



NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER ON  
**CHARTER  
SCHOOL**  
FINANCE & GOVERNANCE

# PROMISING PRACTICE PROFILE

## Developing Training Programs for Charter School Governing Board Members

Nevada State Department of Education, Idaho Charter School Network, Minnesota School Boards Association, Utah's CharterSTAR (Straight Talk, Answers and Resources)

**SUMMARY** Charter schools offer an opportunity for teachers, parents, and other community members to be actively involved in the governance of public schools. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that malfunctioning charter school boards are common, reflecting a lack of board experience and a tendency to manage rather than govern. In this

promising practice profile, the National Resource Center on Charter School Finance and Governance describes efforts in four states to train and support charter school governing board members. An infrastructure has been—or is being—developed to provide sustained assistance to develop high-quality governing boards so members understand what their responsibilities are and how to fulfill them, enabling charter schools to focus on supporting students according to their mission.

### Promising Practice in:

- Charter School Finance
- Charter School Governance

### Implemented by:

- State Policymaker
- Charter Authorizer
- Charter Operator
- Other

### Inside:

- Implementation Details
- Impact
- Lessons Learned
- Additional Comments
- Useful Resources
- Contact Information

**BACKGROUND** To increase the quality and effectiveness of charter school governing boards, several states have implemented and promoted extensive, innovative training processes for board members. In Utah, a dissemination grant was awarded to a charter school with an effective governing board. The funding is being used to set up a system within the state to provide ongoing training and support once the dissemination grant has ended. The [Minnesota School Boards Association](#) is focused on proper board implementation of the charter school law, especially with respect to insurance liability. The [Idaho Charter School Network](#) aims to provide technical assistance to board members that will create new high-quality charter schools and sustain existing ones throughout the state. Finally, in Nevada, the state department of education is interested in having well-constituted charter school governing boards with well-informed members.



Utah's [John Hancock Charter School](#) drew on its startup and operational experience to propose a mechanism for providing organizational technical assistance using federal charter school dissemination grant funding. When the grant was awarded in 2006, the school hired Steve Winitzky and his colleagues for their expertise in Utah charter school operation and training. Together they established [CharterSTAR](#) (Straight Talk, Answers and Resources) as a formal organization for charter school technical support and governing board member training in the state. CharterSTAR is applying for a second year of funding to establish a permanent support infrastructure for future training of Utah charter school governing board members.

Jan Rhode, of the Minnesota School Boards Association, has been training traditional school board members for years. When charter school legislation was enacted in the state, she was involved in reading charter proposals. Later, the state asked her, as a natural extension of what she already did, to provide training for charter school governing boards in areas where they were lacking expertise. At the same time, new charter schools needed to obtain insurance for property casualties as well as for errors and omissions. To qualify for state insurance plans, the schools needed to be members of the Minnesota School Boards Association, which historically had been composed solely of traditional local school board members. A modified membership category was created to enable charter schools to take advantage of the low-cost state insurance offered through the association. Soon after, liability issues arose from charter school governing boards' inability to comply with state laws. Minnesota's charter school law requires board members to obtain training in order to receive funding, and the state continues to offer training programs. However, a logical step was for the Minnesota School Boards Association to invite charter school governing board members to participate in its training opportunities and lower potential liability costs vis à vis the state insurance, a mutually beneficial situation for the charter schools and the state.

In Idaho and Nevada, training programs have developed in response to charter school governing board members asking the state for help. The [Nevada State Department of Education](#) has one full-time position designated to serve the needs of the 23 charter schools operating in the state. In that position, Tom McCormack draws on expertise from both within and outside the state to design and implement training and support systems for charter school governing board members. Shirley Rau, the former executive director of the Idaho Charter School Network, boasts of network

membership from 26 of the 28 charter schools in the state. Network membership affords access to board training and technical assistance, among other services. The network has received some funding from federal grants awarded to the state.

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## IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS

The main goal of all these training programs is having efficient, knowledgeable, and high-functioning charter school governing boards so charter school leaders can focus more time on students and school performance. One commonality across the models is the practice of using experts with specific charter school governance experience who are both credible and trusted within the charter school community. Also, none of these programs are "set" programs. They are flexible and adaptable to the specific needs of the charter schools and their board members and are oriented toward promoting sustainable, long-term charter school success.

The training delivery methods used in the four programs vary tremendously, however. CharterSTAR in Utah has several components, including workshops for people interested in applying for new charters. The state requires charter developers to attend one of these workshops in order to have their applications considered. The workshops include a review of the application process and training that outlines the roles and responsibilities of becoming a new public school. Some discussion is focused on how boards can function effectively. Once applications for new charters have been accepted by the state, CharterSTAR provides training for schools in their pre-operational planning year. These trainings usually begin with founders and sometimes board members, executive directors, and business managers of the newly forming charter schools. In the planning-year training, CharterSTAR covers details of the obligations that charter schools have as public entities operating under the umbrella of state and federal education codes.

Although addressed in the planning-year training, CharterSTAR runs an entire training program for existing charter school governing boards designed to teach members what their role includes and, more importantly, what their role does not include. Last year it hired Brian Carpenter—chief executive officer of the [National Charter Schools Institute](#) and author of numerous publications on effective boards, including [Charter School Board University](#)—to hold three regional workshops in Utah. These workshops were met with excellent attendance



throughout the state and rave reviews in participant evaluations. CharterSTAR has hired Carpenter to return to Utah in fall 2007 to work individually with charter school governing boards that have asked for extra support and training.

Although not as extensive a program as in Utah, Nevada is developing a system of supports for charter schools that will lead to their major end goal of quality charter schools with well-informed governing boards. Nevada law requires all new charter school governing board members to sign affidavits stating that they have read and understand the responsibilities of their position. Attached to the affidavit are three pages of information and guidance. In addition, many governing board members also attend annual governing board trainings sponsored by the state department of education. In the three years training has been conducted, the department has twice brought in experts from other states and, most recently, used the expertise of an attorney within the state. The local attorney, Bonnie Drinkwater, prepared sample bylaws that charter schools can use as a guide when developing their own bylaws.

In addition to annual charter school governing board trainings, the Idaho Charter School Network provides individual training sessions based on four areas of excellence developed by members of the network in collaboration with Jim Griffin of the Colorado League of Charter

Schools. Charter schools that are members of the network can request a team assessment. Composed of volunteers from charter schools statewide, teams conduct interviews and collect observations related to the areas of excellence and prepare an assessment, with recommendations, for individual schools. The evaluation teams have sometimes included governing board members who need support themselves and who learn new strategies by being a part of the evaluation process for another school.

Minnesota offers a fourth model of board training; charter school board members participate in trainings designed for and attended by traditional local school board members. As a result of their membership in the Minnesota School Boards Association, charter school board members have access to trainings provided for all members. Many training workshops address issues relating only to charter school board members. However, Jan Rhode of the Minnesota School Boards Association believes that the governance issues facing charter school boards are more similar than different from those facing traditional school boards. Consequently, most of the trainings offered by the association are cross-trainings, despite the fact that relationships between traditional school board members and charter school governing board members are often competitive and sometimes adversarial.

### What Can Charter School Governing Boards Learn From....

- Independent School Boards?  
See *Trustee Handbook: A Guide to Effective Governance for Independent School Boards*, Ninth Edition, by Mary Hundley DeKuyper (2003), <http://www.nais.org/products/book.cfm?ItemNumber=146372>.
- School Site Councils?  
See *School-Site Councils* by David Peterson del Mar (1994), <http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=ED369154>.
- University Boards of Trustees?  
See *The Effective Board of Trustees* by Richard P. Chait, Thomas P. Holland, and Barbara E. Taylor (1991), <http://www.greenwood.com/catalog/OXEBT.aspx>.

### IMPACT

All the training models described in this profile are relatively new, so their long-term impact has not been evaluated.

Those involved believe the anecdotal evidence verifies that the training is moving in the right direction and that charter schools within their state will ultimately have effective, functional, and well-informed governing boards. This will then lead to a greater focus on students and school performance. To date, the anecdotal evidence includes the following.

- In Minnesota, none of the charter schools with governing board members involved in trainings alongside traditional school board members have faced closure because of finance or governance issues.
- CharterSTAR has received very positive feedback in Utah regarding the trainings and support it provides, and the same is true for the trainings offered in Nevada. Both states report a high level of charter school board member participation.

- CharterSTAR is also training new staff from the Utah Association of Charter Schools to assume responsibility for training charter schools at various stages of development, from application through board leadership succession. The state charter school association used to be strictly a volunteer organization. CharterSTAR is helping the association achieve long-term sustainability, with the hope that the group will take over training once the dissemination grant expires.
- The Idaho Charter School Network reports highly successful team assessments for the schools that have participated so far.

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## LESSONS LEARNED

Representatives from the profiled programs believe their training models are replicable in other states. Federal dissemination funds are available, and Idaho and Utah have used those funds to help boost their training programs and networks of support. Most states also have charter school networks, associations, or resource centers, and all states that have charter schools have staffing already built into the structure of their department of education. The models described in this promising practice profile use, in different ways, the various components of the existing charter school state infrastructure.

## Implementation Challenges

Across all these training models, one implementation challenge has been attracting and sustaining broad participation from charter schools around the state. The team assessments in Idaho are voluntary, and participating charter schools have been well-established ones that are looking to fine-tune their processes. Shirley Rau would like to see the state department of education help charter schools with the financial costs of participating in a team assessment. Rau has moved from the Idaho Charter School Network to a position in the state department and is seeking to establish a charter school support grant program that would require all charter schools to go through the process in their first three years of operation and provide financial support for them to do so.

In Minnesota, charter school governing board members, unlike traditional school board members, are not local officials elected through general public elections. Their state school board association membership is modified and limited, and some of the charter schools have

complained about this arrangement. The Minnesota School Boards Association is a powerful lobbying force in the state. Charter school members do not have any voice or influence in the politics of this association, though they do have their own separate charter school association.

## Keys to Success

All the leaders involved with these models cited the importance of honing the willingness of people with expertise to share their knowledge in exciting ways and with true commitment for the charter school movement. Particularly in Idaho, charter school representatives volunteer their time to participate in the assessment teams that visit other schools as peer support. Rau noted that their willingness to participate had a lot to do with the lessons the team members learned by working within the team assessment process. The areas of excellence were developed by charter schools in the network, and Rau recommends that each state develop its own context-specific areas for assessing the effectiveness of charter school board governance.

In both Idaho and Minnesota, governing board members, including local school board members in Minnesota, have come to realize that best practices are about running a business, not differences in school philosophies. They see the mutual benefit of collaborating. In Minnesota, reducing the specter of insurance liability is a strong motivator for encouraging traditional adversaries to work together.

After observing voluntary training sessions offered in Utah that consistently had low attendance, Steve Winitzky tried a new approach with the regional training sessions. In addition to bringing in a well-known expert on effective boards, he adopted several strategies that he believed led to the high turnout that resulted. First, CharterSTAR charged a small fee of \$25 per person. The fact that the workshops were not free indicated a higher level of quality and importance, which encouraged more charter school governing board members to attend. The workshops were also located regionally so no one in the state would have to travel more than an hour or so to attend one of the workshops, and participants were given dinner. Start times were set so members would at most have to leave work a little bit early to arrive on time; ending times assured members they would be finished at a reasonable hour. Because of these key strategies, nearly every charter school in the state sent representatives of their board to one of the workshops.



## Key Questions for Charter School Governing Boards

- Does the board have a plan for how it will conduct the necessary program oversight and maintain fiscal health?
- Does the board engage in regular, ongoing training and development?
- Does the board's composition include the skills and expertise needed to govern effectively?
- Does the board refer back to the charter school's mission and values as a guide for decisions?
- Does the board evaluate itself annually and establish goals for the following year?
- Does the board have a leadership succession plan to ensure a smooth transition from one board chair to another?
- Does the board have a clear sense of its own authority and duties as well as those of the school leaders, parents, teachers, and any service providers?

## ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

The content of the profiled trainings falls into two distinct and equally important categories. The first involves the legal issues of running a charter school, including minutes, finance, staffing, education codes, and open-meeting rules. The second category involves the role of the board within the context of separation of duties from the administrators hired to run the school. Charter school governing boards need to be taught how not to micromanage but still maintain knowledge of what is going on in the school. Governing boards' roles should be limited to policy setting and general oversight. Although all charter school boards have certain similar needs, states must design training content to fit the unique needs of their charter schools.

## USEFUL RESOURCES

- *Charter Starters: Leadership Training Workbook on Governance and Management* by Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, <http://www.nwrel.org/comm/catalog/detail.asp?RID=12658>.
- *Creating Effective Governing Boards* by Frank Martinelli for the Charter Friends National Network, [www.uscharterschools.org/gb/governance/](http://www.uscharterschools.org/gb/governance/).

- *Fundamentals of School Board Membership: A Guide for Newly-Elected Charter School Board Members* by the Minnesota School Boards Association, <http://www.hhh.umn.edu/centers/school-change/handbook/running.htm>.
- Information on the Broad Institute for School Boards: <http://www.crss.org/tbisb.htm>.
- Information on the Carver Model of governance: <http://www.carvergovernance.com/>.

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This Profile is one in a series highlighting promising practices in charter school finance and governance implemented by state policymakers, charter authorizers, and charter operators across the country. This Profile was written by the Center on Educational Governance for the National Resource Center on Charter School Finance and Governance (NRC). Promising practices are selected from nominations received by the NRC on the basis of innovativeness, evidence of positive impact, and potential for transferability and usefulness. The NRC has not conducted program evaluations of the initiatives profiled and does not endorse particular policies, practices, or programs. For more information on this Profile, please contact the Center on Educational Governance at (213) 740-0697.

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