

# THE NEW SCHOOLS HANDBOOK

*strategic advice for successful  
school start-up in partnership  
with school district officials,  
staff and community members*

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Robin Lake, Abigail Winger, and Jeff Petty

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Center on Reinventing Public Education  
Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs  
University of Washington, Box 353060  
Seattle, Washington 98195-3060  
T: 206.685.2214 F: 206.221.7402  
[www.crpe.org](http://www.crpe.org)

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# INTRODUCTION

## SO YOU WANT TO START A SCHOOL?

This primer is for people who dream of starting a new school, a place where children and adults engage in the rewarding work of learning and teaching. Turning hopes and dreams about a new school into reality is a demanding project. It takes vision, hard work, and above all, planning. Wishful thinking and good intentions are no substitutes for realism. We also believe this primer will help school districts that are interested in developing new and more autonomous schools.

The demand for new schools is great. States and districts are increasingly searching for creative new ways to serve their student populations through smaller schools, community-based learning, and thematically centered schools. Even more directly, charter school and school contracting initiatives provide an opportunity for converting existing schools or starting new ones that often have autonomy over budgets, staffing, and educational programs. The best new schools demonstrate how focus, teamwork, expertise, and adaptability increase student achievement. Population growth, pressure to reduce the size of large, impersonal high schools, and state accountability plans that require new options for rethinking failing schools all add to the pressure to cultivate new school options.

This guide provides an overview of the school development process from start to finish and includes an appendix of additional resources. It should be helpful for anyone starting a new school, whether it is a private school, a charter public school, or a district magnet school. But we've paid special attention to the unique challenges of starting a new school within the traditional school district structure, where building political support, negotiating agreements with district personnel, and navigating rules and regulations can be daunting tasks, and if not handled skillfully can quickly halt plans for a new school.

As many are learning the hard way, starting any kind of new school is something like starting a small business and running a political campaign at the same time. You will have to quickly develop education and business plans, find facilities, hire strong staffs, recruit students, decide how decisions

will be made, figure out how you will demonstrate results, work with the media, and navigate state and local rules and regulations.

Starting a new school as part of a school district can give you an advantage in resolving some of these issues - if you have district support, you may have access to district facilities and central office administrative support. But working within a district structure can also bring unique challenges. Most districts are designed to support existing schools and programs. Most are unaccustomed to providing services to autonomous schools, and central office staff are typically strained to meet the needs of their existing schools. Community politics and union contracts can create divisive environments. Once new district schools are up and running, they face considerable pressures that threaten to pull them apart. New district-wide mandates, incoming staff who do not share the school's educational vision, and diverse demands from parents can quickly dilute or destroy even the best educational program. These realities all point to the need for better planning before schools open.

We hope this primer will provide you with valuable information as well as a healthy dose of caution. Opening a new school is unquestionably a worthy and exciting endeavor, but it is also one not to be entered into lightly. For those who succeed, the experience is one of the most valuable and exciting endeavors they will ever undertake. Starting a new school is a community's affirmation of its commitment to children and its hope for the future. Competently thought out and properly planned, you have every reason to expect your school to survive and thrive.

### **Primer design**

The lessons in this primer are based on our experience studying school start-ups and the lessons of the burgeoning charter school movement. Through interviews and site visits, staff from the Center on Reinventing Public Education have delved into the nature of the start-up experience, including its difficulties and the many challenges new schools face. We have studied all kinds of schools: private and parochial, "turn-key" neighborhood public schools, alternative public schools and charter schools. Some of the

founders we met with were parents, some were teachers, and some were administrators.

We also draw from the Center's experience and ongoing research about school leadership and organizational development. After years of studying the elements of effective schools, we are struck by the fact that new schools often fail for reasons that could easily have been avoided – they don't plan effectively up front and don't anticipate common roadblocks, namely ineffective governance and decision-making mechanisms, poor leadership selection, complex finance issues, and inadequate performance accountability.

The primer's sections are based on the lessons learned about school start-up from founders themselves. Despite their different circumstances, the experiences of these founders suggested some common themes that we think are important for the success of any new school. But consistent with the primer's focus, we've taken care to include stories, advice and tips relevant to working within a public school district structure. In addition to citing school founders, some quotes and ideas in this primer are drawn from a workshop of charter school start-up experts.<sup>1</sup>

### **Section ONE: Getting Started**

This section outlines some of the most difficult tasks associated with starting a new school. As a practical matter, you, as a new school founder, need to take the time to think through nuts-and-bolts issues such as whom to involve in planning the school, how to establish procedures for making decisions, and where you will find your students. But you need to balance that by paying attention to your new school's educational vision. What's likely to make your school different from the others in your neighborhood? What are you going to stand for? What is the essential focus (mission) of your school? It's tempting to want to jump right into the more concrete tasks, but spending the planning time to achieve clarity about what you hope to accomplish is essential to successful implementation. You will have precious little time for this vital conversation once your school opens its doors.

### **Section TWO : Creating a Plan**

This section gets much more specific. Now is the time to

1. For charter school specific start-up information, please see *So You Want to Start a Charter School: Strategic Advice for Applicants*, Center on Reinventing Public Education, Oct. 1996. ([www.crpe.org](http://www.crpe.org))

worry about negotiating an agreement with the school district, financing your school, recruiting students, locating a building and paying for it, and many other educational issues, including establishing your educational credibility and thinking about curriculum and assessment.

### **Section THREE: Opening Your School**

This section covers hiring decisions, working with parents, trustees and the district, and risk management issues.

We conclude by drawing together the lessons of the primer and summarizes the main lessons for new school development.

An appendix follows that categorizes helpful web-based resources for the school development process. It covers Educational Program Design, School Facilities and Operations, Charter School Resources, and has a sample contract.

The strategies presented in these sections are not exhaustive. They are only guideposts to help you navigate the process of starting a new school. You will need to adapt and interpret them to match your particular context, and you will likely have to develop new strategies to solve problems not foreseen by this primer.

# SECTION ONE

## GETTING STARTED

*Are you running after something or away from something? It's my experience that people who want to get out of the system they hate, but who are unclear what it is they want to do, tend not to succeed.*

### **School founder**

The most common mistake new school founders make is launching a school without putting enough time into building a strong foundation for the design process. Don't be too eager to begin planning the details of your school without taking the time to give some serious thought to why you want to start this school and what kinds of expertise and support you will need to guide the planning process. Avoid the common error of rushing to open a school only to find out too late that core members of the leadership team have deep philosophical differences about the nature of education. Don't get into a situation where you find out too late that your governing board lacks the expertise to oversee the school effectively. To avoid these land mines, you need to spend time up front to establish the philosophical basis for starting your school and to gather and develop your resources for the school planning process.

This section addresses the building blocks of the planning process. These are the things that absolutely need to be covered before you start worrying about the details of the school program, building, policies, and finances.

### **Establish your legal authority**

- Understand that district schools are usually not their own legal entities.
- Think about operating under contract or charter, after weighing the pros and cons.

States are responsible for overseeing education within their borders. They delegate a great deal of that authority to local school districts. Most public schools exist at the pleasure of their school district and rarely have their own legal authority. If the school is sued, the district is sued. The

### **The section will help you:**

- ▶ Identify the basis of your legal authority
- ▶ Build a leadership team with a common vision
- ▶ Define and refine your mission and objectives
- ▶ Establish decision-making processes
- ▶ Get the help you need
- ▶ Gauge your market
- ▶ Test the political environment
- ▶ Negotiate with your district

district decides how much control schools can have over state and local funds. If the district has a collective bargaining contract with its teachers, every district school must comply with the contract unless it has a special waiver agreed to by the district and the teachers union.

If you want your school to have more legal control than a traditional public school, you have several options. You can:

**Negotiate with your school district and teachers union to have waivers from district policies.** Getting waivers from district policies and union contract is more possible than you may think. In Seattle, Washington, for example, a local philanthropist proposed an idea for a new school to the Superintendent. After gaining board approval, the school now operates with an independent governing board, control over most of its finances, a waiver from certain union contract provisions, and a more flexible schedule. You might also be eligible for waivers from state rules and regulations through the state education agency or state board of education.

**Form as a charter school.** Some 36 states now authorize charter schools, which you can think of as public schools that have made a novel bargain, gaining freedom from detailed external control in return for strict accountability for performance. Charter schools do gain some freedom of action, though what they are free to do varies from place to place and is often subject to re-definition. By law, charter schools are answerable to the government agencies that sponsor them for the execution of their charters and for demonstrating student learning. Though some are answerable to local district school boards, many obtain their charters from special state agencies, other state institutions like colleges and universities, and state departments of education.

Despite the theory, charter status is no guarantee of independence. In one Georgia charter school visited by the Center, the principal had so little independence that the district personnel office threatened to assign him to a different school. He left the district. Clearly such a situation is not one you would seek. Although the degree of

independence varies from state to state (and even from school district to school district), charter status usually offers more flexibility and autonomy, but also may involve higher levels of scrutiny and accountability and fewer financial resources.

**Seek a contract with a local school district.** Much of public education is delivered by completely independent organizations, particularly in the areas of remedial and special education. Public schools, for example, routinely place some severely handicapped children in private facilities and pay tuition for their education. Although a contract will usually not provide the autonomy of a charter school, it is one way to obtain a measure of legal authority if chartering is not an option in your state. A school in Washington's Federal Way school district operates on such a performance contract that provides a measure of autonomy and a limited term of operation.<sup>2</sup>

**Start an independent private school** by establishing a non-profit 501(c) (3) corporation under the rules of the Internal Revenue Service. With this tax-exempt status in hand the state department of education will offer you a license to open a school if you meet basic regulatory requirements.

Once you are clear about what purpose your school will serve and how much autonomy you want it to have, the work can begin to put your theory into action and start a school. The following sections will help guide you through this process.

### **Build a leadership team with a common vision**

- Don't try to do it alone. Build a team of people who share your vision.
- Start small.
- Take the time to do it right.
- Plan on spending at least a year just planning.

Almost no one can start a school on his or her own. The task is simply too overwhelming. You'll need to a team of people who can contribute ideas, talent and energy to get the school up and running. But beware of getting

### **A Common Vision**

*You are going to have to have committed people who are willing to go the extra mile. This is no easy task, and you're generally doing it toward the evening, after work, all your weekends, your vacations, getting a major corporation started. You better all pretty much agree on what it is that you are hoping will be the result. So there has to be a vision and a mission and some real strong believing that will guide you.*

### **Charter School Founder**

<sup>2</sup> Guidelines for structuring a performance contract with a school district are included in the appendix.

### **District “Help” Threatened to Cloud School’s Vision**

*They had a tradition in the district of having what was called a “core team” that came on first. You know, like a small group of people that advised the principal (during start up), and I said, “Forget it.” I don’t want people coming in on two different levels.*

**Founder, Public School of Choice**

### **The Importance of Setting Aside Planning Time**

*Finding time is right up there [as one of the big obstacles to starting a school]...it’s just like moving into a furnished apartment verses an unfurnished apartment. You know, you move into a turnkey regular school, it’s already there. There’s an attendance policy. There’s a detention hall—if that’s what you’re going to have—there’s a library, there’s a daily schedule, there’s bus service, there’s a janitorial staff...*

**Founder, Public School of Choice**

too many people involved early on; as a rule, the larger the group, the more diffuse the vision becomes. More than four or five people in your core group is probably an unmanageable size. In general, then, it is best to start planning with a relatively small, committed group of people. The core group should consist of people who can work together and who complement each other’s backgrounds and work-styles. Resist the temptation to add people to the core group based on eagerness and interest. Get clear, up-front commitments from core group members, defining the amount of time they will commit and their responsibilities. It is also a good idea at this point to think about how the core group will eventually change over time: Will the core group change if the school comes to need a different set of expertise? Will core group members have a governing role once the school is up and running?

It’s extremely difficult to build consensus around a shared vision for a new school. People have very different motivations for starting a school. You may think that you and your colleagues have all been saying the same things about what kind of school you envision. Later, you may find out that you had entirely different assumptions about whether the school has a strict discipline code, what kinds of skills should be required for graduation, or how much professional freedom teachers will have. Members of a planning group may find it easy enough to agree that they want diversity at their school. But are they prepared to accept diverse levels of ability, behavior, or interest in the students they enroll? Other planners may be devoted to student-directed learning. That sounds good to most people. But what about the student who is not learning? How will the school deal with that child? Most new schools are eager to involve parents. What does that mean in terms of parental involvement in the classroom or how to deal with parents who fail to meet expectations?

The specifics of your school plan must be based on your shared educational philosophy about what it means to educate and to be educated. Take the time you need up front to think carefully and reflectively about the nature of your school and how its philosophy will play out in practice. It is easy for people to agree on broad principles, but once a group begins to map out how a school will operate on a

## FOR EXAMPLE...

Developing an initial list of “graduation” outcomes for your school can help your founding team make sure it is on the same page in terms of expectations for student learning before it invests a lot of time working on the mechanics of the proposal.

Here is one founding group’s initial brainstorm list of graduation outcomes. When they sat down to develop their list of outcomes, they realized that although they agreed on core values and general philosophy, they had dramatically different ideas about the structure of the school they hoped to develop. They could not find a way to agree on a core academic focus for the school. Some had a very traditional, but high quality comprehensive high school in mind while other hoped for a school that focused on high level of competency in core analytic skills. Some hoped to develop a school that placed more emphasis on core values of students rather than core knowledge. Others believed every student should leave the school with basic survival skills, including knowing how to handle a gun responsibly and being able to swim. This group did not continue to work together after this point.

### **High School graduates at our school will have the following abilities upon graduation:**

- Community Service
- Athletics
- Arts- visual, performing arts
- Fulfill basic college requirements so students can attend college if they choose
- Requirements should be based on competencies, not seat time
- Math- algebra, geometry, pre-calculus
- English- communication both oral and written
- Analytic skills
- History- local, national, world
- Philosophy- world religions, etc.
- Creative
- First aid
- Use of a compass
- Language and culture, 2nd language
- Moral, ethics and compassion
- Health, care of self, nutrition
- Sciences
- Physics (separate from science)
- Rights and responsibility of living in a democracy
- Master one art
- Swim
- Travel- leave school often (this fits with experiential learning)
- Awareness of place, self, other
- Getting along with others, working effectively in groups
- Gun handling
- Technical competencies
- Environmental appreciation

## NOW TRY THIS...

**The following scenarios are designed to prompt discussion and debate among your founding team members. They should be used early in the process to help core members define the school's mission. Later in a new school's development, they can help the team anticipate and avoid problems that are likely to arise. Have your group discuss their responses to these scenarios and try to reach agreement about how your school would respond in real life**

The people who wrote your school proposal had great ideas, but are having trouble running an organization. Some parents and teachers say, "The school must get rid of its founders or it will fail."

A new principal hired after the school starts does not like the approach to pedagogy and says, "I'll do it my own way."

The board wants to make day-to-day management decisions and the principal says, "I can't work this way".

The board becomes a mouthpiece for discontented parents and teachers, constantly demanding answers or changes from principal and teachers.

Some students are not learning from the school's instructional methods. The question arises: should their families be counseled to go elsewhere or should the school change its methods?

Parents and teachers split into two factions: those who think children should learn at their own pace and those who think the school is demanding too little and is jeopardizing students' chances to get into good high schools/colleges.

The school is committed to a permissive, accepting climate, but some children behave in ways that the founders never imagined would happen in their school (e.g. bullying, defacement of property).

The parent of a child whose behavior has upset the school community demands she get another chance. Other parents say, "the school must prove it is serious."

Parents start demanding more classes in arts and athletics, things the school never intended to provide, saying, "But this is a public school!"

The school depends on parent volunteer help but some parents do not come through.

A teacher whom everyone likes is just not working out in the classroom.

Discontented teachers or parents try to bring external authorities on their side, (e.g., the teacher's union, the authorizer, special education advocacy groups, etc.)

Teaching staff becomes divided and hostile between those who do whatever it takes no matter how hard or time-consuming and others who say, "I put in my seven hours."

The school is obligated to take part in a state testing or accreditation system but some teachers say, "I came here to get away from all that."

The school is committed to consensus decision-making and a non-hierarchical structure. A year after opening, it is unclear who is responsible for what, and decisions are being made too slowly to solve problems effectively.

The board becomes severely factionalized once the school is up and running. One group sees the school must change to survive; the other says the school must stay true to its mission.

The school is founded on the belief that kids must master subjects before moving to a new grade. Some kids aren't making it. There is pressure from parents and teachers to ease standards.

The school is founded on a core belief that school focus should be limited. Teachers begin to argue for need to broaden students' experiences and skills. New funding offers opportunity to expand program to include areas not part of the school's initial focus.

A small high school, founded on the belief that personal connections between students and teachers are key, is having a hard time staying afloat. Will the school expand enrollment to bring in new income? If the school is successful, will the school expand in order to serve more students?

## **A Vision Is Not Enough**

*You can't just have a vision. You need to articulate the vision, get the staff to agree to it, and then you need the policies that will be supported by all and uphold the vision, because the vision doesn't implement itself. You can't just have a vision.*

**Founder, Public School of Choice**

daily basis, it often encounters unexpected challenges that threaten to quickly divide the group. If they are serious enough, these issues sometimes spell the end of a school planning process – and the school itself.

Discussing, clarifying, and challenging fundamental assumptions about what a school is about is one of the most important exercises a leadership team can pursue. Time spent in the early stages can help avoid a crisis once the school is up and running.

You'll find that you need at least a year to develop a strong plan. (The following sections outline what needs to go into your plan, and Table 1 provides a sample planning timeline.) Adequate planning time is critical for ensuring that everything is ready before your school opens. This time is needed to create the leadership team, design the academic and structural details of the school, get approval from appropriate authorities, engage in marketing, recruitment, and admissions (if the school is private or a school of choice), structure conversations with parents and community, and hire and induct faculty that fit with the mission of the school.

In your enthusiasm to get started, you might think that if you can get a basic program started, you'll be able to work out the details later. This is the most common mistake new school founders make and it can destroy what is likely to be your one chance at running an effective school. You can't plan for everything, but you can anticipate the problems that most commonly plague new schools: inadequate facilities, critically low enrollment due to poor marketing, ineffective governing boards, financial mismanagement, inability to demonstrate results, and conflict with parents, students, staff, and the school district. Take the time to learn from others' mistakes.

Planning is best done in large amounts of dedicated time. Creating an education program, brand-new policies, and financial arrangements takes time. It takes much more than the half-days of shared release time, which, in most districts, is all the paid time teachers have to work together. In order to avoid missing the details and nuances involved, finding one place for the planning team to consistently

## FOR EXAMPLE...

**Table 1: Sample planning timeline**

WHEN?	TASK	NOTES
AUGUST - SEPTEMBER	Create mission statement	Articulate school mission specifically and “actionably”.
	Extend mission to 1-2 page mission/vision document	Flesh out some of team’s beliefs about how learning best occurs, what’s unique about the program, etc.
	Delegate design aspects to different team members	Team members research, draft, and present well-developed ideas to team for discussion/adoption.
	Discussion/decisions re: how best to involve district staff in development process	
OCTOBER	10-15 page mini-design plan covering all aspects of school program in brief	
NOVEMBER - JANUARY	First draft of comprehensive design plan, i.e. contract fully explaining ed program, staffing, operations, governance, facilities needs/use, relationship with district, finance and budget issues, parental involvement, accountability plans, etc.	Small groups/point people working intensively and semi-independently on their tasks, reporting back to large group at meetings.
JANUARY	External and legal review of design plan	
FEBRUARY	Re-draft	
	Preliminary district negotiations	May be able to incorporate this into earlier drafting if district staff are more involved in ongoing process.
	Recruit governing board; establish committees/teams to continue work on pre-start-up tasks	This can be going on informally at earlier stages.
MARCH	Finalize design plan, formally present to district board	
MARCH - JUNE	Working in small teams, complete pre-start-up checklists for: educational program, staffing, students and parents, legal and organizational, finance and operations, and facilities (some of these may be more/less relevant depending on the relationship with the district).	Each category here deserves its own timeline. Some of the tasks may be do-able at an earlier stage as small groups are working on their sections of the design plan, for example.
JULY - AUGUST	Staff orientation/training	
SEPTEMBER	Opening	

meet on a regular basis is generally more effective than relying on telephone calls, hastily arranged conferences, letters, and e-mail.

### **Define and refine your mission and objectives**

- Create a comprehensive, actionable mission statement.
- Outline the qualities you hope the school and the staff will reflect, the populations you want to serve and the results you seek.
- Use an “anti-mission” statement as a way to get going.
- Run it by non-educators to clear up jargon.

If the vision statement defines your school on a grand scale, the mission statement brings the vision down to earth. The mission statement defines a school’s purposes and objectives and focuses the school’s sense of direction. The mission statement helps school staff, prospective students, and parents get a clear idea of how they will be treated and what will be expected of them in the school. It explains to the community how this school is distinctive from other schools. It also provides a basis for philanthropic foundations to decide whether or not to support the school and gives interested observers confidence that key personnel and constituencies are committed and purposeful.

Most importantly, your mission statement should be *actionable*. It should state what the school is about and what it will do to achieve its goals. If the statement is meant to guide instruction and inform the school community, it must contain clear actions that participants understand rather than platitudes whose interpretations cover a range of ideals.

Some founders may find that an “anti-mission” statement can be a useful exercise during the planning process. This statement details what the school is *not*. Your anti-mission statement, by providing a clear picture of the limits of the school and the needs and demands it will not meet can help your planning group identify what your school will do best. It is important for the school founders (as well as potential

parents, students, and staff) to understand clearly what is not included within the school's intent. If you don't take this step, don't be surprised to encounter parents and community members who insist the school be something that it is not. As one school leader told us:

*We had people come here because they were passionately convinced it was a school for the gifted. We had people come because their kids had no success anywhere else; it was their last resort. We had people come because they thought it was a hippie alternative, and we would never ask their children to do anything – it was just laissez-faire and laid back, just appreciate and smell the flowers. We tried to describe as carefully as possible what it was that we were, but they refused to hear it. For the first three years, you've got a zoo of interests.*

A well-developed anti-mission can prevent misunderstanding about the school's focus and save founders, parents, and the community a lot of confusion, and wasted time.

Try to keep the mission statement brief, focused, and straightforward. Here's one kind of mission statement that might flow from a vision of "producing graduates who can change the world":

*"Success Academy" is a school serving grades six through eight dedicated to a demanding and intensive educational experience to ensure that eager students, no matter their tested ability levels or ethnic or socio-economic background, are rigorously prepared in their middle school years for demanding high school college-preparatory programs.*

Here's another that might be related to "producing graduates who are comfortable facing life's challenges":

*"The Better Solutions Institute" is a small, non-traditional high school serving grades 9-12 that provides rigorous alternative education programs emphasizing academics, work-experience, and internships — all designed to persuade dropouts and potential dropouts to remain in school and develop the skills*

*and knowledge required to grow, change, and learn throughout their lives, on the job or in college.*

Each of these mission statements describes quite a different school. What both of them have in common is that they:

- define the populations they will serve,
- orient the potential parent (or funder) to the school's educational approach, and
- are reasonably explicit about the results they seek.

One wants to take “eager” middle school students, no matter their tested ability, and prepare them for rigorous work in high school. The other expects to intervene with dropouts and potential dropouts and prepare them for work or college. The significant thing is that potential students and their parents should be able to look at your mission statement and understand how your proposed school differs from the one down the street.

Contrast the above mission statements with this one:

*The “High Hopes School” believes that the school and community together should commit their energies in developing an equitable interdisciplinary environment which empowers students to become better thinkers and life long learners in our global society.*

It is surely heartfelt and rooted in the core values of the school, but it fails to provide any clear guidance for staff, students, and families about what will make this school unique and effective. In the appendix you'll find other resources to help you develop a clear and specific mission.

In addition to the mission statement, you should also put into place a mission-sustaining *process*, by which school leaders can constantly evaluate whether their current methods, organization, and staffing are accurate expressions of the school's mission. An actionable mission statement is useless if it sits on a shelf and does not come alive in every classroom. You should, for example, reserve two specific days during the school year for the entire school

community to have input into whether the school is operating in line with the values outlined in the mission.

### **Establish decision-making processes**

- Be clear about how decisions are to be made and who will make them.
- Get diverse input beyond core group.
- Learn to delegate.
- Decide who will be in charge of financial planning.
- Always come back to the mission, balancing fidelity to it with an understanding that it may evolve.

Although you don't want to be overwhelmed by structure, you do need a structure for making decisions - one that everyone understands. Clarity about who is responsible for what and how the core group (particularly as it expands) will reach consensus or agreement is critical. From the start, members of the core group need to agree on how decisions will be made at each stage of the school's development. Your founding team should establish a timeline for when important decisions will be made and who will be responsible for various responsibilities.

Decisions often benefit from diverse views. If you've constructed it carefully, you've got some diversity on your planning team. But the planning team is small; you need to reach beyond it. Talk to parents, students, and educators. Get out into the community and meet with people at local sports events, church socials, and community fairs. Find out what people are thinking about in terms of education, and what they seek in schools for their children and grandchildren. The more diverse your sources of information, the better your team's decisions are likely to be.

We all know delegation is an essential leadership skill, but let's look at some of the ways this has been troubling for school starters. School founders must understand that some decisions can and should be made by others on the team - even by volunteers or committees. Leaders are not experts in everything. Delegation is a sign of respect for volunteers, and it may be essential to maintain their loyalty and continued effort on behalf of the new school.

### **Importance of a Strong Advisory Group**

*I think the most critical thing is to have support... within your team, planning together, communication with each other, supporting each other, and being able to create time or make time to do that...Our advisory team I would say is the most critical factor that has helped us get where we are—and the district's support. You need a support base. To go out and try to fly this on your own ... would not be possible.*

**Founder, Public School of Choice**

**Don't rely solely on our school district for help**

*I think many school district administrations around the country are not actually managerially equipped to do this sort of thing (help new schools get started). I mean that kindly. I think they're not equipped to do this. I think this is too hard, too challenging, and too unknown.*

**Founder, Public School of Choice**

There is one important area, however, where delegation leads to disaster. In the end, new school planners *must* retain control over financial planning. On finances, the buck truly stops with you. In the initial design process, it is easy for visionaries to get carried away. Often they decide that their new school needs all the educational bells and whistles ever created anywhere for any school – no matter the mission and function of yours. Guard against this. The core team can't afford to set afoot ambitious plans that might squander resources before the school gets off the ground. Keep your eye on the money – otherwise the financial viability of the school and its educational mission can easily be threatened.

Finally, never lose track of the vision and mission statements. Your group, particularly as it grows, is likely to have differences of opinion, not just every once in a while, but practically every day. In these situations, the group can always return to the talisman of the school's vision and mission to guide action.

If the group becomes severely divided at some point in the planning process, returning to the core mission may not be enough. If the mission statement has become irrelevant, if the group's thinking has moved beyond it, or if people no longer truly support it, the group is in danger of creating a school that is no more coherent than the schools it is supposed to replace.

You may find, for instance, that the mission of the school no longer meets the needs of the community. Or that a number of the founding team or prospective teachers no longer feel the mission is effective for the anticipated student population. In these situations, three remedies present themselves: First, acknowledge that the core mission has to evolve and repeat the deliberative process that created the first mission statement. Second, acknowledge the obvious and secede: create two schools, with two different visions, rather than one. The third option may be the least attractive, but in extreme cases it is often the only practical one: Admit that the planning effort can go no further. It is time to pull the plug on the process and quit.

## Get the Help You Need

- Supplement your core team with advisors who can fill in the blanks.
- Find “critical friends” to critique your program.
- Research your school’s area of focus.
- Find a champion in the existing school structures.

Like all new school founders, you’ll need to develop reliable sources of advice and assistance. Your group’s particular expertise will determine the type of outside assistance you need. For instance, a founding group composed mostly of teachers who want to start a new technology school may not have a strong background in finance and governance. They may need to seek out that kind of expertise. A group that does not have many local connections may need help with building community support. The best approach to identifying needs is to start with a list of skills and expertise it takes to start a new school and then determine how to access what the core team lacks.

Below is a basic list of skills and expertise it takes to start a new school. Which of these skills are not available from your planning group?

- curriculum
- instructional services
- evaluation
- special education
- law
- accounting
- personnel
- insurance
- real estate
- construction
- building codes
- public relations
- governance
- meeting facilitation

Despite how overwhelming this list may look, you should resist the temptation to include every type of expertise in the core group. Instead, the core group should broker *outside expertise*, perhaps by creating an outstanding advisory group. Whatever happens, don’t let the advisory group compromise the integrity of the school’s original vision and mission.

## The Value of Data

*One of the driving factors in creating this school was that in my job at [a private school] we were consistently seeing the best kids leaving public schools to go to [area private schools]. And so I got the data from the school district...I think two years ago, 1,600 kids had left the school district.*

**Founder, Public School of Choice**

## Opening and Closing Schools at the Same Time

*The county school system was building schools like mad further out to take care of new developments and closing them equally quickly close in. We had a lot of empty-nest homes near the city line, and most students could be taken care of easily in many fewer buildings.*

**Independent School Board Member**

Where to look? Sources of information and advice for new schools vary state by state, but they often include:

- nonprofit organizations dedicated to providing technical support to schools (e.g., charter school resource centers, independent schools associations, comprehensive school design organizations)
- local and state education agencies
- state and national networks of new school operators and advocates (e.g., think tanks, state charter school associations)
- local colleges and universities
- private attorneys, accountants and bankers; consultants with experience establishing schools

In addition to these sources, in states where charter schools have been established, charter school operators generally maintain informal networks or formal associations that can be another source of assistance. If you are starting a charter school, you can find help there to address typical problems of new schools, nuances of different government agencies and their attitudes toward more autonomous or innovative schools, and how to gain access to expertise. There is a lot of commonality in school start-up work, so if you are starting a new district school, don't overlook resources that are specific to private or charter schools. In fact, these resources are some of the best startup resources available. In many cases, taking an "as-if-you-were-a-charter school" approach to planning can help you consider new challenges and solutions that may not have otherwise occurred to you.

Getting help requires some effort, but it shouldn't be that hard. Most of these groups will be eager to offer assistance and advice, some for free and some for a fee. Be aware, however, that each of them has its own perspective, objectives, and agenda. Be careful to select assistance providers whose services mesh with your school's mission and who are a good fit with your community culture and needs.

You might also use these groups as "critical friends" to provide a sounding board for the viability of your school and

its plans. Do they know of other schools in the state or community with a focus similar to yours? What do they know about the fate of similar schools? Ask them to review drafts of your materials, critique your ideas, and let you do a dry-run practice of your presentations. Don't be dismayed to hear some bad news. At this point, you're better off learning about the mistakes others have made so that you don't repeat them down the line. You're also better off having your ideas challenged before you go before the school board for approval.

### **Gauge Your Market**

- Determine community interest and need for the school you are proposing.
- Use existing data, polls, and population and enrollment projections to determine need.
- Understand that an apparent lack of interest can be addressed with the help of a good spokesperson and marketing strategy.

While your founding team may be excited about a creative idea for the kind of school you want to open, the school cannot be successful unless there is community interest and a need for it. You must determine that an honest need exists and a potential constituency can be found. You probably suspect that both exist. Now you have to firm up what may be little more than a hunch.

How do you do that? At a minimum, you should leaflet the target community to describe what you have in mind, hold a meeting, and see who shows up. Understanding the interest in a potential school will be a critical part of convincing the school district that this will be a successful venture. It's often hard, though, to turn people out for a meeting. You can also distribute a petition asking people to indicate interest in your school, but realize that these should only be your first steps.

Plan to seek out publicly available population data (probably available at your local library or county offices) and school enrollment projections (from your local school district or the state). Every 10 years, the Bureau of the Census provides figures on population, by age and income,

## **Find the Support You Need**

*We were looking for people who would support our idea, and we just literally made cold calls. We had zero budget. We got on the phone and we said, "We'd like to go out to lunch with you and tell you about this new school."*

### **Private School Founder**

in just about every ZIP code in the United States. Frequently these figures are updated with estimates from either the Bureau of the Census or the Department of Labor. You may have to pay for some calculations, but you should be able to use public data to establish current population (by age) as well as projected demand for school facilities. (These are the same data that school systems use to project the need for new schools, including the possibility of overcrowding in existing schools. There is no reason for you not to arm yourself with the best information available.)

In large counties (particularly in fast-growing counties abutting major cities) don't be surprised to come across simultaneous overcrowding of schools and half-empty classrooms. Excess school capacity (the half-empty classroom phenomenon) often exists in close-by, older suburbs with aging populations; meanwhile, rapidly expanding communities further away from downtown are likely to be filled with young families whose children are shoe-horned into temporary classrooms housed in trailers. The second situation clearly offers you a market opportunity; but even the first can be turned to your advantage in your search for facilities (as we will see below).

Founders of focused, or thematic, schools can use targeted methods to determine the interest in their particular type of school program. These methods estimate the demand for a new school by looking at population projections, determining the percentage of the founders' target population within the area, and surveying that population about their interest in the thematic focus of the founders' new school. The chances are reasonably good that most communities will be enthusiastic about a proposed new school emphasizing math, science, and technology. A less conventional school is likely to be a riskier proposition. So you need to carefully gauge the level of interest in your proposed theme: How many parents and students in this community are interested in environmental education? In the basic skills and the classics? In music and the arts? In math, science and technology? Without that information, you're proceeding in the dark.

Learning more about what kind of interest is out there for

new schools can bring up some interesting challenges. In some instances, there may be both interest and opposition to a proposed school. The important factor is to organize the interested support into a coherent voice to counter the opposition. One founder of a public school of choice was able to persuade the local school board to let him open his school despite public backlash to his proposal because a large enough number of parents still enrolled their children at the school, reflecting an interest and a need that convinced the board.

Where there is no interest in new schools, it is possible to generate some interest. This involves careful planning and some marketing. First you must convince parents and community members that the proposed school is based on a successful school model and that there is need in the community for this particular type of school. You must also convince the sponsoring agency that the school offers an educational option that adds something to the services currently offered. Founding teams need an articulate spokesperson to help make this happen.

### **Test the Political Environment**

- Familiarize yourself with the political environment in your community and district.
- Know whom you threaten, and start thinking about how to counter or win them over.
- Understand that persuasive data and a solid proposal are your best defenses.
- Organize your supporters.
- Resist being combative: show how your school will add value to the district and family options.

As the old adage has it: all politics is local. New schools are as local, and political, as you can get. Decisions about opening a new school or closing an existing one have never been based solely in the spirit of objective public policy decisions, but the politics may be even more intense today with growing interest in new and different kinds of schooling. Your school will be no exception.

So, you need to familiarize yourself with your political environment. Even when the school is simply an emerging

### **Nature of Change**

*Understand that the progress of change can almost always be measured by the intensity of the resistance.*

### **Founder, Public School of Choice**

vision, you have to start thinking about the key political players. Who are the entrenched interests in the community? How do they think about schools? How do they relate to each other? You need to think about the school board, the superintendent, the central district office, the teachers' union, the media, and a variety of neighborhood and civic groups. Don't leave elected non-school officials out of your thinking. Increasingly, mayors, city councils, state legislators, and governors can be found stepping in to take a direct hand in encouraging school change.

You should also identify interest groups likely to oppose or support your ideas. Imagine that you want to start an outdoor education center to teach environmental science combined with survival skills, teamwork, and respect for the environment. Think about local university science departments, as well as environmental advocacy groups and outdoor recreation enthusiasts in your search for allies. In a political environment you never really know where you might find your allies (or encounter your opponents). Some years ago, for example, a national commission urging the extension of the school year found itself under assault from a group it didn't even know existed: the organization representing summer camps. The camps care about this educational issue for economic reasons - they relied on a long summer vacation for both campers and counselors. Anything that threatened summer vacation threatened them. You need to understand who is threatened by your ideas and how you might respond.

Talk with trusted sources early on to get to know the possible sources of opposition to the school proposal. The new school founders we spoke with encountered a wide variety of opposition. One of the school founders the Center spoke with had strong support from the district superintendent for his proposal, but he had a lot of trouble convincing the school board to approve the school. Another new school founder had support from the board, but not from the superintendent. And another founder basking in the approval of the board and superintendent ran into so much trouble with middle management and community members that her school was nearly derailed.

Confronting entrenched and unified opposition is not just a problem in public education. Despite parent and parishioner interest in a new high school, opposition within one Catholic archdiocese prevented a new school from opening for years. Existing parish elementary schools worried about competition for limited dollars from a new school, and some of the existing Catholic high schools became anxious about losing students. In fact, but for the arrival of a new archbishop, the high school might never have got off the ground.

Once sources of potential opposition are identified, school founders should create a strategy for dealing with them. Sometimes this may be a matter of providing information and education about the school proposal. You might invite key supporters and potential opponents to come to an early meeting with community groups. You always have to guard against misinformation while working hard at allaying fears and exposing myths.

In the public school system, the debate is ultimately based on issues of power, control, and money. But opposition will focus first on the quality of your proposal. Without a rock solid proposal, you will never make it through the real debate over entrenched interests. We recommend your group take time to think carefully early in your planning process about potential “battles” and how to prepare for them.

You should also look for powerful supporters in the community. You might seek support from many credible sources: philanthropists, political leaders (mayors and legislators) and religious leaders who will support the project. Organizing supporters, especially parents who will have children in the school, can be an especially powerful way to persuade district officials to approve your school. Many people who might be relatively neutral on the merits of your school (on the grounds that it is hard to distinguish one school from another), can easily become your enthusiastic supporters once they’re convinced your school is a legitimate effort to respond to the needs of local children.

Opposition may develop from people who disagree with the school’s philosophy, or from people trying to prevent

### **The Best Defense is a Good Offense**

*My experience is that when these union people do come in with the assigned purpose of being critical...that allows them to be who they are. But it also allows them to engage your thinking when they would not ordinarily. Ordinarily, they'd lie in the weeds, develop their arguments, and then come out at the eleventh hour and try to put the kibosh on things. And if you can get to them before that happens, I think that's helpful.*

**Charter School Founder**

## **Need for Allies**

*I think without the superintendent being in favor of [the new school] it never would have happened. He helped explain...the big picture...to the school board.*

### **Founder, Public School of Choice**

a transfer of students (and funds) from existing schools. When opposition develops, political savviness and having a champion in the power structure are important, perhaps essential, assets.

For example, one school founder we interviewed had extensive parental support for his proposed Catholic high school, but parish pastors, archdiocesan administrators, and community members prevented the school from opening for years. The school was able to open only after it found a champion and supporter within the archdiocesan bureaucracy who helped overcome internal resistance from other administrators.

Another group eager to establish new options within the existing system ran into considerable opposition from opponents of charter schools. But because the group had been making the case to the school superintendent that parents wanted more choices within a public school context, they found a sympathetic ear for creating new kinds of schools. As one member of the group told the Center:

*Our superintendent...talked to the public, and he knew ... that parents want choices for their kids and that they want to have a voice in those choices.*

In situations like this, skill in interpersonal relations is essential. If you've spent six months publicly criticizing everything about the existing order of things, you'll find it hard to get a sympathetic ear in the central offices established to manage the existing order. You'll find yourself in much better shape if, instead of promising to replace something that is flawed and incompetent, you position yourself as an alternative adding value to what's already there.

## **Negotiate with your school district**

- Arm yourself with knowledge.
- Ask the right questions.
- Negotiate a Memorandum of Understanding.
- Know when to walk away.

If you decide to operate as a district school, you will need to find out a) whether your district will allow you to start a new school; and b) what the specifics of your agreement will be (i.e., how much control you will have over your school and your funding). Many school planning groups have worked hard on designing a school only to discover too late that district officials were not entirely committed or were not willing to let the school operate autonomously or with adequate resources.

Before you start earnest discussions with the school district, you need to make sure you know as much as possible about how the district operates. To start, you should know what kinds of services are available to other district schools, what the teachers contract covers, what kinds of tests are administered, and you should have a basic understanding of the district's financial picture and per pupil revenues and expenditures. You should also have a basic understanding of what kinds of issues are important to board members and the superintendent, what kinds of academic performance pressures the district may be under, and what the district's previous experience has been, if any, with attempts to start new schools. You should be able to find most of this information by checking online resources and looking at old newspaper articles.

You should also be well prepared to answer basic questions about your proposed school: why it is needed, what the overall focus will be, what your planning process will look like, etc. If you will need board approval to operate, plan to go before the board only when you can anticipate very tough questions. Be sure to do a dry run presentation before a critical friend who is familiar with board politics to test your ability to answer questions the board is likely to ask.

Once you have had preliminary conversations with the superintendent or other district officials, it is a good idea to write up a preliminary Memorandum of Understanding or a formal legal document (if you are operating as an independent legal entity), which outlines the basic elements of your early agreement.

## **The Challenge of Getting a Fair Financial Deal**

*Districts are reluctant to give you the start up funds that you need to put you on an equal footing with an up and running school... I have no resource center. I have no supplies. I could take you into my room and at least 10 of my student desks are so wobbly you'd be afraid to sit in them. All of my desks come from some warehouse somewhere. We don't have new equipment... Let's put a benign face on it and just say they just are not used to equipping and dealing with brand new educational enterprises.*

**Founder, Public School of Choice**

At a minimum, this agreement should cover these issues:

- What resources your school will receive; and when? What does the cash flow look like and what is it based on?
- What reports and other compliance documents the school is required to file, to whom and when?
- What levels of student performance are expected, how performance will be measured, and how a given level of performance will be judged as adequate or inadequate?
- What options the school district has if the school's performance is not adequate?
- What options the school has if the district does not meet its obligations?

A contract should also identify the risks in the relationship and clearly show which party, the district or the school, should assume which risks. An example of a model contract can be found in the appendix. Even if you are on the best possible terms with the school district leadership, beware “handshake” or “gentlemen’s agreements” about the terms of your operation. Get as much as possible down on paper to avoid future tensions and to protect yourself against changes in district leadership.

The sets of questions throughout the remaining sections of this primer identify predictable areas where issues of resource control or freedom of action are likely to arise. You won't be able to identify all potential problems in advance. What is possible, however, is to agree upon a process for resolving unpredictable problems or issues when they do arise, as they certainly will.

Here is a short set of questions to help you address unanticipated problems:

- What are the means of ongoing communication?

- ⚡ What protections will your school have from unilateral actions on the part of the district office?
- ⚡ What processes are agreed upon to permit your school to request that procedures and policies be reviewed when they appear to the school to interfere with its development or operation?
- ⚡ Will your school be permitted to develop a mission, culture, and mode of operation that makes the school distinctive and allows it to be focused? That is, will your school be permitted to be “uncomprehensive” so long as every class of students is equally made welcome or given an opportunity to attend? If de facto exclusion occurs as a result of a very focused mission, how will the district and your school address the matter?
- ⚡ What process will be used to resolve differences between your school and the district? When and how may this process be invoked?

Working through these questions in advance will allow many issues to surface in advance rather than in the middle of a start-up effort. Doing so is also a demonstration of seriousness and good faith on the part of both the district and school founders.

Unless you have the opportunity to open your school in another district or under authority of an alternate chartering agency, your “negotiation” process is likely to consist of discussions about how you will need to adjust your proposal to meet district demands. But this should not necessarily mean that the district’s position will always be “take it or leave it.” Keep in mind, you are a valuable asset to your district if your school will promote the district’s mission, provide good public relations or if you can solve a problem (i.e., overcrowding, dissatisfied parents or replacing a low performing school). If you can demonstrate why it is in the district’s interest to allow you to operate, district officials and personnel will be more likely to work with you to reach mutually acceptable solutions.

Even if you are working with a supportive district, however, the scope of negotiation is likely to be narrow. So, before you start pounding out details, you need to know what aspects of your school proposal can be altered without compromising your fundamental vision and which cannot. You should be prepared to “walk away” from your negotiations even if it means you will never start a school.

# SECTION TWO

## CREATING A PLAN

*People often when they're planning can get limited to the curriculum...and the things that turn them on and they are just blind to reality. And before you know it, you've got real people in your school, and real parents, and you have inappropriate parents and pressuring parents, you have kids with issues you didn't anticipate. You need to prepare for these realities as much as you possibly can. You can't fully prepare, but that's one of the biggest mistakes founders make. They don't envision the full reality – they've been working theoretically.*

### **Founder, Public School of Choice**

At this point you should have a leadership team, a vision and mission, decision-making structures, advisory groups, some sense of your educational market and the political currents in your community, and a general idea about how to establish the foundation of your legal authority. You've come a long way from dreaming you might like to open a school. But you still have a long way to go before the doors swing open. Remember, we said to set a side a year just for planning. This section outlines how you'll use that time. If the last section helped lay your school's foundation, this one provides the frame and roof.

This is the point in new school development where a leadership team's cohesion is tested. When the time arrives to get specific about what the school day will look like and what will happen in classrooms, even the most cohesive groups encounter disagreements. The planning process can easily come unglued. If the founders have not done enough work developing their vision and mission, the core group's differences will surface as they debate the reality of what the school will look like on a day-to-day basis. By contrast, a team with carefully selected members that has worked to fully develop a shared vision and mission is likely to experience a smooth transition into the planning process.

As you begin to develop the specifics of your school's operations, don't lose sight of the vision with which you began. You may be tempted to expand the school beyond a reasonable scope or develop policies or programs that do not fit with the school's mission. All aspects of the school's operation — including, instruction, finances, and staffing — should flow from the vision. It may be useful during the

### **you need to clarify:**

- ▶ your educational program: curriculum and how you'll assess your progress; outcomes— how to get there, how to know, how to tell others (standards, curriculum, assessment, reporting and accountability)
- ▶ the financial feasibility and sustainability of your school;
- ▶ how you will recruit students (and parents);
- ▶ where to find a building and how to pay for it; how you'll deal with the regulatory environment, including special education; and
- ▶ the policies and procedures you will use.

planning process to keep a copy of the mission statement in a prominent place as a constant reference.

In the planning process that links the initial decision to start a school with the actual opening day, you'll have to clarify the points on the previous page.

These topics are among the most common issues new school founders must address. Others will occur to you as well. Your founding team should feel free to attend to them in whatever order is best suited to your planning needs. However, we strongly recommend you start with your educational plan and let it drive other decisions.

The recommendations in the following sections assume that your school will have high levels of legal autonomy, including control of budget, staffing, and curriculum. However, each section also includes questions you should ask your district to clarify how much control they are willing to cede in each of those areas.

### **Establishing educational credibility**

- Align mission, outcomes, curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.
- Define your own outcomes before looking at others.
- Adopt or design assessments related to your educational objectives.
- Consider allying yourself with a network.
- Link internal and external accountability.

Unfortunately, many existing schools are never pressed to explain how each event in a student's day (week, semester, etc.) aligns with the day's other events to serve the school's educational goals. As a result, many students experience school as a collection of centrally located but otherwise disjointed activities and interactions. This is most obvious for the high school student who moves several times a day among unrelated classes taught by teachers who neither collaborate nor, except by coincidence, share a focused understanding of what they are working to accomplish. At best this is inefficient; at worst, it puts resources for learning at cross purposes. It is more difficult for

students to get invested in the work of the school when they are unable to identify a coherent message about what the adults, (i.e. those who have designed and are implementing the whole enterprise), intend.

As a new school, many people will question your educational credibility and press you to explain what your school will accomplish, how you will do this, and how you and everyone else will know it's a success. With little manipulation these questions translate to the framework of a sound educational program. What your school will accomplish may be rephrased as "What do we want each graduate to know and be able to do?" These are your student **outcomes**. To accomplish these you will employ a diverse array of content, from the courses you offer and the sequences in which you offer them to the readings and activities that fill them. This is a broad definition of **curriculum**. Another part of your strategy for accomplishing outcomes is your collective style of engaging the curriculum. Do the students you are serving learn best in a highly structured setting? What are your shared beliefs about group work vs. individual work? About the formality of teacher-student interactions? These comprise your **pedagogy**. Finally, you and your students will understand their progress toward outcomes, and thus your progress as a school, by various means of **assessment**.

Although these questions may help to focus your conversation about educational credibility, *sustaining* a coherent program remains one of the most difficult tasks you face as a school developer. Beyond the various stages of planning and opening the school, you will face ongoing pressure to expand your curriculum and extra-curricular activities to please students, parents, and teachers with a variety of interests. There will always be room to question whether the particular student outcomes around which you've focused your educational program are the most appropriate. This is further complicated by the yearly change in students, parents, and teachers who ultimately act out the vision you initiated in the development process. In anticipation of these pressures, an important aspect of your discussion of educational programs is defining what it will mean for your group to collaborate. This collaboration time needs to be structured and strategic through processes

*"A strong recommendation would be to begin the standards developing process 'in a vacuum,' without consulting any other standards documents. It is all too easy to begin this process by grabbing as many outside standards documents as possible, reading through them all and trying to figure out where your particular school fits in. In fact, the opposite process is more authentic and will ultimately have more staff, parent, and student buy-in: Know who you are first, then create and find standards to match and elaborate that vision."*

**Laurie Gardner**

former teacher and administrator,  
charter school technical assistance  
provider<sup>3</sup>

3. Navigating the Standards Maze, a publication of the Charter Schools Development Center, <http://www.csus.edu/ier/charter8standardsmaze.htm>

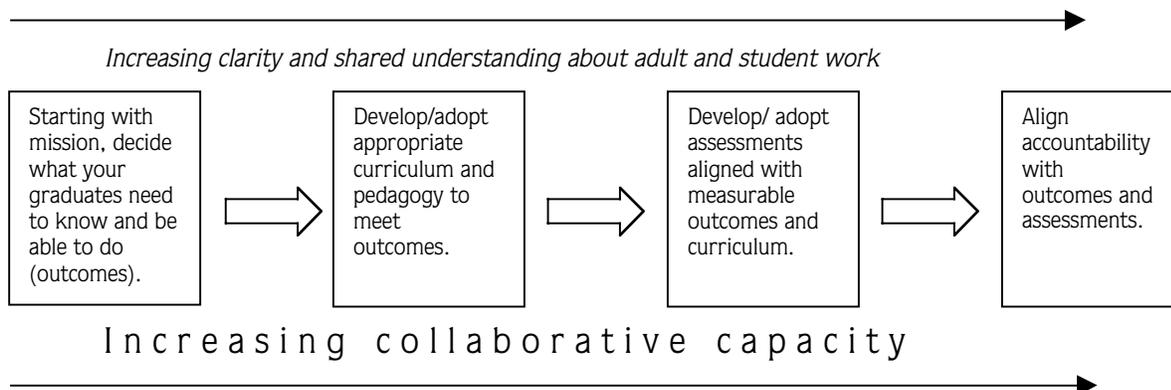
such as regular debriefings and other self-studies, as time together does not by itself increase your group’s effectiveness. Be explicit that today’s work to define your educational program is also defining the adult culture that will allow you to sustain today’s work and successfully redefine your program as it matures. In a conversation about what it means for a school to develop focus, one experienced principal and school founder said that “an ongoing (adult) learning community is the ways and the means to common *focus*. ... Make professional learning a part of every meeting.”

The chart below depicts a general progression for building your educational program

### Starting ‘in a vacuum’

Defining what you believe students should know and be able to do is surprisingly difficult given the many sets of student standards and outcomes at your disposal. Most states and many school districts have invested considerable time and expertise to articulate learning goals or standards for graduates, and often these are further broken down into grade level standards. While these may be useful for helping outsiders understand what your school will do relative to other schools, and addressing them is ostensibly required of all public schools, existing standards present at least two problems for the new school developer. First, they seem to obviate the need for the very conversation that will help your team discover and clarify its shared beliefs about powerful teaching and learning. Many school founders and leaders stress the need for the adults *at the school site* (and ideally parents and students, too) to begin their work with the conversation about what students need

### An approach to building your educational program



to know and be able to do. Adopting existing standards without thought presents the risk of adopting the notes from someone else's conversation.

A second potential problem with existing state and district standards is that they often stop short of prioritizing learning goals. Trying to give equal time and value to each item in a multi-page document is a recipe for lack of focus. An essential part of the site-based conversation about what every student needs to know and be able to do is some decision-making about what skills and attributes are *most* important and which ones are just somewhat important. These distinctions are the foundation of school design, helping you understand which programs continue all year as opposed to seasonally, which activities happen daily as opposed to weekly, and so on.

Your school-based student outcomes should fit easily on a single page and ideally will be *clear and specific* enough to mean the same thing to most anyone who reads them, including non-educators, but not so specific as to be binding on the creativity of your teachers and learners. Because you and your students and parents (not to mention the district or other oversight agencies) will want to assess progress toward the student outcomes, they also need to be *measurable*. (More on this in the discussion of assessment.)

As your teachers come on board, additional conversations will be needed to plan backwards from the outcomes to determine *benchmarks* and classroom level standards. For example, for a student to reach this outcome by the end of eighth grade, what does the end of sixth grade need to look like? And more specifically, if this benchmark is to be reached by the end of sixth grade, what needs to be addressed in each component of that child's sixth grade experience? Examples of resources for creating effective school outcomes, benchmarks, and classroom level standards are in the appendix.

Next, you will need additional conversations to determine the relationship between your own site-based outcomes and the existing standards. Looking at the existing standards *after* developing your own is an excellent

opportunity to consider the quality of your own discussion about student outcomes and consider whether you want to make any adjustments. Depending on your state and/or district's focus on standards in overseeing schools, the specificity of your alignment to outside standards may vary. It may be sufficient to note that your own outcomes are not in conflict with any of the existing district and state standards. On the other end of the continuum, you may need to create a document showing explicitly how the various experiences designed into your sophomore-junior off-campus science exploration program, for example, address district standards 3.1 – 3.8, 4.2 – 4.6, etc.

Finally, a common pitfall for new schools is to be unrealistic in the outcomes they promise. Since your student outcomes will likely be an important part of your internal and external accountability, it is important to set your sights high, but not so high that that you set yourself up for failure. Keep in mind that as a new school you will be under increased scrutiny. Better to promise less and deliver more.

### **Alignment**

As you move from defining outcomes to designing the program to achieve them, maintaining alignment gets increasingly difficult. But if your school is to make sense to its teachers, parents, and students, it is essential that mission, outcomes, curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment are not only reflective of extensive conversation *at your school site*, but also that they are aligned with each other. If part of your mission is to develop students who are effective leaders, for example, then leadership qualities should be readily visible in your student outcomes. These might include the ability to organize long-term projects, give and receive critical feedback, and present to groups. To support these outcomes, the curriculum might include projects of increasing duration and complexity through the course of study. Presentations to various groups, in class and otherwise, would be part of every student's regular experience, perhaps culminating with major 'defenses' of academic work before a panel of outside visitors and experts. Self-reflection and exchange of critical feedback would be visible throughout the school, not just for the students but among adults as well. The assessment of these particular

student outcomes would be appropriate to their nature, (i.e. participatory and collaborative rather than individual). Writing an essay about a famous leader and having that essay graded by one person, while related to leadership, would be a poorly aligned assessment for the outcomes named.

Alignment happens not just in assessment, but within the whole educational experience of the school. Contrast this view of *alignment* to the experience of a student who hears that adults running the school want him/her to develop leadership skills, but who is never required to facilitate a group discussion, is not asked to participate in critical dialogue with colleagues about the nature of their work, and sees no students and only a few adults playing a significant role in the leadership of the school. Alignment is about all aspects of your school. For your school to be most coherent to everyone who participates in it, even those who visit, your instructional goals need to be visible in how everything works, how you understand when it is not working, and how you respond to issues once identified.

### **Curriculum and Pedagogy**

Curriculum and pedagogy are, in many ways, where all of the pieces of the school's plan come together. The educational philosophy of the proposed school—its theory of teaching and learning—should be directly represented in its curriculum and instructional methods. You may need to create your curriculum, but you may also be able to identify successful programs or school design models consistent with the school's educational philosophy and adjust them to your school's needs. Creating your own curriculum is time consuming, but many school founders have found it to be a valuable process.

If you decide to “build your own” curriculum, you will need to discuss where the school stands on issues such as integrating subjects and materials, collaborating among staff, emphasizing applied skills, learning for “deep understanding,” grouping by skill level, and implementing multicultural education programs. Consider what the limits of your curriculum will be. How many foreign languages will you offer? Will you emphasize applied sciences over liberal arts, or will you compromise depth and expose students

to both? Will you have a school band? If not, how might you accommodate students pursuing musical interests elsewhere? What about athletics? Issues such as these are often remote from the minds of school visionaries when they begin to think about their new school. In contrast, they are often the first questions that come to mind when parents and students ask about a school.

As a guide to thinking about curriculum and pedagogy, allying yourself with existing networks of new or experimenting schools might be valuable. Some religious schools align with an educational tradition – Jewish day schools or Jesuit high schools, for example. But even non-religious schools can affiliate themselves with a number of “educational faiths” in the form of organizations such as the Coalition of Essential Schools or New American Schools. (See our appendix for a number of design networks that new schools might want to consider.) Schools that do not ally themselves with such known sources of educational legitimacy have a greater burden to bear both in proving themselves and in making promises to parents about what they propose to teach their children.

We caution, however, that aligning your new school with a non-profit network or for-profit management company comes with its own challenges. Your school district may be suspicious of for-profit “education management organizations” such as the Edison Schools. In that case, you would do well to float potential partnerships with key people before making any firm commitments. By contracting or aligning with an outside organization, you may also have to agree to give up some decision-making powers, such as hiring the school principal. Be sure you know what you are getting into and who is accountable for various actions and results.<sup>4</sup>

Another excellent means of thinking about curriculum and pedagogy is to visit other successful schools. No school does everything perfectly, but visiting schools you’ve heard good things about is an exceptional opportunity for insight to what you hope to accomplish in your own school and how you will accomplish it, as well as what you wish to avoid. Rather than going to good schools to adopt their methods, visit them to reflect on your own ideas and inten-

4. For an excellent guide to contracting with management companies, see: *Charting a Clear Course: A resource Guide for Building Successful Partnerships Between Charter Schools and School Management Organizations*. Second Edition published by the Charter Friends National Network May 2001.

tions. Look for the discrepancies between what they are trying to do and what they are accomplishing, and let this inform your planning. Debriefing a school visit and sharing critically among your team about what each other saw that seemed to be working well vs. poorly, consistently vs. inconsistently with the school's mission, etc., will help you understand each other's thinking as well as build your capacity to learn together through disagreement and clarification.

### **Assessment**

As important as it is to define what students in your school will be expected to learn, it is equally important to understand how and when student progress will be assessed. Once you know what you want students to learn, you must develop ways to determine if, indeed, they know it. The classroom and school-wide assessment methods you choose will be important diagnostic tools for discovering and correcting problems among students, and programs. You should think about creating an evaluation plan outlining what steps the school will take to continually assess itself and improve its instructional practices.

Assessments are used not only to measure student achievement, but also to evaluate the progress of the school. As such, assessments must be meaningful to the teaching staff and parents; policy makers must also see them as legitimate measures of student achievement and useful for comparison with other schools. While assessments should fit a school's educational objectives, founding teams should also consider which assessments are required by the state or are used by comparable schools. There are few areas in education more confusing than assessment. But it is important to understand what each assessment claims to measure and the limits of each assessment instrument. Since no assessment can cover everything, you probably need to think about using multiple assessments. The shortcomings of one assessment may be remedied by the strengths of the next. Portfolios, standardized tests, and subject mastery presentations are examples of various methods of assessment.

For your assessments to be most supportive of your school's learning goals, and of learning in general, it may

be helpful for you to separate which assessments are more about reporting to outside entities and which are about informing students' learning. Most of your assessments will engage teachers, students, parents, and others in the immediate community in the process of helping each other understand and improve student progress toward learning goals. "Outside entities" will be those people who are not likely to be in your school with any regularity, such as state-level policymakers, researchers or, if you are in a very large district, school board members.

In developing the most useful assessments, it is useful also to separate assignments from assessments. Students may complete a project to demonstrate their understanding of a literary work, for example, but the project is not the assessment. The assessment is in how and by whom the project is understood to relate to what is being learned. For example, is the project self-assessed according to a rubric supplied by the teacher or developed by class discussion? Or does the teacher alone assess the project, and if so on what basis? This may seem again overly semantic; the intent is to ensure that assessment is not only occurring but that it is purposeful and aligned with the particular task and goals at hand.

Since no assessment is appropriate for all purposes, you will need some way to think about how the various assessments used at your school collectively inform you about how individual students, your students in general, and your school as a whole are performing. You will also need tools to communicate to parents, oversight agencies, and policymakers that your assessment strategies provide legitimate answers to questions about student and school performance. The following chart portrays how one charter school helped ensure for itself and demonstrate to outside entities that its assessments were appropriately thorough and aligned to student outcomes. (Note: an accompanying list of student outcomes preceded this chart and has been omitted.)

## FOR EXAMPLE...

### Methods for Measuring Pupil Progress

Jane Doe School students will be assessed in each of the aforementioned skill areas by a combination of standardized and site-generated assessments. The following chart demonstrates Jane Doe School's commitment to multiple assessments and shows how assessments are linked to each exit outcome. The text below describes each assessment.

Assessment - evaluator	Math	LA	Sci.	PE	Arts	SS	World Lang.
Stanford -9 Achievement Test (SAT-9) – state	X	X					
New Performance Standard – criterion ref. test	X						
Math Competency – district	X						
Writing Sample – district		X					
District Fitness – district				X			
Portfolios - self, teacher	X	X	X		X		
Exhibitions - self, peer, teacher	X	X			X		
Learning Logs – self, teacher	X		X				
Project Evaluations – self, peer, teacher		X	X		X	X	X
In-class tests - teacher	X	X	X		X	X	X
Student-led Conferences – self, parent	X	X	X				X

### Description of Assessments

**SAT – 9** – State required achievement test.

**New Performance Standard** – Criterion referenced exam based on standards developed by the National Committee on Education and the Economy.

**Math Competency** – District-generated test to assure math competency of all students graduating from district.

**Writing Sample** – District generated writing assessment; students respond to a writing prompt and are evaluated on a six-point rubric by two district readers.

**District Fitness** – District-generated “fitness gram”; students evaluated on flexibility, strength, and endurance.

**Portfolios** – Collections of student work selected by student and teacher at the end of each trimester to show growth over time and outcomes met.

**Exhibitions** – Public exhibitions/performances of student work (e.g. visual art, inventions, plays). Work is assessed by self, peers, teachers and, when appropriate, others outside the school community.

**Learning Logs** – Students respond in writing to prompts to convey new knowledge, insights, and understanding.

**Project Evaluations** – At completion of culminating projects, student work is evaluated by self, peers, and teacher. Evaluation considers process and product and is measured by a rubric designed for the project.

**In-class tests** – Quizzes, end-of-chapter exams, skill demonstrations.

**Student-led Conferences** – Students demonstrate progress toward exit outcomes by sharing work portfolios that reflect growth over the academic year. Students and parents evaluate these presentations in writing according to a scoring rubric.

## **Academic accountability and demonstrating results**

- Align internal and external accountability.
- Set realistic goals regarding school performance.
- Take baseline measures of performance.
- Make sure parents will understand how they will be informed.

Until recently, most schools were held accountable only for providing a certain amount of instruction per pupil over an academic year. Today more public schools are responsible for demonstrating student performance results. A persistent problem with school accountability is that the conversation with outside entities such as the school district is disconnected from the internal conversation about student outcomes and the school's current strategies to reach them. The essential task of demonstrating success to outside interests becomes, like misguided assessments, an impediment to the progress it purports to be about. Starting a school presents the opportunity to redefine accountability in terms of critical friendship that enhances rather than distracts from your goals for student learning.

Especially in the first two years of operation, new schools tend to operate on the basis of solving immediate crises and “putting out fires.” Unanticipated problems with new buildings, new staff interactions, and new policies and procedures can easily consume most of your attention, along with that of teachers, school leaders, and board members. If you haven't prepared in advance for how and when you will demonstrate results, this is likely to become one of your crises. You may then be subject to demonstrating results only distantly related to your program, using means disconnected from your carefully planned assessments.

The first step is to agree among your school team and with your school district about the criteria and the mechanisms of accountability. In other words, for what will the school be accountable and how will it be held to account. You will want to be clear on several questions, such as: Will the school's success be judged strictly on the basis of test scores, or will other factors such as parent satisfaction be taken into account? What will be the penalties and

interventions if the school fails to achieve its performance goals? The goal should be an accountability agreement that allows some flexibility for unexpected setbacks, but that still sets high and attainable performance goals. Unless your school district has a long history of performance-based accountability, you are likely to have to “invent the wheel” in this area. Consider this an opportunity to define the best accountability agreement in your district and set examples for other public schools.

Next, new school personnel should set aside time to develop on-going benchmarks and data collection procedures for academic progress. Once developed, they should be presented to your governing board (if you have one) and the school district for approval. These procedures should include processes for analyzing teaching effectiveness and criteria for staff performance evaluations. Consequences for poor or outstanding results should also be agreed on from the start.

Finally a new school must be clear that parents will know how well their children are doing in the school and how the school’s overall performance compares with the performance of other area schools. Part of this should include an up-front statement for parents and students about what will happen if a student’s performance falls below acceptable levels. The more specific you can be ahead of time, the easier it will be to enforce school policies when it is necessary.

It is helpful to make a list of all the constituencies you are accountable to (i.e., students, parents, your governing board, your school district or sponsoring agency, the state, the “public”, the media, funders, etc.) and then use this list to frame your accountability plan. Ideally, the requirement for an external accountability plan will translate naturally to your internal accountability plans. How will you satisfy your own team that what you are doing is not only consistent with your goals but that that it is demonstrably effective. Keeping external accountability aligned with your internal goals and measures will greatly improve your school’s sense of coherence among adults and students. (See the Accountability section of the appendix for resources to help you develop effective monitoring of academic progress.)

Whereas extensive accountability planning might be voluntary in an existing school, it is one of the most critical aspects of a new school. They're essential for you since you need to stress that the purpose of your school is to serve students better so that they can learn more. Equally important, if you have defined the terms on which you expect your school to be held accountable, you will be better able to buffer the school from unfair community critics—or from attempts to impose new government edicts on you after the fact.

### **Questions to consider:**

- ⌚ How will the district judge your school's performance? What will the district do if your school's performance is unsatisfactory? How do the responses to these two questions differ from the way other district schools will be treated? If your new school and existing district schools will be held to different standards, is the rationale for doing so clearly understood and agreed to by all schools involved?
- ⌚ Will the district consider performance measures other than student test scores in judging school performance; and if so how these will be weighted relative to test scores?
- ⌚ What is the baseline (demographically similar schools, district-wide averages) against which your school's performance will be judged?
- ⌚ What actions may the district choose to take: warning, required changes in school staffing or programs; closure and replacement?
- ⌚ What are the rights of students if your school is warned, ordered to change, or closed?
- ⌚ What are the circumstances under which the district administration is entitled to act unilaterally, versus those under which the district must go through a hearing process?

- ? Will your school have a set period of time (e.g. five years) to prove its academic performance? If so, what will the review process look like? When will it occur? What kinds of intermediate reviews will take place?

### **Determining Financial Feasibility**

- Anticipate your on-going operational expenses and income.
- Don't forget planning costs.
- Create a separate plan for school start-up expenses.
- Integrate building expenses into your financial planning.
- Develop a fund-raising capacity.

One of the first and most important things for you to get your hands around is the projected finances of your school. Unless you have business experience, this is likely to be the most intimidating aspect of your work. It's the area where many core teams suddenly find themselves afflicted with panic. But it is also one of the most important things to plan well. Poor financial management is one of the main reasons new schools fail. And miscalculations regarding your budget can seriously constrain your ability to provide a high quality educational program. Once in motion, your school's financial plan is a tool for setting priorities within the program. It lends realism to the proposal for the new school and provides constraints within which to work.

Financial planning involves several distinct steps, from on-going expenses to planning costs, to sources of revenue. It's best if you separate these things and think about them sequentially, but you will also want to develop an overall business plan that brings all the pieces together into a strategic financial document. (See the appendix for resources)

#### **Operational Expenses.**

Start by trying to get a general sense of your operational expenses and income. You already have a vision and a mission statement. You have a sense of the size of your school

and what you want to offer. Don't start by guessing at your potential income and then figuring out how to spend it. Start by costing out the expenses involved with the school you decided you wanted to start. You may have to modify your ambitions down the line, but don't start cutting corners just yet. Eric Premack at the Charter School Development Center in California suggests new school founders establish three budgets, a dream budget, a starving bare-bones budget, and an in-between. This approach can help you plan think about desired programs vs. essential programs and make sure you will at least have enough to support the essentials.

How many teachers will you have and what will you pay them? Do you propose to pay your teachers at 100% of the salary schedule of local school districts? At 85%? At 90%? What about substitutes? What will you pay them on a daily basis and how many do you think you might need? Have you thought through fringe benefits? What kinds of services and activities do you propose to make available and how expensive are they? How about supplies and equipment (don't forget the computers)? How much do you anticipate spending on maintenance, service of the physical plant, marketing, telephone, copying, mail, and loan repayments? What about extra-curricular activities and athletics? Will you charge students fees to cover any of these expenses? Every conceivable expense item has to be taken into account by someone on your core or advisory groups skilled in developing institutional budgets.

The appendix includes information about where to find examples of budgets and other financial planning tools. All we are trying to do here is familiarize you with the types of expenses you can routinely be expected to encounter every year. The major expenses are likely to be for personnel and building, whether you are renting your facility or paying off a capital cost. You may be surprised to find that 80-85% of your on-going budget will be made up of personnel costs. Such proportions are not at all unusual.

It is hard to conceive of a school operating with much less than a quarter of a million dollars annually. Depending on the size and kind of school you propose to open, the figure might easily run to ten times that amount, or much higher.

**Planning.** You need to think about paying for the time it takes to plan. Some founding teams use spare time outside of their regular occupations to plan for the school opening, but some teacher-founders can obtain paid release time to meet. Other core groups have decided it's important to pay at least a minimum stipend to recognize the contribution people make to planning.

Planning expenses also often include such things as attending educational conferences, paying for surveys, marketing, and development. Budget for these and try to get the costs covered – otherwise your school is likely to open with liabilities already on its books. Sources of support might include: school district support for planning alternative and charter schools, state or federal support for charter school planning, and philanthropic support for planning a new independent school.

**Start-up Costs.** Per-pupil and tuition payments usually do not arrive until (after) students are enrolled. Since many costs are incurred before then, including the lease of a building and stocking equipment and supplies, a founding team must consider interim financing options. How are you going to pay for this? Will you borrow money? What will you use for collateral? How will you convince a bank that you are a worthy investment? Will you buy property or rent space? Many parents involved with planning new schools (particularly independent schools) have pooled contributions to finance planning and co-signed loans to cover the costs of start-up until revenue comes on line.

In your financial planning, pay particular attention to the costs involved with getting your school opened and off the ground in the first year. You can expect that the costs associated with your first year will be substantially higher than subsequent years, whether you open a public or an independent school. Holding open houses, marketing, acquiring textbooks, computers, and buses, vans, or other transportation will be time-consuming in the months leading up to year one — and in the first year itself. This time may have to be covered, in addition to costs of purchasing many of these items. Plan on it now so that you're not surprised later.

### **Parents Can Help Spread the Word**

*We communicated with parents and said, "You basically need to go out and tell everybody that you are going to be going to this school. And since you're going, it's going to be an OK thing, and so why don't you invite your friends?" And the minute we had this core group of families, we had an identifiable body of people. And after that point, we had an average of five people a week wanting to enroll.*

### **Charter School Founder**

**Building Costs.** Provisions for locating and financing a building are covered in greater detail below. Here we want simply to emphasize that costs associated with the building must be considered in the financial plan, whether you hope to rent a building (and therefore include building costs in the on-going operational expenses) or purchase or build one (in which case you are likely to include mortgage costs in a capital budget). Whatever you intend, do not make the mistake of ignoring the costs associated with finding and acquiring a suitable building. Even if a local school district turns excess space over to you at a minimal rate (because you are a qualified non—profit organization), you are likely to face substantial, immediate expenses for maintenance, painting, rehabilitation, and possibly making the building fully accessible and up to code. As with the start-up expenses, these costs are likely to be high, one-time expenses and you should not overlook them.

**Income.** How are you going to pay for this? It depends on what kind of school you propose to start. If you have taken a proposal for an alternative school to the local superintendent and school board and obtained their approval, financing for your school depends entirely on the details you work out with the district. Here again, it pays to know what all the different available local, state and federal funding sources are so that you can make your case for getting your students' fair shares.

If you have applied for and received charter status, you will likely have a more dependable, but slimmer budget. Most charter schools are entitled to receive the state average per-pupil expenditure for each student they enroll. So, if your school proposes to enroll 400 students and the average state per-pupil expenditure is \$3,000, you can expect to receive from the school district or state about \$1,200,000 annually for operating expenses once enrollment reaches your projections. You might not, however, receive local levy funds from your district to pay for facilities, so you will have to factor rent and building upgrades out of your state revenues, fight to get access to local levy funds, or find other sources of income.

You will also want to reach agreement with the district about how district services will be allocated to your school.

Will the district charge you prices for all district services? Some? On what bases will prices be determined? Most school districts do not account for their expenditures on a per-pupil basis, so you will likely need to suggest ways to allocate monies and services that are fair to your students. The appendix includes resources for attaining district price lists and financial agreements.

**Fundraising.** Ideally, your basic operating expenses should be covered by per-pupil payments. However, you should consider supplementing per-pupil payments with on-going fund-raising efforts to support enrichment activities. To make sure you retain control over privately-raised funds, consider setting up a separate non-profit funded only by donations to the school.

Many public schools have significant fundraising programs. Frequently affiliated with district-wide foundations, these new efforts supplement traditional grant-seeking from state and federal sources and try to leverage new sources of funds within communities with everything from bake sales and car washes to auctions and aggressive efforts to discover new sources of philanthropic support. A school that does not have grant-writing expertise will be seriously limited. If you plan to rely heavily on grant funds, you will need to have a staff or board member who is skilled at writing grants and who can dedicate a significant period of time to researching and applying for outside resources. You should also have a strategy in place for organizing and encouraging parents to help raise funds.

As you develop your fundraising plan, keep in mind that the best source for grants and contributions are those organizations and individuals that are interested in or are advocates of your school's mission, especially within the geographic area where your school is located.<sup>5</sup>

### Questions to consider:

- ❓ How will funding for your school be allocated? How much control will you have over those funds? Will your school get a standard amount in real dollars for each pupil enrolled?

### **Need for Fundraising**

*We have basic school start-up money. We will operate on a budget that's the same as any other school that will be FTE decided as the district does per student per teacher. But many of the things that we want to do with the program are going to cost more, so we are going to be writing some grants. And I know the grants are out there. It's just a matter of doing the legwork.*

### **Founder, Public School of Choice**

5. *The Massachusetts Charter School Handbook*. Boston: Pioneer Institute for Public Policy Research, Charter School Resource Center. 1994, p. VII-2.

- ⚡ When will payments from the district occur? Will special education students get district-paid services above and beyond the basic per-pupil amount received by the school? Note: Special education is an extremely complex funding area. We recommend you use the resources listed in the appendix to develop a deep understanding of federal, state and local funding rules.
- ⚡ What district supplies and services will be provided to your school? How will this differ from the supplies and services provided to other district schools? Will there be charges for these services? What will those charges be?
- ⚡ What district funds or outside grant funds and teacher release time will be available for faculty planning and professional development? Who will decide how these are used: your school or someone in the district office? Will any district funds or other resources be taken away as outside grants are obtained?
- ⚡ What commitments will the district make to provide support for the development of your school? Are those commitments conditional?

### **Recruiting students**

- Understand that you will need to market your school.
- State clearly what you will offer and whom your school will serve.
- Identify your potential students.
- Don't expect them to find you – go to them
- Make sure your admissions process meets legal requirements.
- Expect rumors and deal with them.
- Plan on asking parents and students to help market your school.

Many school founders misjudge just how difficult it will be to recruit students for their school. Excited about the possibilities of what they are planning, many naturally assume they are designing a school with universal appeal. Most new schools (like most existing schools) do not meet that demanding standard.

For new schools, especially before the school opens (but also throughout at least the first three years) enrollment challenges are formidable. You must grapple with this. You really do not have anything concrete to show to parents or potential students. The school does not exist; the faculty is not in place; there are no students to meet with and no school culture to assess. Apart from the core group, the proposed school is a complete mystery to everyone. As we will see, even after you have explained the school to potential parents, many continue to view your school through the prism of a lens that can see no other school than the one they would have founded for their child had they possessed your foresight and fortitude.

One of your first tasks in establishing your new school is making sure you will be able to fill its classrooms with students. To effectively recruit students, school founders should have a strong background in marketing and know their target audience. You must clearly present the school's vision and structure to potential students, make sure the public knows what type of student your school intends to serve, and whose needs or interests the program does not meet. Experienced school founders recommend finding ways to help parents visualize how the school will look and feel. Brochures, presentations, local media, one-on-one meetings with parents, district mailings, and open houses can all be effective recruiting strategies.

You need to identify your market and go to your students (and their parents). Don't make the mistake of thinking they will find you. Some may, but most will not. Take the initiative. If you're enrolling students in the early grades, visit pre-school programs and distribute literature around churches, community centers, and pediatricians' offices. Opening a middle school? Work with community centers and other schools dealing with elementary school children and then make your way to area high schools, both public

### **Enrollment Challenges**

*The main difficulty was enrollment. I didn't expect that it would be that difficult. But now that I've been through it, I say, "Of course it was that difficult!" No one is going to enroll in a school where they don't know the leader, they don't know who the kids are, they don't know who the parents are, and they can't see a building. The physical nature of the plant...is incredibly important.*

**Founder, Public School of Choice**

and private, to let them know how fortunate they will be to get their hands on some of your graduates.

It may seem obvious, but you also need to identify the type of students you want and locate them, either geographically or in another institution. You don't need a universal marketing plan (although some effort to establish your name recognition in the community might help). New schools often offer a distinctive program, such as a focus on math and science. You will need to think about how you can positively recruit applicants who will most benefit from your program. A school aimed at drop-outs should provide enough information for college-bound high school students to understand the program was not designed for them. That school should also focus its marketing strategy on the places that teenagers "hang out" – record and clothing stores, for instance.

At the same time you need to identify your market, you must also remember that public schools are normally required to have open admissions. Be sure you understand the difference between legitimate marketing and unlawful discrimination. It is one thing to provide the information parents need to make a decision or to target student recruiting to the kind of students the school is designed to serve. It is quite another to apply subtle or not so subtle pressures on potentially interested parents not to submit an application because the school operator does not believe the student would "fit" or to imply in conversations that certain types of students are not welcome.

The line between mission affinity and exclusion is blurry and risky. For charter schools, the requirements surrounding open admissions are usually spelled out clearly in the charter law, and it is best to have a lawyer with expertise in this area review your policy in light of your state's legal requirements. Other public schools will need to know if they must comply with district assignment policies, desegregation requirements, and other district policies. In many cases, alternative district schools have quite a bit of leeway to have screening policies, such as entrance exams, that ensure students are a good fit with the school program.

Expect to deal with very difficult rumors, particularly before the school gets off the ground. You may hear that the school is running out of money. Or someone may start reporting that your school will appeal to problem-kids. Or that the board has been taken over by left-wing kooks (or right-wing nuts). Imagine the worst anyone can say about your school, and expect someone to say it. The minute you start hearing about these things, you need to deal with them. One founder took quick action to dispel rumors and fears about the school's program in this way:

*We started hearing the questions, so we created a mailing, "The Most Frequently Asked Parent Questions." We sent that out, right away, as fast as we could, right when we heard that there were some rumors flying around that were not necessarily true. We sent another letter to kids feeling that kids might approach this spring and summer and all of a sudden get cold feet about entering a school that's away from their home school, so we sent out a student letter addressed to the kids' questions.*

Finally, apart from mailings and other routine recruiting strategies, word-of-mouth from parents is a highly effective recruiting and public relations tool. School founders recommend using parents and students to market the school and spread the word by telling friends and neighbors about the new school.

You can't teach students who are not in your classrooms. Understand that you must market your school. Above all, don't be shy. If you're not willing to market your own school, why should anyone else care to?

### **Questions to consider:**

- ? Will the district publicize your school? If so, will you have influence over the district's communication plan?
- ? Will the district assign students to your school? If so, on what basis? Will you be allowed to screen or meet with interested families? May your school

recruit additional students? If so, what are the ground rules?

- Where will students or parents be directed if they call the district for information about your school? How will the school be described to them?
- May students who decide they don't want to attend your school transfer to another school in the district? How will these options be communicated to parents and students?

### **Finding and paying for your building**

- Start early and think creatively.
- Invest time and expertise in finding appropriate space.
- A renewable lease might initially be as good as purchasing or building.
- Provide time for re-modeling.

Unless you are lucky enough to have a building provided by your district, you will need to find a place to put your school. It's one of the more difficult issues you'll face in the year before you open. Finding a building often involves not only the challenges of real-estate finance but also politics and luck. Invariably, it will require a lot of your time.

Generally speaking, there is a limited amount of school-appropriate real estate available anywhere, especially in cities. School buildings have to pass fire codes for children's occupancy; they may require specialized areas for play, scientific experiments, recreation, and meals. Adequate rest-rooms for the number of people in the building have to be present. And the hallways need to be big enough to handle students during peak periods of the day. Assuming you can find such a building, you may run into timing challenges financing a real estate deal before you've received approval to open your school.

Because finding a building can be so difficult and take so much time, your founding team should start prospecting

for space as early as possible. In the meantime you should continue to develop the rest of your school's organizational plan.

Don't be afraid to think creatively. Depending on the school design, it may be possible to "dream up" non-traditional facilities by using closed down public schools, unused district space, city or county facilities, non-profit community buildings like the YMCA, vacant or underutilized parochial schools, or commercial buildings such as shopping malls. New schools might operate classes in portables on the grounds of another school and share athletic fields and a cafeteria with the other school. Facilities strategies for new autonomous public schools is an under-explored area. Rather than just reviewing existing options, you should think, research, and consult with as many people in as many fields as possible to find new financing strategies or new facilities models. Keep in mind: when choosing a non-school site, it is important to consider carefully the (often very high) costs of bringing a facility up to code.

The ideal site would flow directly from the school's mission and projected enrollment. In reality, founding teams often choose from existing buildings or are assigned to a particular site by a district. If it is necessary to be co-located with another school within an existing building, you and your team should think carefully about whether the placement is a good fit for your school. Co-locating can have benefits, but it can also cause tensions and conflict if the schools have different resources, cultures, and student populations. You'll also want the location to be as close to possible to your intended students, (or accessible by public transport) a factor of considerable importance unless you plan to draw broadly from across a district or county.

Earlier we spoke about unusual growth patterns in which the same district might simultaneously be closing schools in one area while building new ones elsewhere. Look for those opportunities. Many districts are eager to lease unused buildings to non-profit entities of various kinds; they sometimes demonstrate a preference for new schools – both because the building is ideally-suited to school needs and because schools are often much more substantial and reliable tenants than a passing parade of small poorly

### **County Was Glad to Provide a Building**

*The county was pleased to lease one of its unused elementary schools to us at very attractive rates, way below market. We were thrilled and thought they'd done us a huge favor. It turned out that they were equally pleased. County managers were leasing between five and ten buildings to various non-profit groups and coalitions of non-profits. After a year or two we realized the county thought of us as model tenants because we worried about the building and took care of it. A lot of the other groups were dealing with very difficult populations, the county had trouble collecting its rent, and the buildings were dirty and sometimes trashed.*

**Independent School Board Member**

financed non-profit institutions with transitory, sometimes fairly unstable, clients.

There are many barriers to finding the right space. Your school district may not be willing to make space available to you. Other non-profit community institutions, like the local YMCA, may not have space. Vacant parochial schools may not be located where the founder hopes to open a school. Commercial buildings will almost certainly have to be renovated to create classrooms and other school facilities. Such renovations must conform to general building codes and provide access for handicapped persons. Because of these problems you may have to do what many new schools do – start in an undesirable location (e.g., another school building or in portable classrooms) and then move to a more suitable site as you prove your school's viability.

Finding a building for your school isn't a job for amateurs. The research necessary for an informed decision probably should be delegated to a committee which should seek out the services of commercial real estate agents, architects, building inspectors, general contractors, real estate financiers, and attorneys with a practice in real property for the building committee. One of the things the committee should examine with the help of its experts is the relative merit of leasing space (from public or private agencies) as opposed to building or purchasing space.

School districts are increasingly open to the idea of new facilities arrangements to support several small schools on one campus or creative financing arrangements for autonomous public schools. It will likely be up to you, however, to do the research and propose the idea. The Facilities section of our appendix lists several resources to get you started.

Finally, assuming you locate suitable space, consider the need for (and cost of) renovations and bringing the site up to code. If severe environmental contamination is present, the costs of cleaning it up may outweigh the benefits of even outright donation of a building. Pay attention to these issues. You will probably need to provide additional time within your planning parameters to remodel the site and bring it up to code.

### **Questions to consider:**

- ? If the school will co-exist with another school in one building, will there be one principal for the whole building or a principal for each school? Will one of the principals be considered the de facto owner of the building?
- ? How will issues regarding the use of the building be resolved?
- ? How will tenant schools use space? What facilities will be used in common and what will be used by your school? Will one principal in a building speak for all tenant schools, or will each school leader speak individually?
- ? How much money is available for renovating or partitioning the building? When will it be available and who will decide how it is spent?
- ? Who owns the equipment purchased by the school?
- ? How long can your school be guaranteed that it can occupy a district building without being transferred to some other site or left without a facility?
- ? Who is responsible for facility maintenance? Are there union contract issues that will restrict your ability to contract for outside maintenance?

### **Understanding the regulatory environment**

- Understand the regulatory requirements you must meet.
- Pay particular attention to issues such as student health, safety, and civil rights.
- Take planning for special education seriously and form a committee to research requirements and make recommendations.

The complexity and scope of public school regulations generally present serious challenges to new schools. Special education requirements need particular attention.

If your school is a charter school or another public school with a high degree of autonomy, you may believe that you are exempt from many regulations. You may be, but you cannot exempt yourself from some, for example, federal requirements governing student health, safety, and civil rights. However, it may well be the case that other regulations (e.g., the length of the school day or year, or the procedures you must follow in purchasing books and equipment) do not apply to you. If that is the case, you need to be clear about which regulations apply and which do not. If you are not clear, you will be at the mercy of central office staff and other middle managers who will almost certainly want to treat you like every other school in the district and will make sure that every conceivable regulation in the book applies to you. It is in your interest to know the boundaries of your regulatory responsibilities.

In some cases, the legal status of your school may be unclear, for the purpose of reporting and meeting regulatory requirements. A little ambiguity is sometimes helpful. Your position should be that absent a clear requirement to meet burdensome regulations, the school board's intent in authorizing your operation was to exempt you from as much regulation as possible. However, ambiguous legal status can leave you exposed to charges from opponents that your school evaded government accountability requirements when it thought it was exempt. Access to professional legal counsel is essential in this area.

Make sure you plan to set up your accounting so that it complies with district requirements and good financial practice. Consider hiring an accounting agency to help you set things up correctly from the start. This will keep you out of trouble with the district and will provide an important tool for allowing you to maximize your available dollars.

Basic health, safety, and civil rights regulations (including those governing special education) present a different problem. While you don't want to be in a position of having needlessly restrictive regulations applied to your new school, you also can't afford to be in a position of ignoring important protections for your students, staff, and visitors. Parents and the public are quite properly disturbed when accounts reach their ears of unsanitary food preparation, broken or missing fire extinguishers, or the existence of weapons or dangerous behavior in school. As a matter of both principle and common sense you must attend to these issues.

Special education often presents a particular challenge to new schools. Despite the fact that new schools often attract a high number of students with special needs, new school founders often treat special education as an afterthought. Particularly in the rush to start a new school, founders often push special education to the side on the grounds that it is not at the core of planning needs, requires special expertise, and is just "too hard to do right now."

Because special education has the potential to be costly (up to 25% of a school's total budget), because ignoring it can lead to disastrous interactions with parents and even lawsuits, and because the needs of special education students deserve proper attention, new schools need to incorporate special education into their initial planning. It should not be an afterthought.

Your core group should form a special education committee to examine relevant federal and state statutes and requirements in an effort to develop a special education plan consistent with the vision of the school. The committee should also explore options for reducing the costs of special education, including contracts for part-time special education services and partnerships with other independent public schools to share special education expertise. The best solution for a new public school may be to remain part of the district special education pool, so the district can supplement the school's regular program. To determine this, it may be helpful for your special education committee to work through a series of questions or scenarios like what

### **Challenge of Special Education**

*I think the reality has been that schools have tried to consider special education as an add-on at the end of the planning process. You have to plan for special education as part of your integrated curriculum and financial package, and you need to set aside funds, services, and personnel for that purpose*

#### **Charter School Technical Support Provider**

if we have X number of average cost special needs students and what happens if we have X number with extremely costly needs? What are the budget implications we can absorb and what are those that would put us out of business? What does this risk imply for our special education relationship with the district? What options exist other than partnering with the district?

Preparing for special education services is more than a curriculum consideration—it is often a regulatory requirement regarding access and mainstreaming, especially for new public schools. Making provision for special education students is an issue for every new school. For private schools, state and federal regulations are minimal, but can be costly. For public schools, on the other hand, government regulations are much more complex. Traditional public schools must be aware of the myriad of requirements regarding reporting and budget issues for English as a Second Language students, and other special programs and populations. As a new school founder, public or private, you ignore these requirements at your peril.<sup>6</sup>

### **Questions to consider:**

- ❓ What documents must be filed with the district and state, and at what time?
- ❓ Can we request assistance obtaining and filling out compliance documents? If so, from whom?
- ❓ What are the penalties and other consequences of failing to file compliance documents on schedule; and of filing inaccurate documents?
- ❓ What recourse do we have if special education services provided by the district are not high quality or do not fit the mission of our school?

6. For these reasons, we strongly recommend you take a look at the special education resources referenced in the appendix.

## **Creating policies and procedures**

- School policies and procedures should reflect the school's mission and culture.
- Customize standard policies and procedures to fit your school's needs.

Most existing schools operate within a web of everyday policies and procedures to which they give hardly a second glance. They know how to handle medical emergencies. Everyone is familiar with snow-day policies. Student (or teacher) absences and required excuses are well understood by the entire school. But you don't have this luxury. You'll have to create policies and procedures governing issues such as these from scratch.

Creating the everyday policies and procedures governing the new school is likely to take a lot of time. They'll cover everything from parent and student handbooks and range from emergency plans to attendance and discipline policies. Rather than creating policies from scratch, you are likely to save time by obtaining sample policies from schools with similar educational philosophies. Your team can then examine these documents, picking and choosing the policies and procedures that seem most relevant to the work you are doing.

But don't underestimate the importance of creating a good set of policies for your school. Think of policies as your "mission infrastructure" – procedures and guidelines that have the very important role of letting students and parents know how the school's mission is to be carried out. A strict behavior and dress code, for example, sends a strong message to incoming students about the level of discipline expected at the school. If you are opening a schools for high school age students, you may decide to develop some policies in partnership with students, so that they feel ownership and more respect for the school's rules and code of conduct.

You and your founding team should keep in mind that creating good policies and procedures should not result in the

creation of a strict bureaucracy. On the other hand, proactive school policies can free your school from having to defer to one-size-fits-all district policies.

# SECTION THREE

## OPENING YOUR SCHOOL AND BEYOND

*Faculty is absolutely key to all this. Community support? Yes, that was key. Pastoral support was key. But I knew from my own experience in schooling that all the equipment, all the beautiful classrooms, all the best books, really are very secondary to the people who make the difference....You need the right people to make it happen and they are the key.*

### **Catholic School Founder**

**A**s your new school moves from concept and planning to actually opening, the work of the founding group will transition from planning and setting policy to teaching and learning and running an organization. Some members of the original group may lose interest while others try to dominate the new enterprise. Whatever develops, inevitably group dynamics will change. You should expect that, not be surprised by it.

This transition period is an especially important time to establish stakeholders' roles, define the culture of the school, and maintain a focus on student achievement rather than adult politics. The days leading up to the opening day, for example, rarely go smoothly. Founders can expect to lurch from one short-term crisis to another. There are too many roadblocks to anticipate and you will probably encounter most of them. Take heart in the fact that everyone else who has opened up a new school has gone through the same thing and lived to tell the tale.

Even after the new school is up and running, the first three years will be challenging. As the core founding group and the original parents and students phase out and new stakeholders get involved, the life of the school will change. Don't be surprised by that; every new organization, school and non-school, reports the same experience. The pressures on you and your school to shift focus or expand in new ways will be intense. You need to anticipate some of this, deciding whether you will oppose certain kinds of changes, accept others, and perhaps channel yet others in different directions.

This section finishes your school building, hangs the door, and opens it. It provides guidance on important issues requiring attention during your school's opening and early development.

### **The section provides guidance on:**

- ▶ hiring staff and maintaining school cohesion
- ▶ working with parents
- ▶ developing governance and board relations
- ▶ managing liability, insurance and risk
- ▶ navigating the central office and resolving disputes

### **Vulnerable Through Year Three**

*In year three you're around long enough to have brought other people in, and you're still young enough that you are what I call vulnerable to everyone else's projections. In other words, they project onto you what they think you should be. And even if you have a very clear vision, there are going to be people out (who want you to change it to fit their desires)—and you're still young enough that you're vulnerable to that...*

**Founder, Public School of Choice**

### **Hiring staff and maintaining cohesion**

- Be clear about the school's philosophy and what will be expected of teachers and staff.
- Don't be afraid to think of defining a different administrative structure for your school.
- Hire based on skills needed, not people available.
- Anticipate staff turnover and think about how to integrate new people into the school program.
- Understand that hiring needs and priorities will change over time.

Nothing will be more important to the success of your school than the people in it. Neither a wonderful vision, a compelling mission statement, a powerful curriculum, nor clearly articulated policies can compensate for poor hiring decisions. People have to make your school work, and you must hire absolutely the best people you can find. This means that the principal and teaching staff must be not only first rate professionals, but also people who fit the mission of your school. In addition, they must work well together as a team and represent the school to parents and other outsiders.

In order to attract and hire the most appropriate staff, your founding team must be able to articulate the school's philosophy and expectations to potential hires. There is little point in hiring go-by-the-book, discipline-bound teachers if your program emphasizes student projects and team teaching. And, if your school intends to emphasize discipline, hard work, and the basics, you don't want to find you've turned your classrooms over to teachers who believe that student self-esteem is what it's all about— and that whatever students turn in should be accepted since you don't want the kids to feel badly about themselves.

It's hard, but once you've clearly stated the school's philosophy be as specific as you can be when questioning potential teachers. The more specific the screening the better your staff will fit. For example, your hiring process should be designed to assess whether candidates are a good match with your particular school program in addition to assessing their instructional skills. Do the applicants understand the school's instructional method? Do they understand the

school's approach to school climate and management of student behavior? How comfortable are the candidates with being observed and evaluated, if that is a defining feature of the school's strategy? You will also want to make sure that applicants get as full a picture as possible as to what kind of workplace your school will be. Consider bringing strong candidates to schools you are trying to replicate or that are similar to your school. Have candidates meet with members of your staff, parents, and students to get a feel for their expectations and personalities.

By all means, take the opportunity of opening a new school to consider the possibility of creating an administrative structure that differs from the normal public school model. Public schools are overseen by principals. Why shouldn't yours be led by a Head, a President, a CEO, or a Lead Teacher? Each of these titles implies a subtly different model of leadership. A Head might be modeled after a traditional independent school head, with the sort of prerogatives and independence within the school that traditional school principals do not enjoy. A President might be akin to a hands-on leader of a business or corporation, while a CEO might be a school head who handles fundraising, recruiting, and business decisions, but stands somewhat apart from instructional decisions. A Lead Teacher would be just what the name implied – a team leader presiding largely over the instructional program. The point is: just because you're opening a school doesn't mean it has to look like the one you're leaving.

As in any line of work, it is always good advice to start the hiring process with a clear picture of the types of skills needed in the school (administrative and instructional). Once you understand that, you'll be in a much better position to find people with those skills. Whatever you do, don't wait to see who's interested before deciding whom to hire. You're likely to wind up hiring people you like, instead of people who have the particular skills and talents for which you're looking.

The hiring challenge doesn't end with the initial round of hires. Your founding team should also develop a strategy for dealing with staff turnover, especially if the school district will retain control over teacher assignments. What

### **The Team Approach to School Leadership**

*In the case where there's a single founder, you're always going to be up against the limitations of that one person. The team concept is critical for an existing school to make it work, but I think it's also healthier to have a team actually starting something. Because if it had been any one of us alone, I'm not sure if we could have survived this. But what's happened is, we have all picked up the ball as school head at different times, and we've all been appropriate at different times in the school's history*

### **Independent School Founder**

you need is a system that makes sure new staff and teachers are fully integrated into the program. Staff turnover should not mean disintegration of your school's focus. One school founder we interviewed expressed regret that the public school he helped start quickly began to lose its focus when new teachers were assigned by the district regardless of whether they understood and agreed with the school's philosophy. "By the time I left," he lamented "we had a number of teachers who did not understand what the premise of the school was."

Finally, you need to understand that the skills needed to run the school will change over time, particularly as the school becomes more established. This is especially true for school leadership. In the beginning phases, for instance, the school may need a leader focused on external relations, activities such as marketing, recruiting, dealing with central office officials, even fund-raising. As the school matures, the same school may need a leader more focused on improving the educational program, internal governance and other long-term quality assurances. Don't be surprised if your leadership needs change. And don't be afraid to make the change.

### **Questions to consider:**

- ❓ Will the district require your school to have a traditional administrative model, or will the district allow an alternative governance model, such as a teacher-led school?
- ❓ If a large school is being reconstituted or redesigned, how will the faculty from the existing large school be divided up among the new small schools? Who decides? Will each faculty member belong entirely to one school? If some staff members will be shared, how will that be decided? How will it work?
- ❓ Will your school be limited to selecting from current faculty and staff employees, or may they recruit others?

- ‡ If your school does not want a current faculty or staff member (or vice versa), will that person be placed elsewhere or does your school have to accept him/her? What has the district promised the union about this? What is the union’s view on this?
- ‡ How much responsibility for dealing with union issues about staffing will be borne by your school?
- ‡ Will the district guarantee that it will not transfer your school’s principal without the consent of either the principal or the school community?
- ‡ What role will the school community play in selecting school leaders?

*“There is no topic about which parents are more passionate about than schools. There is no topic they are more concerned about than their children, and there is no object upon which they displace their anxieties and their tensions more favorite than the school...A new school is this Mecca, and we have people coming out of the woodwork to get into the school. And try as we might, no matter what you say you stand for, no one believes it. They are all convinced that you are the salvation, that you are the hospital for whatever their disease is.*

**Founder, Public School of Choice**

### **Working with parents**

- Make sure parents understand your school’s philosophy.
- Keep the promise you made to them to meet their child’s needs.
- Don’t take it personally if they decide they want to look elsewhere.

Just as incoming staff members need to have a clear conception of what your school is all about, so do parents. It is in your best interests to make sure that parents do not choose the school for the wrong reasons. Your parents, therefore, should be treated as potential partners in an important new venture. You must make the school “real” for parents. Bring them to the school; have them meet with other parents and students; encourage them to ask questions; and of course, question them. It’s hard to do all that in the days before you have a building or a school staff to show anyone, but make the effort to get your plans for the school across. Make sure parents understand things like the school’s mission, instructional strategy and academic expectations, approach to special education, discipline policies, meal and transportation plans, and

### **The Need to Manage Parents as Carefully as Staff**

*Here's the problem: in these new schools, these parents come in, and they're bound and determined that this school will subserve their deep personal and philosophical needs and they will tear it apart, and they will find teachers who support them, they will divide and conquer.*

**Founder, Public School of Choice**

extra-curricular activities. If parents don't understand what they are choosing and what kind of educational experience the school will provide their child, you're bound to wind up with problems down the line.

Despite your best efforts, some parents (and students) simply will not hear you when you describe what the school is all about (or they will misinterpret what they heard). This is human nature, especially in public schools where parents are used to one school looking pretty much like another. You will simply have to take the time for parents to become accustomed to what your school offers and what it does not offer.

It's also important, of course, to keep the promises you make to potential (and actual) parents about what you will provide to their children. If you've promised intensive exposure to technology or the arts, you can be expected to be reminded of that promise if special funding for computers or musical equipment falls through. If your selling point was hands-on experience with environmental solutions, you'd better be prepared to fill in for the science teacher if she gets sick the week the kids are supposed to spend at a local outdoor camp. You may not have to deliver exactly what you promised, but you do have to deliver a close approximation.

Finally, even though you have been clear about what your school offers and the parents have clearly understood what the experience for their child will look like, you and the parents may find that the school and the child are not well matched. No matter how effective your school, it cannot be everything to everyone and cannot serve every child equally well.

Don't try to resolve this tension by giving in to pressure to add programs or services outside the school's expertise. (You might be able to help the family find supplemental instruction or services outside the school.) Obviously also, you would not want to re-orient the school to meet a single child's needs. It's much better to encourage the family to rethink what they want in a school and to help them place their son or daughter in school better fitted to them. Whatever you do, don't take parental desire to explore

other options personally. In almost all cases, you, your school, and this family will be much better served by exploring what else is out there.

### **Questions to consider:**

- ⚡ How will parent grievances be resolved? What kinds of disputes should be resolved at the school level and when should the district or school board be involved?
- ⚡ What steps will the school district take to advertise your school effectively to help families make good choices about schooling options?
- ⚡ What kinds of commitments can your school request or require of parents at your schools? Are you allowed, for example, to require parents to commit to a certain amount of volunteer time at the school?

### **Developing governance and board relations**

- Establish a clear role for the school's governing board.
- Keep the board's size manageable and provide training.
- Recruit board members who understand and share the school's philosophy.
- A "rubber-stamp" board is of no value to you at all.
- Keep the board focused on the main goals: educating students and the school's finances.
- Understand the limits of your board's authority vis-a-vis the school district.

It's unusual to find a public school, even an alternative public school, with a true governing board. A public school may have a parental advisory council, but that is also an entity likely to very little real decision-making authority.

On the other hand, charter schools, parochial schools, and newly-established independent schools traditionally have board or board-like structures. Particularly for schools

### **Board's Understanding of Role Critical**

*The big danger area is having people on boards who don't really understand what it is you do. When there's a financial crisis, instead of going out and getting the money (and this is what happened here) they go in and they say, "You can't do this and you can't do that...." Then you have a philosophical battle.*

### **Independent School Founder**

organized as non-profit corporations with a Board of Directors or Board of Trustees, the board is an extremely important governance mechanism. It is the entity responsible for maintaining the school's financial viability and fidelity to the vision on which the school was founded.

Keeping a board focused on its main role is extremely difficult. Boards are supposed to make decisions only when the school's financial integrity or basic values are at stake. The general philosophy of school governance invariably holds that all other decisions should be made by the school principal or staff. At its extreme, this school of thought holds that the only job of a board is to hire and fire the principal (on the theory that it is the principal's job to maintain the school's finances and vision and a principal who can't do that needs to be replaced.)

The ideal of school governance and disinterested, big-picture board oversight is rarely realized. Micro-management by boards and inappropriate meddling in details is a problem wherever boards are found. Individual board members who don't properly understand their functions are easily drawn into school disputes about individual teachers, grading policy, whether this parent or that student were fairly treated, even into dress codes. You don't want your board involved with any of this.

From the outset, establish a clear set of expectations about the board's responsibilities, including areas that are appropriate for board decisions and those that are not. These expectations should also include clear statements about appropriate and inappropriate public and private behavior on the part of board members. Board membership is very prestigious. A situation in which one of these influential people says negative things about the school is toxic. (See appendix for resources on effective governance).

So establish expectations, put together a board handbook, make sure new board members are properly oriented to their responsibilities, and periodically provide the board with training and exercises so that everyone understands their roles. Should a particular board member wander too far afield, be prepared to have the board chair or another influential board member speak to him or her privately.

To help maintain board relations, it's a good idea not to create a board that is too large. Anything beyond 10-12 members quickly becomes cumbersome. Obviously, you need to provide a variety of kinds of expertise on your board. What is required will differ based on your school's needs. New school founders warn that it is critical to have board members who understand the challenge of running a new school and will take responsibility for helping to solve problems that arise, rather than simply chastising staff. To ensure the objectivity needed to make good policy decisions for a school, school staff should generally not be members of the board and a board should not be composed entirely of parents with children attending the school. The one exception to the school staff rule is the head of the school. Usually it is a good idea to place the school head as an ex-officio member of the board.

A rubber-stamp board is of little value to you. You need a board that is sympathetic to what the school wants to accomplish but is prepared to ask difficult questions about the school's capacity to achieve its vision. (While it is appropriate and healthy to have board members who ask critical questions and provide constructive feedback, you can't permit a situation to develop where constant debate over the general mission and philosophy becomes destructive.) Achieving this balance requires a lot of attention from the head and from the board's leaders. The "care and feeding" of boards, in fact, is a key skill required of school heads, not in the sense of responding to the board's every whim, but in the sense of making sure the board functions effectively and does the school the most good.

The board's major functions should be seen as fiduciary and academic. On the fiduciary side, your board has an obligation to make sure the school has the financial wherewithal to deliver on its promises. The board's fundamental obligation is to oversee the school's long-term financial viability – and to approve budgets on a regular basis that are balanced and realistic.

Second, the board should hold the school's vision in trust. In this role, the board is responsible for making sure the school is accountable academically. It is not the board's

### **School Progress Hampered by New Decision-Making Committee Imposed by the District**

*The [school district] adopted this shared decision-making model ...We were in the early stages back then, and the [committee] basically determines everything. The staff, the educational experts, are reduced to the role of submitting proposals to a committee on which sit 2 students, 2 parents, 2 teachers as equal voices. That was their idea if egalitarian, democratic, educational practice...But what it does is it arrests your motion and then you have plenty of time for factionalism.*

**Founder, Public School of Choice**

job to ensure that students are learning what the school promised it would teach. It is, however, the board's job to make sure the school is checking on whether its learning promises are being kept.

If your board does not have the clear legal authority and responsibility that comes with non-profit status, it will be up to you to negotiate the boundaries of the board's decision-making powers. This is an important area for you to work out in great detail. Understand that a handshake agreement with your current superintendent could change tomorrow unless you have something in writing about which decisions are for the governing board, principal, and staff to decide and which are district or school board decisions. Don't wait to let the district define your power. Get out ahead by researching what powers other autonomous schools in your state have and arguing for at least that level of governance power.

#### **Questions to consider:**

- ❓ Where does your governing board's authority stop and your school district's authority begin?
- ❓ Can your governing board's decision be overridden by the school district? If so, under what circumstances?
- ❓ Can the school district offer you any guarantee that they will not impose a new governance structure on your school (e.g. a site council or a curriculum council) that you have not agreed to?

#### **Managing liability, insurance and risk**

- Assess potential liabilities.
- Develop appropriate by-laws and a risk-management strategy.
- Obtain adequate insurance.

As a teacher or principal in a traditional public school, you may never have had to worry about liability. Parents and

citizens could not really sue you; if they had concerns with the school, the district is where they sought relief.

But as the founder of a new school, you may be exposed to legal liability in ways that rarely occur in traditional public education. Your liabilities very much depend on your school's legal status: autonomous public schools and private schools usually assume much higher risks than traditional public schools. Some new schools (for example those formed as non-profit corporations) may be distinct legal entities that can sue and be sued. In other cases, it is less clear where a school's liability ends and a district, state, or a private entity's begins. The extent to which board members of a school can be held personally liable for school-related decisions also varies and you may need to consider coverage for officers and board members.

The first step, then, in defining a risk management strategy is to thoroughly understand the relevant laws that apply to your school so that you can clarify the potential liabilities of every responsible adult in it. In some cases, a law may not require insurance, but the school and individual board members may not be protected without it.

Well-structured by-laws and clearly defined risk management policies are the best liability protection, and they help reassure insurance providers that the founders have taken reasonable steps to manage risk. Insurance providers will also probably be concerned with potential issues such as child abuse, athletics injuries, and transportation.

Once the founding team has identified potential risk factors and policies for managing that risk, they should explore insurance options that will fit the school's needs. Options may include group purchasing and, depending on the legal status of the school, charitable or legal immunity. School founders should be aware, however, that brand new schools without a track record may need to demonstrate a risk management record first and then begin to build a strong insurance portfolio.

As with your building, this is also not a job for amateurs. Find professional help on the issue of liability and risk management for the school and follow it to the letter.

### **Questions to consider:**

- What is the extent of your school’s potential legal liability?
- Will your school district require you to purchase legal services from the central office?
- How much of the district’s insurance policy will apply to your school and to your board members?

### **Navigating the central office and resolving disputes**

- Be proactive, not resentful.
- Find an ally in the central office.
- Don’t be afraid to flex your political muscle, if needed.

New schools are often something of a mystery to central office staff. Your school’s very existence may inspire resentment from middle managers who see you as getting “special treatment” if you have exemptions from district requirements or a different financial arrangement than other schools. In other cases, central office staff will simply assume you are no different from other district schools and give you a hard time if you ask to be treated differently.

It’s easy to become resentful or antagonistic toward inflexible district staff, but in the long run, it’s in your interest to try to pick your battles carefully and to try to find ways to accommodate them on matters that are not especially problematic for you. Be proactive so that you can anticipate requirements and avoid unnecessary penalties or charges of being unresponsive. For issues that threaten your school’s core functions, try to find an ally in the central office who can help you navigate the bureaucracy and advocate on your behalf. If all else fails, don’t be afraid to call in your allies; parents and students at the school, political allies, and staff can be very persuasive, especially in large numbers.

**Questions to consider:**

- ? Who will be your primary contact person in the central office?
- ? What recourse will you have if the central office is unresponsive to your needs?



# CONCLUSIONS

**S**tarting a new school is likely to be the most exhilarating, draining, hopeful, frustrating, rewarding, experiences of your life. Your school holds the promise of changing students' lives for the better and providing better schooling options for families in need. The following quotes from school founders are key concepts to keep in mind as you progress through this challenging but worthy process.

## **Start with a quality core**

*You're starting a school. You're bringing together a group of people within a context. Whether you like it or not, you live in a context—our society. You need to think about what our society is out there, how it affects kids, and then decide what you want within your four walls. To me that is ground level. Define your culture.*

## **Start small, with a cohesive group of people.**

*Know that there is an honest need and support- a potential constituency- for the school; this should be the impetus for the founding.*

## **Build your support base**

*The most critical thing is to have support and that means within your team, planning together, communication with each other, supporting each other, and being able to create time or make time to do that. You also need the support of a larger base. Our advisory team and the district's support I would say are the most critical factors that have helped us get where we are. You need a support base; to go out and try to fly this on your own without a backup would not be possible.*

*You should not be undercapitalized when you start a school.*

## **Protect yourself**

*Don't take criticism personally.*

*Be aware of people wanting a piece of you. There are people who say they want to help the process, but they may really just want to get something from the school.*

*Know that you're going to be out there all by yourself because everybody else is too busy and has their own problems.*

**Keep your eye on the prize**

*Have a vision and convictions about the importance of this endeavor. Have a sense of hopefulness, a can-do spirit.*

*Know that it's a lot of work, but it's worth it.*

# APPENDIX

## RESOURCE LIST

**This resource list is meant to direct you to some of the best on-line resources for topics covered in this handbook. The list is organized in three parts: Education Program Design, School Facilities Operations, Charter School Resources**

### Educational Program Design

#### ***Mission Statement***

A founding team must create a mission statement based on a shared vision of common core beliefs to reference throughout the planning process and throughout the life of the school. The mission statement defines a school's purposes and objectives and maintains a school's sense of direction.

► **Pioneer Institute Charter School Handbook - Mission Chapter**

<http://www.pioneerinstitute.org/csrb/cshb/mission.cfm>

This chapter comes from a handbook for charter school founders and contains a description of what a mission statement is, and provides links to good examples of school mission statements.

► **Illinois Charter School Developer's Handbook - The Mission Statement**

[http://www.lqe.org/Resource\\_Guide/gs\\_mission.htm](http://www.lqe.org/Resource_Guide/gs_mission.htm)

This chapter of a handbook for Illinois charter school developers details the five elements of a mission statement and includes samples of various charter schools' mission statements.

#### ***Curriculum and Standards***

A school's educational program is where all of the pieces of the school's plan come together. It is essential to define the educational philosophy of the proposed school - its theory of teaching and learning - before deciding curriculum and instructional methods.

A list of outcomes or objectives that students who attend your school should achieve can be based both on various curriculum and instructional methodologies as well as state or national educational standards.

► **Content Knowledge, a Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K-12 Education**

<http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks>

This compendium, part of which is on the web, catalogs nearly 250 highly regarded national, state, district, and other academic standards and related benchmarks in 11 major disciplines (ranging from math and language arts, to "life skills"). It borrows heavily from the national-level standards-setting efforts in many subject areas, while only briefly referencing state-level efforts.

► **Achieve, Inc. Standards Database**

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

This nonprofit organization - created by America's governors and corporate leaders to provide advice and assistance to states on education reform and school accountability - offers a Standards Clearinghouse, which organizes academic standards in mathematics, English/language arts, science history, and social science by state, grade level, and subject. It provides a tool for researching and comparing state-mandated academic standards and assessments (with samples of student work).

► **USCharterschools - Standards Resources**

[http://www.uscharterschools.org/pub/uscs\\_docs/ta/account.htm](http://www.uscharterschools.org/pub/uscs_docs/ta/account.htm)

This site provides an extensive list of links to standards development resources and a listing of links to resources related to curriculum development.

## ***Assessment***

As important as it is to know what students in your school will be expected to learn and to decide which tools will be used to achieve those goals, it is equally important to make provisions as early in the process as possible on how and when student progress will be assessed. The classroom and schoolwide assessment methods you choose will be important diagnostic tools for discovering and correcting student problems, programmatic problems, and implementation problems. They are also important accountability measures to let parents, funders, and the state know how students perform at your school.

► **Pioneer Institute Charter School Handbook - Assessment Chapter**

<http://www.pioneerinstitute.org/csrb/cshb/studach.cfm>

This chapter delineates the core elements of a school assessment system and provides some examples. It reviews a variety of assessment options available to schools and suggests procedures for developing an assessment system that serves both the requirements of external reviewers and the needs of the school community.

► **US Charterschools - Assessment Resources**

[http://www.uscharterschools.org/pub/uscs\\_docs/ta/account.htm](http://www.uscharterschools.org/pub/uscs_docs/ta/account.htm)

This site contains a list of links to multiple assessment tools (i.e. alternative assessments such as portfolios) including those geared for ESL, Title I, and Special Education.

► **ERIC Clearinghouse on Assessment and Evaluation**

<http://ericae.net/nintbod.htm>

This site consists of an extensive list of on-line resources for alternative or performance-based assessment. It also contains reviews and information on the ETS test collection, research instruments, and other test publishers, news, test schedules, essays, and bibliographies.

### ***Accountability:***

Despite the numerous operational issues that schools may be expected to face in the first years of operation, it is important to pay early attention to the academic program and prepare to demonstrate results to parents, the board of directors, or the school's oversight agency. The first step in doing so is to reach agreement with any oversight agencies regarding for what and how the school will be held accountable for student performance.

► **The Annenberg Institute for School Reform's "Framework for Accountability"**

<http://www.annenberginstitute.org/accountability/toolbox/>

This site offers an approach that schools and districts can use to identify who is accountable for what and to whom, to address seven key conditions needed to teach all students to high standards, and to incorporate data as central to the accountability program.

► **WestEd Policy Program: Hot Topics: Accountability.**

[http://www.wested.org/policy/hot\\_top/accountability/ht\\_hm\\_act.htm](http://www.wested.org/policy/hot_top/accountability/ht_hm_act.htm)

This web site presents a brief synthesis of the accountability issue and links to research, web sites, education organizations, advocacy groups, and periodicals. It also provides a working annotated bibliography of research on accountability.

### ***Whole School Design Models:***

Many new schools founders benefit from research-driven programs on which to design their school or part of its program. These planned designs can be firm structures for comprehensive reform within a school and provide resources and advice for implementation.

► **The Catalog of School Reform Models Website**

<http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/catalog/index.shtml>

Compiled by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory at the request of the U.S. Department of Education, this site was developed to support schools, districts, states, and others as they proceed with their work under the Obey-Porter Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration program passed by the U.S. Congress in 1997. It contains descriptions of 64 school reform models, including 33 entire-school reform models and 31 skill- and content-based models (reading, math, science, and other areas). Criteria for selecting models included evidence of effectiveness in improving student academic achievement, extent of replication, implementation assistance provided to schools, and comprehensiveness.

► **Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Guidebook**

<http://www.wested.org/csrd/guidebook>

The purpose of this guidebook is to provide a coherent framework for planning schoolwide improvements. It is intended to help educators begin to redesign schools, to move beyond piecemeal reforms, and to reconfigure entire academic programs to help every student meet challenging standards. The guidebook describes the context and key elements of comprehensive school reform, and it offers a process for conducting comprehensive data analysis, planning, and implementation. It includes tools and activities to facilitate planning and implementation, profiles of successful schools, and lists of additional resources.

### ***Equity:***

When creating an educational program for a school, equity issues ranging from creating multicultural curriculum, devising appropriate assessments, developing an open and inclusive school, to understanding state regulations regarding access often arise. It is important for school founders to consider all prospective students' needs when devising their school program.

#### ► **Educational Justice Resource Page**

<http://www.edjustice.org/cgi-bin/resources.asp>

This site aims to promote quality education for students of all races and cultures. Its resource page provides extensive links to resources that help tackle issues of educational equity, culture, and institutional racism in education.

#### ► **Teaching for Change Catalog**

<http://www.teachingforchange.org>

The Teaching for Change catalog offers hundreds of K-12 books, videos and posters for teaching from a social justice perspective.

#### ► **Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's Equity Center**

<http://www.nwrel.org/cnorse/info/index.html>

The Equity Center is committed to helping public school personnel embrace the key concepts of equity and eliminate bias and discrimination - whether overt or subtle, unconscious or intentional, personal or institutional - in the context of their day-to-day activities. This Center aims to aid schools helping children receive equal access to an equitable, high-quality education.

#### ► **US Charterschools - Equity Resources**

<http://www.uscharterschools.org/cs/uscsp/query/q/112?topic=27&x-title=Resources+on+Equity>

This site provides a list of links to equity resources including topics such as gender, sexual orientation, English language learners, and tolerance.

### ***Special Education:***

The complexity and scope of special education services and regulations present a particular challenge to new schools. Despite the fact that new schools often attract a high number of students with special needs, new school founders often treat special education as an afterthought. Because it has the potential to be costly (up to 25% of a school's total budget), because ignoring special education can lead to potentially disastrous interactions with parents and even lawsuits, and because the needs of special education students deserve due attention, new schools should give it the same attention as their general education program and overall financial planning.

#### ► **Special Education Resources on the Internet**

<http://seriweb.com/>

SERI offers a collection of on-line resources for special education including links to information related to specific disabilities.

► **ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education**

<http://ericec.org>

This clearinghouse covers all aspects of the education and development of the disabled and gifted, including identification, assessment, intervention, and enrichment, both in special settings and within the mainstream. The site offers links to fact sheets, digests, laws, discussion groups, and a search of the ERIC database.

► **US Charterschools - Special Education Resources**

<http://www.uscharterschools.org/cs/uscsp/query/q/112?topic=24&xtitle=Resources+on+Special+Education>

This site provides a listing of resources and organizations related to special education.

## School Facilities and Operations

### ***Facilities:***

Finding a building is one of the most difficult pieces of the planning process for school founders. It involves both politics and luck - and can be very time consuming. Because finding a building can be so difficult and take so long, your founding team should start researching building options as early as possible.

► **Out of the Box**

<http://www.charterfriends.org/outofbox.html>

Designed to help charter school operators find and finance a suitable, affordable facility, this comprehensive resource guide has dozens of practical ideas drawn from the experiences of charter school pioneers in all parts of the country. It includes about 20 case studies documenting how individual charter schools have addressed their facilities and facilities financing needs.

► **National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities**

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

This site contains annotated bibliographies on K-12 school facilities issues that include descriptions and links to full text publications, books and journal articles; additional web sites, links to organizations, programs and agencies, state resources, academic research centers, products and services, and periodicals; on-line publications on school facility topics; and links to a variety of sources of school construction and cost estimating information.

### ***Budgeting and Business Plans:***

Financial planning takes place in two stages: 1) determining the finances of the planning process and 2) determining the finances involved in running a school. Once in motion, the school's financial plan is a tool for setting priorities within the program. It lends realism to the proposal for the new school and provides constraints within which to work.

#### **► Seattle Public Schools Budget Builder**

<http://bb.ssd.k12.wa.us>

This site, created by the Seattle Public School District, provides tools to explain school-based budgeting, details national examples and ideas about school-based budgeting, and includes glossaries and annotations. The site also contains tools to aid in designing budgets for individual Seattle schools; this function will later be used in other cities throughout North America.

#### **► Sample Start-up Budget**

<http://www.csus.edu/ier/charter/startcosts.html>

This simple start-up budget shows projected start-up costs for a hypothetical, 75-student, elementary charter school.

#### **► Charter School Business Plan Basics**

<http://www.csus.edu/ier/charter/bizpl.html>

This is an outline for a very basic charter school business plan, including a sample operating budget, monthly cash flow projection, and long-term fiscal plan.

#### **► Tools for Business Planning**

<http://www.charterfriends.org/outofbox.html#business>

This link has advice for effective real estate planning as well as links to general business planning guides, tools, and resources.

### ***Funding:***

Start-up expenses often include paying for the time it takes to plan, attending educational conferences, and paying for marketing and development. Schools often also need one-time funding for the start-up of educational programs and equipment. Some schools, including charter and private schools, receive no state or district funding until the opening day of school, necessitating the pursuit of other funds. This funding may be provided by philanthropic or government grants, and fundraising.

#### **► Accessing Federal Programs: A Guidebook for Charter School Operators and Developers**

[http://www.uscharterschools.org/gb/fed\\_funds](http://www.uscharterschools.org/gb/fed_funds)

This guidebook provides basic information to assist charter schools in accessing the federal programs and resources available to them through the U. S. Department of Education. The programs selected are those that are commonly considered the most beneficial to charter schools.

#### **► The Foundation Center**

<http://www.fdncenter.org>

This site contains a comprehensive directory of private, corporate and community founda-

tions. It also provides advice on grant availability, fundraising, information about hundreds of funders, reading lists, links to other useful sites.

► **Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program (CSR D)**

<http://www.wested.org/csrd>

The CSR D Program awards funds to schools that are in the process of implementing comprehensive school reform based on research and effective practices. This site provides the most current information and resources about CSR D.

► **The New Schools Venture Fund**

<http://newschools.org>

The New Schools Venture Fund is a venture philanthropy fund created by technology venture capitalists and entrepreneurs to leverage the expertise and resources of a powerful network of New Economy pioneers in order to help promising non-profit and for-profit education ventures succeed. The site provides the means for creating a nationwide network of education entrepreneurs as well as contains entrepreneurial resources such as recommended readings and useful links regarding curriculum, governance, and business plan creation.

***Governance/ Policies and Procedures:***

For schools with a Board of Directors, the board is the entity responsible for the school's financial viability and its fidelity to the vision on which the school was founded. Careful consideration must be made to create a strong, balanced board to guide the school. Day to day school adherence to its vision comes from clear procedures that let students and parents know exactly what the school's mission is and how it is carried out in practice. Creating the everyday policies and procedures of the new school can be a time consuming process. These policies and procedures include documents such as the parent or student handbook and range from emergency plans, to attendance and retention policies.

► **National Center for Nonprofit boards**

<http://www.boardsource.org/main.htm>

The National Center for Nonprofit Boards is dedicated to increasing the effectiveness of nonprofit organizations by strengthening their boards of directors. In addition to published material on nonprofit governance, NCNB provides assistance and resources through its website, Board Information Center, and workshops.

► **Pioneer Institute Charter School Handbook - Governance**

<http://www.pioneerinstitute.org/csrb/cshb/governance.cfm>

This document details the many functions of a governing board and provides concrete suggestions for developing an effective board.

► **Pioneer Institute Charter School Handbook - Appendices**

<http://www.pioneerinstitute.org/csrb/cshb>

This page's appendices provide links to many sample documents related to school start-up including items regarding the board of trustees by-laws, sample job descriptions and employee evaluations, sample insurance proposals, sample student handbooks, and a sample employee policy manual.

► **Charter School Governance Tool Kit**

<http://www.csus.edu/ier/charter/pubs.html>

This comprehensive tool kit provides sample governance documents from charter and other schools from across the country. The sample documents include sample by-laws, student, parent, and staff handbooks, and sample policies. It can be ordered on this site.

## Charter School Resources

► **U.S. Charter Schools Website**

<http://www.uscharterschools.org>

This is a national web site that shares practical information and innovations among charter school operators (e.g., teachers, parents, principals, community members, etc.). It contains key information about starting and running a charter school. Its contents are relevant to charter school leaders, consultants, researchers and policy makers.

► **The Charter Friends National Network**

<http://www.charterfriends.org>

This site is part of a national network connecting and supporting resource centers and other state-level charter support. The network provides publications, conferences, online communications, a grant program, and multi-state initiatives on high priority issues including accountability, facilities financing, special education and federal policy development.

► **The Charter Schools Development Center**

<http://www.csus.edu/ier/charter/charter.html>

This Center, housed in the Institute for Education Reform, provides technical assistance, training, and resources to the charter school reform movement both in California and nationally. The website contains numerous charter school publications ranging from detailed “how-to” guidebooks and “tool kits” of sample documents (i.e., charters, bylaws, strategic plans) to brief news articles and policy papers.

► **The Pioneer Institute Charter School Development Center**

<http://www.pioneerinstitute.org/csdc>

This website, aimed primarily at charter school developers in Massachusetts, contains a detailed downloadable handbook for charter school founders with chapters covering topics such as mission statement, curriculum, accountability, leadership, facilities, and financing. Its appendices include numerous sample documents both for schools and authorizers, covering various legal issues, governance bylaws, school and personnel policies, accountability, facilities development, and facility financing.

► **Center for Education Reform**

<http://edreform.com>

The Center for Education Reform is a national, non-profit education advocacy group and an active broker in providing resources, support and guidance for school reform to communities across the United States. Its web site contains listings of all their print-only publications with information on how to order them as well as copies of all their monthly newsletter back issues.

► **Educational Excellence Coalition**

<http://www.wacharterschools.org>

Founded in 1994 by dissatisfied public school parents and teachers, the Coalition is Washington state's leading advocate for strong charter school laws. The mission of the Educational Excellence Coalition is to revitalize public education through legislative reforms based on deregulation, competition and parental choice. This site provides news updates on charter school legislation in Washington, the body of I-729, Washington's pending charter school initiative, links to charter school organizations nationwide, and answers frequently asked questions about charter schools in Washington.



## **What Should District-School Performance Contracts Cover?**

A contract between a school district and a school is a performance and resource agreement. It should specify:

- ▶ What resources a school will receive.
- ▶ What reports and other compliance documents the school is required to file, to whom and when.
- ▶ What levels of student performance are expected, how performance will be measured, and how a given level of performance will be judged as adequate or inadequate.
- ▶ What options the school district has if the school's performance is not adequate.
- ▶ What options the school has if the district does not meet its obligations.

A contract should also identify the risks in the relationship and clearly show which party, the district or the school, should assume which risks.

This guide for structuring a performance agreement has four parts: Resource flow from the district to the school; Setting, measuring, and judging student performance expectations; establishing the district's options in case of inadequate performance by the school; and allocating risks.

### ***Resource Flow:***

- School will get a standard amount in real dollars for each pupil enrolled.
- Payments from the district are due on specified dates and the school is due a penalty for late payment.
- School will (or will not) get use of a district-owned building.
- Students enrolled will (or will not) participate in Title I programs and be tested at district expense.
- Teachers will (or will not) be eligible to participate in district-paid professional development programs.
- Special education students will (or will not) get district-paid services above and beyond the basic per-pupil amount received by the school.

### ***Compliance Documents***

- What documents must be filed with the district and state, and at what time.
- Whether and if so where the school can request assistance obtaining and filling out compliance documents.
- Penalties and other consequences of failing to file compliance documents on schedule; and of filing inaccurate documents.

### ***Student Performance***

- What measures of student performance will be used: tests by name; testing schedule; how the school's value added is to be calculated and by whom.
- Other student performance measures to be considered, including (possibly) student performances and portfolios and how these are to be judged; attendance, course completion, graduates' performance in higher levels of education.
- Whether performance measures other than student test scores are to be considered the district in judging school performance; and if so how these will be weighted relative to test scores.
- The baseline (demographically similar schools, district-wide averages) against which school performance is to be judged; and whether the judgment will be based on cross-sectional or value-added measures).

### ***District Options in Case of Low Performance***

- What actions the district may choose to take: warning, required changes in school staffing or programs; closure and replacement.
- Rights of students attending schools that are warned, ordered to change, or closed.
- Circumstances under which the district administration is entitled to act unilaterally, versus those under which the district must go through a hearing process.

## Risk Analysis

The following table identifies some of the things that can go wrong in a charter school and suggests which party, the district or the school, is responsible to correct particular problems. A party that fails to correct a problem for which it is responsible can not exercise its full rights under the contract. Thus, a school that has not corrected a problem for which it is responsible cannot expect automatic continuation of its charter. A district that has not corrected a problem for which it is responsible cannot strictly enforce its rights under the performance agreement.<sup>1</sup>

Risk	Borne by District	Borne by School	Shared
Low enrollment		xx	
Inability to find teachers		xx <sup>2</sup>	
Late or partial payments to school	xx		
School inability to meet financial obligations		xx <sup>3</sup>	
Inability to secure building; frequent disruptive moves			Depends on whether district has promised a building
disruption, conflict within the school		xx	
Changes in district attendance boundaries	xx		
Failure to reach enrollment goals for disadvantaged		xx <sup>4</sup>	
Frequent turnover of teaching staff			Depends on whether staff or district initiate move
Change in demographics, needs of students enrolled			Measures and baselines must be re-negotiated
New compliance requirements	xx		
Availability of promised district services	xx		
Low student performance		xx	
Loss of promised state or federal funds	xx		
Loss of funds raised by the school		xx	
Unavailability of promised district services	xx		

1. This implies the need for some neutral body to hear disputes. In an all-charter district the school board might play this role. However, in a district where charters are rare and school board members might consider them competitors for "their" schools, some independent forum is necessary.
2. Except when district policy has caused teachers to avoid the charter school.
3. Except when the district has not made payments due the school.
4. Except when caused by changes in district enrollment policies.



