm); employment issues at [www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/download/HREmploymentManual.pdf](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/download/HREmploymentManual.pdf); capital construction at [www.cde.state.co.us/cdefinance/CapConstMain.htm](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdefinance/CapConstMain.htm); and financing at [www.uscharterschools.org/gb/dev\\_fin/intro.htm](http://www.uscharterschools.org/gb/dev_fin/intro.htm)

### **Waivers from State Law**

Charter schools must comply with all state laws and district policies except for those from which it has received automatic or requested waivers. Statutes prescribing Colorado Student Assessment Program, School Accountability Reports, Accreditation, the Public School Finance Act, the Exceptional Children's Educational Act, background and fingerprint checks, and the Children's Internet Protection Act cannot be waived.

In 2005 the State Board adopted a rule providing automatic waivers from 13 state statutes. Charter schools may seek additional waivers from state and local law.

Waiver requests are included in the charter school application and subject to negotiation during the contract phase. Once the charter has been approved, the authorizer applies to the state on behalf of the school. If the only waivers requested are on the “automatic” list, CDE will grant them immediately. Waiver requests that are not on the “automatic” list must go before the State Board of Education for review. The State Board has 45 days to deny the request; otherwise the request is granted. Waivers remain in effect for the term of the charter contract. The State Board reserves the right to review waivers and revoke those they deem unnecessary.

CDE recommends charter schools considering waivers discuss their impact and the process with other charter schools that have received such waivers in the past.

More information on the waiver process is available at [www.cde.state.co.us/cdeboard/download/bdregs\\_301-35.pdf](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdeboard/download/bdregs_301-35.pdf); automatic waivers at [www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/download/2005\\_Study/Complete\\_Study\\_2005.pdf](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/download/2005_Study/Complete_Study_2005.pdf); commonly sought waivers at [www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/download/CharterWaivers.pdf](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/download/CharterWaivers.pdf); and district forms at [www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/download/WaverReqFrm011405.pdf](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/download/WaverReqFrm011405.pdf).

### **Waivers from District Requirements**

In the charter contract, the charter school may request waivers from school district requirements. The appropriate district personnel review requests for waiver from state law and school district policy for approval prior to finalizing the school’s charter contract. District waivers do not need State Board of Education approval.

### **Negotiating the Charter Contract**

Negotiations begin after the district has approved a charter school application. A local school district has 90 days and the Colorado Charter School Institute has 45 days to negotiate a charter school contract. Experienced authorizers use templates for such contracts; however, if the school is working with a new authorizer, it can use best practice documents available at the Schools of Choice Unit or online at [www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/guidebook/district/index.htm](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/guidebook/district/index.htm).

The charter application serves as a basis for developing the contract. The contract, which outlines the relationship between the school and authorizer, includes details about funding, waivers, the educational program, the provision of special education services, the provision of other contracted services (e.g. business, human resources, insurance), reporting requirements, dispute resolution, governance structure, and the term of the charter.

## **Other Legal Agreements**

Charter schools also engage in contract negotiations with employees, parents, and service providers (e.g. janitorial, food service). Most charter schools seek waivers from traditional employment contracts and implement at-will contracts with the aid of legal counsel. Some charter schools enter into contracts with parents that outline expectations for volunteering and assisting their students outside of school. Other contracts may specify the obligations of the school in meeting the learning needs of students. In addition to employment and parent contracts, the school may enter into contracts with service providers for food, transportation, construction, or special education.

### **Checklist for Establishing a Charter School's Legal Standing**

- √ File Articles of Incorporation and bylaws with the Secretary of State's office
- √ File SS-4 with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) in order to obtain an Employer Identification Number (EIN)
- √ Apply for a sales tax exempt certificate from the Colorado Department of Revenue
- √ Purchase Directors and Officers (D and O) insurance
- √ If you choose to apply for formal recognition as a tax exempt organization under Section 501(c)(3), file form 1023 with the IRS
- √ Register as a business with the Colorado Department of Revenue

## **Tracking Legislative Changes**

Board members need to know of and be prepared to accommodate new legislative requirements. Additionally, schools may need to participate in the legislative process to block harmful bills or encourage the passing of beneficial legislation. The board may choose to form a committee or designate one person to track legislative bills. Congress (<http://thomas.loc.gov/>) and the Colorado General Assembly ([www.leg.state.co.us/](http://www.leg.state.co.us/)) provide a listing of the history, status and content of all introduced bills. The Colorado League of Charter Schools follows and responds to charter school legislation at the state level. The Center for Education Reform and the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools monitor and respond to legislation at the federal level.

Additional resources are available at the Colorado League of Charter Schools at [www.coloradoleague.org](http://www.coloradoleague.org), the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools at [www.publiccharters.org](http://www.publiccharters.org), the Center for Education Reform at [www.edreform.com](http://www.edreform.com), and the National Charter Schools Institute at [www.nationalcharterschools.org](http://www.nationalcharterschools.org).

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## 7. Training for Excellence

*“Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.”*

President John F. Kennedy

An effective board demonstrates a strong commitment to continuous improvement by engaging in professional development and training. Training increases the board’s capacity to accomplish their responsibilities, overcome challenges, and work together. Through greater understanding of school curriculum, state standards and testing, and other programmatic operations and their impact on student achievement, the board can make better long and short-term planning decisions. Through a needs assessment, boards can determine what additional training they need. Training is available through CDE and the Colorado League of Charter Schools throughout the year.

### **Role of a Charter School Governing Board**

To help board members focus on long term planning and resist the tendency to micromanage, members can receive training to distinguish their role from that of the administration. Whether the board is comprised of parents, educators, and community volunteers, or individuals from an education management organization (EMO), proper delineation of roles is essential. Confusion over roles and inappropriate intervention leads to frustration, loss of trust, and poor governance. This training may also clarify the role of individual board members.

### **Financial Planning/Fundraising**

Careful financial planning and fundraising are essential for the successful operation of a charter school. A school with excellent education programming can falter and close due to financial mismanagement or lack of adequate funding. Training in budget development, budget management, financial planning, facility financing, and fundraising is recommended.

### **Facility Financing**

Facilities (purchase and maintenance) constitute 15-25% of a charter school budget. A board may find a private investor, secure bonds, or establish capital construction grants to fund facility purchases, construction or renovation. Training can help boards reduce overall costs and effectively oversee these projects.

Training and technical assistance is available at the Colorado Department of Education ([www.cde.state.co.us/index\\_charter.htm](http://www.cde.state.co.us/index_charter.htm)), the Colorado League of Charter Schools ([www.coloradoleague.org](http://www.coloradoleague.org)) and the National Charter Schools Institute ([www.nationalcharterschools.org](http://www.nationalcharterschools.org)).



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## 8. Guiding Renewal and Accreditation

An effective board actively participates in evaluating the success of the school in meeting its mission and vision. Frequent, thorough internal evaluations are essential to school improvement and prepare the school for the external evaluation required in the renewal process.

### **Renewal and Accreditation Process**

Charter school governing boards are responsible for negotiating the charter renewal and preparing the district-required School Accreditation Plan.

State law specifies that the charter school submit a renewal application by December 1 of the year prior to the contract expiration [22-30.5-110, C.R.S.]. The local board must make a decision by February 1. The renewal process varies by district. Some districts simply require a renegotiation meeting while others require a renewal application, site visit and/or a report. The process may be reduced if the district is comfortable with the data provided by the school and is familiar with its operations.

Additionally, charter schools, like all public schools in Colorado, must be accredited through their authorizer (district or CSI). Authorizers, in turn, are accredited by the State Board of Education through an Accreditation Contract. Many districts have combined their charter renewal and accreditation processes.

### **School Advisory Council**

State law requires a charter school to have a School Advisory Council [22-7-106 et. al., C.R.S.], unless waived. The School Advisory Council law, enacted before the Charter Schools Act, was designed to increase meaningful parental involvement in public schools.

Charter schools have some flexibility in its implementation. Charter school governing boards may establish the School Advisory Council (SAC) as a board subcommittee to develop the School Accreditation Plan in alignment with the strategic plan. The SAC begins with an evaluation of the school. The SAC evaluates, at a minimum, instructional quality, curriculum implementation, financial integrity, management, student performance, governance, programs, and general operations. The council then uses the data and analysis from the evaluation to create accreditation goals and a strategic plan.

The SAC may recommend non-accreditation goals aligned with the charter's vision/mission be included in the School Accreditation Plan. Upon adoption by the full board, the School Accreditation Plan is submitted to the authorizer. The governing board may assign additional responsibilities to the SAC to review curricula or programs on an ongoing basis. In this case, the SAC should establish policies and timetables for gathering data and standards for what constitutes success or failure. The board should keep in mind that new programs need time for full implementation.

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## 9. Providing Financial Security and Oversight

An effective board provides financial security for the school through oversight of the budget and financial operations. This responsibility requires knowledge of business plans, grants, budgeting, accounting, fundraising, financial reporting, safeguarding of assets, and annual audits. Financial stability and security depend on a number of factors for which the board must be proactively involved including student enrollment, staff retention, and the acquisition of additional funds. Boards are responsible for ensuring timely, accurate financial reporting.

### **The Business Plan**

A school's business plan includes a market analysis, management plan, operations plan, facility plan, and financial plan. The following are components of the business plan:

**Executive summary:** A two page summary provides a synopsis of the overall business plan.

**School description:** This section provides a brief description of the school including its mission, curriculum or educational program, and governance structure.

**Market analysis:** The market analysis includes the number of students in the general vicinity, an analysis of education needs unmet by nearby schools, the number of students the charter school must attract to build a financially stable program, and how the school intends to draw students. The section also includes a marketing and retention plan.

**Management plan:** The management plan outlines how the school will be managed on a day-to-day basis, and the responsibilities and qualifications of the administrator and business manager. The plan also outlines policies regarding financial management, and staff evaluation, compensation, and retention.

**Operations plan:** The operations plan includes the daily and extracurricular schedule and policies for interacting with visitors, answering phone inquiries, tracking attendance, filing authorizer required reports, managing the facility, providing security, and using technology.

**Facility plan:** This section provides a description of the current or planned facility and any expected renovation or expansion.

**Financial plan:** This section provides an operating budget, balance sheet, capital budget, and cash flow reports.

**Attachments:** Common attachments include the charter application, articles of incorporation, bylaws, curriculum summary, class schedule, and resumes of board directors and key staff.

## **Budget Management**

The budget plan includes reasonable estimates of revenues and expenditures and a plan for compliance with state and federal accounting and reporting requirements. Figures should reflect those used in the business plan. The charter school also needs to establish proper accounting procedures to safeguard assets and ensure accurate financial reporting.

The primary source of revenue for Colorado public schools is the Per Pupil Revenue (PPR) a revenue stream determined by enrollment. The PPR is based on a formula established by the Colorado Public School Finance Act of 1994 for all public schools. The “Total Program” formula is a base amount derived from the annual pupil count adjusted for district-by-district variances in cost of living, personnel, district size, and number of at-risk students.

Each school district is guaranteed a minimum Total Program amount of \$6,135.00 (for 2007-2008) per child. Local monies derived from specific ownership (such as vehicle registration) and local property taxes fund most of the Total Program. However, when the local share is insufficient to fund the minimum Total Program, state tax funds pay the remainder. A district’s Total Program amount divided by the number of students equals the district’s per-pupil revenue (PPR). The district may also receive “categorical program” funds for English language proficiency, gifted and talented, small attendance centers, special education, transportation, and vocational education.

Colorado law mandates that each charter school receive 100% of the PPR for each student except that the district may choose to retain the actual amount of the charter school’s per pupil share of the central administrative overhead costs for services actually provided to the charter school, up to a maximum of 5% of the PPR. The district must pass along a proportionate share of categorical aid from the state and federal government including special education funds. Charter schools also receive funding by applying for public and private grants.

Generally, facility costs and salaries and benefits comprise 75% of charter school expenditures. Schools also need to budget for special education, professional services, classroom and general supplies, liability insurance, and other considerations.

More information on CDE requirements for financial management and reporting are available at [www.cde.state.co.us/cdefinance/sfFPP.htm](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdefinance/sfFPP.htm). General information on financial management is available at: [www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/guidebook/fin/pdf/FinGuide.pdf](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/guidebook/fin/pdf/FinGuide.pdf), and [www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/guidebook/fin/pdf/HelpfulFinanceSites.pdf](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/guidebook/fin/pdf/HelpfulFinanceSites.pdf)

## **Grants**

Grants typically constitute 20% of an overall development plan. Board, administrator, and faculty, directly or through the use of a consultant, pursue grants funded by state and federal governments and state and national private foundations. Boards generally maintain a grants/fundraising committee that actively pursues grant funding for startup costs, special projects, technology upgrades, curriculum materials (e.g. manipulatives, supplemental readers), classroom or program equipment, professional development opportunities, performing arts, athletics, and library materials.

Grant funding ideas arise from the strategic planning process or a needs assessment designed to identify funding priorities. The committee identifies grant opportunities and writes or hires a consultant to write a proposal. Funded grants require reporting and evaluation. Grant writing and reporting is much easier when a school has a strong strategic plan and continuous internal evaluations from which to draw ideas and data.

**Types of grants:** Charter schools pursue five types of grants:

- Project support grants fund programs that address a specific problem (e.g. a new reading program targeting low reading proficiency rates).
- Matching grants pair funds from the granting agency with funding that the school raises from internal and community sources. Usually the foundation or granting agency will specify an amount they are willing to give once equivalent funds are obtained from the community. These grants work particularly well for major capital expenditures.
- Challenge grants are grants contingent upon funds raised from other non-governmental sources. Generally, the granting agency offers a 2:1 or 3:1 match to funds raised.
- General operating support is defined as unrestricted funds that help sustain an organization's operations, including personnel costs associated with administrative and fundraising expenses, as well as capital grants for buildings.
- Capital grants are “bricks and mortar” grants that are used to help build a facility or make major purchases associated with a building (e.g. a new air conditioning unit).

**Finding a match:** Most grant opportunities can be found through granting agencies' websites or at the library. The CDE website and the Colorado League of Charter Schools also provide information on available grants and grant partners.

When considering applying for a grant, it is important to determine if the school meets the requirements listed in the agency's Request for Proposals, the amount of the award, whether the agency's prior giving indicates an interest in similar projects, and whether the school currently has parents who are employees of the granting agency.

For information on available grants see CDE ([www.cde.state.co.us](http://www.cde.state.co.us)) and the Colorado League of Charter Schools ([www.coloradoleague.org](http://www.coloradoleague.org))  
Grant information is also available at [www.fdncenter.org](http://www.fdncenter.org) and [www.schoolfundingcenter.com](http://www.schoolfundingcenter.com)

**Networking:** It is important to build relationships with several funding agencies. Granting agencies are more likely to maintain their support if the school can demonstrate results. Before contacting an agency, board members should learn about the organization, its giving patterns, and partners by reading annual reports or by attending events sponsored by the agency. The next step is to request a meeting with the agency before applying for the grant. State/federal and large foundation personnel are not generally available. In the meeting, board members should describe the project needs and get feedback from the grant officer. This information will enable the board to decide whether the grant program is a good fit for the project.

**Frequently used documents:** The grant writer will need the following documents:

- Yearly budget
- Audited financials
- Biographies on key staff, administration, board
- Anti-discrimination statement
- 501(c)3 statement
- Data on volunteer hours and duties
- Past grants and in-kind gifts
- Strategic Plan
- School Accreditation Plan
- Longitudinal achievement data

**Developing the proposal:** In developing a proposal, the grant writer (board member or consultant) must be able to describe the school's needs with supporting data and the proposed solutions backed by research. For example, if there is a large population of students who are not reading at an appropriate level, the grant proposal should indicate the percentage of students and to what degree they have fallen behind using academic data. The grant should clearly articulate the goal (e.g. 100% 2<sup>nd</sup> graders will receive the intervention and 85% of 2<sup>nd</sup> graders identified as below grade level will be at grade level within one year). The grant should describe research-based activities (e.g. the purchase and use of effective reading curricula). Finally, the grant should describe how the school will track and evaluate the programs during and after the grant period.

A strong proposal follows the granting agency's guidelines and is clear, concise and well edited. Most successful proposals are innovative and strike an emotional chord that fits well with the priorities of the granting agency.

If awarded, the board should make note of the reporting requirements and work to prepare and submit the reports on time and in the correct format. It is important to

remember the school is working to develop a long-term relationship with funding agencies.

**Grant format:** Most grants consist of the following sections:

- Cover letter
- Summary
- Agency information (mission, history, accomplishments)
- Purpose of grant (need, goals and objectives, timeline, sustaining activities)
- Evaluation (how the school will evaluate whether the project has been successful)
- Budget and budget narrative
- Requested attachments

### **The Development Plan**

In conjunction with solid overall financial management, a successful development plan supports the long-term viability of the school by producing discretionary funds and generating community excitement about the school.

Shortly after the charter application is approved, a board committee or development director hired by the school should develop the plan. By developing the plan early on, the school can capitalize on excitement about the school opening.

Key components of a development plan include:

- School mission, vision, and goals
- A needs assessment
- Review of past fundraising goals and progress
- Description of potential donors
- Strategies for cultivating donors and community support
- Individual responsibilities and timelines
- Evaluation measures

Initially, the “investors” will be parents, grandparents, staff, administration, and board members. Board giving should constitute about 10% of the yearly fundraising goal. Strong internal support indicates to outside investors that the school is a worthy investment.

The development staff or committee should then reach out to potential local partners (business and community organizations) by inviting them to a school tour and to discuss the goals of the school. The school should also send existing and potential partners school newsletters and invitations to special activities such as spaghetti dinners, talent shows, or musical programs. To make these visits especially effective, faculty, staff, and parent volunteers should be trained on how to communicate effectively about the school’s mission and potential.

In subsequent years, schools should encourage previous donors to increase their commitment to the school by providing them with documentation on how the school and its students have benefited from the previous years' campaign.

Solid recordkeeping procedures are essential. The school should maintain a database identifying stakeholders to track donations, ensure thank you notes (for tax purposes) are sent, and to schedule regular donor contact.

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## 10. Selecting, Reviewing and Supporting the Administrator

An effective board identifies and hires a capable administrator who shares the mission and vision of the school. The board is also responsible for the annual evaluation of the administrator and the setting of professional goals for improvement. Boards support administrators by ensuring that they have the necessary resources to accomplish goals and by conveying confidence in their day-to-day decisions.

### ***Characteristics of a Quality Leader***

- Focuses decisions on what is best for students
- Knows how to disaggregate data to make decisions about curricular adjustments and teacher training
- Communicates well with parents, students, faculty, board, and staff
- Recognizes a variety of needs by staff, faculty and students and is willing to find ways to meet their needs
- Incorporates input from stakeholders to provide shared ownership in decision making
- Knows how to effectively delegate tasks and responsibilities
- Leads by example by being highly motivated, accountable, and willing to actively pursue growth opportunities
- Communicates the vision in school staff, faculty, community members, authorizer, and students
- Stays current on educational research and is willing to try new things to meet the needs of students and staff
- Has demonstrated expertise in teaching and learning
- Knows how to inspire and create an effective professional learning community
- Is an excellent manager of people, time, resources, and budgets
- Has experience in and appreciation for the school model/philosophy

### **The Hiring Process**

Given the independence of charter schools, the administrator must be both an instructional and a business leader. They must manage the facility and finances, oversee instructional and operational staff, engage with students, elevate school culture and morale, represent the school to parents and the community, manage conflict, promote the school, ensure the school meets all local, state, and federal laws, encourage academic and professional excellence, and guide the school toward meeting its goals. In short, the administrator guides the school on the path to its mission and vision.

**Creating a job description:** The board should write a detailed job description for the position and decide how it will interview and select qualified candidates. The job



description should include the minimum professional qualifications such as the type of degree, certification, and work experience; and the job duties including management (budget/finance, personnel), educational leadership (curriculum evaluation, administration of program), communication with parents, the community, and the authorizer, facility maintenance, staff, student performance evaluation, and other tasks.

Sample job descriptions are at:

[www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/guidebook/gov/index.htm](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/guidebook/gov/index.htm)

**Forming a search committee:** The board may form a committee to develop an employment announcement, strategies for interviewing candidates, and expectations for what is considered a quality candidate. Staff, parents and other stakeholders should provide the committee with recommendations regarding leadership characteristics and interview questions.

**Selecting candidates:** Recruitment strategies include contacting other charter schools and trusted peers within the education community for candidate recommendations and advertising the position in places that cater to the charter community such as job postings websites sponsored by the Colorado Department of Education, the Colorado League of Charter schools, and the U.S. Charter Schools network.

**Interviewing candidates:** It is illegal to ask questions about age, marital status, family planning, religious affiliation, disabilities and should never be addressed in an interview. The board/committee should prepare a list of standard questions such as:

- What strengths and weaknesses would you bring to the leadership position?
- What have you or are you doing to address the deficits?
- What is the most satisfying experience in education you have had?
- What has been your experience in teaching and leadership in other schools?
- How has your educational background contributed to where you are today?
- What do you believe are the greatest contributions of charter schools?
- How are charter schools different from traditional public schools?
- What experience do you bring to this position that you believe will be helpful?
- What will you do to help the school to fulfill its mission and vision?
- What concerns you most about taking over the leadership of this school at this time?

For sample interview questions are available at

[www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/guidebook/gov/index.htm](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/guidebook/gov/index.htm)

**Checking references and prior job performance:** The board should check with former employers to verify dates of employment and ask questions about the candidate's past performance. Boards may also learn about the applicant by inquiring with individuals who know the candidate, but may not be listed as a reference. If a candidate has been

terminated by another school, the board should assume the situation had two sides and ask questions of several individuals involved.

### **Evaluating Administrator Performance**

The board should annually evaluate the performance of the administrator to identify opportunities for professional growth and acknowledge areas of excellence in the following areas:

**Personnel management:** An effective administrator motivates staff, recognizes excellence, mediates when relationships become strained, provides guidance on professional development, and encourages the use of innovative and effective classroom practices to support high academic achievement. Standard questions regarding personnel management include:

- Does the administrator recruit and retain a highly qualified, diverse, and expertly trained professional staff?
- Does the administrator assist staff in establishing professional development plans that align with the school's mission, improvement plan, and individual staff/classroom needs? How is professional development tracked and evaluated?
- Does the administrator encourage the use of teaching techniques that have a strong research base?
- Does the administrator model high ethical and professional standards?
- Does the administrator support teachers willing to try innovative approaches?
- Does the administrator articulate high expectations for staff and students?
- Does the administrator regularly evaluate staff?

**Vision and mission:** An effective administrator facilitates the internalization of the mission and vision of the school and uses these founding documents to set goals and oversee activities and actions. With input from staff, the administrator sets goals and expectations, analyzes data to track progress toward those goals, and shares the results with the internal and external community. Standard questions regarding the vision and mission include:

- Does the administrator articulate the vision in concrete terms?
- Does the administrator engage in goal setting for school improvement and involve teachers and staff assessing needs and finding solutions?
- Does the administrator effectively implement a school improvement plan that results in increased student achievement?
- Does the administrator effectively communicate goals for school improvement with the community?

**Communication:** An effective administrator communicates regularly with stakeholders. Standard questions regarding communication include:

- What routine methods of communication has the administrator established (e.g. weekly folders, faculty meetings)?
- How productive is the administrator's communication with parents, teachers, students, staff, and community members? How are his or her relationships with these stakeholders?
- Is the administrator's communication style open and honest?
- Does the administrator use technology to improve communication and record keeping?
- Is the administrator effective in articulating ideas, needs, praise and constructive criticism?
- Does the administrator listen effectively and is he or she able to respond quickly and appropriately?
- Is the administrator effective in conflict resolution?

**Finances and Operations:** An effective administrator assists in establishing a budget, oversees its implementation, supervises the facility, and manages the learning environment. Standard questions regarding finances and operations include:

- Did the allocation of funds assist teachers in increasing student achievement?
- Were policies and procedures followed for spending emergency funds and paying for pre-approved budgetary expenses?
- Were funds fairly distributed?
- Does the school run smoothly? Are policies and procedures regularly followed?
- Does the administrator recognize and celebrate success?
- Does the administrator provide suggestions for improvement when something fails?
- Is the business office running smoothly?
- Is the facility well maintained and the environment conducive to student learning?
- Does the administrator model and support collaboration and excellence in day-to-day operations?
- Does the administrator implement strategies to facilitate parent involvement?

**Student Achievement:** An effective administrator regularly promotes high student achievement and supports faculty in their teaching. The administrator sets a tone of expectation for both students and faculty as they strive to reach academic excellence. Standard questions regarding student achievement include:

- Does the administrator assist in the collection, interpretation and evaluation of school and student data?
- Does the administrator regularly use data to guide decision making?
- Does the administrator ensure compliance with federal, state and authorizer requirements?
- Is the school operating smoothly and focused on learning?
- Does the administrator effectively work with stakeholders on setting goals for school improvement and are those goals usually reached?

- Does the administrator guide development of new programs to meet identified needs of struggling students?
- Does the master schedule maximize student learning?

**School Safety:** An effective administrator develops and carries out procedures to guarantee student, faculty and staff safety. Standard questions regarding school safety include:

- Has the administrator developed a respectful and safe environment?
- How does the administrator monitor the safety and security of the school?
- Has the administrator developed a plan to deal with bullying?
- Does the administrator deal with student misconduct quickly and effectively?
- Is the school a drug-free zone?
- Does the administrator manage the diverse social, emotional, and intellectual needs of staff, faculty, and students?
- Does the administrator resolve conflict and crises quickly and effectively?
- Has the administrator implemented a consistent and effective classroom management plan that focuses on self-discipline and responsibility?

Sample administrator evaluation forms are available at [www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/guidebook/gov/index.htm](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/guidebook/gov/index.htm)

### **Encouraging Continuous Improvement**

The outcome of the administrator evaluation will determine his or her areas of strength and weakness. Acknowledgement of accomplishment is important. The board may publicly acknowledge the achievements or create a reward/bonus plan. The board may create a corrective action plan for areas in need of improvement that includes long-range goals and interim benchmarks provided that it is done in a manner that won't modify the administrator's at-will employment.

### **Providing Continuous Support**

A positive relationship begins by hiring an individual who meets the board's expectations and has the experience and skills to run the school. The board shows confidence in the discernment and abilities of their chosen school leader by staying out of the day-to-day operations of the school. The board should involve the administrator in the strategic planning process and provide sufficient time to meet the board's requests. Members should also verbally encourage administrators and convey their appreciation. If the administrator is new, the board can provide resources for the administrator to have a mentor or coach (usually an experienced administrator from a nearby school). The board should provide new and experienced administrators with resources to acquire professional development.

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## 11. Building Relationships

An effective board builds positive relationships among school personnel and between the school and the outside community. To maintain trust and cooperation within the school, the board must communicate regularly with the staff, faculty and parents. The board should also establish relationships with members in the external community to enhance the image of the school and invite financial and volunteer support. The board can also help maintain a positive relationship with the school's authorizer.

### **Board Member Relationships**

Building positive working relationships between board members is essential to effective governance. These relationships can be strengthened by providing orientation training for new members and participating in team building activities and training. Board members should establish and at times revisit norms for behavior. Disagreement in group situations is common but where there is respect, clear communication, and self control, the result will be better decisions and a stronger governing board. Conflict that results in personal attacks destroys group cohesion and leads to poor decision making.

### **Board and Staff Relationships**

Boards should form a positive relationship with school administration and staff while maintaining an appropriate distance from day-to-day decision making. Frequent communication dispels rumors, mistrust and alienation between the board and the staff. Contact can be initiated by holding "board visit days" where the staff and faculty are invited to informally interact with the board to ask questions, listen to reports, and provide input into important decisions. During the development of the strategic plan, staff should be invited to provide ideas and feedback. Board members should also attend school functions.

### **Board and Administrator Relationships**

The board should work toward having an open and honest relationship with the administrator. They should work together when developing the strategic plan, long-term growth plans, and policy development. The board should also invite the administrator to evaluate the board's effectiveness.

### **Board and Parent Relationships**

The board should engage parent participation in the operation of the school and the maintenance of a high achieving, safe, fun environment. The board can provide opportunities to parents to serve on committees, tutor after school, help in classrooms, serve lunches, help with events, and attend board meetings. The board should also establish clear grievance procedures.

### **Board and Authorizer Relationship**

Relationships between boards and districts range from productive and respectful to tense and strained. Most schools receive some services from their authorizers (e.g. professional development, special education). The board should make efforts to communicate with the district regarding its services and the success of the school in a professional manner.

### **Board to Board Relationships**

Boards can benefit from networking with other school boards. Members of successful, established charter schools can provide advice and mentoring. Schools can share special services, special events, and equipment.

### **Board and Support Organization Relationships**

The Colorado Department of Education and the Colorado League of Charter Schools provide information, insight, training, and assistance.

### **Board and Community Relationships**

Developing relationships with the community can provide benefits to the school including monetary and in-kind donations, discounts on goods and services, volunteers, activities for students, marketing, and new ideas. For example, a school could form a relationship with a nearby company whereby the company provides computer technical assistance to the school in exchange for use of the school's technology lab for training.

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## 12. Pitfalls to Avoid

An effective board must avoid actions or habits that impede decision making, cause conflicts of interest, overwhelm the administrator and staff, micromanage day-to-day activities, and squander resources and opportunities. Such pitfalls have negative consequences including explosive meetings, loss of respect, bad decisions, low morale, loss of board members, employees, parents and students, and decline of the school. Training can help boards overcome barriers and function more productively.

### **Indecision**

Boards may be overcome with indecision as members avoid making unpopular or difficult decisions. They may put off an important decision by requesting additional reports when facts conflict with what the board wants to do. At times when members feel strongly about a decision, discussions can become heated and even hostile.

### **Mishandling Conflict**

Conflict can arise when a school is undergoing major changes like facility development, change in leadership (administration or board), has failed to achieve its goals, or is under pressure from the authorizer or parents to change. It can also arise from poor communication, leadership, unaddressed issues, lack of information, and unmet expectations. When handled correctly, conflict can lead to greater clarity, better communication, mutual understanding, and ultimately a wider range of potential solutions. Boards should establish procedures that will help them to manage conflict in a productive way including norms for interaction that stress respect, openness, honesty, and commitment. They can receive training in conflict resolution techniques and if necessary, mediation.

More information on overcoming board conflict is available at [www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/guidebook/gov/pdf/Top%2010%20Mistakes-Best%20Practices.pdf](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/guidebook/gov/pdf/Top%2010%20Mistakes-Best%20Practices.pdf), and [www.nationalcharterschools.org/uploads/pdf/resource\\_20060308114658\\_Five%20Dysfunctions%20of%20School%20Boards--v6%20as%20of%201-30-06.pdf](http://www.nationalcharterschools.org/uploads/pdf/resource_20060308114658_Five%20Dysfunctions%20of%20School%20Boards--v6%20as%20of%201-30-06.pdf).

### **Nepotism**

Nepotism is the practice of having relatives of board members or the administration employed within the school. Nepotism can have a disastrous effect on a school by creating conflicts of interest, unequal treatment or the suggestion of unequal treatment. If a relative is retained when others are laid off, for example, staff may perceive preferential treatment even if the decision was based solely on budget figures. Nepotism can also encourage inappropriate communications and gossip.

## **Personal Agendas**

Because board members may also be parents and volunteers, they need to be sensitive to conflicts of interest. At no time is it appropriate to pursue a personal agenda (in the interest of a small subset of students that may include one's child) that is contrary to the best interest of all of the students. It is important to put aside the emotional attachments of parenthood when making difficult board decisions so that decisions can be based on the long-term benefit of all students.

## **Too Much, Too Quick**

Boards frequently have a grand vision for a school and are tempted to pursue everything at once instead of through slow, measured steps. Too much, too quick can exhaust the administrator and teachers and prevent the school and its students from attaining excellence in any domain. A new school should establish a firm core of curricula before adding additional programmatic specialties. Once the foundation has been laid and teachers are comfortable, additional programs can be added that further enhance the student experience.

## **Micromanagement**

Micromanagement occurs when a board fails to make the transition from a founding board to a governing board. Once the doors are open for the school, the board should step back and focus on policy and fiscal development while allowing day-to-day activities to become the primary responsibility of the administrator or director. When boards do not make this transition and continue to interfere outside of their role, they impede school operations, discourage the administrator, lose the board's focus on the big picture, and ultimately prevent the school from effectively meeting its goals.

## **Overdependence on the Administrator**

While a board must hand over the day-to-day operations to the administrator, they retain an oversight responsibility. The board must be prepared in the event that an administrator leaves unexpectedly, to ensure the school's programming continues while the board finds a replacement. The board should have a contingency plan that determines which senior staff assists in such an event.

## **Financial Mismanagement**

The majority of charter school closures in Colorado have resulted from financial mismanagement. In most cases, the board failed to set up strong policies for finance procedures and did not provide strong oversight of financial expenditures. Boards need to receive training in finance management that enables them to meaningfully examine monthly budget reports and to contribute substantially to the development of a strong budget. Every member of the board should be able to view and understand all financial



reports from the school. The board should ensure internal and external audits are regularly conducted of the budget and finance procedures.

### **Overextending Administrators**

The job of a charter school administrator is exceptionally demanding. As an instructional and business leader, they bear more responsibility than their traditional public school counterparts, particularly when the school is new or experiencing significant growth. Overextension leads to burnout and high turnover. The board can take steps to ensure the demands on the administrator remain at a reasonable level. They should begin by creating a job description that a single person can effectively accomplish without becoming overextended. The board should also provide resources to enable the administrator to effectively delegate and develop leadership roles among the staff. When the school reaches a certain size, the board should consider hiring a vice-principal.

### **Lack of Policy Infrastructure**

In the startup phase, the board may become so occupied with trying to get the doors of the school open that it fails to put in place the policy infrastructure. The new administrator cannot make effective decisions and develop procedures without a policy foundation, which may lead to mistakes and possible legal infractions.

### **Unqualified or Poorly Qualified Board Members or Founders Hired as Employees**

Board members or other volunteers, particularly those involved in developing the new charter school, may become employees despite being unqualified or less qualified than other candidates for the position. There are legal constraints and insurance issues that preclude unqualified persons from performing many specific functions. Additionally, these individuals may have a conflict of interest if their input prior to becoming employees resulted in decisions that favor them later as employees.

### **Lack of Continuity and Institutional Memory**

As charter schools mature and original board members retire, new members may have little knowledge of why the founders created the school and the reasons for their decisions. Without institutional memory, leaders may make avoidable mistakes or undermine the distinct character of the school. A list of non-negotiable principles and policies, whether imbedded in the bylaws or elsewhere, can help future board members recognize critical, foundational elements and avoid casual tampering. It is also wise to keep the original founders associated with the school to gain historical context for policies.